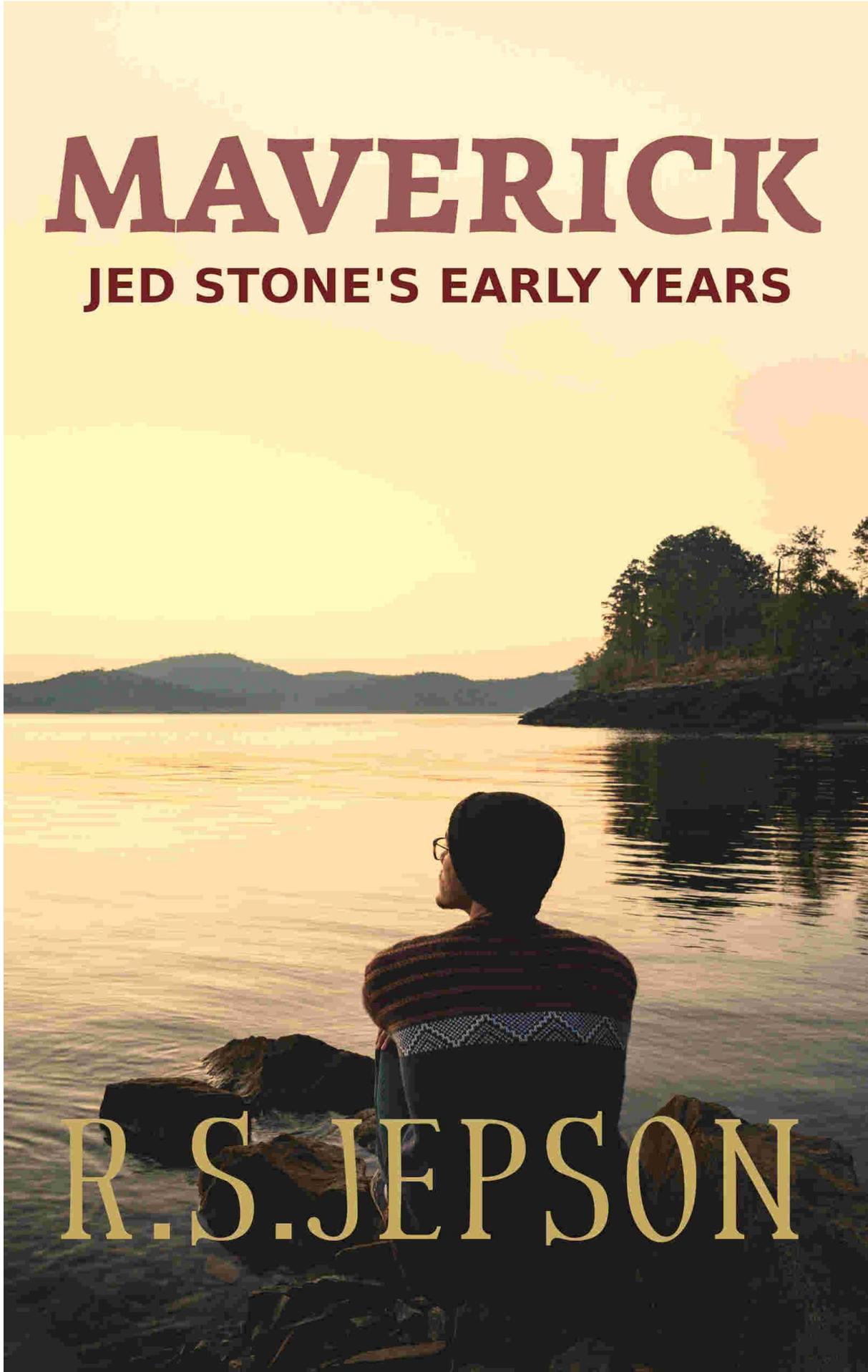


MAVERICK

JED STONE'S EARLY YEARS

A person wearing a dark beanie and a patterned sweater is sitting on dark rocks by a lake. They are looking out over the water towards a sunset. The sky is a mix of yellow and orange, and the water reflects the light. In the background, there are dark silhouettes of trees and hills.

R.S. JEPSON

MAVERICK

Jed Stone's Early Years

by

R. S. Jepson

Chapter 1

Martha Stone was standing at the kitchen sink when she heard a loud bang. A whooshing sound that disappeared into the distance in seconds followed it.

"What is that boy up to now!"

"He's fine, love. Probably playing at rocket building again," said William.

Three minutes later, something landed on the roof with a thud and crashed to the ground.

"Oh. Lord! What was that, Bill?"

"Nothing to worry about, I'm sure. I'll find out what Jed is doing."

Jed was ecstatic. His second rocket had proved a success. Rocketry had become one of his passions since his father bought plans and instructions for his tenth birthday. The first blew up on the launchpad, but this one, standing over one-metre tall, soared into the sky in a beautiful, vertical flight path.

