

THE
HARBOUR
EXPLOSION

THE NOVA SCOTIA EPISODE

THE BLUE CRESCENT MOON SERIES

LISA TASCA OATWAY

The Harbour Explosion
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The Dinosaur Encounter: The Alberta Episode

For Oliver: may you enjoy reading as much
as your mom, your dad, and I do.

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THE VACATION



The beginning of the winter school break has finally arrived! The Stonehart family will be starting their family vacation in four days time, after the Christmas celebrations. The destination this time is Nova Scotia, a beautiful maritime province in eastern Canada. Nova Scotia is known for whale watching, lobster rolls, and is the site of the world's largest explosion before the atomic bomb.

The family has been preparing for months for this trip by researching all the interesting places to visit. Each family member got to select one place to visit while on vacation. The family then busily planned the ten-day stay around the different points of interest. The hotel is booked, and the tickets to the attractions are purchased. All that remains to be done is to pack for the vacation.

The Stonehart family is a family of six: Stephanie, the mom; David, the dad; and the four children. Daniel (Danny) is the oldest and is thirteen years old. Veronica (Ronni) is the oldest daughter at ten years of age, followed by James (Jamie), who is eight for a few more days. The youngest, Victoria, better known as Tori, just celebrated her seventh birthday. Jamie will be celebrating his

birthday during the trip, and Mom and Dad have a special surprise for him.

The family has travelled on vacation quite a bit, with the most recent one this past summer to Alberta. That trip took them to the Calgary Stampede and the beautiful Rocky Mountains, and it exposed them to a very unique encounter with dinosaurs. You can read all about that adventure in *The Dinosaur Encounter: The Alberta Episode*.

Although they drove out to the Maritimes years ago when Tori was very young, renting a cottage with their friends in the summer, this trip to Nova Scotia will be a winter trip, taking in all the beautiful sights and activities offered in the winter. They will also be flying to and from Halifax, the provincial capital of Nova Scotia, rather than driving, because they want to return home in time for the start of school in January.

But equally as exciting as the trip is the Christmas celebration, which is a big deal in the Stonehart family, with large families on both sides. This year, the Stoneharts are hosting Mom's side of the family on Christmas Eve and Dad's side on Christmas Day. They leave on their trip the day after Christmas, December 26, known as St. Stephen's Day, or Boxing Day, when the stores put on some of the largest sales ever. It will be a busy time, but they are pretty organized, and it should all work out.

The Christmas tree has been up since early December, and each of the children has adorned the tree with their ornaments, given to them by Mom and Dad over the years. Mom and the girls have been busy pulling out all the Christmas decorations to make the house look festive and inviting, while Dad and the boys have worked outside, adding lights and lawn decorations to give the house a great seasonal look.

On the days when the family decorates the house, Mom selects Christmas music, and the girls sing to their favourite tunes while transforming the house into a scene from a fancy department store; large wreaths, over-sized stockings, Santa shoppe elves, and dozens of tin soldiers are sprinkled throughout the various rooms, making each uniquely a Christmas marvel. The boys listen to the Christmas tunes outside through a small speaker, allowing them to join in with the singing and dancing, mindless of any reaction by the curious neighbours.

The day after tomorrow is Christmas Eve, December 24, where many throughout the world celebrate the arrival of baby Jesus. The Christmas Eve festivities are a popular tradition at the Stonehart house, consisting of a big fish dinner followed by a church service at 9:00 p.m. Mom's brother and sisters and their children arrive around 3:00 in the afternoon and gather in the big Stonehart kitchen to catch up and munch on appetizers. Mom and her sisters and sister-in-law busy themselves with the dinner preparations. Mom makes her popular shrimp and scallop pasta dish, and the aunts prepare numerous main courses of fish-based dishes, ranging from trout, salmon, and sole to shrimp, mussels, and calamari—grilled, baked, or fried. Copious amounts of vegetables accompany the dinner. Desserts, which are plentiful, follow the main course but are usually untouched, since everyone is so full by the time dessert rolls around.

Kitchen clean-up is started by Dad, and the brothers-in-law all pitch in by loading the dishwasher, washing the delicate plates and glasses by hand, and cleaning up the huge quantity of pots and pans used to prepare the feast. All the cousins help at this point as well, and it really becomes organized chaos, but everything is eventually tidied up and placed in its proper place in time for the

second half of the evening—attending a service to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Just before the various family members head off to the church, they hold a Kris Kringle exchange of gifts, where a small and inexpensive gift is purchased by each member and placed under the tree. After dinner, the youngest to the oldest member selects a gift, symbolic of the warmth, love, and generosity of the season.

This yearly tradition has become one of the most favourite days in the year for all the extended family, not only owing to the wonderful dishes consumed, but mostly to being able to catch up with loved ones. The cousins and adults get to hang out in a relaxed and fun-filled setting with one another and create wonderful memories. Having a large family can be complicated, but on this night, it's a perfect reminder of the strength and support of family.

While reflecting on the fun Christmas events ahead, Danny's thoughts wander off to the Nova Scotia trip, the first destination vacation the family will be taking during the winter, and the new adventures that await them.



THE SNOW GEAR



The family wakes up to a deep blanket of white and pristine snow on December 23, the day before the first family gathering. It's going to be a white Christmas! The first snowfall of the season occurred in the middle of December, and what little snow has remained is dirty and dingy—hardly worthy of a white Christmas. The fresh snow is an open invitation for the Stonehart kids to take out their toboggans, sleds, saucers, and other snow equipment to enjoy a day frolicking on the slopes in their back yard.

