

## **Episode 50: Deb suddenly stopped skiing**

Have you ever found yourself in some kind of weird situation or predicament, and you actually have no idea how you got there? You're asking yourself, "What just happened?"

This is something I find really fascinating – when our brain is trying to figure out the reality of what is going on, but it just doesn't have enough information to make sense of it. So the end result is usually confusion. But in some cases, it can be terrifying.

Our guest today is Deb, and that's what happened to her one day while she was downhill skiing.

It was a beautiful day, she's in fresh snow, and she's having a great time just flying down the mountain. But suddenly and without any warning, she just stopped. She's on her back and unable to move. Then she finds that breathing is getting more and more difficult. There's no one else around.

And she has no idea what just happened.

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And now, here's my conversation with Deb.

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### **Scott**

This happened on a Friday, the 13th. Did that cross your mind at all before you went out that day?

### **Deb**

Well, I generally do notice when there is a Friday, the 13th. I just feel like, "All right. Let's see what we can do today." I always expect great things to happen on Friday, the 13th.

### **Scott**

Wow, I love that. So many people are superstitious and are, like, "Oh, maybe I shouldn't leave the house today." You said that you and your neighbor, Gary, went skiing on most Fridays. Was that pretty much like an "every Friday" thing?

### **Deb**

Generally, I was fortunate enough to have a job where I can work from home. I did accounting and bookkeeping. So, I could, kind of, do my work whenever. He is a veterinarian and he's a very busy guy. He would always take Friday off. He was going anyway. We were next-door neighbors, so I would just generally say, "Come pick me up" and off we go on most Fridays.

### **Scott**

Where did you go skiing usually?

### **Deb**

Well, this was in Colorado. We had all kinds of great places that we could go to. We would generally go to Breckenridge Keystone, Arapahoe Basin, Loveland, and Vail. Those are sort of in the Summit County, Vail Valley area.

**Scott**

The place you went that day was Keystone Ski Resort in Keystone, Colorado, right?

**Deb**

That's right.

**Scott**

How far was that from where you live?

**Deb**

That's about an hour's drive.

**Scott**

So, was it worth driving an hour to get to some great downhill skiing?

**Deb**

Heck, yeah.

**Scott**

Okay. You said to me, "In the summer, Gary likes to hike two runs that are unknown to the general public."

**Deb**

Right.

**Scott**

Is that usually allowed at these places or is this all public property in which you can go wherever you want?

**Deb**

Well, the big thing is that you need to stay inbounds if you're going to ski in a ski area - that's what we would do. He would just find places that - you take the ski lift up - you could maybe hike a little bit more and then get, kind of, an easier jump on the run. You'd be able to ski a little bit higher than everybody else. We were careful to stay inbounds and just look for the places that weren't as crowded, as Colorado has a lot of resorts that have that type of skiing.

**Scott**

On that day, you said you took a few runs on the front side of the mountain. Can you just take us through what happened on that day?

**Deb**

We usually take a few warm-up runs. Keystone consists of 3 mountains. That's what it looks like on the trail map. It looks like 3 mountains that are connected by chairlifts. You can ski the front side of the mountain and the back side of the mountain. Keystone has this other side that's called the Outback. You take a lot of chair lifts, ski a run-over, then catch the next chairlift until you get into the back. If we were in front, we would see a couple of runs on the front, get

warmed up, and then head back into the more challenging areas - that's what he liked to do. That was his plan. I think I told you that he was really into finding fresh powder and cool little spots that a lot of people don't know about. So there we were, we were going toward the Outback. We skied onto a chairlift called the Outback Lift. It takes about 15 minutes of riding to get to the top. There are plenty of runs that go right off the top of that lift. But of course, Gary being Gary, knew that if we hiked up about 10 minutes, we could get onto this ridge that was above where the chairlift let you off. There was always really fresh snow - there's not a lot of skiers up there. We'd ski down. Then, we took a run called the "Stadium Run". We were on the actual North Bowl in the Outback of Keystone, if that makes any sense. Once you get your ski or run, there is what they call a "run-out", which is basically, sort of, a catwalk, which the snow cats use to make their way around the mountain. That was about a mile of just real easy flat skiing, to get back down to the bottom of the lift. So, on this day, we did all that, when we decided to ski the North Pole. Gary usually skis in front. He would stop and wait for me because I'm not as fast as he is. When we got down to this area, the run was pretty clear. There was probably almost a foot of fresh snow. Maybe the snow was up to my thighs. Near the bottom, just before that run-out, are these big stands of trees. There's also, sort of, a bowl that looks like a cereal bowl that you would want to have enough speed going into it so that you can get out and onto that run without having to hike or pull too much.