In the nose cone, a radio frequency transmitting altimeter signaled Jed's cell-phone. It had recorded a maximum height of three-hundred-twenty feet. At that point, a parachute should have opened automatically to bring the craft safely back to earth. But it had failed.

Jed was dismayed. All his hard work would end up smashed on the ground. But the exercise was also a success.

He felt even more dismayed when its trajectory appeared to be taking it right over the house.

"Uh oh!"

With a terminal velocity which Jed dared not consider, it hit the side of the roof, bounced, and then slid towards the ground. To Jed's horror, it loosened a slate which followed the rocket downwards and disintegrated on the path. His dog, Misty, yelped and ran towards the barn.

I'm in trouble now!

His father came out. He walked along the path, then turned and looked up.

He turned back again towards Jed with his hands on his hips.

Jed looked sheepish as he approached him.

"Sorry, dad."

"It's okay, it won't take long to fix. But, son, there's ten acres of land here. Why fly it so close to the house?"

"There should have been a parachute, but it didn't work."

"I see. Other than that, did it go well?"

"Oh, yes! It made over three-hundred feet, perfectly straight too."

"Well done. Perhaps later, we'll try to find out what went wrong, eh? But for now, you'd better pick up the pieces and go apologise to your mum. It gave her a bit of a shock."

"Okay, dad."

The remains of his rocket lay scattered along the front of the house. He gathered them up in a large bucket. Some pieces had survived remarkably well, and the nose cone was in one piece. The altimeter was still transmitting, and he thought enough remained of the rocket to figure out why the parachute didn't open.

But first, he had another duty.

He walked into the house and made for the kitchen.

"Sorry, mum."

"What on earth were you thinking of? All this rocket stuff and explosives. Last week you accidentality blew up an old chicken coup. Can't you find a calmer hobby?"

"Don't be too hard on the lad, Martha. He's following his dream. I'll fix the slate later, a small price to pay. It was quite an achievement, what he did."

"Well, I don't know. I guess if you're happy, and Jed is safe, I can't complain too much."

Jed's interest in rockets went far beyond the models he made. For the past five years, his goal was to become an astronaut. This was no school-boy dream, nor a flight of fancy.

His computer held videos of every venture into space since humankind had escaped the pull of gravity and journeyed beyond the earth's atmosphere; from Sputnik to Space-X, which paved the way towards commercial spaceflight. In between were projects from the Americans, Russians, and eventually Europe along with many other nations. From the heady days of the Saturn V rockets and the first moon-landing to the present day, he knew every detail.

Not just simple facts. He had learned the principals of aeronautics; he had studied star charting and how to work in zero gravity. The rockets he built told him about thrust vectors and power-to-weight ratios, cargo-carrying capability and avionics. He learnt about the solar system, orbital velocities of planets, their rotation and composition. He studied the huge array of satellites surrounding the earth and about those that had gone much further; the Voyager series as they travelled beyond the heliopause, the bubble created by the sun, into interstellar space.

Now, he took an intent interest as work began on a new design of space vehicle, the ITC, Interplanetary Transport Craft. This would become the successor to the Space Shuttle.

It was similar in principle to the Space Shuttle, with a reusable main hull, but a new form of drive dispensed with the disposable boosters required for take-off. It looked similar but was considerably larger and a massive new runway was being built to handle the landings. NASA planned a series of three, destined to travel to Mars and beyond.

In his lifetime, Jed believed he would go to Mars and help build a permanent base there, perhaps he would go further. They were big dreams, but Jed was no ordinary boy.

William finished a task he had been working on and then called his son over to one of his workshops, sited in an old Great Alabama Southern Railroad railway carriage. He asked him to bring all the rocket parts with him.

"Let's find out why the parachute didn't open on your rocket."

Jed placed the bucket on a workbench and started taking all the pieces out.

"So, this is the part?"

William held the nose cone, which was intact, though scratched. He gently prised it open to reveal the miniature altimeter transmitter and the parachute housing.

"How should it have worked?"

"The altimeter should have sent out a signal at three-hundred feet. That should have activated the micro servo here," Jed pointed with a pencil. "The servo should have pulled this pin, releasing the spring which would have opened the enclosure."

"I see. Can you put a simulation on it, from the app on your phone?"

"I think so," said Jed.

He took out his cell phone and opened the app. He searched through the menu until he found the simulation function.

"I've found it. I'll try to activate it."

"Okay, before you do, I'll put a meter on the output of the altimeter. Right, can you ramp it up, linearly?"

"I should be able to . . . ah, here goes."

The altimeter feedback on Jed's phone rose, 280 . . . 290 . . . 300.

"That's it, Jed, I got the signal. The altimeter works, but the servo didn't activate. Let's test it."

William applied the output of a three-volt battery to the servo.

"Okay, this is the same polarity as you set it to."

Nothing happened.

"I'll switch the wires around."

