

*The Outlaws*  
*Volume Two, "The Mission"*

Chapter Three

A questioning look spread across Sam's face and he asked Jose', "What problem?"

Jose' answered, "You'll see, I think."

For the next few minutes the subject changed, and the pair sat easily, and they exchanged questions back-and-forth about the whereabouts and health of old friends. In that time, Jose', although he still grappled with the sight, Jose' grew a little more at ease about

seeing Sam crippled and in a wheel chair, and if he didn't think about that, the next hour was just an hour with the old Sam he knew. The flippant sense of humor, the wise-cracking, all of that was still there, in spades. Likewise, Sam relaxed and felt the comforting regard, a sort of fondness for Jose' that he had held since Jose' first trained him as a jumper.

After a time, Jose' said, "Com'on, let's get you set for the night. Are you tired?"

"A bit. It was a long drive. But I'm fine once I get back in the van. I might need a little help with some personal chores if you are up for it?"

"Just tell me what to do."

Jose' had cared for a handicapped loved one and knew exactly what Sam needed help with, and he willingly jumped forth. From that moment on, Jose' was never far away from Sam if he needed help.

“If you don’t mind, I think I’ll get a short nap first and then find something to eat.”

“Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll get with Joanne, see if she’s got somewhere you can sleep tonight, and after you rest, we’ll eat and I’ll introduce you around. I know these curmudgeons will want to meet you.”



Joanne fixed a hearty stew for everyone that night, and the outlaws gathered at the fire pit. She set the Dutch oven next to the fire to warm, and then she sliced a loaf of homemade bread before she passed around paper plates and plastic forks. Jose’ was first at the deep black pot and fixed a plate for Sam and helped him get ready to eat. As Sam carefully eased forkfuls of the stew into his mouth, Jose’ was sitting next to him on a beer cooler ready to help him in any way he could. He liked the feeling he got

when ever Sam smiled at him in appreciation. He wondered at times as the night grew darker why they had ever lost touch with each other.

Jose' waited until everyone had nearly finished eating before he broached the subject. He had a plan. Dick and Buzz had gone off to the privy, so he had to wait until they got back before he could bring it up. Julian and Roger had shown up for the week-end, as they often did, and Sam had been told that they were both F.A.A. inspectors. Jose' had briefed him on why they were there and what their backgrounds were. Sam made the remark that it must be nice to have the Feds in the outlaw's back pocket. Jose quickly corrected him, telling him that even though Julian and Roger looked out for the outlaws, no one took advantage of that.

Penny probably wouldn't show up until late Saturday afternoon as she had a FedEx run that night and

would sleep late before climbing in the Beech. Hank was there, as always, along with Dick, Cliff, Pat and Kelly.

Jose' waited until everyone was back around the fire. Joanne was still there. During supper, Jose' had introduced everyone to Sam, and with Sam's permission, he told them a little about Sam's disease and condition - on purpose - and they all knew he had been a jumper as well. There a few questions from the group about Sam's days as a pilot and where he had jumped and so on. Sam answered the questions comfortably and before long it was evident that he would fit right in. But, until Jose' started to talk, the general impression among the group was that Sam was just visiting, and he would not be there long.

Jose' jumped right into it. As he did, he watched Chuck intently to see if Chuck might quickly pick up on where he was going with what he was about to propose. But more

importantly, Jose' hoped that Chuck would see a solution to the very problem he had raised earlier.

As he looked at the faces surrounding the fire, with a bit of a raised voice but attempting an air of nonchalance, Jose' asked, "Anybody ever see "Operation Dumbo Drop," the movie?"

At first, a few of the guys looked up from their meals or just shook their heads yes or no, but mostly there was silence around the fire.

Dick was the first to speak up and he said, "Yeah. I saw it. Terrible movie but fun watching 'em shove an elephant out the ass of a C-123. Technically, it was piece of crap. Hell, they didn't have three ring releases in '68."

"I saw it." followed Kelly. "Danny Glover and that Ray guy, right?"

"Ray Liotta." said Chuck,

“Played the gangster dude in  
“Goodfellas.””

“Right.” said Jose’, “Anyway. If  
you saw the Dumbo movie, I got  
something I want to ask everyone.”

Chuck was sitting on the log  
next to Buzz, his feet apart, leaning  
forward drawing small circles in the  
sandy ground between his legs with  
the stick he used as a fire poker.  
Buzz had finished eating and was  
stretched out, his heels dug into the  
sand, his arms crossed and pressed  
against his chest savoring the stew  
with occasional small burps.

“Shoot.” said Chuck.

Joanne stopped what she  
doing, having just thrown a small  
stack of dirty paper plates into the  
fire which had consumed the plates  
with a momentary grand flourish of  
yellow-orange flames that jumped  
skyward and clearly lit the circle of  
faces all around.