The Stonehart house is set in a rural area in the province of Ontario, perched on the top of a gentle hill and surrounded by farms and forests. Out at the back of the house is an ideal snow run, with a long and fairly steep incline, from which the kids launch themselves and enjoy the thrill of speed and wind as they hurtle down the slope. Coming up is never as much fun, but the promise of another quick trip down keeps them motivated to pull or carry their equipment up the hill to reach the top, where they do it all over again. And again.

Jamie and Tori are especially eager to get out into the snow today. Mom reminds them that there are still a number of chores that need to be finished before the arrival of the family tomorrow, but there will be plenty of time in the afternoon to play in the snow. “Aw, Mom,” groans Jamie. “Can’t we go out this morning and finish up our chores this aft?”

“You know that’s a bad plan, Jamie,” says Mom in an understanding tone. “Let’s get the chores out of the way, and then you can reward yourselves with an entire afternoon of snow time.” Jamie isn’t convinced. But he knows he’s not going to win this one. So he resigns himself and, turning to Dad and Danny, says, “Let’s go get the big tables from the basement.”

“That’s the spirit, Jamie,” says Mom. “You’ll all be rewarded with a treat this afternoon, after you come in from the snow.” This could only mean Mom’s hot chocolate, and maybe a few of the delicious home-baked cookies Mom prepares for the Christmas season. Jamie is starting to feel better about the plan already.

After lunch, the kids are bustling to get out into the snow. “Are you coming too, Mom?” asks Tori, the youngest of the family.

“I think I’m going to pass, sweetie,” says Mom, “and take the time to relax before the few busy days we have ahead. Are you okay with me skipping out this afternoon?”

“I guess,” says Tori disappointedly. “Are you coming, Daddy?”

“Not today, sweetie,” says Dad. “I’m going to follow your mom’s plan and work in the shop finishing up my current project.” Dad’s hobby is wood-working, and he enjoys working with wood to make amazing creations, some of which are standing out on the lawn as Christmas ornaments. Mom’s hobby is knitting, and she creates beautiful and warm items for family and friends.

Tori is disappointed, but her big brother, Danny, comes to the rescue. “No worries, Tori. You can ride with me on the

Super-Duper flash sled. I'll even haul you up the hill, but only twice, because you're getting much bigger now, so pulling you up the hill is becoming a real workout." Tori giggles at her brother's remarks. She has fond memories of being pulled up the hill by Danny on a sled or toboggan, like a real princess, while Ronni and Jamie complained all the while that they needed to carry their own snow equipment up the hill. The joys of being the youngest!

The sharp, clean air hits them as soon as they step outside. It's a frosty afternoon, even though the sun is bright and shining. The blue sky is a sharp contrast to the white blanket that covers the ground. Dad helps them to pull down the snow equipment from the storage loft he built in the garage, and one by one, the kids select their favourite piece of snow-riding gear. Ronni and Jamie prefer snow saucers—the Flying Saucers, as they have been nick-named because they pick up a lot of speed and allow the rider to be airborne over bumps in the run. Ronni's is named the Speedqueen Flying Saucer, while Jamie's is the Dragon Flying Saucer. The saucers are curved pieces of plastic or metal with handles on either side, upon which you sit cross-legged and launch yourself by shifting your body weight. Steering a saucer down the hill requires the same body-shifting movement.

Danny prefers a sled-type vehicle, specifically a classic alpine sled, which consists of a wooden platform to sit on with metal runners or blades down the outside length of the platform. There's usually a slot to place your feet on or in, and some form of steering mechanism to allow the rider to guide the sled. Dad built a two-seater sled a few years ago, and it has been affectionately named the Super-Duper Flash sled, or SDF sled for short, because it's fast moving and shiny, just like a flash of lightning. Danny has gotten really good at steering this device and can beat anyone down the hill, even with a passenger, who is usually Tori.

Tori's favourite piece of snow gear is a one-person Manitou snow sled, which is similar to the saucer, but rather than sitting with your legs crossed, your legs are extended in front of you. She has affectionately named her sled the Manny. It too has built-in handles, and by shifting your weight, you can steer the sled down the hill.

When Mom joins the kids, her preferred snow apparatus is the two-seated Manitou snow sled, or the Manny 2. She has used it for years, with her youngest child in the rear, their legs wrapped around her waist. Although all the kids are grown and able to handle their own snow equipment, she still favours it because she has mastered manoeuvring it down the snow hill. Dad prefers the snow sled and has built a second sled for himself, which is equally as fast as the SDF sled. His sled is known as the Trojan Warrior, after the ancient Greek war horse—silent, mysterious, and deceptively fast.

Equipped with their favourite snow gear, the kids make their way outside the garage door to the back of the house and trudge through the deep snow to the edge of the snow hill. Dad waves to them and reminds them of the safety rule when on the snow slopes. He then returns into the house via the garage, where he heads to his work shop in the basement to continue working on his current project.

The snow hill at the back of the house slopes away from the house, and its steep pitch allows the snow riders to pick up some serious speed, when the conditions are right. The first few runs are going to be slow until the snow is compacted and icy, allowing the snow gear to glide over it easily. That's when you pick up some real speed and feel all the sensations related to rushing down a hill on a piece of plastic or wood on a sunny, yet crisp, winter day.