**Scott**

You said that the snow was, like, 2 or 3 feet deep?

**Deb**

No, it wasn't. It was probably about a foot of fresh snow- on top of the snow that was already there. The base in December was probably 60 to 70 inches with fresh snow on top of that.

**Scott**

I'm trying to picture it and you can probably tell I'm not a skier. What level were your skis at? Were they at ground level? On the top of the old snow? On top of all the snow? How did that fit?

**Deb**

They were pretty much halfway between the hard snow and the powder snow. So then my skis would sink about 6 inches or so.

**Scott**

All right. So, you could kind of see what was coming. If it was something under the snow, you would have no idea.

**Deb**

Correct. So, there we go - down into the trees. That's where I slowed down quite a bit. I did want to have enough speed to get out of that bowl. I was slow enough that I could make quick turns. I could even stop if I needed to. As I went along, I was just thinking to myself and making really quick decisions like, "Watch out for this stump. I see that there is a tree coming up. I need to go around to the right of that, and then to the left of that one." There were enough trees that I had to really watch what I was doing. I had to be careful. I got down there. As I was going around the trees, I came to a complete dead stop. I fell backward onto the snow. As I laid there for a second, I thought, "Okay, I fell down. I probably tripped over something. The tips of my skis crossed together or something happened that caused me to fall." I wasn't really worried about it.

I tried to catch my breath, get up, and keep going, but I couldn't catch my breath. That's the first thing I noticed - why can't I catch my breath? I couldn't get enough breath to sit up. I couldn't really move my arms around. I was just thinking, "What happened? I had no idea."

I can tell you what did happen that I did not know at that time. There was a fallen tree that was, kind of, horizontal to me. The end of it was probably about 2 feet off of the ground. As I came around the big tree, I skied right into the pointy end of that tree that had fallen over. I was going fast enough where the force was so great that it split my pancreas in 2 and shattered my liver right then and there. I had big-time internal injuries. As I was laying there in the snow, my insides were bleeding profusely. That was causing my stomach to get really bloated while all that pressure was coming up against my lungs. So, I couldn't get a good breath.

**Scott**

All you knew at that time was "Something knocked me down and I can't breathe".

**Deb**

You got it. Yeah, I was just laying there wondering what had happened. I had no idea.

**Scott**

That's got to be the most confusing thing. One second, you were just skiing along. The next second, you were on the ground, couldn't breathe, and had no idea what caused it.

**Deb**

Exactly. Worst of all, I was completely alone. Gary was ahead of me, probably, by five minutes. I didn't know this at that moment, but he had actually waited for me for 10 minutes before sensing something was wrong. However, on a powder day like this, people who are on the mountain - especially back in the bowls - want to ski where nobody else is. You kind of want to find your own little fresh powder to ski by yourself.

**Scott**

Just like you guys did?

**Deb**

Exactly, yeah. We were just creating our own little path on the trail. There was nobody around, I was laying there, I didn't yell out for help or anything like that. I just laid there. I was really concerned about breathing. I would take a breath. It would be really short. Just enough to breathe. I couldn't get a deep breath. One of the miracles that happened was that, as I lay there for about 10 minutes or so, a guy came skiing through my tracks, which was kind of weird. He skied up and said, "Hey, are you okay?" I said, "No. I couldn't really talk, much less yell." He replied, "Well, I'm gonna go get ski patrol. Do you think you need help?" I said, "Yeah, I think I do." He took my skis off so that I would be a little more comfortable. I asked him to look out for Gary too on his way down because he was probably going to go right by him.

**Scott**

He arranged your skis a certain way, right? Can you describe that?

**Deb**

Yeah. If you put both your skis standing up into the snow, criss-cross against each other, that will signal that there's a hurt skier. So, if anybody else came along, they would know that's where I was. When ski patrol came along, they would look for those skis planted in the snow.

Anyway, I laid there, so that was a big, huge relief. I never found out who this guy was, but he totally saved my life. He went down to get ski patrol at the bottom of the hill or at the bottom of the ski run where Gary was. After he waited about 10 minutes, he started hiking up to me, but the snow was so deep that he would take one step and sink up to his waist, then he'd have to get out of that and put his other foot down. He was pretty much climbing on his hands and knees trying to get back up and find me. So, he did that.

