

The Outlaws

Volume Two, "The Mission"

Chapter Two

Chuck was sitting next to Buzz on the log, and he used a small twig to indolently poke at the fire's ashes causing small sprays of orange sparks to drift upwards through the gauzy grey haze of the fire's spiraling column of smoke. As he watched the embers disappear into the inkiness of the darkening purple of night sky above, he absently twirled the thin stick between his hands. Now and then, he took another small sip of warm beer from his can. He had been nursing the same beer for over an hour, the one he'd opened as the sun begin to set. As the sun slowly settled beneath the tops of the feather-topped pine trees at the west end of the runway silhouetting the ragged tree line against the sky's burnt-orange hue, he still silently cursed himself.

Five of the outlaws sat across the fire from Chuck and Buzz - each man sitting cross legged, Indian-style on the ground or perched on their own coolers – and their solemn faces would be briefly illuminated by fire's occasional flare, their eyes sparkling whenever Chuck pushed the stick into the fire's glowing red base. Each time the fire rose, the faces would be brightened for a moment, and it was easy to see that their collective gaze was locked on Chuck and Buzz.

"I'm sorry." said Chuck in nearly a whisper as he turned his head towards Buzz. "I shouldn't have lost my temper like that." Then he raised his head to address everyone there, and he repeated himself, a little louder, "I mean it. I acted like an ass today. I'm sorry."

Buzz said, "It's all right, man. Your place, your rules, right?" And Buzz smiled as he set his can to his lips and tipped it upward.

Chuck studied Buzz's face and throat as Buzz's protruding larynx vibrated with each swallow he took. He thought it odd that he had never noticed anyone's Adam's apple move like that. And he nearly laughed in spite of himself. But returning to the seriousness of the moment,

he said, "Yeah. But it was wrong to do it so publicly like that."

"Apology accepted." said Buzz, "Now, let's shut-up and drink some more beer." And he threw his empty beer can high over his shoulder into the darkness. When the can clinked hitting the ground behind him, he belched loudly, and said, "Who's got a cold one? We need to do some serious drinking here."

Jose', attempting to ease the tension a little, perhaps to evoke a laugh, said in a half-raised voice, a bit timidly, "We don't need no stinkin' NOTAMS!" And he looked around the group sheepishly before hiding his face behind the shine of his beer can.

No one laughed, but everyone did take another mouthful of beer, almost simultaneously, following Jose's lead. Then as a drill team might, each outlaw set their can on the ground in unison.

It was obvious that something else was bothering Chuck. Even Joanne had stayed away from the fire this night, knowing, this time, her presence would dampen what Chuck might say. He was still mulling what she had

said in the kitchen that morning. He felt her answer held some sort of an answer to his concerns. But there was no solution yet. He agreed with her notion that it was a sense of purpose that kept old people alive and engaged, but what purpose beyond the outlaws gathering to reminisce and maybe make a few jumps and share a laugh or two would motivate the group?



Chuck actually wasn't sorry that he had chased the Farto Brothers away. He was only disappointed in himself that he had snapped at Buzz in front of everyone when he told Buzz to get rid of them. To Chuck, seeing one of the Fartos jump up on the tail of the 180 was akin to someone picking your dog up by an ear. It made him deeply angry.

What he was thinking before the Farto Brothers showed up was still on his mind: Were the outlaws growing tired or bored with what they had been up to for many months now? Fewer and fewer were showing up to jump and it seemed that only the die-hards were staying engaged. In total, Chuck knew that on most jump days now, not including the semi-permanent campers like Hank and Tom, he might only see six or so of the initial gang.

Trying to shift the focus of his thoughts, Chuck looked at Jose' and asked, "Hey, did you invite that "Sam" guy you told us about?"

"Yeah, but he sounded hesitant about coming."

"Why, do you think?" asked Tom.

Jose' thought about that for second and then responded, "Sam said he would think about it. That's all."

Then Jose' laughed a small laugh before he caught himself and he said, "But I can practically guarantee that he's got more manners than those two clowns this morning." But the words were said and Jose', feeling like he might have stepped on a toe or two immediately looked at Buzz and said, "Me sorry, too." And he smiled an exaggerated smile, the light of the fire reflecting off of his glistening teeth.

Dick had been quiet for some time just listening to the back-and-forth conversation. He was a man who usually didn't hold back when he had something on his mind, and he stood up to get another beer from his cooler. In fact, he retrieved two, one of which he handed to Buzz who reached

out to get it saying, "Thanks." Then Dick slowly pulled the tab back on his dripping can, and a small geyser of bubbling white foam gushed over the can's side and ran across his fingers. He switched hands with the can and shook the beer from his wet hand saying, "Chuck! What's eating you? You've been on-and-off moody for a few days now, and it's starting to show. Com'on, buddy, we're all friends here." And he slowly lowered himself back onto his cooler.

Hank raised his thigh off the ground an inch or two and leaned sideways in Jose's direction who was sitting next to him and he loosed a long, high whine of wind and grinning devilishly, he said bluntly, "Not sorry." Jose' feigned mock indignation and jumped to his feet saying, "Jesus Christ, man! Give a dude some warning will you?" And everyone there reared back and broke into a tension easing round of high-pitched laughter. It gave Chuck a moment to think.

Then he said, "We're getting to be a mighty small group."

"We've always been a small group." said Dick. Then, knowing instantly what Chuck meant, he said, "And we are getting smaller. Maybe we need to invite more folks in?"



A few days after that conversation among the outlaws, a brown Ford van sat at the gate and the driver began to honk the horn.

