

Seven stories of fellowship set in different global locations.

Promised Land

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Promised Land

by

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CHAPTER 1

Trailblazing

(USA)

January 1, 2025, dawned quietly, peacefully, around the globe. Almost three full years had now passed with no disasters of consequence, no significant reported loss of life or other calamities. After more than a generation of cataclysmic events, natural and man-made, the planet finally seemed to be experiencing a period of tranquility. Even the usual forecasters of doom had been uncharacteristically silent lately; there had been no recent predictions of any apocalyptic happenings or other signs of Earth's imminent demise.

As I looked back over the previous two or three decades, especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century, science and technology had conjured up so many astounding developments. And there had been so many equally astounding natural disasters. But I had managed to be among the survivors. A miracle? Perhaps. If I believed in miracles. Then again, perhaps if I had been living in another country, rather than in the US, I might not have been so fortunate, since the most dramatic results had occurred outside of the US.

Nonetheless, I have to admit that the event I remember most vividly is not one that caused the most deaths or even received that much attention, but it did happen here in the US and, especially, it's one that I witnessed personally. So I'll start there.

"Did you really see cars and trucks frozen on the highways for five miles, with people dead inside?" As Cal asked Jake the question, he hoped he sounded skeptical enough, even though he was pretty thoroughly convinced this time. Like most of the other patrons in *Moose's*, he had seen Jake reel in many an unsuspecting first-time listener (and even a few regulars) as he spun his tales of history witnessed firsthand. Skepticism seemed as much in order now as ever.

"Actually, five miles is a conservative estimate," Jake declared in his distinctive drawl, which was usually tinged with more than a hint of mockery, even when he was telling the unvarnished truth. Only one person could usually tell the difference—I, his partner, Sydney. And even I could be fooled every now and then.

Although I myself didn't drink anymore, I often accompanied Jake to *Moose's*. He and I went back a long way, to a time even before we both had served in the Air Force during the Gulf War. After all these years around Jake, I felt a certain protectiveness, if not always toward him, at least toward his

hapless targets. They listened to him so intently, their mind-altering substance of choice further dulling their powers of discernment as the hours wore on.

Today, Jake was describing how, in 2010, after an unseasonably warm January, early on Monday, February 22, a cold front that no one had forecast (well, almost no one) suddenly descended from the Arctic Circle and raced through parts of the western US like a twister through Tornado Alley. Hundreds of travelers returning home after the long Presidents' Day weekend were frozen to death literally in their tracks on the highways. It was as if someone had aimed a flash-freeze gun at vehicles as they drove by, and a curtain of ice had enveloped and immobilized them instantly. From the virtually cloudless, deceptively blue sky, the ice-enshrouded procession of vehicles had looked like a crystal dragon snaking along the highway in celebration of Chinese New Year.

Here in Idaho, where I grew up, Jake and I operated an aerial photography business—holograms, digital movies, stills, whatever we could anticipate or create a demand for. We were one of the few in the emerging holographic field who could offer high-quality images transmitted from a given location directly to our clients, usually major national and international television networks, and into the homes of their customers.

At about 11:30 a.m. that Monday, we began hearing of an unusual weather system that was developing in Canada and moving south. Wanting to get a jump on other freelancers and on the networks themselves, Jake and I immediately headed north in our customized helicopter. But as we screened weather and traffic reports, I soon realized the danger that awaited anyone who ventured too far north of the 40th parallel for the time being. After flying for a few minutes, I was not interested in continuing any further. Initially Jake protested, but the sight of two small aircraft, possibly our competitors, a mile or so ahead of us, suddenly plummeting to earth and crashing was enough to silence him totally. And on the ground there was no southbound traffic for as far as we could see. I did a 180-degree turn, headed south again for a while, then landed.

Within the hour we began noticing southbound traffic on the highway, and it seemed safe to proceed north again. Safe, yes. But by no means pleasant. The sights that we encountered along the way were ghostly, surreal.