As soon as the second wire touched, a faint 'whir' came from the servo. Its lever-arm pulled the pin, and the parachute housing burst open.

"There you have it, son. You had the voltage polarity the wrong way around going to the servo."

Jed slapped his forehead. "Stupid mistake!"

"Ah, an easy error to make."

"I should have tested it."

"A lesson learned then, thorough preparation. Think of a mistake like that on a real rocket with people onboard."

"You're right, dad. I need to be more rigorous."

"Are you going to rebuild it?"

"Oh, definitely. I'm not giving up."

"Good lad. Now that's sorted, how about a game of chess once we've eaten?"

"Yes, great."

The family sat around the dining table for their evening meal. Misty sat at Jed's feet.

"We found the problem with Jed's rocket," said William.

"Oh," said Martha. "Does that mean you're going to build another one?"

"Yes, but I'm going to fix the first one, to start with. Then build a bigger one."

"Oh, Lord!"

"I will fit it with a video camera so you can see the whole farm. I hope to get it to four-hundred feet."

"Good grief, Jed," said his mother. "Where will it all end?"

They finished up the meal, then William said: "How about that game of chess then?"

"Sure, dad."

William thought video games were wonderful, their high-resolution graphics and realistic simulations were getting better all the time. Nevertheless, he preferred the traditional games. Chess was his favourite, the most cerebral, but he also enjoyed Backgammon, Mah-jong and Scrabble. With friends and family, for lighter entertainment, he sometimes played Monopoly and Risk.

He was pleased, and proud, that Jed also liked these games and didn't spend all his time fixated with computer games as so many youngsters did.

Despite his age, Jed now proved a challenge for William. He kept him on his toes.

"Do you want to use the timer, Jed?"

"No, we'll go without it."

This suited William, and Jed was no slouch when he came to make his move. In some games they had played, Jed had startled William with the occasional audacious move which he had almost pulled off. He had glimpsed a brilliant mind.

This evening, Jed was on-form. He saw a pattern, or rather, an infinite number of them. He had already found that his mind didn't work quite the same as others. He would spend his entire life trying to figure it out, but he never reached the true answer. It was enough to know-how to use it, and he was becoming adept.

He loved mind-mapping, and found, through such methods, he could find the solution to complex problems. He saw form, where no one else did. The mind-mapping he performed on paper was mirrored in his mind, and sometimes he did not need the physical written symbols. The symbols were his creation and he believed his brain used unique convoluted algorithms to which these linked. At school he excelled, achieving A-grades in all his assessments. His teachers suggested he move up a year.

And he was becoming a formidable chess player.

After an hour, his dad frowned. Jed had him on the run. Both had lost many pieces, but Jed kept up the pressure.

It was Jed's move. William was aghast when Jed made one of his maverick moves. Then he saw it. He had no option but to take Jed's queen, yet despite this, he saw Jed could checkmate him in three moves. It dumbfounded him when Jed did it on his very next move. With glee in his eyes, he moved a mere pawn, knocked over William's king, and said with pride:

"Checkmate!"

William was astounded. He previously held the title of state chess master. Now his son, not yet eleven years old, had beaten him. But his heart was full of pride.

Their future games would be battles, he knew. Within months, Jed won half the games, after two years he won the majority.

Many years down the road, the same scenario would play out with Jed and his son, as the propensity for genius in the family deepened.

William dwelt on Jed's abilities, he had always suspected, and now knew, he had an exceptional son. The day after Jed beat him at chess, he bought him a Rubik's cube, an intriguing puzzle from the 1980s. It interested him to see how Jed would handle it.

The cube was a simple, yet ingenious, mechanical device. With no knowledge of the solution, it was almost impossible to resolve. Each turn of a face on the 3x3x3 cube would reposition eight squares. Some people cracked it after days of frustration, guides enabled one to figure it in 45 minutes.

"Have you seen one of these, Jed?"

"Yes, but I've never tried it."

"Never?"

"No."

"Okay." William scrambled the puzzle and then handed it to Jed.

Jed studied it and made a few turns of the squares. Then he stopped, held it in his hands and thought. William timed him.

After three minutes, Jed began turning again. Three minutes later, he had six single-coloured sides.

"Six minutes and ten seconds," said William. "Amazing. Try again."

Jed shuffled the puzzle randomly.

"Okay, start."

This time it took Jed a touch over three minutes. The third time, two minutes. After another go, Jed put it down. "I'm bored with it now. It's too easy."

William smiled.

William met with Martha on the veranda.

"He's a genius," he told her.

"I know."

"He beat me at chess last night, and he just cracked the Rubik's cube in minutes. We need to encourage him."

"How do we do that? He seems well-motivated as it is."

"I'm thinking about school and university."

"A bit soon to be talking about university, at his age."

"His teachers believe he is capable of more and needs to move up a grade. We need to look at him going to university much sooner than normal."

“You think so?”