At the bottom of the snow hill is a forested area with brush, or undergrowth, in the foreground and larger mature trees beyond. The undergrowth provides a braking area for the sledders, so as the kids dash down the hill, the soft bushes and long grasses act as a natural stopping area, provided the kids don't veer away first. They've had lots of practice and have all mastered steering away from the scrub area, going either left or right before they reach the brush. Naturally, all the kids have enjoyed crashing into the brush and rolling off their snow gear to declare victory. Although this behaviour is frowned upon by Mom and Dad, they've agreed that it doesn't pose a safety hazard because the scrub is soft and cushiony. Jamie is already plotting his crash landing into the brushwood, and Ronni is hopeful of improving her speed record. Little do they know the turn their fun outing will take ...



THE ACCIDENT



The kids are standing at the edge of the hill, snow gear at their feet, assessing the snow type, and planning the different runs they'll be making for maximum crash impact. The snow is soft and powdery, which means it will take considerable effort to "tame" it, so it's just right for a fast and exhilarating snow ride. Taming the snow involves making multiple trips down the slope, all the while compacting the snow to make it icier. The first runs are slow, and you only reach part way down the hill. With each run, you get a little further until the entire run is carved out and ready for some serious riding. The initial runs are still satisfying, as the light and puffy snow sprays into your face, giving a tingling sensation to the skin.

Danny suggests that they make a snow run to the right of them, which they all agree to. Ronni points to their left, and proposes it as a good candidate for high speed. Ronni's suggestion is accepted, so with the two runs marked out, the kids begin the process of compacting the snow. Danny and Tori take the right leg, while Ronni and Jamie take the left. And so begins the down and up trips on their gear. The kids are ecstatic, yelping and whooping

on the down trip and huffing and puffing on the up trip. It takes them about forty-five minutes to tame the snow, but Danny and Tori finally declare the job done for their leg. The left leg is a little longer and isn't quite finished, so Danny and Tori switch over to the left one to help Ronni and Jamie. After another ten minutes, the left leg is ready. The hard work has paid off, and the two runs are shimmering in the sunlight—a great indication that the snow has been sufficiently compacted and is icy. Excellent conditions for fast snow runs! The kids still have a good couple of hours of snow fun ahead of them before the sun begins to set and it becomes too dark to continue.

Danny and Tori perch the SDF sled on the brink of the slope and carefully get on, adjusting themselves on the wooden platform as they've done over the past winters, careful to not start down the hill before they're properly seated. Tori is in behind Danny and inches up closely, wrapping her small arms around his waist. She gives him the thumbs-up signal, indicating that she's ready, and they make forward and backward motions in unison to help move the sled. Eventually, they start to descend the slope, slowly at first, and then picking up speed, feeling the crisp air on their faces and the thrill of going down a slope freestyle. They're shouting and laughing and thoroughly enjoying the first full downhill ride of the season.

Jamie and Ronni are on the left leg, deciding who will be the first down the hill. Ronni invokes the oldest-first rule, which means as the older of the two, she's entitled to the first run. Jamie groans but accepts, albeit reluctantly. His usual easy-going character guides him to pick his battles, and this one is not worth it. Ronni, beaming that she has bested her younger brother, perches the Speedqueen saucer on the edge of the slope, carefully seating herself in it and crossing her legs. She grabs the handles and over

her shoulder asks Jamie to give her a push. Jamie complies willingly and gives Ronni a big shove, which sends her down the slope. Jamie can see the back of Ronni as she glides over the bumps on the run, picking up air, plunking back down on the snow, and shifting her weight from side to side to increase her speed.

Just as Ronni approaches the scrub area, she leans to the left while pulling up on the right handle and veers off to the left, stopping gently in front of the tall grasses, which are drooping with the weight of the snow. Ronni rolls off the saucer and is jumping up and down, clearly excited at her first run of the season.

It's Jamie's turn now. He's obeying the snow hill safety rule that his parents have drilled into them from the early days. He cannot start his run until Ronni, who is ahead of him, completes her run and moves away, avoiding any possible collision on the slope. Jamie, following the same steps as Ronni, is getting comfortable in his Dragon Flying saucer at the edge of the slope. He starts to sway from side to side, beginning the forward motion needed to start the descent. Within seconds, he too is gliding down the hill, picking up speed, and enjoying the thrill of the ride. He sees Ronni out of the corner of his eye making her way up the hill for her next run. Danny is towing Tori up the hill on the right leg, Tori talking a mile a minute to Danny's back and making all kinds of hand gestures, re-living the experience they just enjoyed.

Jamie is approaching the underbrush and decides to try a new move, leaning forward on the Dragon to shift his weight to the front of the saucer, picking up momentum and crashing into the tall grasses and soft shrubs. He comes to an abrupt stop, and his body is jolted backwards. He falls on his back. He gives a yelp and starts to laugh wildly. What a great ride! The leaning forward trick just before the impact was a great idea. He'll have to share it with the others. He's revelling in this thought when he hears Ronni at the

top of the hill yelling, “Okay, Jamie. No sleeping on the job. Move out of the way so I can get my next run in.”