Jake continued to regale his audience with the dramatic details. "Some cars had pulled off the road wherever they could, and *they* weren't getting touched by the ice as it surged along the highway like a wave rolling toward a beach. Those cars in the slower lanes also seemed to be doing okay. It was as if all that frigid air was being drawn by the rapid movement of the vehicles that were traveling at higher speeds. That's what was making them freeze in their

tracks. At one point, the wall of ice caught up to the back of an 18-wheeler that had moved into the fast lane to bypass the slower traffic. It must have frozen the rear tires right away—the truck stopped so abruptly, its front section rose into the air at an angle, like it was doing wheelies.”

Most of Jake’s listeners seemed spellbound, even though many of them were old enough to have seen the images on television themselves at the time of the actual event. As Jake ended his tale, it was almost as quiet in the bar as it had been on the highway around us that day. The haunting vision was as clear in my mind as if I had somehow traveled back to that moment, which literally had been frozen in time.

That day, when we had reached the vehicles that had pulled over, many of the occupants were still sitting in their cars or just standing around, looking stunned, shell-shocked. We took as many shots as we could, talked to a few people, then got back in the chopper and were lifting off to head back south by the time our competitors started arriving on the scene.

Five hundred seventeen people perished that day along the icy corridor. It had stretched from Midvale, Idaho, to just north of Boise, where the system seemed to evaporate as suddenly and silently as it had begun. It had lasted just under an hour.

Jake and I had first met in 1989, when my brother Dave had brought him to our family’s farm to spend Christmas with us. Jake and Dave were both in the Air Force, stationed at Dover, Delaware, at the time. Dave planned to become a commercial pilot. Jake saw the Air Force as an opportunity to achieve a personal goal: owning his own aeronautic business one day. He knew that he could get some of the best flight training anywhere in the US, or the world for that matter, from the US military. And the benefits as a veteran were also very attractive, including money for higher education, low interest loans, health care coverage.

Jake’s irreverent nature often put him at odds with the military’s expectation of unquestioning obedience to the orders of a superior officer. But he was determined to achieve his own goals. That, plus his commanding officer’s recognition of Jake’s uncanny ability to size up people and situations, to the advantage of everyone on his team, kept Jake on track long enough to earn his wings and an honorable discharge.

In 1990, after high school, I too had entered the Air Force; but I wanted to be a mechanic, not a pilot. In 1991, during Operation Desert Storm, when Jake was in his last four months in the Air Force, by chance he and I were both stationed at Travis Air Force Base in California. Dave had already been discharged and had begun flying soon after for a major commercial airline.

After Travis, Jake and I would not see each other again until 2000. By then, I had returned to Idaho and was working as a mechanic at a regional airport. Jake was visiting in the area and had called my parents' number to try to get in touch with Dave. I answered the phone. Dave was now assigned to international flights and was out of the country. Jake invited me to join him for a drink at *Moose's*. Over drinks, he told me about the aerial photography business he was operating in Florida. He wanted to relocate further north; Idaho was on his short list. He also asked if I would be interested in hiring on as a mechanic with his small company—number of employees: one. I told him I would think about it.

In the nine or so years since I had last seen him, Jake had apparently managed to do quite well for himself. After his discharge from the Air Force in 1992, he had been a pilot for a courier service operating out of southern Florida. Then, in 1996, it seems that a rich uncle or friend had left him a tidy inheritance. He used some of the proceeds to buy a twin-engine plane and began his own courier service. He had also made some shrewd investments in the stock market. Both ventures had proven quite lucrative. I got the impression that Jake, then thirty-one years old, no longer needed to work for a living.

By 1999, Jake was ready for a new business enterprise: operating helicopter tours in tourist heaven Florida. But he soon tired of that as well—everybody was playing the tourist angle. Jake seldom liked doing things the way “everybody else” did; he had to find a “twist.” That’s when he began freelancing in aerial photography; his best edge was getting a jump on the competition whenever he could, anticipating what would put him in the greatest demand with potential customers. He tested the waters in Florida, picked up as much technical know-how as he could as quickly as he could, then was ready to relocate to a state with less competition than Florida, where he could make a name for himself in the industry.

