

MOONWAKE
The Journey Home

By

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For our grandchildren

Chapter One

Mike's excitement turned into anxiety as the Earth grew larger. Would everything be as wonderful as he remembered? Would he stay there or would he return to the Moon?

Adjustment to weightlessness on the transport had been easier on the return trip but Mike feared the worst was yet to come. Would his body have trouble adjusting to Earth? It was good his grandfather would be there to meet him.

The familiar continents started taking shape and Mike put his worries aside. The blue-brown color was inviting and the hypnotic circling and swirling of the clouds held his gaze. The slowly rotating globe, suspended in blackness, transfixed him. He wondered if his home world would ever look natural from space.

As their transport closed in on the transfer station orbiting Earth, the crew prepared for docking. Here he would catch the connecting shuttle to Earth. Mike made a last minute check around his seat. After three days in this cramped space ship, it would be great to get off.

The co-pilot for this leg of the trip was Jenny Walker. Jenny was heading home for her required down time from flight duty at the orbiting lunar lab. Mike knew Jenny from their brief but fortunate meeting after his lunar hopper malfunctioned and he, along with Toni and Laura, were propelled into a decaying lunar orbit. Their good fortune that day had been Jenny flying to their rescue.

A hopper wasn't designed to reach orbit and safely return to the lunar surface, so Jenny's flight to bring them back had been truly heroic. She had responded like the ace pilot she was, plummeting down from the orbiting lunar lab to intercept their floundering ship. She had executed precise, hair-trigger maneuvers before making contact and taking them on board. After their successful rescue, she'd immediately reported back to work at the orbiting lab and he'd never gotten to know her. But his trip back to Earth would change that.

Rumors about Jenny Walker had circulated around the base but Mike didn't listen to idle gossip. His parents told him not to put any faith in such stories. They said it was destructive to listen to rumors. All he knew for sure was, that after some problem at the Space Flight Academy, she'd left and gotten her flight certification at a private company near the Cape.

When the transport left Moonwake, Jenny had made a point of coming back to talk to Mike. At first, she kidded him pretty good about needing to be plucked off an orbiting hopper but over the last three days, they'd had some serious discussions about that rescue. They both agreed her flight had been one in a million and that she was one amazing pilot.

Mike knew Jenny wasn't a braggart, just extremely confident. This really wasn't surprising though, he'd come to recognize self-confidence as a common trait in people who lived and traveled off-Earth. That kind of attitude bothered some people but Mike saw past their bravado and admired their courage and daring.

After they boarded the shuttle for the last leg of the trip, Mike asked Jenny what plans she had on Earth.

"I only know I'm going for some fun," she told him. "I like keeping my options open."

"I'm getting together with Toni and Laura next week," Mike said. "Any chance of you joining us Jenny?"

"What? You don't want an old pilot hanging around, do you?" she joked.

"You're not old Jenny," Mike told her, thinking she was younger than his parents.

"The plan, as I understood it to be when I left, was that we'd meet at Laura's house in Alaska and then travel around. Best guess is, first I'll need about a week to re-adjust to

Earth's gravity.

"Pretty big plans for kids your age. By the way, how does Toni like being back home on Earth?"

"I guess she likes it," he said. "She was determined to go back there for a school term and knowing her, she didn't complain too much."

"Yeah, she's a real tough kid," Jenny said, remembering the girl she'd saved from certain death. "Be sure to tell her and Laura I said hi."

"Seriously Jenny, why don't you just say 'hi' yourself?" Mike insisted. "My friend Jason's girlfriend has her own jet. They're flying me to Alaska next week to get Toni and Laura. There'll be plenty of room. Why not come with us?"

Jenny had to admit it sounded inviting. No one was expecting her and her plans were definitely open. "Okay! Why *not*?" she said, happy to be asked and relieved to have a place to go. "You're sure no one will mind?"

"Mind? No! This is a great idea. I'm sure Tasha would love having a co-pilot. The more I think about it, the more I like it," he told her.

The passengers were strapped in and ready to depart the Earth orbiting station when a steward, holding a wiggling figure under his arm, marched down the aisle. "Look what we just found!" he bellowed. "Who wants to claim this kid?"

Fighting like a tiger to break the grip of his captor, was Toni's little brother Zack.

"I know him!" Mike yelled. "Zack! How did you get here?"

"He's a stowaway," barked the steward. Everyone leaned forward, eager to hear all about this unexpected event. "His parents are frantic. Here, sit down and stay put!" he told Zack, strapping him into the seat next to Mike. While stowaways were not unheard of, it was considered a preventable breach of security and that made the Reliance crew look sloppy.

"Hi, Mike," Zack said, smiling weakly. He looked tired and seemed grateful to be sitting next to someone he knew. "They won't send me home, will they Mike?"

"What were you thinking?" Mike whispered. "Your parents must be furious!"

"I just wanted to go on the trip with Toni and Jason," explained Zack. "I'm sorry everyone's so mad. I didn't mean to make all this trouble."

"You *knew* this was wrong Zack, that's why you hid on the transport," Mike scolded. "They'll probably send you right back. Why didn't they just keep you at the transfer station?" he wondered out loud.

"I don't know," said Zack crossing his arms. "They just said I had to stay with the passengers going on to Earth."

"Do his parents know where he is?" Mike asked a passing steward.

"They know he's here and said to take him on to Earth." After delivering that small bit of information, he turned to address the passengers. "Thank you for choosing Reliance Spacelines. It's a pleasure to serve you. Please pay attention to the following procedures and safety announcements."

There was nothing Mike could do, so they sat together in silence as the transport took off toward Earth.

Tasha Parker had been waiting on the tarmac for over forty-five minutes. They couldn't clear her for take off until the weather let up. "Tower, Jasmine TQR, what's our status?" she radioed. At this rate they'd miss Mike's arrival at the Cape.

"Jasmine, you'll have your window in about ten minutes," radioed the tower. "There's a

break in the storm.”

“Roger tower. Give me the good word and I’ll be out of here.” It wasn’t bitterly cold, but cold enough to cause problems. Snow this time of year wasn’t unheard of, but it was unusual. “It looks like we’ll make it,” she told Jason sitting beside her, staring blankly out the window.

“At least it’s not sticking to the wings,” he said, grateful for anything that would hurry their departure. He wished she hadn’t insisted on making this detour to Flagstaff. It had stretched out the trip and they were going to be late.

“If we get this go-ahead, we’ll make it,” she assured him. The weather was lifting and the snowplows were keeping pace with the heavy wet snowfall.

“Jasmine, two commercial flights landing on Four, then you’ll be cleared for take off. Over.”

Flagstaff was in northern Arizona, situated 7000 feet above sea level on the Mogollon Rim. Tasha had altered her original flight plan in Chicago so they could fly over the Grand Canyon. They’d approached the remote mountain community, tucked away in a huge Ponderosa Pine forest, from the north, flying southeast past the majestic San Francisco Peaks.

Jason had to admit the flight over the Grand Canyon had probably been the high point of all his trips with Tasha. The sun had briefly broken through the clouds, flooding the canyon walls with color. It looked like a painting—to fantastic to be real. He’d caught a fleeting glimpse of the Colorado River, a twisted green line, barely visible deep in the canyon and the tool that had been carving this canyon for twenty million years.

Standing like sentries above the clouds, the snow-covered San Francisco Peaks had welcomed them to Tasha’s old hometown. It was a nice perk having a girlfriend who flew a jet. And it certainly gave new meaning to “a slight detour.” They’d been joined by a few of Tasha’s Flagstaff friends for lunch at the downtown Monte Vista Hotel, a restored nineteenth century building, like so many others in this historic town.

Over the last one hundred and fifty years, Flagstaff had grown from a trading post to a sleepy little tourist town on Interstate 40, and now was a booming community growing south toward Sedona, an upscale artist community in red rock country. Tasha’s friends had pleaded with her to fly them to Sedona for some shopping but there wasn’t time and now bad weather had set in, delaying their departure.

“We’re set for takeoff Jason,” Tasha said, snapping him back to the matter at hand. With a practiced hand, she guided the sleek company jet into position for take off. “Roger tower, Jasmine holding on runway Four.”

They watched as each plane appeared out of the whiteness only to be enveloped again in falling snow as they taxied to the terminal. Now it was their turn as Tasha received clearance for take off.

Tasha was tall and slender, with long brown hair and a heart-shaped face. Her quick wit and sense of humor were rooted in her self-confidence. Jason enjoyed her company immensely. He glanced over as they sped down the runway. It still gave him a thrill to watch her behind the controls.

Even though the sudden snowfall was letting up, Jason would only have this soupy gray mix to gaze at until they cleared the clouds. “We’ll be topside soon,” Tasha reminded him. She was just as anxious as he was to meet Mike’s shuttle and was used to Jason’s apprehension about taking off in bad weather. “It should be smooth all the way to the Cape.”

As soon as Mike was ready, they’d fly to Alaska and pick up Laura and Toni. This plan had been hatched three months earlier when Toni, Laura and Mike were sheltered on the

Moon, waiting out a deadly radiation storm. The biggest sticking point of their travel plans, was their parents allowing five high school students to travel alone together on Earth. But when Mike's grandfather had agreed to chaperone them, the trip was approved.

Flying was Tasha's passion. It had always been her dream to fly in space. All her efforts were focused toward a space career. She knew if she built up fight time and made good grades, there was a better than even chance she'd be accepted into the Space Flight Academy. Her friendship with Jason helped her understanding of life off-Earth. But Jason hadn't liked his time at Moonwake Base and there were times when he just refused to talk about it.

"It's great your folks let you use this jet," Jason said, when they broke through the clouds into sunlight. "I can't tell you much about Laura but you're going to like Toni. Mike says Laura's into artsy stuff and spent a lot of her time on the Moon drawing. Did I tell you her aunt is the base doctor at Moonwake?"

"Yes Jason. She helped rescue you and your friends on her wedding day, right?" laughed Tasha.

"That's the one," he said laughing along with her. He was glad to be home. Living on the Moon was too much trouble. He knew his girlfriend wouldn't lose her enthusiasm for space travel until she tried it on for size. Only then would she understand just how different it was. Maybe she'd like it. His best friend Mike certainly had the space bug. But Jason was hoping to convince him to stay on here Earth.

"I'm betting, as soon as Mike spends a few days back here, he'll be telling his folks to send his stuff."

"Really?" said Tasha.

"I think he's forgotten what a neat place Earth is—how much freedom he's missing."

"I don't know Jason; living off-Earth is my dream. It would be worth a little inconvenience to have so much adventure."

"Maybe," he answered, annoyed with her persistence. Tasha certainly was a mystery. Why would a girl with so much available to her here on Earth want to rough it in outer space? Her family owned a successful design firm and she had every conceivable thing she could possibly want right here. "You know Tasha, things aren't always what they're cracked up to be. It might seem like adventure to you but it's a lot of trouble and hard work too."

"You're always knocking it Jason. Let me find out for myself!" she snapped, annoyed by his constant put-downs of space.

"Fine. Go ahead and pick their brains all you want while they're here. Maybe you'll get an invitation to visit. But don't forget, this is my vacation too and I hope you plan to talk about something else besides the *Moon*." There, he'd said it. He was so sick of this. The Moon seemed to be all she thought about lately.

"Jason, I know you don't like talking about it all the time, so I'll tone it down." She didn't want him in a foul mood and spoiling the day. "You know, we better hurry up and decide where to go on our vacation."

Jason looked across the hundreds of miles stretched out before them. "Well, with this for transportation, our options are practically limitless. When will we be out of this weather system?"

"The weather's clearing to the East. It won't be long."

Jason leaned back and stretched. "They don't have to deal with clouds on the Moon. Coming back is going to be a shock to Mike's system. After a year in low gravity, it's going to be tough adjusting to Earth."

He tells me to keep quite about space and then he's the one that brings it up again, Tasha

thought. “Grab the clipboard under your seat and jot down ‘beach,’” she instructed. “I love the beach—everyone loves the beach! Mike can take it easy and just float—ease himself back to Earth’s heavier gravity.”

“Gravity is the biggest problem,” Jason agreed and felt around under the seat for the clipboard. “He’s been taking an enzyme supplement that keeps bones and muscles strong during long trips to places with low gravity. And everyone has a daily workout in the gym.” His hand brushed the clipboard and he pulled it out. “But being six times heavier is hard to deal with.”

“Toni dealt with it and more,” Tasha reminded him. “It will be a couple of hours until we get to the Cape, so sit back and relax.”

“I’ll dream up vacation destinations,” Jason said, and closed his eyes.

“David Matthews! Please pick up the nearest courtesy phone,” blared the loudspeaker. Mike’s grandfather looked around and located the phone. He was picking it up just as the announcement started again.

“This is David Matthews. You have a message for me?”

“You have an urgent message. Please report to the security office located in the west wing of the spaceport,” instructed the voice on the line.

“On my way,” he told the operator and hurried out of the lounge. He soon quickened his pace, half running—half walking to the security office.

“I’m David Matthews. Is something wrong with my grandson?”

“A young boy named Zack Baker is a stow-away on the Reliance shuttle arriving from Moonwake. His parents asked if you and your grandson Mike would keep tabs on him until his sister Toni Baker comes for him.”

David listened closely as the security officer continued. “The shuttle crew contacted us because Mike wanted you know about the situation before he lands.” The agent smiled at David who was slightly out of breath. “I understand your families are friends.”

“I know who Zack Baker is,” Mike’s grandfather said with a sigh of relief. “Sure, tell his folks we’ll sit on him until his sister gets here from Alaska.”

“Thanks Mr. Matthews. That helps us out a lot. The company wants you to sign these release papers making you the responsible party,” she said, pushing some forms across the desk for him to sign.

As soon as he had signed on as Zack’s temporary guardian, David returned to wait for the shuttle and wondered what had he gotten himself into. As soon as Mike and Zack landed, he would check with the Bakers at Moonwake. He’d have more to tell Zack’s parents after he saw their son.

“Hey, Mr. Matthews!” Jason called, when he saw Mike’s grandfather walk in. He and Tasha had landed at the Cape and were standing by the huge waiting room windows. “Look! We made it. Bad weather almost made us late.”

“Well, hello Jason. I got in from Chicago yesterday and was beginning to think I’d be the only one here to meet Mike. You must be Tasha,” David said, introducing himself to the girl next to Jason. “Jason told me your family recently moved to Chicago. How do you like our little city?”