Meanwhile, this guy - this angel guy - went down that mile-long ski run that ski-out. He got the ski patrol - there are usually a few of them hanging around by the lifts - and told them where I was. There were probably four of them. They got on the chairlift - that's a 15-minute ride. They rode up to the top, and then they had to hike up just in case I was on the top part of that run. As there are about 5 runs in this little area of the North Pole, they fanned out, skied down, and missed me. I didn't know any of that as I was lying in the snow. 25 minutes had probably passed by then. I was getting very, very cold because I was still lying completely in the snow and unable to breathe. I started to get scared. I have never been afraid of dying before. This time, I was just really scared of dying alone. It was a really weird sensation. I was like, "Well, if I'm going to die, this is probably going to be how it's going to happen because this is by far the most serious thing that's ever happened to me."

I laid there and started to see my life. When people say their life flashes before their eyes, mine kind of went like a filmstrip that switched from one scene to another. I was just kind of watching these moments from my life. I saw what looked like a vine from "Jack and The Beanstalk", going from where I was up to the sky. That's how I was gonna get to heaven. That whole scenario scared me so bad because I didn't want to do it by myself. So, I did what a lot of people do when they're frightened like this - I began to pray. I was like, "God, give me some company or give me some peace so that I can get through this." Right away, I felt this calming sense that God was with me, that I didn't have to worry, and that I would be okay. From that moment on, I never worried about what was wrong, and I never worried if I would breathe or anything. I was like, "I'm gonna be okay."

As I was processing all that, the ski patrol that had missed me had to ski back down and get back onto the chairlift. They had to retrace their steps in this rescue mission all over again. After 45 minutes, they did find me. Another miracle that happened was if they had found me on their first try, I probably wouldn't have made it because I was bleeding out too much from my internal injuries. Sitting in the cold for that long slowed down my system. I started to not bleed as much. I laid there for about 45 minutes rather than 20 minutes - that was probably what saved my life. The ski patrol showed up right about the same time as Gary did. They were all gathered around me. They said, "Well, Deb, I'm glad to see that you're able to talk to us, but we do need to let you know that you're as far away from the bottom as you could possibly get on this mountain. It's going to take us at least an hour to get you out of here and down to the bottom." I had that reassurance from God that I was going to be okay. I said, "Alright, whatever."

They got me onto a backboard. Then, they put the backboard onto one of those sleds. I don't know if you've ever seen one of these things, but they're around at ski areas. They basically look like a kid's sled. They're red and have all the padding inside of them. So, they put me in one of those, but they couldn't pull me because of the bumpy run-out. They didn't want to hurt me any more than I already was.

### **Scott**

Because they didn't know if you might have a back injury or be paralyzed or something...

**Deb**

Yeah, they had a neck thing on me. Maybe, they were thinking that I had broken my back. All they knew was that I couldn't breathe. Otherwise, there were no scratches or marks on me. They couldn't take my coat off to check and see if they can address any internal injuries, which I don't think they could have done. Their main concern was to get me off the mountain. Gary came along too. We got down to where the ski lift goes up. In this part of the area, to get out to the front side of the mountain, you have to ride a chairlift. So, you need to ride a chairlift to get in and out of there. When they pull up to the chairlift, I said, "I'm not getting on it. I don't think I can get on a chairlift."

**Scott**

Right? Because you're on a backboard and the backboard is inside--

**Deb**

Yeah. A kid's sled.

**Scott**

When you said "a kid's sled" - the kind with little walls around the side - I was initially thinking "toboggan". So, this is like a little sled that you're not going to fall off on one side or the other, right?

**Deb**

No.

**Scott**

It's not designed for a ride on a chairlift, though?

**Deb**

I don't think so, but these guys were great. They really knew what they were doing. The first two guys got on each far end of the chairlift while the third guy handed me to them so that I rode between them. When we got off at the top, there was another ski patrol person waiting with these big hot water bottles. I was so relieved because I was so cold. When we got off on the front side of the mountain, they skied down with me. My head was facing downhill. They're basically skiing/carrying me down to the bottom. When we got down to the bottom, Gary's wife was there - he had gotten in touch with her. So, they were with me. It was really nice to have 2 friends that are there. There was an ambulance waiting. They put me in the ambulance. They took me over to the Keystone Medical Center which, at that time, in 2002, was right there at the base of the mountain. It was an urgent care type of place that was used to seeing broken arms, blown-out knees, wrists, and normal ski-type injuries, but they didn't know really what to do with me.