As Jake brought me up-to-date on his life, I got the feeling somehow that he was being more than a little selective with the details he chose to share—especially his reason for moving out of Florida. I would get that feeling often with him.

I went to work for Jake in 2000. He was still as avid about tinkering with machines as he had been at Travis Air Force Base. Back then, he always seemed a little more curious than other pilots about details of an airplane’s operation and maintenance, details such as how certain features could be modified or bypassed or disabled entirely. He seemed to like finding ways to circumvent the ordinary modes of operation, with machines as well as with people.

Back then too, at Travis, Jake seemed to be able to fit in wherever he wanted to. And fit in he did at *Moose's* once he relocated to Idaho. In fact, for someone who was new to the area, Jake managed to develop business contacts quite effortlessly. Sometimes at *Moose's*, someone I myself had never seen in the bar before would enter and make eye contact with Jake, who would excuse himself shortly after, head outside the bar, then return a few minutes later, usually by himself. The aerial photography service had another customer. The service grew steadily. Often, when there was a breaking story that could be enhanced by visuals, Jake was invariably on the scene a step ahead of the competition.

Computers were also another of Jake's interests. Anytime he wasn't on a run in the helicopter or at *Moose's*, he was usually on the computer. Sometimes when I walked into the small office that he maintained at the airport, if he wasn't expecting me, he would appear startled—nothing too obvious, but it was another thing about Jake that made me wonder at times.

As much as Jake enjoyed entertaining others at *Moose's* with tales of his numerous, often hair-raising adventures, he seemed to enjoy political discussions even more, the more animated the better. In a single sitting at *Moose's*, Jake would alter his position on a given issue as many times as he needed to, just to keep the verbal fires sufficiently stoked. Then he would observe from the sidelines as the word warriors took their stand on one topic or another and argued unyieldingly with each other. Somehow, none of the combatants ever seemed to recognize Jake's role in keeping them sparring long enough to satisfy his own perverse enjoyment at watching the sparks fly, while he would also skillfully defuse any disagreements that seemed in danger of turning physical. In time, I would learn that Jake had more than just a philosophical interest in protecting the bar and its patrons from actual mayhem: not long after he moved to Idaho, he had become a silent partner in the property.

Here in the US in the early 2000's, there had been ample political goings-on to fuel endless discussions at *Moose's* and every other drinking hole across the country. The fireworks of the 2000 presidential elections had been only the beginning, with the highly disputed events in Florida that ultimately placed George W. Bush in the White House. Then came September 11, 2001. Needless to say, the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and Flight 93, and the ensuing military actions had dominated the conversation at *Moose's* well into 2002 and beyond.

But America's War on Terrorism was not suited to Jake's usual selective side-switching; he knew that his standard tactics could be hazardous to his own health, at least for the time being. President Bush's approval rating remained

high during Operation Enduring Freedom, spiking even higher anytime there was a story in the news of one intelligence report or another, warning of possible terrorist activity imminent in one US location or another. Throughout the subsequent turmoil of Operation Iraqi Freedom beginning in 2003, whenever the topic was related to 9/11 or its aftermath, Jake continued to be a model of self-restraint that was almost comical at times, because it was so unlike the freewheeling Jake that we all were used to.

In the years that followed 9/11, it was mostly other topics that enabled Jake to coax the denizens at *Moose's* into keeping him entertained with their diverse views on the issue of the moment. Topics such as Mr. Bush's re-election in 2004; renewed discussions of dividing California into three separate states; the warming of relations between the US and its peskiest neighbor, Cuba; the Summer Olympics in China in 2008, and the opening of the Three Gorges Dam there the following year; the US almost simultaneously electing both its first female president and its first black vice president.