“It’s not so little Mr. Matthews, but I like it just fine,” she said. “Thank you for going along on our school break trip. My father and grandfather are huge fans of yours”

“Well, it’s nice to hear there still are some fans from the old days,” he told her. “I wouldn’t have missed spending time with Mike for anything in the world. We’ll be staying

in Titusville for a few days. We can get acquainted and plan our trip while Mike adjusts. Reliance just told me Toni's Baker's brother stowed away on Mike's transport. They found him hiding in the hold when they were transferring cargo onto the shuttle. He's coming in with Mike."

"Zack's with Mike?" Jason laughed in amazement. "Oh, great! How did that happen? He's going to catch it from his mother."

"Zack? The little boy on the Moon?" asked Tasha. "Your pen pal?"

"That's the one. He's lived on the Moon since he was a year old. How in the world will Zack understand life on Earth?" Jason wondered aloud.

"After they land, he'll be taken directly to Rehab. Earth will be a big emotional shock. They believe he's physically fit but they have to check him over before they can release him to me, or should I say, release him to us. From what I could gather Jason, he seems to have done this little stunt to see you."

"Look, here it comes!" said Tasha, pulling on Jason's sleeve as the shuttle came into view.

"Let's hurry and get to the gate," David said, taking off down the hall. "I want to see them before they're sent on to Rehab."

Chapter Two

Mike waved and tried to act normal when he saw his grandfather behind the waiting room window. It took extra effort to move. He felt heavy and disoriented but he didn't feel as bad as he'd thought he would. Mike figured it would get easier once the strangeness wore off. It felt good to sit down. The tram driver told them they'd be released as soon as they were declared fit.

Mike was glad to catch sight of Zack who had been taken off the transport ahead of the others. Before long, Mike was checked in. Next he was sent over to the medical office to meet his grandfather. His brave attempt to ignore Earth's heavier gravity was wearing him down. All he wanted to do was lie down and rest.

David held his grandson at arm's length to get a good look. "You've grown two inches Mike," he said, and then gave him a big bear hug. "So, how are you feeling?"

"I thought I was going to be fine but I'm real tired," Mike said, sitting down. "It's great to see you but I don't have much energy. Is Zack here somewhere? I saw him being wheeled this way."

"They have him inside," his grandfather said, pointing to a door at the back of the room. "I haven't seen him yet, but Ted over there, he said he had to be processed separately because of his unscheduled arrival. Then he's being turned over to us until further arrangements are made."

David Matthews couldn't take his eyes off his grandson. The last year had been lonely. He'd missed Mike and his parents. Waiting for Zack seemed endless. "Maybe we could leave Zack here and come back for him later," he announced, realizing he probably should get Mike to the house. "Jason and Tasha are waiting for us at the visitor's center. They decided to check out the space displays while we got this straightened out. It's a great tour. I took it yesterday."

Mike was only half listening. "What *is* taking so long with Zack?"

Then, as if on cue, the door opened and out ambled Zack. Everything considered, he was moving pretty well.

"Zack!" yelled Mike. "How are you feeling?"

"He's doing remarkably well!" announced the nurse. "His parents should be given a lot of credit. They managed his growth on the Moon very well."

"Where's Toni?" asked the rumpled little boy. He wanted his sister to fix things and take care of all the problems he'd caused. "I want to see Toni and Jason," he whined, sounding younger than his seven years.

"Toni's in Alaska with Laura," Mike told him. "You can't see her for a week. You're coming with us. We're going to get Jason."

"Hi Zack. I'm Mike's grandfather. Welcome to Earth," said David. Then he took the young boy's shoulder and steered him across the room. "Before we go anywhere, we're calling your parents."

The young stow-away was very quiet while his parents let him know what he had done was wrong. John and Lynn Baker were relieved and very thankful that Mike and his grandfather were willing to watch their young son. They'd already decided Toni would have to bring Zack home.

In Alaska, Laura and Toni were waiting for someone to call and let them know Mike was on Earth. This turn of events wouldn't be the news Toni wanted to hear. She'd miss out on their plans, but it couldn't be helped. Her parents didn't want Zack traveling home

alone.

After the call to Moonwake, the nurse took David aside for a talk. Zack and Mike waited quietly together, more than content to do nothing. Before long, David returned with detailed instructions for their care.

“Now, Zack I know the nurse talked with you a lot before we got here, but he wanted me to understand too. I want you to let me know if you feel bad about anything....” David paused. He looked at the two boys staring blankly up at him and figured, for the time being, they needed rest more than psychoanalysis. “Let’s go get Jason and Tasha and head over to the house,” he said, deciding to wait and see how things went in the morning.

“Oh wait! I think Jenny Walker might be looking for me,” said Mike, suddenly remembering his invitation.

“Jenny Walker? Isn’t she the pilot that “burned rubber” in lunar orbit to save you? She’s here? I want to meet her!”

“She’s on leave and she didn’t seem to have any plans, so I asked her to come along on our trip,” Mike told him.

“Well, did she say she’d come?” David asked, beginning to wonder if the house was big enough for all these people showing up out of the blue.

“At first she didn’t but I convinced her she’d have fun and she agreed to come with us,” Mike told him. “I hope that I did the right thing.”

“You did good Mike. Jenny deserves our thanks after saving you and the girls. I’m going to make sure she knows how much I admire and appreciate what she did. Hey Ted, how do you get that loud speaker to work?”

It wasn’t long before Jenny Walker was summoned and properly thanked by Mike’s grandfather. It was embarrassing how his grandfather went on and on about how brave she was and what a great pilot she must be. When he finished, there was no doubt she was welcome on the trip.

With everyone checked out, David and Mike walked out to get the van. Zack didn’t seem to mind when Jenny took his hand and walked with him to the loading area.

“This looks like our ride Zack,” Jenny said as David stopped outside. She wasn’t prepared though for Zack’s reaction when the automatic doors opened. He reeled back and cried in terror while covering his face with his hands.

This was not a good sign.

Jenny explained to the crowd of curious onlookers that he was just afraid of the newness of everything. What am I going to do with this panicked kid? she wondered.

“Come on now Zack,” David said, having witnessed the whole thing from the van. “You’re fine now. Settle down. What do you think is going to happen?”

“I can’t breathe out there without my suit,” he sobbed, holding tightly to Jenny.

“Now you know you can breathe on Earth without your suit Zack. It will feel a little strange at first. Look at Mike, he’s outside in the van and he’s not wearing a pressure suit.”

Zack looked at Mike sitting in the van and then watched as people went in and out of the door without pressure suits. Finally, he relaxed his grip on Jenny.

“I’ll try,” he said and slowly walked outside.

“Hey, Zack,” Mike yelled from the van. “You’re walking pretty funny!”

Zack had to laugh, remembering how he had teased Mike when he first tried to walk on the Moon.

“I won’t be walking this slow forever Mike,” he said, feeling better after Mike’s joke. He was embarrassed about how he had acted but this was scary. He’d never walked outside a building without a pressure suit. All the air he could ever remember breathing had come

out of a vent or a tube. Florida's humid air filled his nostrils and the pungent smell of vegetation in the freshly mulched beds was overwhelming. David lifted him into the van. This was Zack's home world but he had no memory of it. He'd only seen baby pictures of himself on Earth.

David pulled out of the parking garage and into the sunlight. The bright glare hurt Zack's eyes and Mike handed him a pair of sunglasses. He put them on and looked around. The sun was in the right place, low on the horizon, but that was about all that looked normal. Clouds dotted the blue sky. This world was green and blue. Large white birds appeared out of nowhere and flew by. This just couldn't be real. Zack tensed up and stared out the window. Many vehicles moved over paved roads. The van reminded him of his parent's lunar rover and that made him feel better. Before long he was laughing and pointing at all the cars and the people, at the buildings—there were trees and the surface was covered with grass and pools of liquid water. Jason and Tasha were waiting by the curb when the van pulled up to the visitor's center. Jenny opened the door. Mike grinned and said, "Meet Jenny Walker, the famous pilot—come on you two, hop in!"

"Welcome home Mike," Jason shouted, grabbing hold of his shoulders from the back seat and giving him a good shake.

David drove away from the center and Jason turned to Zack. "Zack, my pen-pal! You're in a lot of trouble!" he joked.

"I'm ready to leave for Alaska," Tasha said, barely able to contain her excitement at having a living, breathing space pilot sitting beside her. "My jet is ready and waiting."

"There's a good chance Toni will have to cancel her plans and take her brother home," David told her.

"That's not fair!" exclaimed Jason, grabbing the back of the seat as David took the corner a little too fast. "This trip was her idea. Nice going Zack." His angry remark surprised everyone and they sat quietly, not knowing what to say.

Tasha finally broke the silence. "Why don't I go to Alaska tomorrow and pick them up? There's no need to wait a week. Jenny, could you go with me? As soon as we're all together and Zack's parents know he's okay, maybe they can stay. It's worth a try."

"Here we are!" David announced, pulling up to a plain block house. "Let's get inside and work out our plans. Jason, you and Tasha help me unload while Mike and Jenny take Zack inside."

The rental house wasn't fancy but it was comfortable. David opened the curtains and let in the last of the fading light. The kitchen was adequate and the four bedrooms would be enough to handle this crowd. They unpacked the van and David gave out room assignments.

"How do you like hanging around this big kid?" Mike teased Tasha. "Jason thinks you like him because he's so good looking but I know you just want to find out about the Moon."

Tasha blushed. How did he know so much about her? He must be kidding. She knew she didn't feel about Jason the same way he felt about her. She couldn't help it if he liked her more. Jason was so easy going she didn't think he really took their relationship that seriously anyway. He didn't seem to take much of anything seriously.

When they were settled in, David called Alaska and talked with the girls. They said they'd be ready to leave for Florida as soon as Tasha arrived. Toni knew her brother needed her. Just three months earlier she had faced her own adjustment to Earth. She knew it would be much harder for Zack who had no memories of living off-Moon.

It was late and everyone was tired. David had food in the fridge and they grabbed something to eat and turned in for the night. Wanting to tune everything out, Zack quickly fell asleep.

The next morning, the smell of pancakes and freshly brewed coffee finally got Jenny out of bed.

“This sure is a nice hotel Mr. Matthews.”

“Good morning Jenny. Grab a plate,” said David, reaching across the counter to pour her a hot cup of coffee. Everyone else had already eaten.

“Call me David,” he reminded her, pleased at the way things were going and happy everyone enjoyed his cooking. “How do you feel today Jenny?”

“Actually, not too bad. How about you Zack?” she asked, looking at the boy wearing the same clothes he’d worn since leaving the Moon. “You’re going to need some new clothes Zack,” she told him.

“Jason’s going to take me shopping at the mall today,” Zack said, smiling up at his big friend. “Jason knows all about shopping malls,” he told her proudly.

“I’ve checked with the airport Jenny and conditions are good,” Tasha interrupted. “How soon can you be ready?”

“It won’t take me long but you’re not going to drag me away from these pancakes just yet! By the way, do you have supersonic capability?” Jenny asked.

“Yes, it has all the latest whistles and bells,” Tasha told her. “But I’m not certified to go supersonic yet.”

“It would really shorten our trip if they’d approve my credentials,” Jenny gently suggested.

“Thanks for the offer,” Tasha told her. One half of her wanted to use a supersonic flight plan and part of her wanted to fly the plane herself.

Jenny sensed she was stepping on another pilot’s toes and let it drop. “Thanks David,” she said, handing him her empty plate. “That will get me to Alaska and back.”

“Mike, how do you feel about clean up?” asked his grandfather.

Mike looked around the kitchen. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen so many dirty dishes. His grandfather must have used every utensil and dish, every pot and pan. “Sure,” he agreed. “I need to move around and walk off some of this gravity.”

Before anyone wanted his help, Jason decided to take Zack out back and look around. “Come on Zack, let’s go check out the dock.”

Zack slowly got up from his chair. His bones and muscles had checked out as normal but he still felt six times heavier than he had all his life and it was very tiring. Jason opened the door for him and they walked outside. The rental house was situated on an inland waterway. A thirty-foot dock extend into the bay. The backyard of the rental had been neglected but the bay view was good. Branches from the neighbor’s huge chinaberry tree hung over the fence, shading most of the yard. It was a beautiful day and Zack began adjusting to being outside unprotected.

They hadn’t made it off the back patio before Zack spotted some ants crawling in and out of cracks in the concrete. He knelt down peering closely at the tiny black bugs and laughed in delight. It amused Jason to see Zack’s fascination with the long moving columns.

“Look at all that water!” yelled Zack, seeing the bay. He rubbed his face. It still felt funny walking outside without a suit and helmet. It was hard to believe there could be so much water—how very, very strange. On the Moon each drop of water was precious.

They were halfway down the dock when a speedboat rounded the bend and roared by. Two skiers waived at them from behind the boat.

“Look!” yelled Zack, running to wave back at the skiers. In his excitement though, he lost his balance. Down he went—hitting hard on the dock’s wooden planks. It wasn’t like falling on the Moon. This hurt. He lay there not moving.

“Zack, are you all right?” Jason asked, leaning over to help him up. Zack pushed his hand away.

“It’s too hard to walk on Earth,” he complained. “I hate this.”

“Come on Zack, don’t be a baby,” Jason kidded. “Look! There’s a fish.”

Zack crawled to the edge and hung his head over the side. He looked but couldn’t see a fish. All he saw was the reflection of clouds. To Zack, clouds were strange and mysterious objects moving overhead in the sky. They were all different shapes and they were unpredictable. This disorder bothered Zack. Just then a flock of screaming birds swooped past the dock—his heart pounded and he froze in fear.

Jason was watching the water lap up against the dock, not realizing Zack had begun to panic. “Come on Zack, get up and we’ll go inside,” he said, tired of the boy’s silence and not knowing what to do.

“I want to go back home to the Moon,” Zack told him. “*I don’t like it here!*”

Jason knew if Toni couldn’t go, the whole trip might fall apart.

“You can’t go home yet Zack,” he told him. “You’re just tired and not feeling well. It will get easier. It always gets easier. Just give it some time.”

“Everything is different here. I don’t like it,” whined Zack.

Jason certainly wasn’t the one to cheer up Zack. After all, he hadn’t enjoyed being on the Moon.