Sam just listened as he sipped

his beer through a straw.

“I’m serious, so don’t laugh.”

Jose’ waited a second for effect then he said, “I want to throw Sam out of Penny’s Beech just like they threw that elephant out.”

For the smallest moment, there was stone silence.

Then Buzz dropped his arms to his side and straightened himself and said, “Are you shittin’ us?”

“Nope. Not at all. Let me explain.”

Sam’s eyes opened wide and he raised his head so quickly that his straw stuck to his lips momentarily, then it fell into his lap. Jose’ saw that and nonchalantly picked it up and stuck it back in Sam’s beer can.”

“Thanks.” said Sam meekly.

“You’re welcome. Listen, I’m serious everybody. Sam here has a



wish. He wants to make one more jump before..." And he caught himself, not wanting to make what he was about to propose seem maudlin.

"Before, what?" asked Joanne. Quickly then, somehow she sensed the answer to her own question, and she immediately regretted having said anything.

"Just 'before.' Never mind. We'll get to that later." And trying to keep the focus on the original question, he quickly carried forward. "I think we can do this."

Chuck sat straight up quickly. He threw both his hands behind his head and interlaced his fingers while leaning into them. But he said nothing. The rest of the outlaws remained silent waiting for the interplay between Chuck and Jose'.

Jose' continued to speak through the group's silence, as baffled astonishment was evident all

around, and he immediately took to the offense.

“I know. I know.” said Jose’, “I know what you are thinking. But if the Army can shove a canon or a two-and-a-half ton truck out of an airplane and then fire it or drive it, why couldn’t we rig Sam up and drop him, too?”

Again, silence reigned momentarily before Julian who was watching Roger’s face waiting to see what *his* reaction would be said, “Go on.”

Roger turned and looked at Julian with a raised eyebrow and there was the slightest hint of a smile at the crease of his mouth before he said to Jose’, “At least we have to hear the plan before we say, “Are you nuts?”

Jose’ laughed a small laugh and then he said, “Well, when the idea first came to me, I thought that it was ‘nuts’, too. But then it hit me.

We'll make him an egg in a pillow."

"What?" said Buzz. "Wait..." said Buzz with a slightly raised voice, "...you know me. I hate adulthood. But I gotta ask, you're saying that you want to toss a man with brittle bone disease out of an airplane and watch him break into a hundred tiny pieces when he hits the ground?"

"No!...", shot back Jose', "...think about it." he said before continuing, "Have you ever seen a real heavy drop and I'm not talking about the elephant now."

Hank raised his hand like a school boy and shook it several times, "Honeycomb!"

"Wait!" Chuck said, "Let's slow down. Go ahead there, Jose'."

"Okay." said Jose'. "I'll take it from the top."

"Please." said Roger. "I'm all

ears.”

“Right.” said Jose’, “Let me start with this. You guys remember the other night when we were all talking about how small the group has gotten and how we are losing guys?”

Everyone but Roger and Julian who weren’t there nodded that they remembered.

“Well, I was thinking that maybe that’s because some of the guys got bored. I mean, there are only a few of us that are making jumps and flying now. The rest were just here to shoot the shit and do a little drinking. Right?”

A smile had begun to gradually work its way across Chuck’s face and he began staring at Joanne while he was listening to Jose’. Joanne became vaguely aware that he was now looking intently at her, and she turned to look at Chuck and saw the smile. She raised her

index finger to her lips in a motion of silence. Chuck saw that and nodded once indicating he would stay silent.

“Well, it hit me that if Sam wants to jump one more time, what better purpose could we have, as long as we’ve broken all the rules anyway, than helping him do it. Ain’t nobody going to get bored with that. Just planning it might fire some of the guys up again.”

Joanne walked over and stood behind Chuck and placed a hand on his shoulder, and she gently squeezed it.

Jose’ continued. “Listen, if we can get Penny to let us use the Beech and we rig him up right, we can do this.”

Hank, wanting attention, very loudly cleared his throat once to punctuate the conversation. “A-hem!”

Everybody looked at him before

he said, "You happen to be lookin' at an aerial delivery specialist here." And then he said, "Well, sort of. But I've got friends who are."

"Hold that." said Jose', "I'll get back to it." Hank nodded okay and sat back down.

"Hank's on the right track. When you heavy drop something, you honeycomb it heavily and suspend it from multiple canopies. Now, we'd have to do some test drops to get everything right, but if we do this carefully, we can land him gentle as feather. And we static line him."

Jose' slowly began to realize that he was getting ahead of himself and he said, "Wait." And he looked at Chuck and Joanne.

"I'm sorry." said Jose', "I know this ain't my place, but..."

Joanne squeezed Chuck's shoulder a little harder, and Chuck turned to look into her face. She

was gently shaking her head up-and-down almost imperceptibly and smiling as she silently mouthed the word, "*Purpose.*" Chuck shook his head that he understood. And he turned to face the group.