The kids enjoy many trips down and up the slopes in the next hour. Tori has now switched to her Manny, having used up the two free tows that Danny had offered. Jamie has shared his leaning forward technique with the others, and they’re finding it gives just that extra umph needed to maximize the soft-landing impact. Ronni is preparing for her next descent and, inspired by Jamie, wants to try a trick of her own to gain further distance. It’s not only about the speed but also how far you can go on a run. She prepares for the descent at the top, is given a push by Jamie, and begins her downward trek. She’s wanting to try to lean back in the saucer as she approaches the bottom while veering to the left to see if she can gain distance. She’s approaching the bottom, leans back, and is suddenly airborne and racing through the air. For a second, she’s exhilarated, but she quickly realizes she is powerless. She starts to panic. The bushes are getting closer. She’s flying through the air. She can’t control her speed. She can’t manoeuvre away from the tops of the bushes. She hopes she can crash-land safely. She’s about to yell for help. And then ... nothing but blackness.



THE SNOW ANGEL



Jamie is patiently waiting at the top of the hill for Ronni to finish her run before he starts his. He sees her floating in the air near the bottom of the hill and is waiting for her to land. What a great aerial! He'll have to get her to tell him her trick. But just as he expects her to touch down, she continues to fly through the air. She's getting pretty close to the underbrush, and in a blink, she's vaulting over the shrubs and sailing into the undergrowth, out of his sight. He senses that something is wrong and waits for her to emerge. He waits a few seconds longer. No Ronni. Jamie is starting to feel panicky. He sees Danny to the right, finishing up his run. He yells out, "Danny! I think Ronni's in trouble! She went sailing over the bushes, and I can't see her. Go check on her! Quick."

Danny hears the alarm in Jamie's voice and bolts upright off the Super Duper, stumbling to catch his balance. He begins trudging through the deep snow, still fluffy and voluminous here, toward the left leg. "Where is she, Jamie?" Danny asks, panting, partly from the exertion of walking through the deep snow and partly at the foreboding feeling he's getting about his sister. Tori,

who is at the top of the hill, also saw Ronni disappear into the scrub. She shouts to Danny, “Over there!” and frantically points to a spot. Jamie looks at Tori and then Danny. He realizes that Danny won’t be able to make out the spot from where’s he’s standing. Jamie will need to be more specific.

“I lost sight of her by the tall grasses at the bottom of the run, Danny. Hurry. She’s been gone for a while,” adds Jamie, really worried for Ronni. She’s not a prankster, and by now, if all were well, she would be coming out of her landing spot to gloat about her aerial stunt. But it feels like an eternity since she went into the brush.

Danny continues his trek toward where Ronni was last seen, being guided by both Tori, who has now run to be by Jamie’s side, and Jamie. “There! I lost sight of her right where you are!” yells Jamie to Danny. Tori is nodding in agreement and looks for Jamie’s gloved hand. She slips her little mitt into his glove, seeking comfort. They lose sight of Danny as he enters the spot where Ronni disappeared.

“Do you think she’s dead, Jamie?” whispers Tori in a choked, small voice.

Jamie whips his head toward Tori and says harshly, “Why’d you say that, Tori?” He realizes that he has had the same thought and is irritated by Tori’s question.

“I dunno, Jamie. She should have been out of there by now,” says Tori in a pleading voice. Jamie recognizes his fear in Tori and is about to console her when Danny comes running frantically out of the undergrowth.

“Jamie, quick! Go get Mom and Dad. I found her. She’s unconscious. I need help to get her out. And take Tori with you. Hurry!”

Mom and Dad are kneeling on either side of Ronni, with Danny crouching nearby. Jamie and Tori are at the bottom of the run, near the spot where Ronni entered the undergrowth. It’s eerily quiet inside the undergrowth, and oddly there’s no snow—just a blanket of pine needles. The thick tree branches of the closely-situated pine trees form a sort of umbrella, and the snow has not penetrated them.

Ronni is sprawled on her back, arms and legs splayed, with her feet pointing toward the forest, and her head to the snow run. She looks like she could be making snow angels, but she’s not moving. Her eyes are closed, and her breathing is shallow. Her saucer is upside down, deeper into the forest, and is reflecting the sun, which is reaching the forested area through a break in the trees.

Dad is loosening Ronni’s scarf and unzipping her jacket to ensure she can breathe freely. Mom is looking over Ronni for any signs of bleeding or breaks; she shakes her head to indicate that she doesn’t believe there are any breaks in her legs or arms, nor does she see any blood. She’s not sure if there is any spinal damage, and just as she is about to suggest that Danny run to call an ambulance, there’s a moan from Ronni. “Don’t panic, sweetie,” Mom says in a slightly shaky voice. “We’re here and we’re getting you help. You had an accident. Do you remember anything?”

Ronni moves her head from side to side, and Mom and Dad exchange a worried look. Ronni’s head moving is a good sign that

there may not be any spinal damage. “My head hurts,” croaks Ronni. “And I’m really thirsty.” She begins to sit up.

“Whoa there, missy,” says Dad in a soothing voice. “We need you to take it easy. Just lie still for a bit longer until we can assess if you’ve been hurt. You passed out, and that’s always an indication that your body is in protection mode.”

“Danny, ask Jamie to get some water from the house for Ronni,” says Mom calmly. “Have him fill up a water bottle. And ask him to take Tori with him. I don’t want her left alone. And come back please, in case we need to get some additional help.” As Danny starts to get up, Ronni gives a sad whimper and raises her right hand to her forehead. Mom motions to Danny to continue on his way. Turning to Ronni, she says, “How are you feeling, sweetie?”