We got in and they put me in a room. I still could not breathe. At that point, they wanted to take a look at what in the world they were dealing with. They had wanted to cut off some of my clothes, to which I objected, so they took everything off. They could see that my belly was really big - probably like a 6-7 months pregnant woman. They were confused. Why isn't there any kind of scrape where this impact happen? So, there's another miracle that happened that day when we got to the area that morning. As we got out of the car and started walking towards the left, I went back to put a vest on as I was a bit cold. The zippers of both my vest and coat were

coincidentally lined up. So, when I hit the tree, the zippers stopped the impact from piercing my skin.

**Scott**

You could have been impaled!

**Deb**

Oh, I totally could have been impaled. Yeah, it was even kind of sharp on the end. So, that's what stopped it. That's the only thing that stopped it. They said, "We can't really help you. We can't address this need. You really need to go to a Level 1 Trauma Center." That happened to be in Vail, which was about 30 miles away. So, they put me back into another ambulance. By then, I was starting to get some pain medications because the pain in my gut felt like I was punched or run into something - it was very, very painful. They set the sirens going and got me up to the Vail Valley Medical Center. This is when they started. There was a lot of rushing around and I could hear them talking about me. I was awake the whole time. They were trying to get my crit levels, which is when you get a reading out of your arteries instead of your veins. They couldn't get that reading and they kept thinking that I was crashing. I could hear him saying, "Get the operating room going now! She's crashing!" Meanwhile, I was thinking, "I don't think so. God told me that I was going to be okay, so I'm not gonna sit here and be concerned about it."

**Scott**

For a lot of people, those are the last words they ever hear - "She's crashing! We're losing her!"

**Deb**

Exactly! Well, we're gonna do what we have to do. At this point, Gary had called my husband, John, from Keystone. He was about 125 miles west of me in Denver. He got in his car, started driving, and got to Vail when I did. They assessed me and stabilized me somehow, but they said, "You're going to need a surgery that's going to require a specialist. We're going to need you to go to Denver." I was thinking, "Okay..."

**Scott**

Better call an Uber!

**Deb**

Better call an Uber ambulance again. I was getting into my third ambulance. They took me to the helipad there in Vail. I had just enough time to say hi to my husband. Then, they said, "Okay, everybody, we're going to Denver."

**Scott**

Your husband had just come from Denver, right?

**Deb**

Exactly.

**Scott**

So, he was going back there. Was he able to ride in the helicopter with you?

**Deb**

No! I wish he would have, it was really cool. We got into this little, tiny helicopter. I was just amazed because they had a pilot, a paramedic, a nurse, and me in there. It was really small. I decided to enjoy the ride. I thought, "This is amazing - flying over the Rocky Mountains in the helicopter." So, while I was doing that, I got a blood transfusion. We landed in Denver at the St. Anthony Medical Center and all these personnel came running out. I remember thinking, "This is just like on ER. I'm on a medical show." They grabbed me and rushed me inside. I had to wait for my surgeon to be available. By 9:30, I was going in for surgery. I crashed at 11:45 in the morning and then had surgery at 9:30 at night till about 1 in the morning. They had to staple up my liver, remove two-thirds of my pancreas and my spleen, and then sew me back up again.

**Scott**

When did you finally figure out what had actually happened or what caused this?

**Deb**

I think, somewhere in that ambulance ride over to the Keystone Medical Center is when they told me, "It looks like you ran into a tree."

**Scott**

They could probably tell by the way you were in the snow - you hadn't moved by the time they got there - and the little pointy end of the tree, and put those two together...

**Deb**

Yes, guilty.

**Scott**

So, have you had a full recovery? Are there any lingering effects?

**Deb**

I still have some but not much. Not much at all. I did end up breaking a little bone in my back, which we never really addressed. I mean, the other things were way more important. So, that gives me trouble sometimes. I do have reoccurring pain sometimes but, really, I'm living a pretty good life.

**Scott**

You've mentioned the fact that this happened gave you a new perspective on life. What is that new perspective or how did that change your mind?

**Deb**

Well, I really felt that God is there for me in a very personal way. That was a very huge knowledge to have. I rely on that quite often. Plus, the fact that life is short, of course. I try to make the most out of every day that I can.

**Scott**

A good way to live.

**Deb**

Yeah.

**Scott**

As we record this, we're kind of in the initial stages of the 2020 Coronavirus situation. I think a lot of people are giving thought to the big picture, and life, as well as how we are actually mortal. You went back to thank those who saved your life. What was that like?