"I'm not hearing any problems, yet." said Chuck.

Jose' shook his head affirmatively.

Then he turned and looked at Sam. "You still up for this?" asked Jose'. Sam simply said, "You bet."

Several guys set their beer cans down and stood to stretch. Then Cliff walked over to Sam and stood next to the heavy motorized wheel chair and stood looking at it. Then he bent down to get a better view of the battery and the servos and after a minute he said, "Well, if they can drop tanks..."

Jose' said in response, "That wasn't quite what I had in mind.

Roger stood up as well and he began taking half-steps back and forth. "I hate to be a stick in the mud here, but you guys know all this depends on Penny. And that's just for starters."

By that time, Julian had gotten to his feet and had walked over to Sam's chair and stood next to Cliff. "You guys know that this thing weighs a ton, right?"

"'Bout a hundred and fifty pounds, empty." said Sam.

Jose' said, "Dropping him in that chair wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

Cliff said, "What, then?"

"Egg in a pillow. I'm an engineer, remember?"

Hank said, "I've got a buddy up at Bragg that might be able to get us all the honeycomb we need."

Hank then jumped to his feet and he ran off into the darkness



towards his trailer without saying a word.

“Wonder what he’s up to?” said Kelly.

Everyone around the fire listened, as in the distance Hank’s camper trailer began to emit the noise of a top-to-bottom frantic search with the chaotic sounds of thumping and scraping and things being tossed around. They watched, as through the camper’s tiny windows, a dancing flashlight’s beam darted, flashing bright, then fading, then bright again, around the inside of the rocking camper. Someone said, “What the hell is he doing!?” A few laughed. Then there was silence, and suddenly Hank yelled loudly as if from the depths of a well, “Ha!” Then there was silence again, and the flickering light within the trailer went dark. In seconds, Hank materialized from the night into the fire’s light holding a large object and walking quickly. He approached Sam, and he gently laid

a heavy book with tan colored covers, nearly the size of a ream of paper, five hundred sheets, into Sam's lap. "There ya go!"

Sam bent towards the book that now lay on the red and green tartan wool blanket that covered his legs attempting to see the title in the darkness. Then he looked up into Hank's smiling face.

Hank had retrieved his beer can and just as he tipped it to his lips, he said with a forced mock southern drawl, "That thar is t-e-e e-m-m four-dash-forty-eight, my man. Tee. e-m-m. four-dash-forty-eight!" Then he exaggerated the drawl saying, "The Oh-ficial 'United States Army Airdrop of Supplies and Equipment Technical Manual." All four hundred and eight pages of it. *Rat thar!* Pitch-urs and everthang. We gonna turn you into a tank and boot yur ass out of a Beech arr-plane." After that, Hank took a swig from his beer can and he stood there beaming.

“Where the hell did you get that!” asked Jose’.

“Told you, I’ve got friends at Bragg. Home of the arr-borne!”

Standing next to Sam, Jose’ said, “May I?” as he reached for the manual.

Sam laughed and said, “Be my guest. I don’t think I’ll be flipping through it.”

Jose’ lifted the manual from Sam’s lap and turned it so he could see the pages in fire’s light.

After a few minutes of holding the manual up in the light where he could read it, Jose’ quietly said “*Jesus! We could rig an elephant up and drop it with the stuff in this book!*”

Hank was beaming and said, “It’s nice to have friends in good places. Shit. I bet I could get anything we would need.” He thought about that for a second and

scratched his chin slowly, then he said, "If I can get you assholes to chip in for a few bottles of hooch."

Kelly said, "How much do you need?"

"Look at this!" said Jose'. "Page after page of instructions about how to rig anything. Even what size parachutes and hardware to use for all kinds of loads."

Cliff pulled a pocket sized flashlight out of its leather case on his belt and stood next to Jose' shining the light on the manual as Jose' slowly flipped through pages. "Look-ee there!" said Cliff. "It even tells us whether we need a C-130 or a C-17." And everyone laughed boisterously except Joanne who had no idea that they were talking about really big airplanes that only the military possessed.

Chuck stopped laughing and said, "Well, we sure as as hell ain't gonna get him in the Cessna. Penny

is our only hope.”

“But her Beech has that really small door on it. If we package him like I think we are going to have to, we couldn’t get him in, much less out.” said Buzz.

That remark cast a silent pall over the entire group. Until Jose’ looked at Julian and Roger and asked, “You guys got any ideas?”

Roger, the senior of the pair thought for a second then said, “No and we’re not gonna have either.”

Julian looked at Roger and shrugged his shoulders as if asking why. Then Roger said, “Listen. This is different guys. So far, with your own airplane and doing things the way you have so far, we’ve been able to keep a lid on this thing. But, now, it’s obvious that more people are get involved what with bigger airplanes and so-on. We’re just gonna have to stand off and nod “yes” or “no.” Sorry.”