Issues surrounding the War on Terrorism continued to rise to the forefront of discussion in the US from time to time. Somehow, Jake invariably had advance knowledge of key facts in those and other hotly debated issues of the day, whatever the year or the issue. By 2007, how Jake got his news had ceased to be as much of a mystery to me, especially since he had offered me one-third ownership of the aerial photography business in 2004 and I had accepted.

Shortly after that, Jake had begun teaching me to fly a helicopter. By then he had already become less cautious when I was around. As we had gotten to know each other better, and especially if he had been relaxing at *Moose's* for a while, sometimes he might give me a glimpse into his unquestionably gauzy past. Like the time he casually mentioned finding his name a few years before in the database of one of the government's least publicized and most powerful security agencies. "If *they* were keeping tabs on me, I knew I didn't even have to check to see who else thought I was worth the effort," he had commented, almost proudly it seemed to me. I had been deducing for sometime that Jake's forays on the Internet weren't just for entertainment—he was an adept hacker.

After several successful years of running the business together, every now and then Jake and I liked to get away and leave the flying to someone else. We both found ocean cruises a very relaxing change of pace. In 2008, when we went island-hopping together in the South Pacific and needed someone to fly the chopper in our absence, I was able to call on Mack Johnson, another buddy from my days in the Air Force, who lived in Georgia.

When I reached Mack by phone, he agreed enthusiastically, but I also detected disappointment, even sadness, in his voice as he explained the reason

for his availability. “I’ve got a lot of vacation time built up. If I don’t use it soon I’m going to lose most of it. Joyce doesn’t like to leave the area for more than a few days at a time; she’s always afraid she might miss out on some big deal or another, if she goes too far and the hotel or the ship doesn’t have a fax or reliable Internet access or some other business amenity she might need.”

Joyce was Mack’s wife. They had been high school sweethearts, married right after they graduated in 1989. They both had served in the military. Mack had re-enlisted in 1992, while Joyce had entered college and earned her degree in marketing. Joyce had gone on to become one of the most successful real estate brokers in Atlanta, in fact, in the entire southern US; her specialty was commercial property. Their only child Donny had been born in 1994.

When Mack came to fill in for Jake and me in 2008, I asked him how Donny was doing. He was silent for a moment, then, with a dejected look answered, “I’m getting worried about him. He’s going on fourteen now. He started junior high last September, and I’m beginning to see changes I don’t like. He used to get good grades, always told us where he was going, when he’d be home. Now, he barely has a C average, he’s hanging out with guys who look like nothing but trouble, and half the time he doesn’t get home until almost midnight.

“The one thing I’m thankful for is that he’s still best friends with his buddy from elementary school. Tino’s mother is Cherokee; this summer, Donny went with him to visit Tino’s grandparents on the reservation where they live. Donny really enjoyed it. He went to a powwow; he learned to ride a horse. When he came back home, he was talking about maybe becoming a veterinarian. That’s the first time I’ve heard him talk about going to college in almost a year. I asked my church to pray for him, help him stay on the right track.”

I suggested, “If you think he might be serious about becoming a vet, maybe he would like to spend some time on my parents’ farm next summer. He could even bring Tino along.”

Mack said, “You really think your parents would want to? He could be a handful for them.”

I replied, “They raised me and my five brothers and sisters, and we all turned out okay, if I say so myself.” Then I had another idea. “You know what?” I proposed to Mack, “Jake and I are planning a trip to Alaska next summer for a couple of weeks. If you want to run the business for us again while we’re away, you could even stay on the farm yourself and make sure Donny and Tino get settled in all right. It’s not a long drive to the heliport.”

In 2011, when Mack came to help us out for the third time, I asked him how Donny was doing. This time, his face lit up. “Syd,” he said, “you

wouldn't believe the change in my son. Donny's a senior in high school now. He wants to be a vet more than ever. He's applied to a couple of universities. He's just waiting to hear from them now. I have you and your family to thank for helping him get to this point. That summer on their farm two years ago was an answer to our prayers."