**Deb**

Yeah, I was in the hospital for about 8 days. I'm going to say, probably, two months later, I went up to Keystone and I was able to go into the medical center. I was able to go to the Flight For Life, which was the emergency medical helicopter transport. I was able to speak with the ski patrol, the guy that found me, and they were all just surprised to see that I survived. They all thought that I would die from my injuries. That was sobering.

**Scott**

That's got to be gratifying for them to know.

**Deb**

Exactly. They all had a part in it and saved my life. Forever grateful.

**Scott**

But you've never connected with the guy that found you in the snow again.

**Deb**

Who are you, angel? If you're skiing in the north bowl on December 13, 2002, let me know. I'd love to say thanks.

**Scott**

Keystone ski resort. If you were there and found somebody laying in the snow, get in touch. We'll connect you two.

**Deb**

Yeah, that'd be great.

**Scott**

I understand that you went skiing again.

**Deb**

I knew I would ski again. I can't just fall off the horse and stay off. So, we had a unique opportunity at Arapahoe Basin. It stays open until the end of June. On Friday, the 13th of June, Gary and I went skiing again and had a great time. I didn't ski very long. It wasn't anything too exciting. Man, it felt so good to get back on the horse.

**Scott**

The fact that it was on another Friday the 13th, I guess, kind of proves that you are in no way superstitious about that day?

**Deb**

I don't think so.

**Scott**

I'm not either. That is pretty cool. I was surprised that there is still snow in June.

**Deb**

I know. Some years are better than others, but they're up at about 12,000 feet or something way up there.

**Scott**

So you went back? Do you still ski today?

**Deb**

I skied for about 4-5 years. Then, I just started to get older and more tired, so not so much anymore, but I still like to do some snowshoeing when I can and things that are a little less exciting.

**Scott**

Yeah, but it's great to exercise outdoors, though.

**Deb**

Oh, for sure.

**Scott**

Thanks for sharing your story with us.

**Deb**

Thank you for listening. I appreciate it. I love your show. It's fabulous.

**Scott**

All right, just a couple of things before we head out the door.

First up, we have lots of new listeners! I'm so happy when I hear from people who are just now discovering the show! I know a lot of people have found this podcast because of an episode trade I did with Whit Missildine, who's the host of the podcast *This Is Actually Happening*- which is an amazing show, so if you haven't heard it yet, you definitely need to go and check it out.

So if you're new to the show, I wanted to let you know how you can get involved and get in touch.

First up, probably the best way is through the private Facebook group. Lots of discussion going on there, we talk about the episodes, upcoming guests, sometimes I'll put up a poll to see what the group thinks about a particular story I'm thinking about doing- all kinds of stuff. Quite a few of the actual guests you hear on this show are in that group and can answer questions. So, check it out, that's at [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.whatwasthatlike.com/facebook).

I'm also on Instagram, I post almost every day there, and Twitter as well. If you're a Reddit user, or a "Redditor", this show has it's own subreddit. That's still getting off the ground, so go over there and join the group, and that's at [reddit.com/r/whatwasthatlike](https://www.reddit.com/r/whatwasthatlike).

I'm also building the What Was That Like YouTube channel, so you can subscribe to that if you want, [WhatWasThatLike.com/youtube](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/youtube).

Okay, I think that covers the various ways you can find this podcast all over the internet.

We've gotten a few more Apple Podcast reviews in recently -

Came from This is really Happening ★★★★★  
by EllenpdxGirl – Apr 28, 2020

Loved the story shared on a similar podcast, which is named in the title of the review. Subscribed can't wait to hear more! Love the tempo, tone, and listening skills of the host whose guests are from all walks of life

From This is Actually Happening ★★★★★  
by Lrcvermont – Apr 29, 2020

What an awesome show, thrilled to be introduced and eagerly bingeing these intense stories & experiences!

Love this! ★★★★★  
by Noroads – Apr 30, 2020

I'm a new listener here from 'This is Actually Happening.' I've only had the chance to listen to a few episodes so far but I'm totally hooked. I love hearing these amazing stories in the first person. I'm an artist and thought I had reached the end of the podcast road. I'm so happy I have some fascinating, new content to keep me company while I paint long hours. Keep it up! -Lindsay

So, thank you so much for that, I really appreciate all the kind words! Now the show has to live up to that! Believe me, I have new episodes in the works and you're gonna love what's coming up.

In the meantime, stay safe, and I'll see you in two weeks!