“Absolutely. If he isn’t stretched, he could lose interest. It happened to me for a time.”

“Do you think we should speak to the school?”

“I do,” said William.

Within six months, Jed was fast-tracked through school and moved up two full years. He struggled to begin with, not with the curriculum, but with his classmates. When within his age group, it went unnoticed. Now the difference could be seen.

His intelligence was without question, but he lacked social skills. He kept to himself most mealtimes and breaks, usually working on some project, either as part of his schoolwork or personal ideas.

Eventually, there was enough concern that they raised the matter with his parents. After prolonged discussion with them, including Jed’s input, they brought in a child psychiatrist.

Within a day, he diagnosed Jed as having Asperger’s Syndrome.

Now, having an underlying cause for his challenges, his parents paid for a behavioural psychologist. Dr Kennedy taught Jed coping strategies and in time he could converse, still with some awkwardness, with his contemporaries. Strangely, he could talk with no difficulty with intelligent adults, as if he was the same age as them. He found it easy to speak of his passions, but in this scenario, he could also do small talk.

Overall, William and Martha lost their concern for Jed’s condition. They now knew it would not hold him back, and in common with others, believed it was contributory to his mental abilities, especially in his passion and single-mindedness.

Chapter 2

The autumn sun rose into a clear sky on a crisp morning in early October and burned off a thin layer of mist covering the placid waters of Lake Augusta.

It was Jed's fourteenth year, and he was about to complete the construction of his ultimate rocket. It stood over six feet tall, carried a real-time camera and an onboard experimental suite of accelerometers, air density measuring equipment, and temperature sensors. He had added these instruments to include it as one of his major science projects for school.

In a week, only his father would be at home, so he wouldn't have to stress his mother with the inaugural flight. She was going away on a dig connected with her profession as a palaeontologist, having been told of an important find in Dakota.

Jed walked out from the house with Misty close on his heels, heading for one of his father's workshops. Both were in old railway carriages with the same livery, but one held complicated and delicate equipment. William permitted him into it, but he banned Jed from working on his projects within. The other he was free to use.

On the way, Misty detoured into the woodland adjoining the land of Fairchild Ranch. There, they often walked together. Jed would throw sticks for her, or play hide-and-chase, squealing in delight when she found him as Misty barked with excitement. They were best friends and inseparable, but it was not unusual for her to venture off into the woods on her own.

"Okay, Misty, see you soon. I've got work to do." Jed said as she ran into the trees.

He entered the workshop and beheld his construction. He had tested and retested every circuit and mechanism and longed to see it soar into the sky. But first, one final job remained; it needed painting. The task would take the entire weekend. The whole body would be a deep electric blue, but he also wanted to apply stripes and decals and then a final coat of clear enamel. He purchased the paints a week ago and had waited all week to finish school and make a start.

The rocket lay horizontally on a specially made cradle on which he could rotate it to carry out maintenance. Now it would aid in painting the machine. Over an hour later, he had completed the first primer coat. Though dull grey, it unified the rocket from its patchwork of build markings, glue, and different colours of materials. He stepped back and smiled; it was coming together. The paint needed two hours to dry, and so he stepped outside,

The air was warming up a little, but still cool. He gazed at the trees. The deciduous species were losing their green and turning brown and red as the year aged.

He then remembered Misty. She had been gone for an hour, nothing unusual, but he set off to find her and perhaps have a play together.

He reached the edge of the woods and called her name. There was no response. He tried again, to no avail.

Misty knew the woods as well as Jed, and he was sure she couldn't have got lost. They often ventured far together on the rough paths. He made his way into the edge of the trees, continuously calling her name. At any moment he expected her to come running from behind a tree, but there was no sign of her.

Jed walked back to the house in case she had returned there, though it unlikely as she always went to where Jed was. She wasn't there.

He returned to the woods and searched again, following one of their usual paths. After half an hour of calling her name and walking over a mile, he became concerned.

After another half hour, he saw something which caught his eye. A black shape in a patch of sunlight, out of place in the natural surroundings.

"Ah, there you are, taking a nap. Misty, here, girl!"

She didn't move.

He got within twenty paces of her and called her again. A feeling of dread descended on him. Why wasn't she responding?

He continued to walk towards her, calling her name.

He could see no movement of breath and now his mind went into denial. *She must be fast asleep.*

He reached her position and numbness and confusion replaced denial as his brain struggled to cope with the looming truth.

He knelt beside her and rubbed her. She felt cold and wasn't breathing. He searched for a pulse. It was absent.

Reality hit.

"Misty!" he cried out.

He cried and lay down beside her. He held her close and buried his face in her neck as the tears flowed. He kept repeating her name.

Time disappeared and he had no idea how long he lay beside her lifeless body. Cold seeped into his bones and he pulled himself together,

He knelt and picked her up in his arms. It was no easy task; she was a full-grown Labrador. But from somewhere he summoned the strength.