For Jake and me, life continued almost uneventfully for the next few years. Then one fall evening in 2019, as he and I sat on the back porch of our house, leisurely observing the darkness slowly overtake the waning daylight and the shimmering stars reveal their presence in the moonless sky, he remarked, "Sure looks like things are beginning to pick up with this space travel business. More and more companies are signing up folks who want to go—at ten million bucks a pop for some trips. I understand that one carrier is all booked up for Mars already, from their first scheduled flight in 2025 through the end of 2030."

I knew the signs well by now; I could practically see the synapses firing in Jake's head. Next stop, Mars. Was I really ready for *this* turn of events? Then I figured, I had come this far with him already, what difference could a few million more miles make?

The trick now was for us to acquire the knowledge and skills we would need for the next phase of our lives. Jake had no doubt where we should look—the US government. From NASA's web site on the Internet, he downloaded application packages for shuttle pilot positions with their Mars colonization project. The training was taking place at the Academy for Cosmic Exploration (ACE) in Florida. The next class would start in one year. The deadline to apply for admission was just three weeks away. We had our applications completed and in the mail within a week.

The day after Christmas 2019, Jake received a letter from NASA notifying him that he did not qualify for the project. All applicants had to be no older than thirty-five years of age at the completion of training. I received my letter a week later. Being almost three years younger than Jake still meant that I too was already well over the age limit.

"So they think we're not good enough for their little ole space program, do they? Well, I've got news for them. You and I are gonna be the best darn shuttle pilots in space. They're gonna be *begging* us to fly for them!" Jake vowed defiantly.

Jake began spending more time than ever on the computer. I soon knew the reason. Late in January 2020, he called me into his workroom. He handed me several computer printouts; they were blueprints and schematics for two of the space shuttles that were being developed for NASA, for which ACE would be training pilots. He also handed me a Training Guide for each model,

complete with Instructor's Guides including all answers.

"I'm just getting started," he promised.

Jake spent the next several days working at the computer almost around the clock. More than once, I would wake well after midnight and notice that he was still at it. He was obviously delving into something complex, something that warranted security measures at the site he was "visiting" that were challenging his not inconsiderable hacking skills. I suspected that it involved the joint space venture that had been in the news recently, the latest cooperative effort among scientists and engineers from the US and several other countries. I didn't pry. I knew that Jake would update me on his progress when he had something worth sharing. Finally, after about a week, as I walked by the door to Jake's workroom around 2:15 one morning, I heard him say, "Bingo!"

I entered the room but remained silent. Jake acknowledged my presence with body language, but did not speak. The printer was cranking out the pages. After five minutes or so, I returned to bed. The next morning, as I fixed myself breakfast in the kitchen, Jake stood in the doorway holding a stack of papers about four inches high. He said triumphantly, "Now I know almost as much as they do. Just a little more poking around and I'll have the rest of what I want."

Jake had his own code of ethics of sorts regarding his hacking: He usually did it only to obtain specific information, usually information that he felt was unfairly restricted. He also never did it with malicious intent. He had only contempt for those who periodically unleashed computer viruses that inflicted chaos on countless users and billions of dollars in losses on businesses around the world.

After two more days of trying unsuccessfully to burrow beyond the security measures that were thwarting him at the web site, Jake finally gave up, conceding philosophically, "It's probably a good thing anyway. If I try to go any further, they might detect me now. I'm pretty sure I've covered my tracks so far."

Jake and I set about diligently preparing to become shuttle pilots using only the printed materials we had accumulated through Jake's successful hacking. We supplemented that information as needed through any sources we could identify. But all of this preparation was only theoretical. We needed some hands-on experience, and so far the best we could do in that regard was some flight simulations Jake had unearthed at a couple of web sites.