“I have a splitting headache. I think I’m going to be sick.” She quickly turns on her side to be sick. Mom gives a big sigh of relief. That quick motion by Ronni confirms that her back hasn’t been injured. Dad massages Ronni’s back, and Mom pulls a few tissues from her jacket pocket to wipe Ronni’s mouth. Mom always has tissues ready. “Yuck! I hate puke breath,” complains Ronni, citing one of her favourite lines from her most-beloved movie.

“Glad to hear you haven’t lost your sense of humour,” quips Dad.

“It hurts to laugh, Dad,” says Ronni, wincing.

Mom, who is continuing to observe Ronni and looking for anything out of the normal, sees a nasty bruise starting to form across Ronni’s forehead. “I think you may have hit the branch overhead with your forehead, sweetie,” she states. “You’ve got a bruise forming across it. Do you think you can sit up?” Ronni nods, gives a grimace at the pain brought on by the nod, and shakily tries to sit up. Dad helps her by readjusting himself at her back and placing his hands under her arms. “We’re taking you to see Dr. Hopkins. We want to rule out any other injury.”

“Will I be able to go on the trip? And what about Christmas Eve tomorrow?” says Ronni with a quiver.

“First thing’s first!” says Dad. “We need you healthy. Everything else can wait. I’m going to carry you to the house, missy. Just like when you were a little girl.” Ronni rolls her eyes, despite the searing pain this gesture brings on. She’s a very independent young lady and doesn’t want to be reminded of being “weak” and “needy”, which is how she refers to young children. “I know you love to be reminded of your ‘needy’ days,” teases Dad, as if reading her mind. “Ready. One. Two. Three. Up.” He sweeps Ronni into his arms. He steadies himself, and half crouching to avoid the pine tree branch, heads for the opening in the underbrush. Danny, who is returning, makes way for Dad and then heads into the underbrush to help Mom and retrieve Ronni’s saucer.



THE DIAGNOSIS



As Dad makes his way up the snow hill carrying Ronni toward the house, followed by Mom and Danny, Mom says, “I’m going to run ahead and call the doctor’s office to let them know we’re coming. I’ll take Ronni in, David, and you can stay with the kids.” She beckons to Danny to join her, and the two of them sprint up the hill as Dad cautiously trudges up, careful to not slip or fall, all the while talking to Ronni to keep her distracted and calm.

By the time Mom and Danny make it to the top of the hill, Jamie and Tori are coming toward them, Jamie holding a water bottle filled to the brim and sloshing with every step he takes. “The lid rolled off as we were capping the bottle, and we couldn’t find it. So we had to bring the bottle without the lid,” says Jamie sheepishly.

Which explains why it took them so long, thinks Mom to herself.

“You did great, sweetie,” Mom says, caressing his cheek and giving Tori a hug. “Ronni seems to be okay, but I’m taking her to Dr. Hopkins. Please be good for Dad while I’m gone.” Nods from Jamie and Tori follow as they crane their necks to catch a glimpse

of Dad and Ronni. Mom hurries off to the house while Danny patiently answers the many questions posed by his siblings.

Mom and Ronni are walking in the corridor that leads to Dr. Hopkin's office. Ronni is managing to walk, but slowly, as every step she takes brings pressure to her head. Ronni is tall for her age and very thin—*willowy*, as Mom refers to her physique. Ronni usually walks erectly, giving further emphasis to her height, but at this moment she's leaning heavily into Mom, who is supporting her with an arm around her waist. Ronni is dizzy and feels nauseous. The hallway lights bother her, and she needs to avert her eyes by looking downwards.

They enter the office and Susan, Dr. Hopkin's assistant, jumps up from her seat behind her desk when she sees them and ushers them to a visiting room. "Dr Hopkin's will be right with you," she says very officially. "We can catch up after he's had a chance to see Ronni," she says to Mom much more casually. Susan has known the Stonehart family for years, and her kids are friends with Jamie and Ronni. She gives Mom a reassuring look while squeezing Ronni's hand and then leaves them to return to her desk.

Dr. Hopkins enters the small room where Ronni is seated on the visiting table while Mom is standing, holding Ronni's jacket and hat. In past visits, Ronni has proudly used the stepping stool to haul herself up on the tall table without the assistance of anyone, regardless of how old she was. Today she needs Mom's help to steady herself.

"Hello, ladies," says Dr. Hopkins in a jovial voice. Turning to Ronni he says, "I hear you've received a nasty bump. Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Ronni then proceeds to tell him how she wanted to try a new technique on her snow saucer, how she remembers sailing over the scrub area at the bottom of the run and into the treed area, how she became frantic when she couldn't control the saucer, and then feeling immense pain shooting across her forehead. Mom is perturbed at hearing the retelling but is grateful that Ronni's injuries aren't more extensive. And Mom is relieved that Ronni's memory of the event is quite clear, despite initially claiming to have no recollection of it.

"I see," says Dr. Hopkins pensively, all the while looking her over for any visible injury. "Where do you hurt?" Ronni points to her head. "Any dizziness?" A small nod. "I'm going to check your limbs, so please lie down. Do you need some help?" Ronni shakes her head vigorously, but the pain in her head is intense.