He started the long walk home and soon his arms and back ached, though he didn't notice. Eventually, he reached the porch and lay her body down gently. He sat next to her, exhausted. With the exertion over, he looked at her and cried again.

His mother appeared from the house.

"Jed, what is it?"

"Mum," the words came between sobs. "It's Misty."

She sat on the other side of the dog and felt her. "Oh, no! Jed, I'm so sorry."

Tears formed in her eyes too. Misty was primarily Jed's dog, but the whole family loved her.

"What happened?"

"I don't know . . . she went into the woods . . . while I worked . . . went to find her . . . and . . ."

He broke down again.

Martha leaned over Misty and put her arms around Jed.

William's car soon pulled up. He got out and walked towards the steps to the porch; he sensed something was wrong and stopped at the bottom.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, Bill. It's Misty."

He mounted the steps and knelt in front of them; he didn't need to ask anything more. He knew what had happened. He put one arm around Martha, and the other around Jed.

They sat in silence for a few minutes and then Bill spoke gently: "Come on now. Let's wrap her in something."

"I'll get her favourite blanket," Jed sobbed.

He came back with it and lay it on the porch next to Misty. Bill lifted her body onto it.

Jed wrapped it around her.

"Are you okay, Jed?"

He nodded.

"We'll put her in the barn for now, where it's cool. Do you want me to do it?"

Jed nodded again. He appeared distraught.

Bill took her body away.

Over tea, Bill asked about the circumstances of her death.

"That's odd. As far as I know, there's nothing poisonous in the woods. Look, son, we'll give her a good burial soon. But if it's okay with you, I'd like to get the vet over first, find out what killed her. Is that okay?"

"Yes, dad."

"Good, I'll call him."

Early in the afternoon, Doug Fletcher arrived. William escorted the vet to the barn where Misty's body lay.

"How's life, Doug?"

"Pretty good. A shame about Misty."

"Yeah, Jed's taken it bad."

"They were very close, I know."

"Yep, went everywhere together."

They entered the barn.

"Over there, under the blanket," said William

Doug began his examination.

"Did she show any signs of being unwell?"

"No, none, as far as we're aware."

"She's only seven years old, a heart attack is unlikely, but something finished her off quickly."

"It seems so. She appeared fine this morning. Jed took her out, she ran straight into the woods, full of life."

"Okay, all I can do is take saliva and blood samples, and a small tissue sample too, and see what the lab results come up with."

After a few minutes, Doug finished.

"I'll get these tested straight away. Depending on what it is, I may find out in my lab. If so, I'll be in touch later. Otherwise, I will have to send it into town and it will be tomorrow."

"Okay, thanks, Doug. Should we bury her, or may you need to see her again?"

"No, go ahead, Bill. Do what you have to. There's nothing more I can do here."

They walked back to Doug's car and shook hands before he drove off.

Bill returned to the house.

"Dad?"

"Nothing yet, son. He's taken samples and will get back to us as soon as possible. Now, we must arrange a burial for her."

Jed bowed his head.

"Come on, Jed. I know she was young, but everything has an end."

Jed sniffed. He raised his face. There were tears in his eyes again.

"Okay, dad."

Bill found Martha in the kitchen.

"I heard what you said, Bill. How should we play this?"

"Well, I think we should make it a little special, it may help Jed."

"What do you suggest?"

"There's a nice spot under one of the trees. I'll rustle up a quick cross and headstone, then we'll do it. If you could find a prayer or some words, that would help."

"Sure, I'll find something."

"Thanks. I'd better get busy then."

By late afternoon, everything was ready.

Bill led everyone out of the house to the prepared area.

"You ready for this, son?"

Jed nodded.

Soft music played in the background as the family gathered around the burial plot. William had dug the grave already, some two feet deep and a little larger than Misty's body.

"I have some words to say which I hope will comfort you," said Martha. "There are two beautiful anonymous poems I found. I'll read the first now, and the second once we bury her."

*"I will lend to you for a while,
a puppy, God said,
for you to love him while he lives,
and to mourn for him when he is gone.
Maybe for twelve or fourteen years,
or maybe for two or three.
But will you, till I call him back
take care of him for me?"*

*He'll bring his charms to gladden you,
and (should his stay be brief),
you'll always have his memories,
as solace for your grief.
I cannot promise that he will stay,
since all from earth return,
But there are lessons taught below,
I want this pup to learn.
I've looked the whole world over, in search of teachers true
And from the folk that crowd life's land
I have chosen you.
Now will you give him all your love
Nor think the labour vain
Nor hate me when I come to take my pup back again?"*

*I fancied that I heard them say
"Dear Lord, Thy Will Be Done,"
For all the joys this pup will bring,
the risk of grief you'll run.
Will you shelter him with tenderness?
Will you love him while you may?
And for the happiness, you'll know forever grateful stay?
But should I call him back,
much sooner than you've planned.
Please brave the bitter grief that comes,
and try to understand.*

*If, by your love, you've managed,
my wishes to achieve,
In memory of him that you've loved,
cherish every moment with your faithful bundle,
and know he loved you too."*

"That was beautiful," Bill whispered.
Jed sobbed quietly.