“Well, you’ll like the mall!”

When Zack heard that, he rolled over and stood up.

Back inside, Jenny and Tasha were dressed and waiting for a ride to the flight complex. Jason offered to drop them off on his way to the mall, which was fine with David, who had hoped to spend the day catching up with his grandson.

Jason seemed to be handling the young boy better than anyone and Zack certainly needed to get some new clothes. So with their duties assigned, everyone got started on their first day of vacation.

It had started out as a calm and sunny day in Florida but that was about to change. The weather center in Atlanta was tracking “Abigail,” the first named tropical storm of the season.

Chapter Three

After thinking about their trip to Alaska, Tasha realized she could learn a lot from a seasoned pilot. Jenny was as good as it got, so Tasha asked her to file a supersonic flight plan.

Jenny sat in the left seat studying the instrument panel. “This is nice,” she said approvingly. “How do you rate something like this Tasha?”

“It is pretty fancy, isn’t it?” Tasha said, pleased that Jenny had noticed. “My parents own Jasmine Interior Designs and this gets them around to their job sites.”

“I’m the last person to ask about design,” she laughed. “I guess I’m pretty rough around the edges.”

“Oh, but I’m more interested in what you do,” Tasha told her. “I’m lucky my parents can buy a jet that I can fly. They’re using the old one so we can have this for our trip. Would it be all right if I took over for part of the flight?”

“I don’t see why not. Remember you’re the pilot of record when we’re not hot dogging it, okay?”

“Sounds good to me. Alaska, here we come!”

Jenny banked hard, heading over the Atlantic Ocean while gaining altitude. “Feels a little sluggish after flying so long in space. Here we go. Hold on to your seat,” she said, as she lit the after-burners and the jet took off like a rocket.

Tasha’s jet had the capability to reach speeds approaching two thousand miles per hour. Jenny skillfully guided Jasmine to the very edge of space as they began their flight to Alaska. It was about four thousand miles, as the crow flies, from the Cape. At this speed they’d get to Alaska two hours ahead of their departure time.

“Here, take the stick,” Jenny instructed. “How does that feel?”

“Good,” said Tasha. “It’s fantastic up here!”

They were soaring 100,000 feet above Earth. At this altitude they could see the blackness of space above and the curvature of the Earth below. Tasha had the urge to break free from Earth’s pull and head straight out into space. She dreamed of seeing Earth from outer space. As the North American continent sped by beneath them, Tasha asked Jenny to tell her what piloting in space was like.

“It’s different than anything you’re used to Tasha. Navigation in space is a whole new ball game. You must understand and use flight methods very different than those you use on a world with an atmosphere. But if you like exploration as much as flying, space could be for you. I’ve been doing it the last twenty years.”

“I’ve applied to Space Flight Academy,” Tasha confided.

“I started at the Academy but ended up getting out,” Jenny said matter-of-factly. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s a good school but back then it was going through some problems.”

“You’re not an Academy graduate?” Tasha asked in surprise.

“It was more or less a formality by the time I left in my last year. I checked out at Reliance Spacelines and I’ve been with them ever since,” she explained.

Tasha was filled with curiosity about what had happened but didn’t think it was right to pry. Maybe Mike knew something. She’d be sure to ask him when they got back. Jenny began their descent and told Tasha to radio the tower at Seward.

“Seward, this is Jasmine, Hozpt TQR, requesting permission to land,” radioed Tasha. “Current readings, 58 degrees North, 148 West—altitude 2000 feet, twelve miles out—approaching from the southeast, over.”

“Jasmine, this is Seward. We see you closing on us. Slow to 800 knots and maintain course heading. Your ETA is 0900 hours. Over.”

“Want to take her in?” Jenny asked, having seen Tasha was a confident and able pilot.

“Do you mean it?” Tasha asked, suddenly sounding like the sixteen-year-old girl she was.

“Well, I don’t plan to leave the cabin,” Jenny laughed. “If you have any trouble I’ll just take over.”

They came in low over the Pacific Ocean, rapidly approaching the little coastal town. The town of Seward was nestled between the Reni Mountains on Blying Sound in the southern part of Alaska.

Since the invention of air travel, flying had been the best way to get around the Alaskan wilderness. Because of its huge size, abundant lakes, vast forests, mountains and glaciers, much of Alaska was inaccessible without aircraft. Years ago it would have been impossible to land here in such a large aircraft. Some of the newer jets, like the one Tasha was flying, could morph into a hovercraft, making it possible to land almost anywhere.

“Jasmine, Seward Tower here, give us your numbers. Over.”

Tasha radioed her coordinates and told them she had them on visual approach. “Tower, landing on runway One,” she confirmed, initiating hovercraft mode. The aircraft rose up and her speed slowed.

“Be kind to our runway, Jasmine,” radioed flight control. “It’s the only one we have and that’s a wild bird you’re flying.”

“Roger, tower. I’ll try to keep it simple and not leave any holes,” she radioed back. “No shows today.”

She set the jet down easily, then switched back to her main engines and taxied to the fuel depot. As Tasha powered down the engines, Jenny lowered the steps. They asked the small curious crowd that had gathered, if anyone knew where Laura Smith lived. Immediately, a young man stepped forward.

“Welcome to Seward,” he said. “Laura asked me to take you up to her house. I’m Robert, her neighbor.”

“That’s mighty neighborly Robert,” Jenny told him and returned his firm handshake. “Thanks for the lift!”

Then Robert told Tasha he worked as a mechanic at the airport and asked if he could take a tour of her jet before they left Seward. She told him that was the least she could do for his help.

The rough road to Laura’s didn’t slow Robert or his truck and Jenny and Tasha held on for dear life. The chill from his open window didn’t bother Robert but his passengers hoped they were getting close to Laura’s house. Before long they pulled onto a dirt road and a field of beautiful wildflowers opened up around them. The sun was up but they were chilled to the bone.

At the far end of the meadow a log cabin stood near a tall stand of trees. A thin column of smoke rose from the chimney. As they drew closer, two figures waved to them from the porch.

“Tasha?” the blonde girl asked as she and another girl came down the steps.”

“Hi,” Tasha said. “You’re Laura?”

“That’s me and this is Toni Baker. Come inside and warm up. My mother made breakfast for everyone.”

Margaret Smith had prepared a huge spread for everyone, including the neighbors. Jenny decided to take advantage of all this great cooking and loaded her plate, indulging

herself for the second time in about four hours. She didn't know how to cook but she sure loved to eat.

After filling their plates, they crowded around picnic tables in the backyard. It felt good to sit in the sun and enjoy the view of the lake. A light breeze off the water made the sun feel even better.

Before noon, they were back at Seward's airport and preparing to leave. Robert got a grand tour of Tasha's jet, while Toni and Laura stowed their gear. Finally, fearing no end to the good-byes, Jenny thanked everyone and hurried the girls on board.

Once airborne, Jenny circled back and made a farewell pass over the people waving below. She waited until they were well out over the water before lighting the after-burners.

An hour into the flight, Tasha left Laura and Toni and came forward see if Jenny wanted a break. Jenny told her she was fine and would take them to the Cape.

To Jenny, Earth was a fascinating planet. Weather patterns intrigued her and she never tired of watching them. As she approached Florida from the Gulf of Mexico, towering thunderheads were developing along the coast. She navigated around them, watching in awe as electrical charges illuminated their dark interiors. It was brute energy and Jenny respected it.

As she prepared to land at the Cape, a place she'd landed so many times in the past, she realized how much she'd missed flying on Earth.

"Tower, Jasmine on final approach. Over."

Chapter Four

Toni shrieked when she saw Zack sitting on the front step next to Jason. He was wearing a mask hooked up to a pipe. She jumped from the van and ran to the house, screaming at Jason, demanding to know what was wrong with her brother.

“Hello to you too Toni Baker!” laughed Jason. “Nothing’s wrong with Zack.”

Toni took a second look at her brother who sat quietly looking back at her from behind the mask.

“He’s just wearing a swim mask and snorkel Toni,” snickered Jason, amused by her hysteria.

Toni sat down on the step next to Zack and gave him a hug. “You really scared us,” she told him. “You never should have hidden on that transport. Promise me, you’ll never do anything like that again.”

“I promise,” he mumbled, taking the snorkel out of his mouth, happy that she hadn’t yelled at him in front of everybody.

“Why are you wearing that mask and snorkel?” Toni demanded to know. She was getting angry now that she knew he was all right. “It looks silly!”

“He spotted it at the store,” Jason told her. “He tried it on and wanted it. I think it makes it easier for him to handle not wearing a space suit outside. He acts more normal when he’s wearing it.”

“That was a good idea Jason,” she said, then turned back to Zack. “Have you been a lot of trouble?”

“I don’t like Earth.”

“You don’t *like* it!?” she shouted. “Well, that’s just too bad Zack because Mom and Dad said I had to bring you home if you were having trouble here and I’m not going to give up my vacation, so get used to it!”

Her sharp tone startled everyone but she seemed to know what she was doing and besides he looked happy to see her. Maybe they’d been babying him a little bit too much.

“Go ahead and wear that if it makes you feel better,” she continued, “but you look pretty funny.”

“Mike’s grandfather told me I could use it at the beach.”

“I told him about my vacation place at Fort Walton Beach up on the Florida panhandle,” David said. “I haven’t been there for awhile but it has a great beach.”

“I bought him some new things to wear at the store Toni,” Jason told her. “He didn’t bring anything with him.”

“Thank you all for everything,” said Toni. “Did you thank all these nice people Zack? You do understand how much trouble you’ve caused everyone? Mom and Dad are worried sick!”

Well, here came the yelling, he knew he deserved it and didn’t make any excuses. He knew Toni loved him and he was glad she was here with him.

Tasha watched as Toni took control of the situation. She knew her idea to bring her to Florida had been the right one. There was no doubt now that Toni would be able to go with them. She wanted to learn as much as she could about life on the Moon and Toni would be the best one to ask.

Life on Earth just didn’t seem as exciting to Tasha as life somewhere else must be. She had a burning desire to see what was over the next hill. Some days she felt there were no limits to where she could go and some days she felt she’d done as much as she could. It

wasn't easy having so much so soon. She wondered if she really had what it took, or if things had just been dropped in her lap. She needed a challenge. She needed a test.

Now that they were all together, it was time to decide on a course of action. Toni called her parents and after some fancy negotiation and heavy pleading, they agreed Zack should go with her and the others and return to the Moon when she did. The next immediate problem was the weather.

Abigail was the first hurricane of the season and she had Florida in her sights. David Matthews had witnessed enough of these storms to know it was best to give them a wide berth and told everyone to be ready to leave for Fort Walton Beach in the morning.

The next day started with a dark, threatening sky. On the bay, whitecaps pushed by stiff winds, kept building. Seagulls, tired of fighting winds aloft, stood on the dock.

Any place on the Florida peninsula or Gulf Coast was a potential target but from all indicators, Abigail would skirt the Cape, swing north and ride along the Eastern seaboard.

David loaded the van while the others latched storm shutters and put away lawn chairs.

"We better get moving," Jenny told David. "The barometer is dropping."

"Come on everyone! We've leaving!"

David took one final head count: Zack, Toni, Laura, Tasha, Mike, Jason and Jenny. Thank goodness for Jenny, he thought.

The wind howled and battered their van as David drove through deserted intersections without stopping. Sheets of driving rain made it hard to see, and trash and debris flew everywhere. Stoplights jerked violently side to side and trees bent under the force of the approaching hurricane.

Sensing the growing danger, Zack moved close to Toni. He didn't understand this.

David dropped them off at the jet then parked the van in the shelter of a hanger. Fighting gale-force winds and stinging rain, he made his way across the tarmac and onto the jet.

Jenny pulled up the steps and latched the door.

Tasha started the engines and contacted the tower.

"Jasmine, proceed to runway Two," radioed the tower. "You cut it close. Jasmine cleared for immediate take-off."

Before long they had crossed Florida's peninsula and were flying over the Gulf of Mexico to Florida's panhandle, leaving Hurricane Abigail far behind.

It was a short flight to Fort Walton Beach. Jenny knew this area from her flight training days at Elgin Air Force Base. She was looking forward to some restful days on beautiful, white sandy beaches. She'd have a great tan by the time they adapted to Earth. No one seemed too worried about how she was doing in Earth's heavier gravity but she was used to that.

After they landed and got a ride, they made a quick stop for burgers. As they bounced along the dirt road to David's place it was obvious no one had used this road for a long time. Scrubby palmetto palms fanned out in a thick carpet across the pine forest floor. Weeds grew across the road. "I didn't think it could get so bad in just five years," said David, shocked to see how much the vegetation had taken over.

"You haven't been back here in five years?" Mike asked, thinking that was about how long it had been since his grandmother died.

"No. I haven't been back."

On a vacation years earlier, Mike's grandparents had talked about buying a home on this beach. During one early morning walk, they'd discovered a sun-bleached cottage. It faced the beach with a deep pine forest between them and civilization. A sign said it was for sale

and they knew it would be perfect for them. They bought it on the spot and after David retired from auto racing, they'd spent most of their time here.

Seeing the place again made David think of happier days. Maybe it was time to rethink his move back to Chicago. He'd done it to be near his son's family but now they were living on the Moon and that looked like a permanent thing. He'd forgotten how much he loved this place and the memories it held for him. He was glad he'd brought Mike and his friends here to rest and recover. He needed to rest and recover too. David paid the driver and unlocked the front door.

Before long the furniture was uncovered and the floors were swept. David cranked open the windows and let in the sea air. Tasha wiped years of dust off a shelf filled with racing trophies. Her father and grandfather often talked about David Matthews. They said he was one of the best drivers they'd ever seen, and that meant a lot coming from them.

While they settled in, David walked down the beach to let his neighbors know they were staying at the cottage. He hoped they'd give him a ride into town for supplies.

Zack found a quiet place to finish off another cheeseburger and part of a bag of fries. He sipped the last of his milkshake. A light breeze blew through the sleeping porch and the soothing sound of waves soon put him to sleep.

Jenny slipped out to sun on the beach, while the others gathered in the kitchen.

"Look Mike," said Tasha. "They have a board version of this game. It has to be an antique." Everyone started looking through a pile of old games Mike had stacked on the kitchen table.

"How about this one?" Mike asked, pulling one from the stack.

"Let me see that," said Toni, glad for some free time with Mike.

