

OVER THE RIM

By Emily Wilburn

Matt Kramer stood looking up at the sky. He blew out a breath of frustration. They'd been planning this trip for months and now the weather had to turn foul. *It wasn't fair*, he thought angrily. *If Dad could hear my thoughts, he'd probably say something like, Life isn't fair, son.* His dad, Reece, came around the truck to stand by him.

"I know, son," he said. "You're thinking we have to cancel the trip now. But we've been planning this for a long time, and we aren't going to bail because of bad weather."

Matt sighed with relief, but he couldn't help feeling guilty. "What about Mom? And the cattle? And Roscoe?"

Reece smiled. "Mom can take care of herself and the cattle, with Roscoe's help," he answered. "Go ahead and say goodbye, we're leaving as soon as I check the horses."

Matt ran off to the house, where his mom, Beth was waiting to give him a hug and a kiss. He tolerated the affection and stooped to pat Roscoe. The setter whined and wagged his tail slowly.

"Sorry boy, it's just me and Dad today," Matt told him, rumpling his ears. "We're going up the mountain."

"Be careful, Matt," Beth called after him as he climbed into the truck. "You take care of your dad for me."

"I will," Matt yelled out the window as the truck set out down the bumpy dirt road. He waited only long enough for them to get to the turn for Kern's Peak before turning on the radio to his favorite rock station.

His dad gave him a look and turned it to the weather report. Matt shrugged and looked out the window. He watched as the familiar scenery rolled past.

Finally they reached the little hamlet that in summer was filled with vacationing people renting cabins for the summer. Now, in mid-October, it was empty and dull. They parked in a dirt lot alongside several other cars. Matt jumped down from the cab, looking around eagerly. Every two years in spring they all came up here as a family. Last time they were here was when Matt was twelve. Now, at fourteen, he was finally ready to go all the way along the trail--over the rim.

He'd been trying to make it that far since he was eight. Last year they got all the way to the third waterfall before it was time to head back. *This year is my year*, he thought.

He grabbed his backpack from the cab and turned to his dad. Reece zipped his own pack up and swung it over his shoulder. "Ready, son?"

"Yup," Matt replied, bouncing on the toes of his hiking boots.

Reece smiled. "Then let's head out."

They headed up the familiar trail, hiking steadily. Reece kept the small portable radio on and swinging from his pack, tuned to the weather. Matt forged ahead, eager and determined.

They passed a young couple on their way down. Matt smiled and nodded as they passed each other, and Reece said hello. As they continued up the trail, Matt's dad glanced back. "It's good that city people come up here. Gets them in tune with nature so they're more likely to want to keep it."

As they went up farther, the wind got colder and stronger. They stopped for a moment at the first waterfall. Matt shivered and pulled out his black fleece jacket. His dad shrugged on a sweater to go over his T-shirt. They both drank a little water from their water bottles. Reece turned up the weather station, but bursts of static came over every so often. Matt looked around, not really listening.

Reece cleared his throat and Matt glanced at him. His dad's face looked grim. "It'll only get worse from here on out," he explained. "The trail curves northwest, if I remember right. I'm sorry, son. I know you wanted to get over the rim, but I just don't think it's possible."

Matt stared at the ground. He felt his dad watching him.

"Well, what do you want to do, son?"

He doesn't want to know what I want, he wants to know what we should do.

"Can we at least go up to the second waterfall?" he asked.

Reece sighed but didn't protest.

They pulled their packs back on and trekked up the trail. Reece kept the radio on as they got farther and farther away from the dirt road.

Matt stopped on a broad stretch of rock to admire the view of the second falls. A blast of wind made him pull the jacket tighter around his shoulders. He glanced back to see his dad standing several feet down the trail. He jogged back as Reece looked up.

"Son, there are some hikers missing," he began. "They left early this morning for a short hike up here and they haven't gotten back yet. A ranger found their cars parked at the bottom. The storm's getting worse and they don't have winter gear. They say there may be some early snow higher up. I suppose we ought to be grateful that they aren't on the Ransford Trail."

Matt nodded and stared up at the peak across the valley. He'd never been on the Ransford Trail before, but he could guess what it was like up on the peak. He looked back at his father.

"We should go after them," he said. Reece nodded and took out his three-way radio, calling to Beth back at the ranch. Matt had his own in his backpack.

With grim determination they set out again. Matt stared at the trail ahead, searching for any sign of the missing hikers. Reece kept the radio on, but now Matt listened to it, too. The news wasn't good--the storm went on for a ways, and it was getting more severe. Snow was expected at higher elevations.