"We must lay her down, Jed. Do you want to do it? I think you should."

Jed shivered and then nodded. He knelt by her body, still wrapped in the blanket, and turned over a corner to look one last time at her face.

His shoulders shuddered as he stroked her.

His father gave him time before speaking: "Come now, Jed. It has to be done."

With his head still bowed, Jed nodded.

He wrapped her body again and then strained to pick her up, but only had to lift her and place her in the grave by which she lay.

Jed stood up and stretched, then let out a huge sigh. He picked up a shovel and filled the grave.

Once the earth was flat, Bill picked up the headstone he had made quickly but with loving care. It was a simple stone slab with a wooden cross set on top. He had chiselled into the stone the words, "Here Lies Misty. Forever loved."

"It's not much, all I could do in so short a time. I'll add to it soon and put a date on it."

He placed the stone and cross over the grave.

"You had some more words, honey?"

"Yes." Martha reopened her notebook and began:

"It's called the Rainbow Bridge."

*"There is a bridge connecting Heaven and Earth.
It is called the rainbow bridge because of its many colours.
Just this side of the rainbow bridge, there is a land of meadows,
hills and valleys with lush green grass.
When a beloved pet dies, the pet goes to this place.*

*There is always food and water and warm spring weather.
The old and frail animals are restored to health and vigour.
Those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again,
just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by.
They frolic and romp all day with one another.*

*The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing.
They each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.*

*They run and play together until the day comes
when one of them suddenly stops playing
and looks off into the distance.
The nose twitches.
The ears are up.
The bright eyes are intent.
The eager body quivers.*

*Suddenly this one runs from the group, faster and faster,
leaping and flying over the tall green grass.
You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet,
you take him or her in your arms and embrace,
clinging together in joyous reunion.
Happy kisses rain upon your face;
your hands again caress the beloved head,
and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your cherished pet,
so long gone from your life, but never absent from your heart.
And with your pet beside you once again,
you cross the rainbow bridge together."*

"Thanks, mum, that was lovely," Jed whispered. "Could you print the words out, I want to put them on my bedroom wall."

"I'll do it, son," said Bill. "I'll make a nice mount for it too."

"Thanks, dad."

Bill took the shovel from Jed and propped it against the tree.

“Let’s go back and have a toast to her memory, you can have a beer too, son.”

They all walked back to the house, Jed in the middle, his parents holding a hand each. Halfway, Jed took a glance back towards the tree, and Misty’s final resting place.

Doug called back mid-morning on Sunday and William took the call.

“Hi, Bill. I have the test results from Misty.”

“Go on,” said William.

“I didn’t cut any corners, after my initial assessment I carried on with more tests. My conclusion is now certain. She died from a rare mutation of the canine parvovirus. I’ve only heard of a handful of cases in the world. The normal vaccine does not affect it.”

“But she seemed so well yesterday morning.”

“The virus acts fast, Bill. Often, it is fatal within forty-eight hours of contracting it, before any symptoms show. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks, Doug. Is there anything that we can do, like tracing where she picked it up from?”

“I’m afraid not. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. It is very rare, even locally it will only exist in a small, short-lived pocket.”

“Okay, I’ll let Jed know. Thanks again, Doug.”

“I can’t say it was a pleasure, Bill, but glad to help.”

William told Martha of the results and then went to see Jed; he was still in his room. William knocked on his door.

“Yeah?”

“Jed, it’s dad. Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

Jed lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He was still learning to accept the tragedy.

William sat next to him on the bed.

“How are you doing, Jed?”

“Okay, I suppose.”

“I’ve heard from the vet . . .”

Jed’s father told him all that Doug had said.

Jed didn’t respond.

“You have had no breakfast yet. Are you going to come down?”

Jed nodded but still stared at the ceiling.

“Okay, when you’re ready,” said his dad.

William went back down to Martha.

“How is he, Bill?”

“He’s still talking it hard. He just lies there, looking at the ceiling.”

“Oh, the poor lad.”

“He’ll come around, love.”

“I know.”

A single tear fell from Jed’s eye. Then something sparked in his mind. He wasn’t sure what it was. He took out his laptop and searched for ‘canine parvovirus’.

He could find scant information about the mutated version, but he learned all about the regular virus.

Something nagged deep inside him.

He left his bedroom, descended the stairs and went outside. He walked aimlessly, but ended up at the edge of the woods. He carried on into the trees. A brief surge of emotion hit him as he imagined Misty beside him, but he passed it off. His thoughts were elsewhere.

After an hour, nothing had crystallised in his mind and he returned to the house.

"Jed," his mother called.

"Not now," Jed replied.

He went back to his room and his laptop.