It had been three months since he'd waved good-bye to her from Shackleton Crater. Mike seemed somehow distant now. She wanted him to notice how well she'd adjusted to Earth but he hadn't even mentioned it. "Do you notice anything different about me?" she finally asked.

"No. Well, I take that back. Your hair is longer."

Well, at least it was something, so she let it drop. "How do you play this?" she asked, opening the box and placing the game board on the table.

"Yeah, let's play," said Jason.

It was more like a vacation now that they were all together. As they played, they imagined themselves characters in the game. The game presented life the way it was before space technology.

Toni chose the red sports car for her game piece and was progressing nicely around the board without seeming to mind how much Mike was talking with Tasha.

"Hey! Anyone, besides Tasha, need a drink?" Mike asked.

"Just bring me a glass of water," Jason told him. "Hurry up. It's your turn! I've climbed Mt. Everest. I expect Toni will win the Nobel Peace Prize on her next turn!"

"Hold it down Jason," shushed Toni. "Zack's sleeping and I don't want him to wake up."

"I just peaked in and he's still asleep," Laura said, taking her seat, "It's all yours Toni."

"Go ahead and roll for me," Toni said, heading down the hall to the bathroom.

They'd been rushing since morning and she wanted to freshen up and look good for Mike. She only been gone a short time, when they suddenly heard her screaming.

"Mike! *It's after me!*" Toni shrieked, racing into the kitchen.

Mike turned and ran down the hall. The rest sat frozen in their chairs.

"Toni, come back. It's just a cute, little furry raccoon," Mike called from the bathroom.

“It’s harmless. They get inside and set up housekeeping.”

Mike poked his head around the corner. “Jason, give me a hand catching this thing. We’ll have to go outside and find where this one got in. There’s a ladder on the side of the house. We need to check the eaves and the roof.”

“That’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen Mike,” Toni said. “Cute? You wouldn’t have thought so if you’d seen it hanging from the ceiling with those beady little eyes staring at you. It was just waiting to attack!”

Tasha didn’t mind raccoons but she was glad it hadn’t been her. “You don’t have any beady-eyed pests on the Moon, do you Toni?”

“Well, as you can see, my brother Zack is a pest and he should be back on the Moon!” Toni said, laughing now. “I made so much noise he must be awake.”

“Zack, come play a game with us. Zack!” she called, raising her voice. When he didn’t answer she went to the sleeping porch but he wasn’t there.

Zack had left the cabin a few minutes earlier to take a look around. The sand dunes, despite being covered with sea grass and being in his bare feet, reminded him of hills on the Moon. He walked down the other side of the dune and onto the sunny part of the beach. He walked faster when his feet began sinking into soft, hot sand. The wind picked up as he neared the waves and the hard, wet sand felt cool on his feet so he remained despite the strangeness of this place.

Making sure to stay back from the water’s edge, he sat down for a minute, waiting for the little bit of fear creeping over him to leave. He looked down the beach. Groups of people were standing in water up to their knees. They reached into the water and then put things into small, colorful pails.

Zack forgot about being scared and watched as they worked their way toward him.

As he watched them, he remembered he still had some fries in his pocket and put one in his mouth. Immediately something white dropped from the sky and swooped past him.

From seemingly nowhere, a flock of screaming seagulls quickly descended upon him, each one clamoring for a bite of his snack. Zack didn’t know these pesky birds wouldn’t leave him alone as long as he had those fries in his hand and he screamed as they got more aggressive, making closer and closer passes. To escape their piercing cries and flapping wings, he curled up, covering his head with his arms. Sand got in his mouth when he yelled for help.

“Zack, for heaven’s sake, give them your french fries!” Laura shouted as Toni grabbed them from his hand and tossed them off to the side. The flock of birds fought over the cold, dried up fries, then begged a few minutes longer before leaving to beg somewhere else.

“I got dirt in my mouth,” Zack complained, wiping the grit off his tongue.

“Go rinse it off in the water,” Tasha said after watching him only make matters worse with his sandy hands. “I’ll take him out in the water,” she told Toni, who’d spotted Jenny and was busy waving her over.

Waves rushed in at the water’s edge and Zack wouldn’t go any further. He was afraid they’d pull him under but he didn’t want to act like a baby. Holding onto Tasha’s hand, he stepped into the foamy surf. It was warm and felt good. Leaning down, he cupped his hands and rinsed out his mouth.

“Aughh,” he gagged, spitting it out.

“Sorry Zack.” Tasha had forgotten he wouldn’t be expecting salt water. “I should have warned you.”

“I’ve never seen so much water,” Zack said, hoping she understood why he was afraid. He thought Tasha was nice and she didn’t yell at him like Toni did.

“Do you miss the Moon?” Tasha asked, trying to understand his fear of Earth things.

“Yes. I wish I was home.”

“You can help me understand your world Zack,” she suggested, “and I’ll help you understand Earth.”

“If I get my snorkel and mask, will you and Jason take me swimming?”

“Sure. I’ll my swimsuit and we’ll see if Mike and Jason want go.”

Laura and Toni were talking with Jenny and they acknowledged Tasha’s wave as she signaled she was taking Zack back to the cottage.

David had returned and was busy unpacking bags of groceries. He asked Zack to give him a hand while Tasha changed.

Knowing there were a lot of mouths to feed, David had picked up just about every fruit and vegetable he could find at the fruit stand. He watched Zack unpack a nice ripe pineapple and hold it up to his nose. “Reach in that other bag,” David instructed. Zack did as he was told and pulled out a coconut.

“What’s this?” he asked, thinking this brown hairy thing couldn’t possibly be food.

“Don’t you recognize it?” asked David, with a smile. “I’m sure you’ve eaten it.”

“I don’t think so,” said Zack, making a face. “What is it?”

“It’s a coconut!” David told him. “We’ll crack it open later and you can drink the milk.”

“That’s silly,” said Zack, thinking he was kidding about there being milk in this thing.

Zack took the large bowl of fruit David gave him and set it on the table. It was unusual to have so much fresh fruit to eat and he felt very naughty peeling an entire banana to eat by himself.

Mike and Jason headed outside, telling Zack to hurry it up so he could go swimming.

“Get your suits on!” Mike called to Laura and Toni as he and Jason ran into the surf. They plowed into the breaking waves, belly-flopping into the surf and swam away from shore. They were about a hundred yards out when they finally stopped at a sandbar, where the water was shallow again. It surprised Zack to see them so far out but standing in water only to their knees.

“Come on in!” yelled Mike. “You’ll like the water Zack. It makes you feel light, like on the Moon!”

Hesitantly, Zack walked into the surf with Tasha. He knew about swimming but he wasn’t sure if he could do it. “What am I supposed to do?” he asked her.

“Just let the water lift you,” she told him, taking his other hand and pulling him further out into the water. It rose up to his chest and his feet lifted off the bottom. The water was warm and it felt good to float. He put his facemask in the water and saw Tasha’s feet. He breathed through the snorkel and decided this was one of the best things he had done since landing on Earth. Tasha pulled him out to the sandbar.

By the time Laura and Toni had joined them, Zack was propelling himself through the water by kicking his legs and learning to pull his body through the water with his arms. It took a little coaxing to get Toni into the water. She hadn’t done any swimming in Alaska and seemed content to wade around and watch her little brother experience swimming on Earth. She was glad he was here, even thought it hadn’t been planned very well.

“Hey Toni!” yelled Zack, holding up his hands. “Look, my fingers are all wrinkly!”

“Time to come in,” Jenny yelled from shore. “Dinner’s on the table!”

While the rest took their time wading back in, Jason and Mike raced back to shore.

“Thanks Mike,” Tasha said, smiling as he handed her a towel. “It looks like you got your Earth legs back pretty quick. When are you going to tell me what it’s like to live on the Moon.”

“How about now?” he said. “What would you like to know?”

“You can tell her about it after we eat,” snapped Jason. He’d noticed how she’d been looking at Mike all afternoon.

“Lighten up Jason,” said Mike. “She has a right to ask questions! What’s the big deal?”

“No big deal,” Jason said, feeling stupid.

“Hey, Zack!” yelled Jason. “I’ll race you back to the house.”

“You’re on!” yelled Zack, as Jason paused to give him a little head start.

Chapter Five

Zack got a nasty sunburn on his the first day at the beach, so he didn't mind using the beach umbrella Jenny had insisted he use. He was adjusting to Earth's heavier gravity and could watch everything from his safe shelter.

Pelicans fascinated him. Small flocks of three or more would appear overhead, flying single file before disappearing out of sight. Soon they would reappear, seemingly out of nowhere. They looked motionless as they glided by, their wingtips almost touching the water. Off shore, the pelicans would fly higher before crashing headlong into the water for fresh fish dinners. After they ate they would float for awhile, then flap their wings and run on the water to get their huge bodies airborne.

When he wasn't watching sea birds, Zack watched hermit crabs. They scurried around the beach, popping in and out of small holes they had dug in the sand. He couldn't figure out why each crab had only one oversized claw. It made them look lopsided.

Laura spent the morning drawing Zack and his brown pelicans. She wanted to capture his reaction to new things on Earth. Whenever she drew birds, it made her miss her pet parrot, Bubba, who was back in Alaska missing her.

"Hi Jason. Move over and share your towel," Laura instructed Zack.

"How's the sunburn Zack?" asked Jason.

"It feels better. Jenny makes me put lotion on it," he reported, stretching out his arms and legs for Jason to inspect. "See how my back's peeling!" he said with pride, turning so Jason could admire his patchy skin.

"Where's Tasha?" Laura asked. "I thought she wanted to swim."

"She decided to bike into town with Mike. They'll probably be gone all day. How about we take a swim?" he suggested. "But not you Zack," he quickly added. "Jenny gave me strict orders to make sure you stayed under your umbrella this morning. If you're good, she's taking you into town for burgers and fries. Some guys from the air force base found out she's staying here and they're coming to take her to lunch."

The water was very calm and Jason and Tasha decided to dig for shells. They felt around the ocean floor with their feet until they touched a shell and then dug it up with their toes. It was amazing how many they found. Before long, there were too many to hold and they carried them back for Zack to inspect.

As water from the encroaching waves started filling the big hole Zack had dug in the sand, Jason reminded him how the Moon controlled Earth's tides.

Zack liked thinking about home. He missed his friends on the Moon and was homesick for his parents. This was the first time he'd ever been away. And as much fun as it was to see so many new things, he still missed the old and familiar things in his life.

Tasha wanted to spend time with Mike and had offered to keep him company on his ride into town. She liked that he had a sense of adventure—something that Jason didn't have. Tasha peddled as hard as she could, trying to stay upright on the old bike. She couldn't wait to get off this dirt road and onto the paved one.

"Slow down Mike," she called. "I thought you'd be having trouble with Earth's heavier gravity."

"Biking is one thing we get to do a lot of on the Moon," he called over his shoulder. "But I can't get anywhere on those bikes."

“You’re in better shape than I am,” she had to admit.

“Workouts in the Moonwake gym will get you in shape. I think you’d like living on the cutting edge of a new civilization Tasha.”

“That’s what I thought it would be like,” she said excitedly, thinking about all the adventure waiting for her out in space. They finally reached pavement and she pulled up beside him and tied up her hair.

“Jason doesn’t understand that the way you do. First, I’d like to know how it felt when you looked back at Earth?”

“That was a shock,” Mike admitted. “And now when I look at the Moon from Earth that feels strange because I’ve touched it and the universe has become real. To me the planets of our solar system are like continents here on Earth.

“Getting accepted to the Academy may be my ticket to the Moon. My family made a bid on some design work at the new lunar hotel. But a decision on that will be months away.”

“I’d be glad to show you around when you do get there.”

“Thanks Mike,” she said, thinking what a really nice guy he was. “We’re getting near town. Remember that fruit stand?”

Toni had gone down the beach to help David’s neighbor who was having problems with his computer. It was nice to be needed and she immersed herself in the job at hand. Physically adjusting to Earth was one thing but emotionally it was harder. Before she came back to Earth, she’d joked with her friends about bugs and thunder storms but in reality these sensations were very shocking to someone who’d lived in a structured, and for the most part, very predictable environment like a lunar base.

She enjoyed the physical freedom on Earth but missed her life at Moonwake. At the base, everyone was on the same “wave length” and working toward a common goal. Here on Earth, there were more things to do but people didn’t seem as dedicated or focused as the small band of lunar colonists at Moonwake.

Toni was trying to absorb as much as she could on Earth and had managed to fit in. But she couldn’t escape the feeling that she was only a visitor and that her real place was back on the Moon.

It was clear to her that Mike wasn’t as interested in her as she was in him. She was being very adult about her disappointment though, realizing it was only natural for Mike to notice other girls. But the truth of the matter was, she wasn’t finding him as wonderful as she had remembered.

In Alaska she had been an instant celebrity. Everyone wanted to be friends with the girl that lived on the Moon. She quickly learned to sort out real friends from phony ones. She’d grown up a lot this term and was much wiser about relationships, something she’d been sheltered from at the small lunar colony. This trip to Earth had let her be around different kids her own age and she had come to the realization that Mike wasn’t the boyfriend type for her.

Jenny polished off another of David’s award winning breakfasts—the meal no one ever missed. The only down side was the big clean up and today was her turn.

She liked being part of this “family.” It was as close as she’d ever been to belonging. These teenagers and Zack looked up to her and she felt very motherly toward them.

Imagine, she thought to herself, Jenny Walker, the motherly type. She laughed out loud, shaking her head in disbelief. Too bad she'd never been in the frame of mind to settle down and start a family of her own.

"Hey, Jenny-girl!" someone called from outside. "Where's the Academy reject?"

"Inside," she called back, smiling at his joke. "Washing dishes! Where'd you expect to find me?"

Her lunch dates had arrived from the base and they wasted no time kidding her about pulling kitchen duty.

Jenny poured them each a glass of sun tea and listened good naturedly while they laughed and teased her about being such a homebody. After telling them to straighten up, she stuck her head out the door and called for Zack. He'd been thinking about burgers and fries ever since Jason first told him and she didn't have to call twice.

"Can I get a milkshake?" he asked and climbed into the jeep next to Jenny.

"Sure Zack, these fly-boys know where to find the best shakes in town. Right guys!?"