It happened as they were crossing the second falls. A fallen log blocked the trail, so they went to the left, toward the waterfall. They crossed over on large boulders. As Matt leaped onto the bank, he looked back. His dad jumped nimbly from one boulder to the next. He jumped toward the final boulder, but as his foot pushed off from the rock, it slipped. It threw Reece off, and he missed his footing on the landing. He fell backward into the water.

Matt gasped. Although the river was shallow, only a few feet deep, and its current was not too strong, it was freezing cold. Reece grabbed onto a boulder and Matt reached toward him. But suddenly, the boulder shifted, falling onto his leg and pinning it.

Matt splashed into the river. The shock of the cold water made him pause before he waded the few feet toward his father. He carefully pried the heavy boulder off his father, with Reece pushing to help him. Finally they were able to climb onto the bank.

Reece lay exhausted where he was and Matt staggered away. Then he reached into his backpack for his spare clothes and changed quickly, in the shelter of some trees. He glanced back at his dad, still struggling to get to his feet. He ran back and helped him up.

Reece's face was clenched in pain. "I didn't break anything," he muttered. "But I did some damage."

Matt stared at his father. "What do we do now?" he asked.

Reece looked back at him. "Let's face it, Matt," he said. "I'm not going anywhere."

Reece cleared his throat and Matt glanced at him. His dad's face looked grim. "It'll only get worse from here on out," he explained. "The storm is headed southeast. The brunt of it will pass home, but up farther the trail curves Matt nodded. He hadn't really expected anything else. Now he would call Mom, ask her to bring up the van, and wait until they could get down the mountain. Then in a few days, they would come back for the truck.

But Reece kept talking. "But those hikers need more help than I do right now. You can find them and bring them back down. I'll be ok. I can change into my spare clothes and wait here. Your mom can come get me."

He grinned at Matt. "Now don't let me down or you'll have something to answer for when you get home."

Slowly, Matt nodded. He listened as his dad spoke to his mom on the three-way radio. "Beth, I'm in some trouble. I was crossing the falls and I slipped. Yes, but I need you to come get me." He paused and added, "Matt's got to go after the missing hikers." Matt sat and waited. Finally, Reece nodded at him and he stood up, nervous but determined. The wind whipped at his face as soon as he stepped from the shelter of the trees. He thought of the hikers, lost and freezing to death right now, and he started to walk faster.

He hiked alone for a long time. Every so often his mom's or dad's voice crackled over the radio, telling him some bit of news. He answered quickly and kept going.

The storm kept escalating. Now there were flurries of snow along with the biting wind. Matt had to stop to take a swig of water and pull on another jacket. He had no time to enjoy the scenery now.

His mom and dad continued their news flashes. There was an inch of snow on the top of Ransford Peak. Temperatures were dropping. It was four in the afternoon. The missing hikers were Glen and Catherine Patterson and Floyd and Nora Dale.

Matt reached the third falls as his mother reached the parking lot. He jogged along the trail up to the falls, climbing upward frantically. It was 4:15 and getting colder.

As he reached the meadow above the falls, he saw four people about fifty feet away. "Hey," he yelled. They didn't hear him. "Hey!" The two at the back turned around. He raced toward them, shouting "I found them!" into his radio.

At last he caught up to them. "Are you the Pattersons and the Dales?" he asked breathlessly. Curious, they all nodded. "Then you should know that you were reported missing."

"Oh, dear," gasped one of the women, in her early sixties probably.

"Don't worry, we'll get you back down the mountain. But this storm is going to get worse and worse. You could die from exposure."

The four looked at each other nervously as Matt spoke into his radio again. "What now?"

"I hate to tell you this, Matt, but there's a really bad bit between you and me. There's no way you can get down this mountain. You'll have to get over the rim."

Matt slowly put the radio back on its clip. He turned to the Pattersons and Dales. "OK," he said. "We're going over the rim."

They all set off; Mr. Patterson at the back, him in the lead. Matt's mom had reached his dad and was helping him down the mountain. Matt showed the four people behind him around boulders and down steep slopes. Within a few minutes, they reached the fourth waterfall but didn't stop. Mrs. Patterson snapped a picture as they passed. Matt passed his water bottle back, insisting that they drink.

The people of Diamond Lake would meet them at the ridge. It was already five o'clock. The wind was even stronger. Snow piled up in drifts in some places.

The trail was getting steeper. Matt helped the Dales up the roughest spots. His hands grew cold and he knew they had to reach the town soon.

Matt finally climbed over a large boulder to find the lights of Diamond Lake sparkling below. He let out a cheer that was carried away by the wind, but he didn't care. As he helped Mr. Dale over the last rock, he could hardly keep himself from jumping around. He had done it. He had finally finished the climb over the rim.