He stared at the blank search engine. Then, almost without thinking, he began typing words into the search bar. Diseases, viruses, bacteria, plagues, and pandemics. He spent the entire morning researching and then went for another walk.

Late in the afternoon he returned and his mother stopped him.

"Jed, you've had nothing to eat all day!"

"I'm not hungry."

"Come on, have something."

"Maybe just a sandwich."

"Okay, sit down and I'll make one."

"Mum."

"Yes?"

"I need to take tomorrow off school."

"Are you not feeling well?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Then why?"

"I just have to. I really do. There's something I must do. Just one day."

"Well, I see no harm in that. I'll tell them about Misty, that you're upset."

"Whatever."

"Can you tell me about it?"

"Not yet, maybe tomorrow."

Jed had disturbed sleep for the second night running. He dreamed of Misty, then his thoughts wandered off on many tangents. He tossed and turned through the night and awoke with a feeling that something was changing.

He spent most of the day alone again, continuing his online research. The idea which had been nagging at him took form, and then he saw it, and what he had to do.

Since the beginning of recorded history, diseases and viruses had inundated the world. Some were preventable by lifestyle factors, nutrition, sanitation and sewerage infrastructure. But there remained those that sometimes swept through large parts of humanity, sometimes pandemics affecting every nation.

From the plague outbreaks in Europe in the latter part of the Middle Ages, the Spanish flu pandemic at the end of the First World War, then into the 21st century with HIV, Ebola, and many others, Jed saw centuries of immense suffering and loss of life.

In a flash, his life vision changed.

He went down to the kitchen. His mum was there having finished in her office for the day, and his dad had just returned from the University, where he headed research into quantum field propulsion systems.

It was an opportune moment for his revelation.

"You look happier, maybe it *was* a good idea staying off school," his mum said.

"It's not that — mum, dad, I want to tell you something."

"Go ahead, son," said his dad.

“Since . . . you know, I’ve been thinking a lot. You know I’ve always wanted to be an astronaut? But now I don’t”

“Jed?” William furrowed his brow.

“I’ve been studying viruses, epidemics, and pandemics, that kind of thing. There’s more I can do here on earth. That’s where I will be needed.”

“So, you want to be a doctor?” said his mum.

“No, a step closer to the cause. An epidemiologist.”

“Wow, that’s some change, son,” said his dad.

“I know, but I’m sure. I even know what area I want to study; I want to become a field epidemiologist; I want to go to places where an illness is rampant and tackle it.”

His parents discussed Jed’s ideas with him. There was no conflict. He was passionate about the future. It was even a more noble vocation, Martha pointed out.

“We must look at your school curriculum, and university courses, make some adjustments perhaps.” said his father. “But I think it is a splendid idea.”

The following day, Jed returned to school. Over the following weeks, his bedroom changed. Gone were the wall posters of spaceships and planets. They were replaced by images of viruses, data sheets on world epidemics and pandemics, maps of countries of the world, and heroes of disease cures, from Pasteur to the latest scientists at the forefront of the age-old battle.

The models of rockets and spaceships remained, and he maintained a lifelong interest in them, and anything of an explosive nature.

Jed surged ahead in his studies at school with ever more passion, zeal, and obsession. Whenever he heard about an outbreak of a potential new virus, he kept tabs on it every day, following its progress and that of the individual scientists fighting it. He visualised his own laboratory, out in some far-flung corner of Africa, working under an oil lamp, making notes, and with an attractive assistant beside him.

Girls didn’t feature highly in Jed’s life for many years. The vision was one of romance and adventure; nevertheless, his motivation never veered from the overriding altruistic reason. It was a personal vendetta, himself against the world of viruses and pathogens, the sectors of life which had taken his beloved Misty from him, long before her time.

Jed progressed to university at sixteen and excelled in everything except sport. He had a profound intelligence and developed an offbeat sense of humour; along with an unorthodox, off-beat attitude to life. These attributes drew women to him. He entertained them sometimes, briefly. But a higher cause drove him and was loath to waste time on the fairer sex.

Occasionally he would let off steam and party hard for a weekend, then he sometimes bedded three fellow students in the same number of days, sometimes all together. He could be a wild drinker and lover and then return to his role as a tower of intellect, with one goal on his mind, on Monday morning.

During one such crazy weekend in his third year of studies, he fell for a stunning girl. Barbara was studying biochemistry and her mind drew him as much as her body. Jed wondered later in life whether his attraction to women was primarily physical or because of their mental capacity. He suspected the latter, though his conquests were never anything less than stunningly beautiful.

With Barbara, he soared higher still. Her studies intrigued him and added a new dimension to his own. They spent many late nights exchanging ideas and philosophies. He thrilled in her company and the sex they enjoyed was breath-taking. Yet he could never say he loved her. Nothing was more important than his work.