"That's right Mother Walker!" teased the man in the driver's seat. "I never thought I'd live to see you become Mother Walker. Did you know, they still talk about how you bucked the brass at the Academy, Jenny? It took guts to stand up for the class."

"They still remember, huh?" she said, thinking back so many years ago.

"Well, how can anyone forget, with us making sure every new flyer hears about it?" he said, turning to smile at Jenny.

"You don't!?" Jenny questioned as she leaned forward.

"You bet we do!" he shouted over the noise of the jeep. "We make sure each class understands that if they want to be on a winning team, that honesty and loyalty must go hand in hand in their lives. That's not always an easy thing to do."

There'd been many times Jenny had wondered if she'd been foolish to short circuit her career. She'd reported unsafe flying conditions to superiors but her pleas through regular channels had gone unanswered. When she went outside for help, it had caused a major flap but the problems got fixed. Jenny was disciplined, as she knew she would be, for breaking the chain of command. With a black mark on her record, she'd never gotten her dream jobs, the kind of missions she knew she was meant for.

If the new flyers were being taught the importance of honesty and sacrifice for the group, then she knew she had done the right thing.

"Jenny, can we see the horses?" Zack wanted to know when they passed the sign offering trail rides.

"Let's get some lunch and then see if these two jet jockeys will take us riding."

"Oh, boy! We're going to ride them!" Zack yelled in excitement. His sister had told him how she rode horses in Alaska. So Zack knew it was a very big deal.

The smell of burgers and fries filled the air as they pulled up to the lunch stand. Zack ran ahead and got in line at the window. They'd ordered and were halfway through lunch, when Tasha and Mike rode up on their bikes.

"Look Mike!" Tasha said, spotting Zack and Jenny.

"Get your lunch and come sit with us," Jenny told them.

When they finally sat down, Tasha realized even though she was sitting with three pilots and with three people who lived off-Earth, all they kept talking about was horses. She already knew enough about horses from living in Flagstaff.

As they got acquainted, Jenny's friends asked Tasha about her flight experience. They were impressed and said they'd watch for her when she came through training at the base. Cadets were required to make cross-country flights to different bases and their base would be

on her flight roster.

“I haven’t been accepted yet,” Tasha told them.

They were encouraging though and said that with her credentials she had a good chance.

“Come and ride the horses with us Tasha!”

“That sounds like fun Zack but won’t horses seem strange to you?” she asked.

“Very strange!” he said with a grin.

“How do you like living on the Moon?” the younger pilot asked Mike.

“I like it,” he said. “Much more than I thought I would.”

“Jenny filled us in on how you two met,” he said, smiling at Mike. “I heard you took a hopper into lunar orbit?”

“Yeah. Jenny was the hero who rescued us,” Mike said, laughing in embarrassment.

“So it’s all settled,” Jenny interrupted, hoping to spare him more ribbing. “Let’s go riding!”

Mike and Tasha tied their bikes onto the back of the jeep and everyone piled in for the short ride to the farm.

Zack noticed a very strong smell when they pulled up to the barn. Tasha told him to watch where he stepped.

Two friendly horses moved to the fence. They stretched their necks over the rail looking for treats and hoping for a good scratch behind their ears. It was the first time Zack could see how really big they were.

“Which one do you want to ride?” Jenny asked him.

“I get to pick the one I want?” shouted Zack.

The screen door on the old wooden house slammed shut and a spry old woman hurried over to greet them. “Hello folks. How can I help you?”

“I want to ride a horse!” shouted Zack, barely able to contain his excitement.

“How many are riding?” she asked, sizing up the group.

“Do you have enough for all six of us?” asked Jenny.

“No problem,” she said, more than happy for the business. “Just give me and my nephew a few minutes to get them saddled.”

As she turned and left, Mike picked Zack up and set him down on the fence.

“Mike!” Zack yelled in alarm, when a horse pushed his large head against his chest and arms. “Make him get back!”

Zack saw Jenny laughing but he didn’t think it was funny. He was having second thoughts about this. But he’d pestered everyone about the horses, so he knew he’d have to go.

Before long the horses were saddled and led outside. Zack looked at the leather straps wrapped around their heads and through their mouths. He watched as the young man threw a stirrup over the gray horse’s saddle, then reached down and gave a quick, hard tug on the wide belt that held the saddle on the horse.

“She sucks air so we need to tighten the cinch,” he said, yanking the belt again before buckling it a couple of notches smaller. “We don’t want anyone to fall off.” The horse showed her annoyance by stomping her feet and swishing her tail sharply against her back.

Zack was trying to decide which horse he should ride. A brown one, smaller than the others, was looking at him.

“Can I have that one?” he asked.

“That’s the one I picked out for you,” the old woman told him. “Have you ridden before?”

“No, we don’t have any horses on the Moon.”

“The Moon!” she laughed in surprise. “Well, I guess not!”

“No, really,” Tasha told her. “He lives at Moonwake, the lunar base.

“Well, what do you know,” she said, staring at Zack. “That’s really something. Well, little Shelby will take good care of you. She’s real gentle and easy going.”

As she gave Zack a hand up, she told him to swing his leg over the saddle and sit down.

“Now, keep your knees snug against the saddle, your feet in the stirrups and steer with your reins. Shelby will follow the other horses. When you pull back and say whoa, she’ll stop.”

Shelby stepped sideways, feeling his weight on her back, and that made Zack grab for the saddle horn.

“Hold the reins boy!” the old woman commanded. “But not too tight. Just pull gently to the right to go right and pull left, to go left. Shelby knows what to do.”

Zack pulled on the reigns and Shelby yanked her head down, pulling the reigns from his hands. The old woman reached over and handed them back to him.

Everyone mounted their horse. Mike rode his spotted gray over to Zack so they could ride together. The woman told them they’d be out for an hour. She said to follow her nephew out to the trailhead and then just follow the path through the trees and it would bring them back around to the corral by the barn.

Zack’s little brown horse started to move and he squeezed his legs real tight against the saddle, but it hurt and he had to stop. Fearing Shelby would take off and he’d fall, Zack kept a vice-like grip on the reins. Even though she was smaller than the other horses, he felt very high up off the ground.

The horses followed the well-worn path across the meadow. As soon as they reached the trees, the nephew left. They were on their own, heading single file into the woods. The slow pace put Zack at ease. He carefully leaned over and patted Shelby’s thick neck. Her short hair was stiff but lay smoothly against her warm skin. When he patted her again, she snorted and dropped her head. Zack grabbed the reins to his chest. The horse slowed and turned her head to the side of the trail, pausing to rip up a mouthful of grass.

“Kick her in the side,” Mike told him. “Keep up with the others.”

Zack gently bumped her sides with his heels but she paid no attention. She was too busy enjoying the sweet grass. He kicked harder but still she didn’t budge. Suddenly *she* decided to go and took off in a fast trot to catch up with the disappearing column.

“Stop! *Whoooooooooah!*” yelled Zack, bouncing up and down on the hard leather saddle. His feet slipped out of the stirrups and he hung on to the saddle horn for dear life. As soon as she reached the other horses, Shelby stopped. Zack lurched toward her head and grabbed a handful of mane to steady himself.

Helpless to do anything when Shelby took off with Zack bouncing all over the place, Mike couldn’t help but laugh now at Zack’s wild ride. “Ride ‘em cowboy!” he called out, then laughed even harder when Zack swung around in the saddle and grinned at him.

Zack liked being this tall and being carried felt good. He enjoyed watching the sunlight make dancing patterns on the floor of the forest. Their horses slowly moved down the familiar trail and the sweet scent of some flowering plant filled the warm air.

The even sway of his horse’s gate began to slow. Zack looked ahead and saw they were coming to a creek crossing. Soon it was their turn. Shelby took her time, choosing her footing carefully. It made Zack feel safe to see how steady she was and he patted her and told her she was a good horse.

But the relaxed atmosphere quickly ended when they rounded the bend and rode straight

into a hungry swarm of mosquitoes. The bugs were relentless, even the horses were annoyed by the intensity of their biting. Zack had never experienced anything like this. He found it impossible to keep them away from his face and ears while holding on to Shelby's reins.

"Hurry up!" Mike yelled to the riders in front. "We're being eaten alive back here!"

"I see the clearing," Jenny called out. "Hang on, we're almost out of here."

Shelby swished her tail across her back and trotted to keep up with the column of horses heading for the clearing and freedom from the biting bugs. Zack grabbed Shelby's reins and held on.

As soon as they cleared the woods and left the mosquitoes behind them, Zack started scratching itchy little bites on his head and arms. It was hot in the meadow and Zack could smell Shelby sweat. Nothing on Earth was as clean or as tidy as back home he thought.

The horses picked up speed again, trotting the last hundred meters as they headed for home and a cool drink of water. The ride had been long enough for everyone.

Zack swung his leg over the saddle and dropped down. Shelby lowered her head and let him pat her neck and rub her nose. He looked into her huge brown eyes and rubbed her soft nose again. Stepping back, Zack suddenly noticed it felt funny to stand. His legs felt like rubber and his muscles ached. Slowly he climbed into the jeep, thinking how there was so much to learn about living on Earth.

Chapter Six

Their next flight in Tasha's jet took them to the mountain town of Flagstaff, Arizona. By the time they were outfitted with hiking gear, they were lucky to make the last train to the Grand Canyon.

Sunlight flickered between trees and danced inside the train car as they sped through the forest toward the south rim of the canyon. The train moved just a few centimeters above a track suspended in air. The vacationers were traveling in a magnetic-levitation train car that floated on a cushion of electric currents flowing through the track below.

They were traveling through Coconino National Forest, the world's largest Ponderosa Pine forest. The sight of so many trees shocked Zack. Toni told him that trees on Earth helped recycle carbon dioxide into oxygen. He thought of them as machines producing oxygen.

"Too bad we don't have trees on the Moon," Zack said to Toni. "Then we could go outside without suits."

"It would take more than trees to have a breathable atmosphere," she told him and thought how cute it was for him to imagine trees on the Moon. She was glad they'd be at the canyon soon. It had been a long day and she wanted to stop moving.

The flight from Florida to Arizona had taken them over great rivers and vast mountain ranges. Thousands of miles of wilderness passed beneath them, occasionally broken up by cities. Zack had enjoyed every minute of the flight, moving from one side of the jet to the other, asking questions and pointing to objects below.

He became good at spotting approaching civilization. He watched for the man-made patterns of crop fields—miles of multi-colored fields—like squares on a patchwork quilt, reaching to the outskirts of towns. Irrigation made it possible to grow food in the desert southwest and huge farms grew enormous amounts of food year-round.

Their decent into Flagstaff had been turbulent. Atmospheric conditions were always a concern on Earth. Today, monsoon rain, coupled with warm air rising from the desert floor, was mixing up air masses.

As she landed her jet, Tasha watched for approaching wind shears and adjusted her flight pattern as much as she could to avoid them. But, much to everyone's discomfort, they were bounced around a good bit before landing.

On the train, Toni closed her eyes to shut out the flickering sunlight. The best way to get past motion sickness, she had discovered, was to imagine herself at Moonwake looking out at the motionless landscape—a peaceful image, not chaotic like Earth.

Her mind wandered to thoughts of the Grand Canyon. She'd read about it in school and couldn't wait to see it. She tried to imagine a gorge in the ground that was twenty times larger than the huge lava rilles on the Moon, and all carved by flowing water. Even after living on Earth for three months, Toni was still impressed by so much water.

"Look Toni," yelled Zack. "A giant mountain!"

The speeding train was crossing a wide meadow and they could see the San Francisco Peaks towering in the distance. Toni and Zack had seen mountains on the Moon but this one had steep sides and thousands, maybe millions, of trees on its slopes. Typical of Arizona's monsoon weather, towering thunderheads were closing in around the mountain peaks.

"What's that white stuff on the mountain?" asked Zack.

"Snow!" Tasha and Mike called out in unison.

"Snow!?" Zack exclaimed. He almost believed that was something made-up in books.

“How come it’s up there?”

“On Earth, it gets colder as you go higher,” explained Jason. “At the beach we were at sea level, or zero feet, now we’re at seven thousand feet and up there, where the snow starts, it’s about ten thousand feet, and very cold. Now, of course we can convert that to meters if you don’t understand feet.”

Everyone had stopped to listen and seemed surprised by his good explanation.

“What?!” he snapped, seeing how amused they all looked. “I do know a few things, you know.”

“Why is it white?” Zack asked.

“It’s moisture that falls from the clouds and crystallizes in the cold air,” Jason continued, deciding to show everyone he knew even more. “Up there, near the top of the mountain, air molecules are so thin they can’t hold much heat, so the moisture forms into snow crystals that fall from the sky. That’s snow and it builds up and stays on the ground until it evaporates back into the atmosphere to fall again somewhere else as snow or rain, or even hard ice balls called hail.”

Mike began clapping. “Very nice,” he said, teasing his friend about the impromptu science lecture. “I underestimated you Jason.”

His remark didn’t sit well with Jason who was upset with the way Tasha and Mike had been spending most of the trip together. It wasn’t like he owned her or anything but it didn’t seem right for her to be spending all her time with Mike when he was right here. Who did Mike think he was, moving in on his girlfriend and now, insulting his intelligence?

“The frozen ice crystals in the dark craters of the Moon have been there for as long as two billion years,” Toni told Zack. “That mountain snow is probably only a few months old.”

The train continued through the forest until it reached another meadow where scrubby plants and a few lone trees dotted the landscape. Unfazed by the passing train, an elk heard grazed at the edge of the woods.

“We should be at the south rim in about thirty minutes,” David told his group.

“I can’t wait to get there,” Laura confided to Jenny. “My neighbors in Seward lived here for a long time and told me it was impossible to describe the feeling you get when you see it with your own eyes for the very first time.”

“It’s a beautiful place,” Jenny told her. “I was here many years ago and it’s unlike any other place—so large and powerful. In many ways, its quiet grandeur and wide open spaces remind me of outer space.”

Tasha leaned forward, trying to catch what Jenny was saying. She couldn’t believe her ears. Someone, who had flown in space was saying the backyard of her old hometown was as awesome as space! Sure the Grand Canyon was unique, but space was different. How could she even compare the two? But since they were interested, Tasha thought she’d tell them something about the area.

“Every elementary student in Flagstaff studies the local geology. I know all the rock layers and I even hiked down to Havasupai Falls in the canyon with my scout troop. I suppose it is a special place. I just don’t think about it like that anymore,” she added, hoping she hadn’t made it sound like she was bored with something they were looking forward to seeing.