She changes her mind and says weakly, "Yes, please." Dr. Hopkins helps her gently to lie on the table and then proceeds with bending her right arm at the elbow and rotating it in different directions. He then rotates her wrist.

"Let me know if what I'm doing hurts," says Dr. Hopkins, looking into Ronni's eyes with a sympathetic expression. At Ronni's head shake, Dr. Hopkins continues the same procedure on her left arm and wrist and then moves to her legs, bending the right one at the knee and rotating gently; he does the same to the ankle. Ronni continues to shake her head with each movement, which brings on a surge of pain in her head. The left leg passes the test as well. "I'm going to check your eyes, Ronni, with a flashlight. It may be uncomfortable." As he waves the small flashlight across her eyes, Ronni gasps and winces away. Dr. Hopkins quickly turns off the flashlight.

"Nothing's broken. You've suffered a concussion—a mild traumatic brain injury, Ronni," says Dr. Hopkins. "That's when the

brain, which is soft tissue, is jolted against the skull, which is hard. The brain is traumatized or shocked; the blow causes the brain to bounce around in the skull, which can lead to chemical changes. The body's natural defence is to swell, or become inflamed, known as inflammation. You don't seem to have any memory loss, but you are displaying a number of the other symptoms, like loss of balance, sensitivity to light, the headache and dizziness. The colourful bruise on your forehead indicates where you were impacted, most likely by a tree branch. I'm not going to request any tests. Let's help you sit up." He gives her a hand, pulling her up gently.

Turning to include Mom, he continues, "She'll need to be monitored over the next twenty-four hours. Her symptoms are temporary. She'll need lots of rest and fluids. No heavy mental activity, so no math competitions in the next few days, young lady! And definitely no more pressure on the brain, so hold off any type of additional snow sports for at least ten days. You should start feeling better in two to four, and by day ten, the swelling will have decreased significantly, provided you rest."

Ronni breaks out into a cold sweat. She has the worst fear but has to face it. "Can I fly, Dr. Hopkins? We're flying out to Halifax on the twenty-sixth."

"Oh, there will be no flying for at least ten days, Veronica," says Dr. Hopkins, sensing her rising anxiety. A lump forms in Ronni's throat, and she has to choke back tears. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but flying puts additional pressure on the brain, and there's no telling what reaction you'll have. So flying is out of the question!" Ronni's heart sinks! Mom notices the effect the news has on Ronni, and realizes they need to talk it through.

"Anything else we should know about, Dr.?" Mom asks, handing Ronni her jacket and hat, readying for their departure.

“If the symptoms persist, take her into emergency. Other than that, following the rest and fluid diet will improve her state. Any questions?” A slight shake of Ronni’s head indicates *No*. She doesn’t trust herself to speak. She has a number of emotions swirling inside her: anger, disappointment, a sense of failure.

Mom turns to Ronni and says, “Sweetie, I want to have a word in private with Dr. Hopkins. Are you okay to sit in the waiting room for a minute?” Ronni nods, caught up in her feelings, and Mom accompanies her to the waiting room before returning to Dr. Hopkins. She’s gone briefly and then is heard wishing Dr. Hopkins and his family, and Susan and her family, a Merry Christmas. Turning to Ronni, she says, “Let’s go home, Ronni. Hot chocolate is waiting.”

As they walk in the corridor toward the car, Mom still supporting Ronni, Ronni begins to sob uncontrollably. She can no longer hold the dam of tears that has been welling up ever since Dr. Hopkins told them that she isn’t allowed to fly. “Honey, what’s going on?” says Mom, knowing full well the origin of the distress.

“Because of my stupid stunt, we have to cancel our trip,” she manages to blurt out, tears streaming down her face, nose running.

“You had an accident, Ronni. You had a new idea you wanted to try out, and it didn’t turn out as you expected. But always have the courage to act on your intuitions, sweetie. They guide us and allow us to grow to our full potential.” Mom pauses. “Imagine if you hadn’t acted on the intuition to take your first steps, or read your first words. No regrets. And the new technique idea was no different. As far as the cancellation of the trip, that’s one option. There are others. In fact, I have an idea. For now, let’s get home where the others are anxiously waiting.”

“Oh Mom, I feel better already,” blubbers Ronni as Mom hands her a tissue. “At least my heart does. My head is still pounding.” She manages a weak smile—all she can physically muster—knowing she can trust in her mom.



THE ALTERNATE PLAN



Ronni and Mom are greeted at the garage door that leads into the house by Dad and the kids. There are anxious looks on all of them. “Well?” asks Dad.

“Let us get our coats and boots off first, and then Ronni can give an update,” says Mom as Dad begins to help Ronni remove her boots. He knows that leaning over increases the pressure to the head, and he wants to avoid that for her.

They all settle into the kitchen and look to Ronni, who begins, “The good news is that I haven’t broken anything. I have a concussion and should be fine within a few days, if I rest.” She looks to Tori, anticipating one of her many questions, and proceeds to describe what a concussion is. Ronni takes a brief rest before saying, “The bad news—”

Mom clears her throat, interrupting Ronni. “The other news,” suggests Mom sweetly, giving Ronni an encouraging look and urging her to change her word.

“The other news,” continues Ronni begrudgingly, “is that I’m not allowed to fly for at least ten days.” Silence. You could hear a

pin drop. Jamie looks to Danny. Tori whips her head to Mom. Dad is looking bewildered.