Without an emotional entanglement, at least from Jed’s perspective, the relationship withered. It was going nowhere. They enjoyed each other, but boredom was sinking in. To give them direction, Barbara suggested they become engaged. They appeared to be good for each other.

Jed fell into silence. When he opened up, he had come to a decision and he ended the relationship. He let her down gently, but she was heartbroken. Jed consoled her as best he could, but there was no way he was ready for marriage soon, let alone a family. He had too much to do.

After a tearful evening, Barbara understood.

They remained close friends and kept in touch throughout their lives.

As Jed neared graduation, he saw his first opening. A master's degree or doctorate could wait. He wanted to put his knowledge into action.

He passed out of university with an honour's degree, straight into the embrace of Medicines Sans Frontiers and within a week was on his way to the Democratic Republic of Congo to aid in tackling the latest Ebola outbreak.

Chapter 3

Six months later, Jed had seen the awful truth of such contagions first-hand, and in plenty. He had shown a remarkable flair for the work and regularly came up with innovative ideas.

Doctor Hank Saunders called him aside.

"Jed, I'm truly impressed with your work. We're about to wrap up here. What are your plans?"

"I will return home and get my Professional Doctorates degree."

"A good decision. You'll always be welcome back on the team."

"I'll be in touch when I'm ready."

"Great, keep me posted. I'm heading out to Saudi for a week, then heading State-side for a while. Perhaps we could meet up for a beer, you live near to me."

"I'll look forward to that."

They shook hands and parted; a car was waiting to take Jed to the airport.

After a long journey, Jed returned to Fairchild Ranch.

"I've missed you," his mother said, as she threw her arms around him.

"Missed you too, mum. Is dad home?"

"He's working late, he won't be back until about nine."

"Ah, well. I'll see him later."

"So, how was the DRC?"

"It was a bad outbreak, but we got it under control, eventually."

"I'm glad you're home safe, it's a hazardous job working with such diseases."

"It is, but we always take all the precautions we can."

"Back to university then?"

"Yeah, in two weeks."

"How long this time?"

"Two years. Though I think I can reduce that."

"And then?"

"Mum, so many questions!"

"Sorry."

"I'm thinking of going back with MSF, for a while anyway. It gives me good experience and they're a nice bunch of people to work with. At least those I met were."

"Okay, no more questions. Do you want something to eat?"

"That's another question, mum." Jed laughed.

Jed returned to university and threw himself into studies and assignments. This time there was no partying or womanising. His mind was on one track only. His passion for the work involved was high before. Now, after seeing the result of dangerous pathogens first hand, there was an unstoppable, burning fire within him. Eighteen months later, he received his doctorate and longed to get back to the front line.

He rejoined Medicines Sans Frontiers and returned to Africa, this time working on malaria. Jed spent two happy and fulfilling years as part of a dedicated team and once again, received recognition for several innovate and important discoveries. But now, there was little more the team could do.

His colleague, Professor Steve Dawkins, approached him. "We have a new job for you. We're about to wrap up here, but if you want it, the next task is the outbreak of MERS in Saudi."

"I'm game for it," said Jed.

"You haven't been home for months, how about some leave first?"

“I don’t need it.”

“Up to you, but I insist you take time off before the end of the year. It’s too easy to get burnt out in this job.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

Jed flew out to Riyadh a week later and joined the group who had already been there for two days.

“Welcome, Jed,” said Doctor Naomi Foster.

Jed was momentarily stunned upon meeting Naomi. She was undoubtedly attractive, but he sensed something deeper. She was head of one team in Riyadh and exuded an air of confidence and knowledge. His thoughts were distracted as she led him to the basic canteen facilities, made tea for them both, and then briefed Jed on the background and latest developments of the virus.

As time went on, they worked increasingly well with each other and gelled both professionally and personally.

Jed took things a little further and invited her out to dinner.

The conversation soon turned away from work and moved towards their backgrounds and interests.

“I began by intending to go into law,” said Naomi. “That all changed when my mother caught dengue virus working out in Ecuador. She’s a microbiologist. She recovered okay, but it showed me what I wanted to do with my life, fight viruses.”

“Extraordinary! It’s very similar to my life.”

He told her of his dreams of being an astronaut and how that goal changed.

As their conversation continued, they found they were like kindred spirits, so much of their lives correlated.

They became romantically involved from that evening. It was all very low key to begin with, time spent together and some passionate embraces. It was a year before they slept together, but there was nothing serious for several years.

Throughout the MERS outbreak, both had proven themselves and the CDC poached them as the world faced a new outbreak, the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

It was now time for Jed to step up and fulfil his true potential. Over the coming years, he achieved international accolades for his work with the CDC as he countered major outbreaks.

In time he became head of the International Emerging Disease Program, with Naomi as one of his key team members. But nothing in his wildest imaginings foretold of his eventual destiny; a future where he would become the right-hand man to the President of the United States, on three separate occasions, and play a pivotal role in saving humanity from destruction.

The End

LINKS