“I’ve found that sometimes you can get so used to a place, that it tends to lose some of the magic,” Jenny told her.

“Well, maybe that’s it,” Tasha agreed.

“How long did you live in Flagstaff?” asked Laura.

“Almost ten years.”

“Well, it must feel like coming home again then,” Jenny said, thinking it would be nice to have a place to call home.

“Yes and no. I feel happy wherever I am. Flying to so many places has changed how I see the world. Maybe when I’m older, I’ll think differently”

“That’s how I felt when I was your age,” Jenny told her.

Toni noticed they were traveling through forest again. It had happened slowly, first bushes clumped together outside the speeding train, next taller scrub pine and now they were back in a thick juniper and pine forest. An announcement let them know they would soon arrive at the station. Before long the train glided to a stop.

“Let me get off,” Toni demanded, pushing her way down the aisle toward the door with Zack in tow. “I’ve had enough traveling for a week, make that a month! Where’s the Grand Canyon?” she asked, having expected to see it as soon as they stopped.

“Grab all your gear,” David Matthews instructed. “Everyone needs to be in charge of themselves on this leg of the trip. There’s no room for slackers out here.”

Mike smiled, as his grandfather set down the rules. He’d really gotten into the spirit of being “troop leader.” Mike was glad he was here and in charge. It would be nice if his grandfather would come and live with them on the Moon. He felt guilty he’d be leaving him behind, again, when he went home.

Mike didn’t fully realize it but he’d started thinking of the Moon as home. He no longer considered the Moon just a place he was visiting. He had started to identify it as the place to go back to.

“Jason, give me a hand with some of this luggage,” Mike pleaded, as he struggled with the girls’ extra stuff.

“So, I’m *not* too stupid to carry suitcases?” Jason shot back.

“What’s your problem now Jason?” Mike asked, dropping the bags on the floor. He was angry too. Jason had been mad ever since he’d returned to Earth.

“I’ll tell you what the problem is,” Jason said, his voice rising. “You! You’re the problem!”

“Me?!” Mike sputtered. “Ever since I got back you’ve been acting like a jerk! What gives?”

“Tasha’s been hanging around you and ignoring me,” he shouted. Then lowering his voice, added. “And you seem to like it.”

“Gosh, Jason, I can’t help it if she wants to talk about the Moon. Tasha said you won’t talk about it. So I guess it’s your own fault!”

“Well, isn’t it nice to have an excuse to move in on my girlfriend!” he shot back, aching to taking a punch at Mike.

“Cool off, Jason,” said Mike. “I don’t think she cares about either one of us. She only wants to fly in space. Sure I think she’s nice but like I told you before I ever met her, she’s just interested in us because we’ve lived off Earth.”

“*Well!* I’m so *glad* you two think you have me *all figured out!*” shouted Tasha, who’d come back to help and overheard their words.

Mike and Jason didn’t move a muscle as she strode angrily toward them, then backed away as she reached past them to grab one of the duffels, before watching in stunned silence as she turned and marched back down the aisle.

“Mr. Matthews said to hurry it up!” she yelled over her shoulder.

“Now look what you’ve done!” yelled Jason, pushing Mike in the chest.

“Me?!” Mike yelled, shoving Jason down in the seat.

“Stop it right now!” demanded Toni, pushing herself between them. “Tasha said you two were acting stupid and she sure had that right.”

Surprised to see little Toni standing between them, they both backed down. It was a fight neither one really wanted.

“For your information Jason, and yours too Mike, Tasha told me to tell you she has no boyfriend. And, if I were her, I wouldn’t consider either of you dating material! Now stop acting like you had something to fight over and come on. We’re about to do something special. We’re going to see one of the greatest wonders of the world!”

Well, it sounded like Tasha didn’t like Mike after all, Jason thought, or him either for that matter. “Sorry Mike, I should have known you wouldn’t try to take my girl away.”

“It sounds like she’s nobody’s girl. Let’s knock off being stupid and have some fun,” Mike said, relieved it hadn’t come to blows. “Here, grab that bag.”

Chapter Seven

The bus waiting outside the train station was filling up quickly. As they got on and sat down, Zack complained again about how his bottom hurt.

“If you’re going to ride horses you’ll have to live with aches and pains,” Toni said without any sympathy.

The doors closed and the driver and told them to sit back and enjoy the ride. After a very short drive, he stopped outside a rustic old lodge. From the bus they could just barely make out a blur of color from where they knew the canyon should be. David told them this was their stop and they hurried to get off.

As they walked toward the rim, the Grand Canyon stretched out before them. Towering pinnacles of rock cast long shadows down layered canyon walls. It was an unparalleled sight. A virtual light show of red and purple hues played out as the setting sun swept over the canyon. At the low, stone wall they watched in awe as the light level fell and dusk moved in.

“I can’t believe how huge it is,” Toni said, staring across the wide chasm to the opposite side, trying unsuccessfully to grasp its true size.

“It just doesn’t look real,” said Mike.

“It’s your field of vision,” Jenny explained. “Looking at a picture is like looking through a narrow tube—you can’t see anything out of the corner of your eye. Here in person, the whole thing fills your vision and because it is so big, it overwhelms you.”

“I always think about those early explorers coming out of the woods and then *wham* there it is,” Tasha said. “Just think, we’re in shock and we knew it was going to be here!”

“We’re hiking down there?” Jason said in disbelief.

“Tomorrow’s the big day,” said Mike, thinking this was going to be one long walk.

“A squirrel!” screamed Zack, his voice piercing the eerie quiet.

“Get back here!” yelled Toni, as he chased a squirrel with little tufts of black fur on his head. “I’m not kidding Zack, come here right now!” she demanded.

Zack stopped and leaned over the edge to see where the squirrel had gone. The sight of him hanging over the canyon edge, possessing very little understanding of Earth’s gravity, was all she could take. Grabbing his coat, she roughly pulled him away from the edge. “Zack! Don’t do that!” she said angrily, her heart pounding even harder from her own fear of being so close to the drop-off.

“It’s okay, Toni. I’m fine.”

“Well, I’m not!” she told him. “We’re going inside. It will be dark soon and it’s getting cold.”

“Let’s come back after dark,” suggested Laura. “Without city lights, we should be able to see millions of the stars. It won’t be as wonderful as orbiting the Moon but it should be good.”

No one made the first move to leave. It was difficult to process such a powerful image, it tugged at you, making you feel you were about to float out over something that barely registered as real in your mind, yet the butterflies in your stomach told you it was.

“It’s really *something*, isn’t it?” David remarked as he walked toward them. “We’re all checked in and they’re getting us a table. Time to come in,” he instructed, knowing they must be ready to eat. “You need to take your bags to your rooms and wash up.”

Perched near the rim of the canyon, the rambling three-story lodge, built around 1900 with massive Oregon pine logs and local native stone, was pretty impressive itself. When

they entered the lobby, it was like traveling back in time.

David gave out their room keys and told them to be quick or they'd lose their table.

Zack stared at stuffed elk and deer heads and other animals displayed around the lobby. Toni tapped his shoulder, directing him straight ahead to a wide wooden staircase.

"I don't want to hear about how your legs hurt," she told him as they climbed the stairs to the second floor. Their rooms had views of the canyon but it was too dark to see.

The dining room, like everything else in the lodge, was large and inviting. They were escorted to a large table near a stone fireplace. All the tables were covered with white linen tablecloths, so everyone knew to use their best manners.

"Mr. Matthews, why do people stuff the animals?" asked Zack, thinking it was creepy.

"Well Zack, we're amazed and impressed by all creatures that live on Earth," David told him. "Long ago people had to hunt wild game for food. Some hunted for sport and these animals were preserved so people could see and admire them.

"Oh," said Zack, finding it hard to imagine a time when people stuffed animals. "But that was only in the olden days, right?"

"Right," said David. "We don't do that as much anymore."

He was happy with David's explanation and turned his attention to food. They were hungry and tired, so there wasn't much talk during dinner. The fire put out a lot of heat, making it too hot to linger after dinner and soon they left to go outside. The brisk night air snapped them out of their fireside stupor and before long their eyes locked onto the millions of stars that filled the night sky.

It was strangely quiet as they walked along the rim. The path wound along the canyon edge, where visitors passed each other in silence. A white streak, then others shot across the sky, marking the entry of other visitors from space—meteorites or as some people called them, falling stars. When they began to shiver from the cold night air, David's group hurried back to the lodge and up to their rooms. Tomorrow promised to be a very long day.

It was still dark the next morning when Zack knocked on his sister's door. He was glad she was already up. Toni took Zack out in the hall and they headed downstairs. She couldn't get over how everything in the lodge was oversized. The logs it was built from were huge. The steps were more than extra wide. The fireplaces were massive and the rooms were large and open. Structures on the Moon were limited and everything had to be practical, which gave this lodge a great feeling of spaciousness.

Even though it was early, other guests were already down in the lobby. No one else in their group had come down for breakfast, so Toni gave into Zack's pleading that she take him outside, but only after he promised to stay by her side.

The air was cold and dry as they made their way the short distance from the lodge to the canyon rim. Dawn was beginning to light up the thousands of nooks and crannies in the towering stone corridors of the canyon. It was as if someone was turning up the light on a beautiful painting.

Zack was being good so Toni agreed to a short walk. Other visitors strolled along, enjoying the early morning hour and as Toni listened, she heard different languages being spoken. Even though she didn't understand the words, she had a pretty good idea what they were probably saying.

The cawing of crows made Toni turn. Two large, black birds strutted on a bed of pine needles. Suddenly, one took off and perched above them in a scraggly old tree.

"Look Zack, that crow flew into a Pinyon Pine tree. Did you know they can live for a

thousand years?"

"How do birds live so long?" he asked. They both laughed at his joke. Zack was wide awake now and tired of walking with Toni. He ran ahead to look at a squirrel digging near the base of a tree.

Toni ran after him. "Zack! You promised to be good!"

Looking back to see if she was watching, Zack leaned over the low wall, thinking it would be funny to scare Toni again. But the scare was on him when his hand slipped and he began to fall over the wall.

As Toni started to scream, someone appeared out of nowhere and grabbed Zack.

"Do you want to give this young lady a heart attack?" the man scolded, tightly gripping Zack's arm. "Do you know that you almost died?"

"Oh, thank you. Thank you! Thank you," cried Toni, reaching out and pulling Zack away from the man. "I'm Toni and this is my brother Zack."

"Hi Toni, I'm Skip," said the man with a smile before turning back to Zack. "You need to listen to your sister Zack because it is dangerous around here. You almost were one of those people that kill themselves every year because they don't follow the rules."

When Toni looked up to see if everyone was staring at them, she saw Jenny walking toward them. "Jenny! I want you to meet my hero. This is Skip. He just saved Zack from falling into the canyon."

"I was okay," said Zack, embarrassed by all the commotion over a little slip.

Jenny gave Zack a very long look that didn't need any words, then turned to thank Skip. He put out his hand and Jenny took it. It was the rugged hand of an outdoorsman. His face was round and weathered and his hair was bleached blonde by the sun. He smiled from behind his wire-rimmed glasses and asked if she was Zack's mother.

"She's not my mother," laughed Zack. "My mother's on the Moon!"

Skip looked amused by his remark but Jenny assured him it was quite true and that she too lived off-planet, a pilot on leave from an orbiting station at the Moon.

Well, these weren't your usual park visitors he thought, though as a park ranger he met a lot of interesting people. "Have you been down in the canyon yet?" he asked.

"No, but today is the big day," Toni told him.

"And you need to hurry back and eat so we can pick up our gear," Jenny reminded them. "David said it will be a long hard day and we need to keep to a schedule."

"How far in are you hiking?" asked Skip.

"We're camping at Phantom Ranch for two nights," Jenny said and thanked him again for his help.

"I'll look you up," Skip said, as they parted company.

Chapter Eight

“Look—there!” David said, pointing to a plateau down in the canyon. “See that bright, winding line? That’s Bright Angel Trail. We’ll be there after we’ve hike down the wall of the canyon’s outer gorge. Then that trail leads to the inner gorge.”

“It doesn’t look too far,” said Mike. “We should be there in an hour or two.”

“Don’t plan on it Mike, it’s almost nine miles to the bottom from the trailhead. Look way down there, across the river,” his grandfather said, pointing into the distance. “See that clump of trees? That’s the ranch. That’s where we’ll be camping.”

“The river looks green,” Mike said, locating it with the binoculars. “How do we cross it?”

“There’s a hanging foot bridge. Look to the side of the canyon beyond the ranch, that’s Bright Angel Creek. Do you see it?”

“I think so.”

“You can follow that creek all the way to the other side of the canyon, up to the north rim,” his grandfather told him. “Maybe next time you visit, we’ll hike that trail.”

The wind stirred in the pine trees and Tasha paused to listen. Whenever she heard it, she thought of Flagstaff and northern Arizona.

Their expedition began at the trailhead. A mule train entered the canyon just ahead of them. The dirt trail, tucked against the south side of the canyon wall, would remain in shade most of the day. The wrangler astride the lead mule set an easy pace for the line of mules loaded down with supplies and riders. Watching the surefooted mules gave them much needed confidence as their own trek got underway.

It was just after seven when they began their descent into the Grand Canyon.

“Take it slow,” Tasha told them. “It’s steep and there always are wet spots, maybe even some ice.”

They started slowly, carefully testing their footing. It was slow going at first while they got used to their backpacks and the incline. Laura was having trouble on the steep grade. “Sorry Jason,” she said, bracing herself against his backpack.

“That’s okay,” he said. “Hold on if you have to.”

The trail hugged the cliff, switching back and forth as it dropped down through Douglas Fir and Blue Spruce trees. By focusing on the ground directly in front of her, Toni avoided looking at the drop below. Soon they would be at the first rest stop and she hoped it would get easier.

“Toni, my legs hurt,” Zack complained.

“I’m sorry Zack,” she said. “They’ll feel better when your muscles warm up.” She wanted it to be true because her legs were beginning to ache too.

Turn after turn on the trail took them deeper into the canyon. Finally, they arrived at Three Mile Rest House and stopped. Everyone looked back up the canyon, trying to gauge their progress. It was warming up and felt good to rest but all too soon they were back on the trail.