“Dr. Hopkins said that Ronni can’t fly because the added pressure of being in an airplane isn’t good for the concussion. He didn’t say she can’t travel . . . by train. In fact, I confirmed with him that it would be fine to travel by train in a few days. We could fly back from Halifax, because it will have been more than ten days from the accident, and Ronni should be out of any danger by then. That’s the reason I went back to see him alone, to discuss my idea,” Mom explains to Ronni. Ronni remembers she thought it odd, but didn’t think to question why her mom wanted to speak to Dr. Hopkins privately. Now she knows.

The emotional roller coaster is palpable; one minute everyone is tongue-tied, dejected, and disappointed that they’ll have to cancel their trip, and the next they’re jubilant and super excited, talking over each other, taking in what Mom’s idea really means. “Whoa! Hold on!” says Dad, holding up a hand and motioning for all to calm down. “Why don’t we let your mom explain her plan before we act like headless chickens?” Turning to his wife with a flourish, he encourages her to share her idea.

“Dr. Hopkins has recommended plenty of rest and fluids for Ronni to overcome the effects of the concussion. What I’m thinking is that we allow Ronni to rest over the next two days, even with the hectic days we have ahead entertaining both sides of the family. She can lie on the couch most of the day and join us only for dinner. I’ll stay home with her while the rest of you go to Mass tomorrow night. Then we drive to Montreal on the twenty-sixth and catch the train to Halifax. We can fly back home from Halifax.”

“Not a bad plan,” says Dad.

“I’ve never been on a train before,” says Tori excitedly. “It’ll be my first train ride.”

“Mine too,” chimes in Jamie. Danny nods, signalling it will be his first time as well.

“And not just any ordinary train ride,” says Dad. “It will involve sleeping on the train; the distance to Halifax is significant.”

“Oh boy,” squeals Jamie. “I’ve seen pictures of bunk beds on trains. What fun!”

“David, can you start to make the alternate travel plans? I’ll get us all our long-awaited hot chocolate. The occasion deserves some special treats,” says Mom with a wink, knowing that they all enjoy her home-baked cookies.

“Can I have one of the chocolate-dipped shortbreads?” asks Tori, without shame.

“And I want an almond crunch, please,” says Jamie, remembering his manners.

“I’ll get Ronni settled on the couch. Danny, pull out a Christmas movie and watch that with the kids in the family room while Dad makes some phone calls and I prepare the snacks.”

“Don’t forget me,” says Dad, rubbing his tummy in anticipation. Mom just giggles.

Dad joins the family after a while, who is grossly immersed in watching one of their favourite Christmas movies. No matter how often they’ve seen this one, it still elicits laughter and guffaws at the funny parts, year over year. Mom looks up expectingly and pauses the movie.

“Well, that was a lot simpler than I thought,” starts Dad. “Everyone is where they need to be by the twenty-sixth, so it was fairly straightforward to cancel the one-way flight and book us on the train to Halifax. We need to be in Montreal two hours before the train departs, so that means 4:00 p.m. We don’t have to leave

the house too early in the morning. I also rented a van for us that we can leave in Montreal.”

“That’s great news, David,” says Mom.

“I have an idea of my own,” chuckles Dad. All eyes on him. “We’ll have a lot of time together on the train. Sure, there are board and card games to play, meals to enjoy, with plenty of gaming and reading time, but I want each of us to research one interesting Nova Scotian person, place, or event, other than what we’re visiting, and share it on the train ride.”

Groans from all the kids but Ronni ensue. “We’re on vacation, Dad,” whines Jamie.

“I can’t do research on my own,” adds Tori.

Ronni is very quiet. “Dr. Hopkins said I can’t do any mental activity over the next few days, so I can’t join in,” she says sadly.

“Well ...” says Mom as she buys some time to think of how she can address Ronni’s disappointment and Tori’s comment. “What if I were to help both you and Tori to come up with the most interesting and tantalizing facts of Nova Scotian trivia? I already have an idea for my own topic, so I’ll be able to spend time helping you research yours. We’ll find some time over the next few busy days to finish this task. It’s a great idea, David.” Both the girls nod. “Then it’s settled. But for now, I’ll need to get dinner started.”

After dinner, the family finishes watching the movie they started. Mom suggests an early bedtime for all. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and the Stoneharts have a hectic day waiting for them.

Mom helps to get Ronni ready for bed—something she hasn’t had to do for a very long time—and kisses her forehead as she tucks her into bed. Mom bumps into Tori just outside Ronni’s bedroom doorway. Danny, Jamie, and Dad are in line behind Tori.

“We just want to wish Ronni a good night,” says Tori.

“And hope she feels better in the morning,” adds Jamie. Mom moves out of the doorway to let the others in and watches as they assemble around Ronni’s bed.

“I want to give you Sable to sleep with tonight, Ronni,” says Tori as she tucks her favourite cloth doll in the covers with Ronni. “She helps me fall asleep fast, and I know she’ll help you too.” Ronni is moved by Tori’s gesture and realizes how generous her little sister’s act is. Tori is very attached to Sable, and Ronni can’t remember a time when the two have been separated.

“Thank you, Tori. It means a lot,” croaks Ronni.

“I fetched your Speedqueen after we pulled you out. It’s back in the garage loft with the other snow gear,” says Danny. “You must have caught some serious air; the saucer landed deep into the trees, and it took me a while to get it out.”