Chuck did not hesitate to say, “We understand. We’re gonna need to be legal all the way with this.”

Sam had been mostly silent for a sometime, but he soon spoke up. “Are you guys worried about hurting me?”

Roger said, “Yes, there’s that. I’m going to want to know for damn sure, given the fact that they could break every last bone in your body, that the shit isn’t gonna hit the fan and something goes wrong.”

“I won’t let it.” said Jose’ in a deep and resolute voice and for the first time that night a wrinkle line appeared over his eyes.”

He stared intently at Roger before he spoke, then he scratched his head slowly and said, “Listen, I can get my hands on some pressure sensors to gauge the impact and I’ve got definite ideas about how to package him and we’ll make enough test drops to insure his deployment

is good and...”

Roger interrupted Jose’s saying  
“Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply...”

Jose’ waved off his comment with a sweep of his hand and then said, “I *know* that. Forget it.”

Cliff had been half paying attention to the conversation, engrossed, looking at the manual. Then he said, “Well, boys and girls, one thing is for damn sure. Our first job is to find the right airplane and pilot for this. That’s job one.” And every head around the fire nodded in agreement. “Why don’t we see if Penny shows up tomorrow and we’ll run all this by her. Maybe she’s got some ideas.”

“In the meantime, let’s drink more beer. It’s good for thinking.” said Buzz. And there were chortles all around.

Then Chuck said, “Right! I’ve seen the kind of thinking you do when you’re drinking. It ain’t

pretty.”

Buzz grinned widely and the laughing continued. Chuck nudged Buzz sharply in the shoulder and winked. Buzz just looked at him and raised an eyebrow. And he rubbed his shoulder feigning pain while silently mouthing the word, “Ow!”

Then, “Yeah.” said Kelly, “We have to get this right. Let’s hope this don’t turn in another Colonel Saunders. He ain’t no rooster, you know?”

“Right!” said Joanne, and she glared at Jose’ in a mock threatening way while wagging a finger at him.

“Colonel Saunders?” asked Sam. “What’s that?”

“Oh!” said Joanne, as her voice took on a decidedly serious tone, and she said, “That would be Operation Colonel Saunders.” She dramatically swept an accusing hand in a flourishing sweep at the



entire group as she said, "These fools tried to swipe one of my chickens and throw it out of the airplane." Then she paused for dramatic effect and her voice took on a higher self-aggrandizing lilt, "*They* didn't get away with it though. I swing a mean broom."

A few of the guys laughed.

"Don't look at us..." said Julian, "...we had just got here." Roger nodded in agreement smiling.

She paused a second, and then she said, "Tell him about it, you chicken thief." And she continued to glare directly at Jose'.

Sam looked up at Jose' who said, "Later."

Sam shook his head that he understood. The night was passing and it was getting late. He fell silent in thought thinking to himself that he had never seen anything like what was transpiring. He wondered what it was in the nature of the

outlaws that would cause the entire group, with virtually no dissention, at all, to immediately begin to plan what was going to be, at best, difficult to do. He decided that he had to say something.

“Fellas, can I have your attention?” he said quietly.

“What’s up?” said Chuck.

“I’m starting to think that what you are thinking about doing for me, is, well...”

“Well, what?” asked Jose’

“A little too problematic. And I worry that you guys might bring down some heat on yourself you don’t need. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Bullshit.” said Cliff in very strong terms. Emphatically as it were.

Then what came next surprised everyone, most of all, Chuck.

“Sweetheart...” said Joanne addressing Sam softly, “...you didn’t know it when you showed up, but these ruffians needed you.” Then she paused a half second and she said, “Well, not you exactly. But they needed something more that what they been up to for all these months.” Then she looked squarely at Roger and Julian.

“Those two can tell you that the whole bunch here probably oughta be eating bologna sandwiches and drinking Kool-Aid in some F.A.A. jail somewhere by now. And we all can tell you that you can only sit around so many campfires and drink so much beer.”

Buzz burped loudly, never being one to take anything too seriously, and he knew Joanne was getting ready to say something staid.

“Buzz!” snapped Joanne. “Shut-up! I’m serious here.”

“Yes, ma’am.” And Buzz tipped

his beer can upwards.

Sam instantly thought back to something Jose' had said earlier, that his arrival might be the answer to a problem.

"I think I know where you're going." said Sam.

"Right." said Joanne. Then she turned and began walking towards the house, her hands behind her back untying her apron strings. The group sat silently watching her. A few steps away, she stopped turned and looked at them, their faces all lit faintly by the fire's dwindling flames.

"Well!" she said sternly, "What are you fools waiting for?" And she smiled broadly. "Carry on!"

To be continued....