It was hair-raising event whenever mule trains crossed paths with hikers. Hikers had to move to the edge and give the dozen or so large mules, the right-of-way on the inside of the trail.

When they reached Indian Gardens, people and mules both returning to the top and descending into the canyon, dotted the length of Bright Angel Trail. The trail stretched across Tonto Platform, a large flat piece of land above the canyon’s inner gorge. It was a

desert with dried yellow grass, scrubby bushes and cacti. Here they were 5000 feet below the rim and still had three miles to go before reaching the river. It was hot and they eagerly drank from their canisters. Tasha reminded them to watch for snakes.

Jenny looked up to where they'd begun their descent. The rock layers of the cliff face were very distinct. As they continued walking, moving away from the outer canyon wall, the landscape appeared to change. The drop-off into the inner gorge wasn't visible yet and the canyon walls rising around them looked like mountains. Instead of having the appearance of being in the Grand Canyon, it looked like they were in a valley between mountains.

Tasha pointed to the layered rock formations, plainly visible on the outer gorge. "That very top layer is Kaibab Limestone," she told them. "Kaibab is the name of that funny little squirrel you saw Zack. Next is Coconino Sandstone, then Toroweap Sandstone and under that are beds of the red Supai Formation."

Everyone remembered passing through the Supai part because red dust had been everywhere. "That last rock unit is the Redwall Limestone," she told them. "It's really white but it's stained from the Supai rocks above it. Gee, I didn't think I would remember all that."

For a moment, giving a geology lesson had taken her mind off her bad mood. She was still annoyed with Mike and Jason and wanted them to know it. It made her angry every time she thought about the scene on the train.

"At least there weren't snakes on the Moon," laughed Jason.

"Do you have bad memories of our rescue and the Moon?" Toni asked him.

"That must have been awful," Laura chimed in. "Toni told me how it felt to be trapped in the lava tube and how you managed to find help all by yourself."

As they walked along, Jason told Laura how he, Mike and Toni had left the lunar base in the rover to waste some time before her aunt's wedding at Moonwake. Laura already knew the story but she liked the sound of his voice and hearing out how brave he was. It was almost noon when they finally reached the place where the platform trail ended and their descent into the inner gorge began.

Storm clouds had been gathering all morning and now thunder occasionally echoed across the canyon. David hoped the storm would hold off, at least until they reached Phantom Ranch. Toni expected Zack to be as frightened by thunder as she was but it only seemed to amuse him. He told her it sounded like his drums.

"Let's try to get to Phantom Ranch before this storm hits," David urged, as lightning flashed in the distance, followed by thunder rumbling through the valley. "We're still about an hour away."

They checked their backpacks before the final descent. Toni made sure Zack's shoes were fastened and then checked her own. Here the rock wall was dark gray, almost black. White vertical lines of another rock type ran through it, making it look like puzzle pieces. Tasha told them it was the Vishnu Schist, some of the oldest rock on Earth.

"That would still make them younger than the youngest rocks on the Moon," said Mike, impressed with her knowledge of geology. "This white stuff looks like some kind of granite," he added, hoping she'd stop being mad and talk to him.

Here it was easier to see the Colorado River. They could even make out some movement of the greenish-brown water.

"Ever hear of dinosaurs?" Jason asked Zack.

"You're kidding!" Zack said, half laughing. "They're all dead!"

"You got me there," said Jason, "but it sure looks like a dinosaur-kind-of-place to me."

It did feel prehistoric and now Zack half expected to see a monstrous reptile around every turn.

Jenny had taken the lead. “The bridge!” she called out. “Hold on to your hats, it’s fifty feet off the ground.”

“Oh terrific!” Toni laughed.

Here the river was about two hundred feet across. The noisy rushing water would make the bridge crossing very exciting. The suspension bridge looked sturdy and they started across.

Halfway across, Mike stopped to gaze at the water flowing over the bedrock below. The water was cloudy from the silt and debris continually being eroded off the inner gorge walls. It was this erosion that had, and still was, carving the Grand Canyon. Looking up, Mike tried to imagine the twenty million years it had taken to cut through the rock layers of this geologic wonder. Zack stopped next to Mike and watched the flowing water. This was an amazing trip for the young Moon boy.

Phantom Ranch was on the far side of the river. As they approached the ranch, they saw cabins and dormitories near huge Cottonwood trees. Mules and mule wranglers dotted the landscape. People were setting up tents while others relaxed or headed over to the cantina.

David went and got the directions to their campsite. It wasn’t long before they’d pitched their tents and felt very much at home. The weather was holding, so they changed out of their hiking clothes and joined other visitors cooling off in the river. Pools of cold water trapped in scoured-out rocks near the bank weren’t very friendly to sore muscles but it was a relief to be off the trail.

Soon they were refreshed and everyone, but Jenny, took off to explore. She returned to camp for a nap before they went to the cantina for dinner. She slowly sat down and untied her wet river shoes. While she was carefully drying her sore feet, she saw Skip. He was talking to a group of hikers at the edge of their camp. She waved and he walked over.

“I’m glad to see you made it Jenny.”

She was glad he remembered her name.

“Where’s the rest of your group?” he asked.

“Out exploring. I needed a break Skip. I’m not as young as I’d like to be,” she said, rubbing a cramped muscle in her leg.

“I know how you feel Jenny,” said Skip as sat down beside her. “I’m not sure how many years of canyon climbing I have left in me.”

They were still visiting when everyone wandered back into camp.

Chapter Nine

It rained during the night and the river started to rise. Rainwater ran into little streams and creeks, filling the gullies and side canyons that fed the mighty river. By morning the river was swollen and a hard running torrent. This was the mighty Colorado. Bedrock, visible only yesterday, was covered by muddy water muscling its way through the canyon. The large volume of water buried rapids that had been so noisy only the day before.

The girls were awake but stayed wrapped in their sleeping bags talking about the storm that had kept Tasha up most of the night.

"I can't believe I slept through it," Toni said stretching her stiff legs. "I really must have been tired."

"Nothing ever keeps me from sleeping," Laura told them. "Ouch! I can tell my legs are going to be sore today."

"Well, I didn't sleep all that well," Jenny said, before blurting out, "Doesn't Skip have nice legs?"

"Jenny!" they all shouted, screaming with laughter.

"I guess *you* think so," Tasha said, shocked that she'd asked them such a question.

"I'd have great legs too, if I had to walk these canyons every day," said Toni.

"I like him," Jenny said, surprised by her own words. "He has a quiet strength and I like a self-assured man. He's happy and at peace with himself."

"Gosh Jenny, you got all that just from yesterday?" asked Tasha. "I'm beginning to think it's impossible to figure guys out."

"Are you seeing him today?" Laura asked, rolling on her side to look over at Jenny. She thought it was great that Jenny had a boyfriend.

"We're spending the day together. He's invited us all to go hiking."

"Yeah, right! You don't really want us hanging around while you have a date with Skip, do you?" laughed Toni.

"It's not a date!" Jenny protested, but her heart jumped a little at the thought of seeing him again.

People outside their tent were talking about how high the river had gotten. The girls hurried to dress but remembered an earlier warning and first checked their shoes for scorpions.

The guys were already outside. David was busy hanging up backpacks left out overnight. He hoped everything would dry out once the sun made its way onto the canyon floor. Everyone, except Zack, was talking about the stormy night and the rising river.

"Are you going to make breakfast?" asked Zack. "I'm really hungry." He'd been waiting by the fire and his hunger pains had finally gotten stronger than his fascination with the burning wood.

"The fire's almost ready," David said, handing him a fruit bar. "Eat this. It will hold you for awhile." They'd eaten a huge dinner the night before at the ranch's cantina but that had worn off.

Jenny offered to help David with breakfast. She'd decided a few cooking lessons might be a good idea. The rest of their group left camp and stood with a gathering crowd at the river's edge. The current was very strong but everyone's first impression was how wide and muddy the river had gotten.

Over centuries, water seeping through cracks in the rock had cut through stone and carved the towering pinnacles of the canyon. As rock eroded away, countless narrow side

canyons with sandy floors and scooped out rock faces remained, and where microclimates nurtured orchids and ferns.

“I wonder if those pools we saw yesterday are covered over?” Mike said, thinking this could change his plans to explore some of the narrow side canyons. He was anxious to see more of the canyon’s geology and find out what kind of plants grew down here. As their eyes adjusted to the dim morning light, they started to realize the power of the water’s current.

“We can still work our way along the river,” said Jason. “This extra water should run off soon?”

“Look at it Jason!” said Toni. “Does it look like it’s slowing down to you!?”

The rapidly moving water had taken on the appearance of a roller coaster. Branches and uprooted trees, washed out of side canyons, were being swept along in the current. They tumbled over the huge boulders that had been wedged together for centuries.

“We could get up into the side canyons of Bright Angel Creek,” Jason told Toni.

“Let’s go back to camp,” Tasha said, feeling woozy from looking at so much moving water. “I need to eat something.”

By the time they returned, Skip was already in camp and giving Jenny and David a hand with breakfast. The girls smiled and gave each other knowing looks.

“Who’s ready for my famous canyon tour?” Skip asked, as they sat down to eat.

“When do you—” Mike began. “What!?” he asked, looking up in surprise at Tasha who had just kicked him under the table.

“Please pass the pancakes Mike,” she asked sweetly. Toni quickly leaned over and whispered to him that Jenny wanted to spend time alone with Skip. From the way the message had been delivered, he figured it was a secret.

Jenny did want them to come but the girls had decided she better find out now if she liked this guy because time was short and she wasn’t getting any younger.

By the time breakfast was over, everyone around the table knew not to accept Skip’s offer to show them around. Instead, they split into small groups with instructions to meet back at camp for lunch.

Jason and Laura were taking Zack on a hike. The water so high, Toni decided to go along and help watch him.

As they left camp, Skip handed out walking sticks he’d fashioned from tree branches. He told them to be sure and make a lot of noise as they hiked and poke the grass and rocks to scare off snakes.

“Given the chance, snakes will gladly move out of your way,” he told them.

Like everyone else, David was stiff from the hike down but he was having more trouble getting around and told everyone that if they needed him, he’d be hanging around the campsite.

“Well, I guess that leaves just the two of us,” Skip said, turning to Jenny.

“Yep, that’s what it looks like,” she said laughing, wondering if he had a clue about the conspiracy to leave them alone.

Skip was a confirmed bachelor. He’d never met a woman willing to put up with his rugged, independent ways. So, even though he thought she was the most fascinating woman he had ever met, it never once crossed his mind that Jenny might be interested in him.

Earlier, Tasha had practically dragged Mike away from camp. He could tell she was still mad and so he couldn’t figure out why she had paired up with him for the morning.

As they walked along in silence, Mike poked around for snakes, unable to think of anything to say.

“Mike, you didn’t really mean it when you told Jason I only wanted to be your friend because you had been to the Moon, did you?” Tasha asked, finally bringing up the subject that had her so annoyed.

“No—well, maybe,” he said, deciding to be honest.

She was surprised. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

He didn’t know what she expected him to say. Mike liked Tasha but he didn’t want to take a chance and make a fool of himself. They entered a side canyon and stopped to rest on a large smooth rock beside a pool of water. Here the sunshine hadn’t made its way into the canyon but they could see hawks circling above in the sunlight.

Hoping to lighten the mood, Mike suggested they explore the canyon. Tasha agreed, mostly because she’d decided to forgive Mike but also because they might find Native American artifacts, perhaps even ancient rock drawings. They climbed up the sloping canyon wall until they reached a small ledge. The footing was better and they sat down to rest and look around. Above them, they watched a bird return again and again to the same place in the canyon.

“I bet there’s a nest up there, Mike,” Tasha told him. “Let’s get closer and see.”

The climb was getting harder. They gradually worked their way up, being careful about where they put their hands and feet. Tasha knocked loose a small rock and they both listened as it bounced down to the canyon floor. Finally they reached a small plateau. Mike was glad to see the ground flatten out but he wondered how hard it would be to get down.

Tasha pointed back across the narrow canyon, “Look Mike. The nest is on the other side.” The twists and turns of the canyon had fooled them. It was a good mistake though because here they were on safe footing.

Mike sat down and took a long drink. “We better start back,” he said. “Maybe there’s an easier way down on the other side of this plateau.”

“Oh, not yet Mike. Let’s look around,” she suggested. “Look over there. Is that a cave?”

A gigantic boulder, one that probably had fallen into the canyon millions of years earlier, rested atop some sort of opening. “Well, let’s go take a look,” he agreed. “If we find cave drawings, we’ll have something to tell everyone at lunch.”

Tasha hurried ahead to look and Mike followed, watching her as she crossed the plateau. He should have been paying more attention to the uneven ground. This became painfully obvious as soon as he stepped in a whole and twisted his ankle.

“Tasha! *Wait!*”

By the time she got to him, Mike was up and testing his ankle.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

“Give me a hand,” Mike said, gingerly trying to put some weight on his foot. “I twisted my ankle.” He leaned on her shoulder and steadied himself. “Help me over there,” he said, pointing to the opening under the rock.

As soon as they got close to the opening, he let go and hopped up to what looked like a doorway. A large sandstone slab lay nearby.

“What do you think is in there?” Tasha asked, trying to see past him.

“I’m not sure,” Mike said. “I think it’s some sort of room. It’s probably been here for hundreds of thousands of years.”

“An ancient dwelling?” she suggested.

“I can’t see anything yet,” said Mike. He leaned against the opening, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

“This is exciting!” Tasha exclaimed, thinking they had discovered some lost city. “Can

you see anything yet?”

“Watch it!” Mike yelled, as she leaned on his shoulder to see past him.

“Sorry Mike, I forgot about your foot. Why don’t you sit down?”

“We’ll have to find another way out of here Tasha. I don’t think I’ll be taking the steep way down.”

She looked at Mike and for the first time realized she might have to leave him here and get help.

“Hurts that bad, huh?” she asked, already guessing the answer.

“Yeah.” He could feel his ankle swelling against his boot.

Telling him to stay put, she climbed up the rock for a better look. She surveyed the area, looking for an easier way down. The Colorado River was visible off in the distance but distance here was deceiving because the river snaked around so much. Tasha made the decision to go down the other side of the plateau. She climbed down and told Mike she’d found an easier way out.