Then, we got lucky. One evening early that June, Vince, Les, and Abe, three guys in their twenties, showed up at *Moose's*. They had heard of Jake's reputation with machines, especially flying machines. They had also heard of his reputation as a maverick, which had appealed to them. Vince and Abe had dropped out of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in their senior year,

not because they couldn't keep up with the course work, but because, like Jake, they disliked sitting in classrooms listening to professors who knew no more than they each already had figured out by reading the textbooks and doing some research on their own. Les had his PhD in both astrophysics and engineering. He had started but not officially completed the space shuttle program at ACE himself.

The three were the Gates, Jobs, and Wozniak of their generation, intent on being pioneers not in computer technology but in space travel. They planned to finance construction of their own fleet of space shuttles. All three had the money and a certain amount of know-how. All they needed was someone with actual flying experience and the chutzpah to head into space without official sponsorship from any government agency or huge conglomerate. Someone exactly like Jake.

Within a few weeks, we all had reached agreement on terms. Jake and I would each get a twelve-and-a-half percent interest in the company. Abe, Les, and Vince each had a twenty-five percent interest. Jake was not too thrilled about working for someone else again, especially three someone elses all barely half his age. But he needed only a foot in the door. That was all he had ever needed before. If our business relationship with the trio didn't work out to our liking, Jake and I could find or create other options for ourselves eventually. Jake's ultimate vision was finally becoming reality. I was ready to go along for the ride.

In 2012 I had celebrated my fortieth birthday. One of Jake's gifts to me in commemoration of the occasion was forty thousand shares of stock in a biotechnical company I had never heard of: Oxygon. Apparently not too many other people had heard of it either; the stock was valued at just \$1.25. Noting my less than overjoyed reaction to the unusual gift, Jake had commented dryly, "What's the matter? Would you rather some fancy car with a hood ornament? I can exchange it if you want me to."

But I didn't need another car. And I had seldom known Jake to be mistaken where money was involved—especially this much money! I even recommended the stock to Mack. He later told me he had bought ten thousand shares himself, simply on the strength of knowing Jake thought it was a good bet. I kept my eye on the stock listings at least once a week at first. The stock remained unchanged for a while, then slid to just \$1.01 by the end of the first year. After that, I checked it only every few months.

Except for changes of a few cents in either direction, Oxygon's stock remained unspectacular for the next few years. So I was even more surprised when, for my fiftieth birthday in 2022, Jake gave me another fifty thousand

shares. “Trust me,” was all he said. Two months later, the stock’s price was under one dollar a share. I was seriously considering selling most of my shares. Mack, too, was questioning the wisdom of his own investment.

Then, early in 2023, Oxygon rocked the biotechnical industry and the rest of the business world, by announcing that it had applied for a patent on a procedure it had been developing for almost fifteen years: altering DNA in human embryos to virtually eliminate the need for oxygen to sustain human life, thereby making humans more adaptable to the environment of other planets in our galaxy, particularly Mars.

The viability of such a genetically altered life form surviving to birth, much less to adulthood, outside a laboratory remained to be tested. Nonetheless, the implications were mind-boggling. The value of Oxygon’s stock soared. By the end of 2023 it was over one hundred dollars a share, and climbing. Virtually overnight, I was a multimillionaire. Mack was almost wishing he had been less conservative with his own investment in the company. Jake, to his credit, said not a word as the story unfolded; he simply gave me a knowing look as if to say, “Would I steer you wrong?”

By 2020, in the US and around the world, preparations for space migration had begun gaining momentum. The excitement was building. This was no longer just science fiction, the stuff of books and movies and video games. It was becoming real, at least if you had the money, or the skills and knowledge that would get you a contract with someone who did. Ordinary folks, not just astronauts, were getting set to visit—indeed inhabit—space.

But first space, in the form of a once-in-sixty-million-years asteroid, about the size of the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, was about to visit Earth.