“And you need to teach me your trick,” chimes in Jamie, always looking for an adventure.

“I don’t think you need any encouragement, Jamie, to find trouble. It finds you!” says Dad. “Night, sweetheart. See you in the morning.” He leans in to brush Ronni’s forehead with a kiss. Ronni has always known her family has her back; she’s just been reminded of it again tonight.



THE TRIP PREPARATIONS



It's late on Christmas Day, and the last of the family guests have left after having helped to tidy up the kitchen and dining room. Whew! Another great year of catching up with both sides of the family over a huge meal is behind them. The Stoneharts can now focus on their long-anticipated trip to Nova Scotia.

Ronni is feeling better, and despite the large number of house guests, has managed to rest comfortably on the family room couch, with aunts, uncles, and cousins taking turns to keep her company. She joined at dinner but returned to lying down after. The resting has improved her headaches, and the lights no longer bother her.

Packing for a trip is always fun. Mom does laundry and lays out the clothes to be packed days before. Mom is a good packer. She arranges clothes for all types of weather: warm outfits for cold days, splash wear for the rainy days, and always a set of dress attire for the fancy times. Dad teases Mom by saying that she invents occasions so she has an excuse to bring more clothes than are needed.

Each member of the family has their own luggage, and Mom makes sure that each kid is in the room when she's packing for

them. She lays out all the outfits for the trip on each child's bed before she packs them, so when she refers to a particular outfit, they know exactly which one she means. She has already laid out the items for this trip on Christmas Eve Day, before her side of the family arrived, and they all lie on the floor in a corner of the kids' bedrooms, ready to be packed.

The most fun part of the travel experience is the backpack preparation. Each child is responsible for packing their own, but there are some rules. For one, each child needs to pack items that will keep them entertained during a plane, car, or in this case, train ride, and any time the family isn't actively doing something. Mom and Dad never want to hear, *I'm bored. I have nothing to do!* from any of their kids. The other necessary items are snacks to nibble on because, as Mom reminds everyone, "You never know where your next meal is coming from when travelling." And the final rule from Dad is that everyone is responsible for carrying their own backpack, always. This rule makes it tricky to pack, because a heavy backpack, full of all your favourite items, is not a fun thing to lug around.

So the kids plan which items to put in their backpacks weeks ahead of a trip. They all bring their gaming devices with their favourite games downloaded and ready to play. The next common item is a series of books or magazines. All the Stonehart family members are avid readers, and it's difficult to pare down their choices so that the books don't weigh down the backpack. Only Ronni enjoys using an e-reader for her favourite books. The other family members love the touch and feel of paper books over the digital version. And so for days the siblings will add or subtract items to be placed in their backpacks for the journey.

The luggage is kept in the garage. Dad has built a storage loft for luggage and seasonal sports equipment, like the baseball

and snow gear that each of the kids owns. They have created a tradition where the family lines up at the large living room window above the garage while Dad backs the vehicle out to gain access to the stored luggage. Then he rolls out each piece, and the family members join him on the driveway to claim their own and take it to their bedrooms to prepare for packing. This event is called the Luggage Parade. It's always an exciting time, and everyone looks forward to it! The Luggage Parade for this trip occurred during the day of Christmas Eve, to the merriment of all.

The family, exhausted but thrilled with the events of the past two days, has a few minutes to sit together and finalize the plans for tomorrow. "It takes about four and a half hours to drive to Montreal, but I want to leave ample time to give us a cushion for any bad weather we may encounter, and allow us to drop off the vehicle before we board the train, which departs at 6:00 p.m.," says Dad. "Tomorrow's forecast is clear, but we'll be driving through a snowbelt, and sudden surprises are not uncommon. We'll leave the house at 8:30 in the morning, so we'll treat it like a regular school day. I'll pick up the rental around 8:00 a.m. Backpacks ready?" Nods from everyone.

Mom says, "Each family member's luggage is mostly packed; only the toiletries remain for us to pack in the morning. Do you really think we need to leave so early, David?"

"Better safe than sorry," replies Dad. "We can find a nice place for lunch and maybe do some sightseeing close to the train station to kill some time before boarding the train."

"Can we get a beaver tail?" asks Jamie excitedly. A groan comes from Ronni.

"I can't believe you're still thinking about food after the past two days of non-stop eating," says Ronni, rolling her eyes at her brother's insatiable appetite.

“Someone’s feeling better,” remarks Mom, noticing that Ronni is able to be high-browed with her younger brother.

“You can eat beaver tails?” says Tori with a look of disgust.

“Why don’t you explain the other meaning of beaver tail, Jamie?” says Dad. “Before your little sister has nightmares.”

“Oh ya,” starts Jamie enthusiastically, turning to speak to Tori. “Beaver tails are a dessert. They’re like doughnuts, but flat and long, in the shape of a beaver’s tail. You can add toppings like nuts, fruit, whipping cream, maple syrup, and other neat things. They’re so delicious! And you need to have hot chocolate with them to make it a really super yummy treat. We had them last year during our winter camping trip with the Wilderness Club, and we found out that Montreal has some of the best ones.”

“Sounds yummy,” says Tori. “I can’t wait to have one too.”

“All right, everyone,” says Mom. “We have a busy day—another one—ahead of us tomorrow, so we need a good night’s sleep. Off to bed we go.” With that, everyone gets up and starts up the stairs to get ready for bed, eager to start their vacation tomorrow.