Judging by the light, Mike figured it must be around ten o’clock. He told Tasha she might reach camp close to the time every one was expected back for lunch. “But take it slow,” he advised. “The sky is clear and you have enough time.”

“I’ll be back Mike. Wait in the shade of this rock.”

Tasha looked around to get her bearings and to remember the landmarks.

Her descent was easier but the looser footing caused her to slide in some places. Finally she reached solid footing. It was heating up and she stopped for a drink. Looking around she could see the way to the bottom and moved on.

When she reached the canyon floor she hiked toward camp with determination. But within a half an hour she realized she was lost. Somehow she’d gotten turned around. The best course of action was to retrace her steps.

Chapter Ten

Everyone but Tasha and Mike had returned to camp. When lunch was over, they still weren't back.

"They probably just went farther than they'd planned," Skip told Jenny. "I know that section of the canyon like the back of my hand. Wait here. I'll go look around."

David wanted to go but Skip said he'd make better time on his own. "Take care Skip," Jenny told him as they walked to the edge of camp.

"I'll be fine," he said squeezing her hand.

It was almost two o'clock when Skip headed out. He asked every hiker he passed if they'd seen the two missing kids. No one had. The Grand Canyon was huge and you could go in many directions. After a two hour search, Skip decided one of them might be hurt and turned back for more help. Then again, he figured, they could have made it back on their own.

"*Hello!* Over here!" yelled Tasha.

"There you are!" Skip answered with relief. "I've been looking for you. Where's Mike?"

"He's back in the canyon. Up on a plateau," she explained as she hurried over to him. "He twisted his ankle."

"Can you find where you left him?" Skip asked, knowing it would soon be dark inside the canyon walls.

"I'm too turned around now but I remember what it looks like Skip," she said. When she told him about the room in the rocks, Skip was pretty sure he knew where Mike was.

"Good!" he told her. "I'm glad you found that granary. It would have been hard to find him without such a good landmark."

"A granary?"

"I'll tell you both about it when we get there," he said. "Stick close to me."

Skip took off with Tasha hot on his heels, glad for his sense of direction down here in the canyon. She realized now how dependent she was on instruments for navigation. She knew she must work harder on her observation skills. It was almost an hour before Tasha recognized the slope she'd slid down and knew they were close.

Mike was still sitting where Tasha had left him. He was trying to figure out how he always got himself, and everyone else, into these tight situations. But his anger melted away when he heard Tasha calling his name.

"Over here!" he answered. "Down here!" he called. Then, "Up here! *Hello?*" He couldn't tell which way they were coming, until they came into view.

"Thanks for coming Skip," Mike said and tried to get up. "I'll be able to make it back with your help." But his ankle was so swollen he couldn't stand. It was obvious to everyone that it would be a long, slow trek out.

"At least you picked a good place," Skip joked. "We'll stay here tonight and walk—make that—limp, out in the morning."

Tasha sat down. Exhausted, she leaned against the rock. She watched as Skip moved around the plateau gathering wood. She wondered what Jenny found so attractive about him. Their lives were so different.

When he returned and dropped the bundle of sticks and branches on the ground, Tasha asked him if they could get word to the others. He told her they couldn't. His phone was back at camp with his gear. They would just have to say put and start out at first light. It

was almost dark as Skip started a fire. It would keep them warm and keep any mountain lions in the area away.

"It's not so bad," he told them. "They know I'm looking for you. They'll figure we're together and coming out tomorrow."

Happy that things were more or less under control, Tasha wanted to know what Skip meant about the stone structure being a granary.

"The Hopi people settled in this area," he told them. "They built places throughout the canyon to store their grain."

"Isn't this a strange place for a storage locker?" Mike asked.

"Well, it would have been a good place to safeguard food stores," said Skip. "They seemed to have adapted well enough, so I guess they knew what they were doing. There isn't anything left inside. It's just an empty room now. Did you know that traditional Hopi ceremonies are planned using the lunar calendar?"

"Really?" said Mike.

"Have you been a ranger a long time?" Tasha asked, lying down near the fire.

"I've been at the south rim of the Grand Canyon for almost five years," he told her. "Before that, I was at Paria Canyon on the Utah-Arizona border for twenty years."

"Where's Paria Canyon?" Mike asked.

"About fifty miles northeast of here, as the crow flies, or about sixty-five miles up the Colorado River. The Paria River helps feed the Colorado," Skip explained. "It's just south of Glen Canyon Dam. The dam holds back the natural flow of the Colorado River. The water behind the dam is Lake Powell—a huge lake. You should visit it, if you get the chance. A lot of people keep house boats up there and explore the canyons by water. It's one of the most beautiful places around here. This whole area is part of the Colorado River Drainage Basin."

"Isn't that near Lee's Ferry?" Mike asked, remembering it from a map at the lodge.

"Yes," said Skip. "Lee's Ferry is near where the Paria joins the Colorado. That's where people begin white-water rafting trips down the Colorado. They ride the river in those large rubber pontoon boats that can hold about twenty people. They used to let more people go down the river," he told them, "but because so many people were going, the Park Service finally restricted it. Now you need reservations way in advance. Those rafters pull in at Phantom Ranch."

Soon Tasha fell asleep but Skip and Mike continued to talk into the night.

Skip explained canyon history to Mike. When he mentioned Major John Wesley Powell, Mike's ears perked up. He remembered his father telling him that Powell was the first director of the United States Geological Survey.

Major Powell lost his arm at the Battle of Shiloh during the Civil War, Skip told him. But that hadn't stop him from making that historic, one thousand mile river expedition seven years later. If anything, it made it even more amazing. In 1869, Powell and nine other scientists and explorers were the first to make it through the Grand Canyon in wooden boats. It took them ninety-five days and they nearly died of starvation. Some of the men ran off and were killed. Those who had stayed on the river miraculously survived the treacherous rapids and somehow managed to map the Colorado River.

The canyon had changed very little since Major Powell first ran its rapids but other things had changed in the world. Now people lived on the Moon. What would Major Powell think about me, Mike wondered. Would he think I'm an explorer too?

Mike's hunger pains had finally died down. He sat back with his leg elevated and watched the soothing glow of the fire and began talking about life on the Moon. They'd

each found a wilderness to explore—Skip had just been at it a lot longer than Mike.

It was almost dawn when Tasha woke up. She lay quietly watching the fire and listening to Mike. She could tell he impressed Skip. She quietly listened as Mike talked about his family and the lunar colony.

“We better wake Tasha,” Skip told Mike.

“Good morning,” Tasha said, sitting up. “Did you get any sleep?”

“No beauty sleep for me, but I learned a lot about the Moon,” Skip told her.

“Jenny knows all about the Moon,” Tasha said, standing to stretch.

“I know,” Skip said, “but she just keeps asking me about my life.”

“Sorry my sprained ankle messed up your love life,” said Mike.

Tasha turned in horror and whacked him on the arm.

“Oh, I forgot, he’s not supposed to know Jenny likes him.”

“What’s that?” asked Skip.

“Jenny thinks you’re *Mr. Right*,” said Mike, deciding guys needed to stick together because women were too hard to understand on your own.

Skip smiled but didn’t say anything.

It was slow going as they started down the plateau. Skip supported Mike the whole way. It seemed endless, as they had to stop every few minutes to rest and plan their next move down the slope. It took two hours just to get to Bright Angel Creek and that’s where Skip left them. He hurried ahead to get help and to call off any rescue teams.

Later that day a helicopter flew Mike and another injured visitor out of the canyon. The others followed him out the next day. Giving in to their pleas, David arranged for them to ride up on mules. Zack was getting good at riding four legged animals.

Their canyon trek had been an amazing adventure. Now they had three days to explore the south rim of the national park and Grand Canyon Village .

Mike didn’t go with them to Havasupai Falls. With the way his ankle felt, he wasn’t disappointed about missing the hike but he did miss some beautiful scenery.

Toni liked the souvenir shops. She told Zack he should start collecting Moon rocks.

“As soon as they map South Pole-Aitken Basin, you can paint SPA Basin on them and sell them to the tourists. Look at these prices Zack, you could make a lot of money,” she said, as she checked out another carved cedar box. She bought one for her mother and a carved bear for her father.

Mike was getting around better now and went with Tasha to see Powell Memorial. Birds soared above Powell Point on warm air currents rising from the canyon floor. From those heights the birds had unobstructed views of the pinnacles and buttes below. Mike couldn’t think of a better place to study geology. After this experience, he and his father would have a lot to talk about. The Moon had many unexplored canyons, mountains and caves and Mike wanted to get to as many as possible.

Laura sketched canyon vistas. It was impossible to find a bad view. Jason could usually be found sitting nearby. Laura wasn’t sure which she like more, the views or his company.

Zack was having the adventure of his young life. He made it his job to keep everyone advised about wildlife living in the area. He wrote down everything he saw in a pocket-sized logbook. He’d met a boy his own age and together they were tracking everything they could find. They’d seen a lot of deer and rabbits. Lizards and frogs were all over the place, and of course, they loved the mules. Kaibab squirrels were easy to find, as were big black crows and noisy blue jays. Lucky for them, skunks had stayed out of sight. Having so much freedom to play outside was something new and wonderful for Zack and he loved every minute of it.

Jason walked with Laura on their last visit to the museum. Tasha could tell Jason liked the girl from Alaska. She'd never been serious about Jason but still she felt a pang of jealousy seeing them together.

"Come on Mike!" Tasha yelled, grabbing his hand and running ahead of the group.

Toni grabbed Zack's hand and laughed as they ran to keep up. Imagine, she thought, Tasha with Mike. And, she never would have imagined Laura falling for Jason.

Inside the museum, the geologic timeline exhibit explained how water and volcanoes had carved and built the Grand Canyon. Part of the display showed man's time on Earth. It was clear by the very tiny space in the timeline, that people were only a recent addition.

"We need something like this on the Moon." Toni said. "We need to build museums and monuments!"

"Monuments?" scoffed Mike. "You need heroes and history to have monuments."

"Uncle Pete was a hero," Laura told him, reminding everyone how he'd died during a Moon rescue. "A lot of people are making sacrifices to build our colony at Moonwake. We *are* making history!"

"You're right," said Mike, sorry he'd been so flippant. "Hey, Tasha, can your family design monuments?"

"I'll ask them," she said, ignoring his attempt at humor.

What gives with her? Mike wondered. She is impossible to understand.

David Matthews had noticed his grandson's interest in Tasha and understood. It hadn't been easy for him either all those years ago, when he first met Mike's grandmother. But somehow he had figured it out and won her over. He knew Mike would find a way too.

It was their last night together at the canyon. In the morning, they would fly Mike, Toni and Zack back to the Cape for their scheduled launch to Moonwake.

Jenny was unusually quiet during dinner. When everyone finished and started to leave, she asked them to stay just a little longer.

"Skip has asked me to stay," she said, watching as the girls' eyes grew wide with excitement. "I have three weeks before I report back to Moonwake and Skip and I need to make some decisions about our future."

"I thought I saw some sparks," David said. "Good for you. Only a fool would see a chance for happiness and not take a second look."

Everyone gathered around and hugged her goodbye. She promised to stay in touch and then told them to get up to bed. They all held a special place in her heart and she knew she would miss them.

Tasha was happy for Jenny but couldn't imagine how after flying in space, Jenny would be happy grounded on Earth.

As they started up to their rooms, the desk clerk called Toni over and handed her a message. It said to call home. She grabbed Zack's hand and hurried up to her room.

As she waited for someone to answer, Toni realized how excited she was to be going home to Moonwake.

"Are you two ready to come home?" asked her mother. "We sure miss you and Zack. I can't wait to see you. The day you get home will be Zack's eighth birthday."

"I haven't forgotten Mom. But your message sounded urgent. Is anything wrong?" she asked, finally getting a chance to talk.

"No nothing's wrong Toni," Linda told her. "We just have such exciting news! Elizabeth and George just found out they're expecting a baby in December. Can you believe it? Toni? Hello, Toni? Are you still there?"

"Laura! Laura!" screamed Toni, running out into the hallway. "Your aunt's going to

have a baby! We're going to have a Moon baby!"

"Will it will look like us?" asked Zack.

"I think so," said Toni. "It's parents are human."

"It will be a Lunarian," Mike announced. "That should be the name for someone born on the Moon."

"Is it a boy or a girl?" asked Laura.

"I don't know," said Toni. "Oh! I think I hung up on my mother."

Toni was more excited than ever now about going home. She knew a baby would have the lunar colony in a high state of excitement and she didn't want to miss a minute of it. The trip to Earth had been exciting and different but she was anxious to get home.

"Are you ready to go home?" she asked Zack.

"Yes," he said, "I miss my friends."

They all realized their summer adventure was almost over.

"Jason, thanks for not hassling me about staying on Earth. I know you wanted to," said Mike.

"That's okay," Jason told his best friend. "You don't need me to tell you where to live—you know I'd like to have you here."

"Well, space is the future," Tasha said. "And I'll be there the first chance I get. Watch for me Mike. I plan to explore the frontier. Maybe Mars will be my new address."

"You can have it Tasha. I'm happy staying on Earth," said Jason.

"I'm happy he's staying on Earth," Laura said, "but I'm going to miss you terribly Toni."

"Hey! We'll always be fiends," Toni said, giving her a hug. "I can already picture your art show at the fabulous *Moonwake Art Gallery* we'll be building someday."

"Laura likes Jason—Laura likes Jason," chanted Zack.

"Come here you little trouble maker," said Jason, grabbing Zack and playfully tossing him on the bed. "Are you still going to be my pen pal or has your new Grand Canyon friend replaced me?"

"You're still my friend," laughed Zack, as Jason grabbed his foot and pulled him across the bed.

After walking in on all the horseplay, David asked Mike to come outside with him. He knew it would take a few minutes for everyone to quiet down.

They went downstairs and walked outside. Moonlight shined down as they stood together near the old, stone wall.

"Mike, do you remember when you didn't want to go to the Moon and I asked you to give it a chance?"

"I wanted to stay on Earth and live with you Grandfather, but now I want to live on the Moon. Our colony is starting to make important discoveries. Who knows what might be possible! I want to be a part of all that but I don't want you to be sad when I go."

"Mike, if I were younger, I'd want to find what's out there too. Now listen to me. Tomorrow when you get on that shuttle, I'm going to be happy for you *and* for me because it will be my grandson leading the way so others can follow."

The End