In September 2011 there had been predictions that such a catastrophe was imminent—an asteroid was on a collision course with Earth. That had eventually turned out to be just a gas storm, which had dissipated after a month or so. But before its true nature had been determined, the dire reports in the media, by scientists and other presumed experts, had been enough to start a major panic. Those experts had projected that the asteroid’s trajectory almost certainly would result in impact somewhere in the northern hemisphere. Initially, they were unable to predict with absolute certainty which side of the Atlantic Ocean would be affected.

That ominous if imprecise calculation had provoked a frenzied exodus from North America and Europe. The cost of last minute bookings on cruises through the Panama Canal and to other nearby destinations skyrocketed. For thousands of North Americans and Europeans with the means, the outrageous prices were no deterrent. Nor was the fact that they would be making the

journey in the month that traditionally produced the most hurricanes in the region. So far it had been a relatively quiet season. Even Elisa, only the second tropical depression to generate winds strong enough to be called a hurricane to date that year, had been downgraded to just a storm before it had even reached the Virgin Islands.

The chances were slim that another storm could develop and reach hurricane-level quickly enough to affect those tropical itineraries. And even if one did, for ages cruise ships had traveled routinely in the area during the hurricane season without significant disruption to those aboard, much less loss of life. Routes could be altered when necessary to avoid the projected path of a potential troublemaker. Compared with the likelihood of becoming the dinosaurs of the space age because of an asteroid, to all who chose an aquatic escape route, a much more attractive option was the prospect of a few days spent gorging on an unending assortment of appetizers and entrees and desserts. So what if they might eventually disgorge everything they had eaten over the side of the ship a few hours later in the wake of the fizzling Elisa or her successor?

Except that downgraded hurricanes do not always just fizzle away and die. And Elisa did not. Within thirty-six hours after the all-clear had been announced, she roared back to life just south of Jamaica. A few hours earlier, passengers on cruise ships in the area had learned that they had fled a non-existent asteroid. And that night, as thousands slept soundly if resentfully, those aboard three ships in the most vulnerable locations were awakened around four in the morning by the sound of blaring alarms. In little more than an hour, they took their final rest beneath the sometimes treacherous waters of the Caribbean Sea, entombed in the very ships that were to have been their deliverance from what they had believed would be almost certain death, had they remained in their homes on continents hundreds of miles away.

But Mother Nature was not yet through testing the problem-solving prowess of the solar system's presumed most intelligent inhabitants. In late summer 2020, there would be new rumors of errant debris approaching Earth from distant orbits: Scientists in Norway and China separately reported sightings of another monster asteroid, with a trajectory that could bring it into Earth's atmosphere.

With the memory of the asteroid-that-wasn't and the hurricane-that-was still lingering somewhat in the minds of many, this time those inconvenient reports were met almost universally with disdain, their authors quickly and emphatically discredited in the scientific community. That is, until one week before the asteroid actually reached Earth's atmosphere.

By then, evacuations were not a feasible option for the incalculable

numbers of people who would be affected. Instead, scores of guided missiles were deployed from various sites around the globe, to intercept and disintegrate the asteroid or redirect it elsewhere in space. Those missiles proved less than totally effective. But only because of certain ill-advised human tinkering that had taken place almost a decade before.

For several hours one day in 2012, a notorious computer virus had crippled the systems that controlled most of the world's guided missiles. It had been dubbed Chameleon, for its ability to conceal itself within minutes after initial detection, continuing its damage until the last inappropriately altered code could be identified and restored. By then, however, four missiles had been launched accidentally from a site in a former Soviet state. Although only one of those missiles had reached land, countless lives had been lost as a result. After several months, Chameleon had been declared completely eradicated.

But the virus, or more likely a recent copycat, had reemerged with the launching of the missiles toward the very real asteroid of 2020. Those attempting to guide the missiles had struggled frantically to adjust their calculations each time one missed the target. Several missiles had managed to strike the asteroid, disintegrating it into significantly reduced masses and steering those fragments as much as possible away from continents and other large, inhabited areas when it finally did penetrate Earth's atmosphere.

Eventually, the three largest masses had crashed in the general area of the Arctic Ocean. The brunt of their impact occurred in the northern areas of Scandinavia and Russia, particularly Siberia, as well Greenland and several less populated islands. About three hundred thousand had lost their lives there, making it comparable to the tsunami of 2004 that had struck in the Indian Ocean. Had it not been for the missiles, in 2020 hundreds of millions or even billions of lives might have been erased from the planet by the asteroid. Even the AIDS pandemic had claimed many more lives before that virus finally had been controlled, if not entirely eradicated, several years earlier.

Whether because the asteroid's diminished force had caused destruction in only a relatively limited area, or whether due to the distraction of the feverish preparations for space travel, within a month after the disaster, most of the world, or at least the US, seemed ready to return to "business as usual." Which for Jake and me meant getting ready to travel.

Perhaps for the same reasons that the global community's grief over the asteroid tragedy was not prolonged, neither was its grief over the tragedy at the Winter Olympics two years later. But that tragedy could have been avoided entirely, if the responsible entities had heeded the warnings of Chinese climatologist Dr. Mei Leung and her American colleagues.

In the winter of 2020, following the asteroid strike, temperatures around

the world had averaged a few degrees colder than normal. Most experts had dismissed the fluctuations as just a one-time anomaly. Snowfall in the higher latitudes had been slightly heavier than normal, but no cause for alarm either, they felt. Thus, the following year, when Dr. Leung had forecast unusually heavy snowfall throughout much of Earth's temperate zones that winter, she was effectively ignored.

The heavier snowfall had indeed materialized. But for officials and commercial sponsors of the 2022 Winter Olympics, it could not have been more welcome: They had anticipated that those snows would make the two weeks of competitive events an even grander success. And they were right. Then on the final day of the Olympics, the snows exacted the price for their generosity. Several hundred participants and spectators attending the closing ceremonies had perished, as had hundreds of residents in the picturesque homes nestled in the valleys around the venue, all smothered beneath the avalanches that rumbled down the glistening slopes of the surrounding mountains that night. Just as hundreds had perished in the western US on Presidents' Day in 2010. Dr. Leung's forecasts had been ignored then too.

The year 2020 was quickly coming to a close. Contracts signed with our new employers, Jake and I still had a lot of work ahead of us, if we wanted to be ready for lift-off by 2025, when the first trips to Mars were projected to occur. We both knew that we couldn't focus attention on our new undertaking and still continue to operate the helicopter business effectively. It was time to contact Mack again.

As Jake pulled over to the curb of the upscale restaurant, instead of into *Moose's* parking lot as we had invariably done on Mack's previous visits, I could see that Mack realized this wasn't just another casual dinner outing. Not one to beat around the bush unless it specifically served his purposes, once we were seated Jake got straight to the reason for our asking Mack to come to Idaho this time. "Wanna buy a successful, well-established aerial photography business? Cheap?" he asked.

Mack looked at Jake skeptically, but sensed instinctively that he was serious. "How cheap?" Mack quizzed.

"A buck," Jake replied nonchalantly.

"You mean one dollar?" Mack exclaimed in disbelief.

"No. I mean a buck. As in four legs and antlers. I've got a rifle with a telescopic lens and a laser target finder I can lend you. I'll even drive you out to the woods if you'd like. I know a real good spot to hunt for deer. Unless you're one of those bleeding hearts who don't think it's right to hunt poor defenseless little animals."

Now Jake was having fun with Mack. I cut in. “He means one dollar,” I confirmed. “We have all the money we need. In barely five years, if everything goes as planned, we’ll be gone not just from Idaho, but from Earth itself.”

Jake and I told Mack about our plans. Over dessert we toasted our verbal agreement to transfer ownership of the business to Mack. We signed the formal agreement a few months later. All the important pieces were finally in place for the ultimate adventure of our lives.

Seven stories of fellowship set in different global locations.

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