Hearing it, Chuck jumped on the bike everyone used to get around the airstrip, the one with no fenders, bald tires, a worn seat, the padding hanging loose in tufts, the old-timey kind of seat with two shiny coil springs underneath to smooth the ride, and he pedaled quickly towards the end of the sandy road that led to the gate. As he neared the gate, he saw that the driver had a hand out the window waving. Chuck eased up to the gate and dismounted the bike while lowering it gently to the ground. "Can I help you?" he said as he ducked underneath the single bar of the gate and approached the driver's side of the van.

At the wheel sat a ruddy faced man wearing aviator sunglasses tinted silver; his curly red hair protruded from the edges of an oil stained and grimy red baseball cap, its

bill worn and frayed. Written across the hat's front was one word, "Purina," embroidered on a red-and-white checkered background. He smiled broadly as Chuck approached the van, and he asked, "You don't happen to know a guy named Jose', do you?" Chuck was now at the open window of the van as the man extended his left hand saying, "Sorry, that's the only one that works right."

The last thing the man said didn't initially register with Chuck as he was more focused on the man's question. "Jose'? Yeah. He's not here right now." By then Chuck realized who he might be talking to, and he asked, "You wouldn't be Sam, would you?"

"What's left of me is." said Sam, and the van shook gently with his laughter. Chuck, his face a question, had grasped Sam's hand and he shook it, and then he loosed his grasp and stepped back a few inches.

"I'm sorry." said Chuck, not understanding what Sam had just said. Sam, seeing Chuck's quizzical look, laughed again and said, "The left hand is the only part of me that still works the way it should..." and wanting to put Chuck at ease, he added, "...but I can still pick my nose with it."

A broad smile came to Chuck's face, and he instantly liked Sam.

Chuck then said, "Jose' went to town to get some parts. He oughta be back pretty quick." And Chuck put the pieces together. "Don't mean to be personal, but you're handicapped, huh? I mean, I'm sorry, I didn't realize..."

Then Sam emitted a short chuckle, smiled and said, "No worries, man. I figured it's the only way I can get the choice parking spots at the mall." And he pointed to the blue and white handicapped sticker on his windshield. And they laughed easily together for the first time of many times to come.

Then Sam said, "Don't sweat it. Yeah, I guess you could say I'm handicapped, slightly." Then he said, "That's why I sat here honkin' my horn. Just getting out of this thing is sometimes more trouble than it's worth. Didn't mean to be rude." Chuck said, "Not a problem." And he stepped a few inches closer to the open window and tried to peer in without being conspicuous. Sam said, "Go ahead, I don't mind. Take a look. The damn thing's an Adaptive Engineer's dream come true." And he chuckled. "I drive it using mind power and extra sensory perception, kinda like

using the Force.” And he looked at Chuck straight-faced before the slightest hint of a wrinkle appeared at the corner of his mouth. Chuck grinned widely, loving Sam’s sense of humor.

“Wanna follow me? We’ll head down to the hangar and wait on him.” asked Chuck.

“Copy that!” said Sam and he straightened in his seat the best he could.

Chuck nodded affirmatively and turned to raise the gate and get back on the bike.

With Sam following slowly behind him, Chuck mounted the bike and began pedaling back down the road, his mind a swirl of questions about why on earth Jose’ would have invited a full blown handicapped guy into the group? But even as he asked himself that, he felt an immediate kinship with Sam and a wisp of déjà-vu. And like any burst of premonition, meeting Sam at the gate gave Chuck the oddest sense that they already knew each other somehow and it caused him to shudder a bit. As the hangar came into view, he shook the feeling loose, grunted to himself as one does when mildly vexed and when

oddities strike the consciousness unexpectedly, and he motioned to Sam to park off to the side where he might have plenty of room to leave the van if he was going to.

Chuck quickly dismounted the bike and let it fall to the ground, its wheels still spinning, the spokes remaining a spinning, shining blur, and he took a step towards the van to ask Sam if he might be of help. But as he approached the van, he heard the low hum of small electric motors and looked to see a ramp slowly lower from the van's side door, and in a motorized wheel chair, Sam rolled to the end of the ramp on a set on tracks and then the ramp slowly settled to the ground and Sam urged the knob of short joy stick in his left hand forward and eased the chair onto the grass.

Chuck stopped and before he could say anything,

“I think I know...” said Sam, and he interrupted himself, “...Wow! you gotta a neat place here. It looks like something out of my dreams.”

“We love it.” said Chuck. “Hopefully Jose’ will show up soon, and then we’ll go over to the house. I’ll introduce you to the wife.”

And Sam continued, "I'd like that. But, listen, my showing up is going to be a bit of a shock to Jose'." Sam waved his left hand over himself in a kind of flourish. "He doesn't know about any of this. When he called, I just never told him."

Chuck said, "I'll bet."

"He told me all about what you guys got going on here, and I freaking love it. I had to come see it for myself."

"How long's it been since you've seen each other?" asked Chuck and just then the screen door at the house squeaked and it shut with a "whang-bang" and Joanne stepped off the porch and began walking towards the hangar. She was wringing her hands on her apron.

"Wife? I suppose." said Sam.

"Yes, sir. Joanne."

"She's pretty."

"Yup."

As she approached, smoothing down the front of her apron, Sam said, "Ten years."

And, far, far off in the distance rose the baritone rumble of a motorcycle engine accelerating and the sound growing stronger from the direction of the gate.



Sam quickly laid it out for Chuck and Joanne.

Ten years earlier, Sam had been an active man. In his youth, he excelled in school and graduated top of his class at Mississippi Southern University. A varsity football player and avid baseball fan, he enlisted in the Navy on graduation and was accepted into naval aviator training at Pensacola Naval Air Station. During his time flying jets over the skies of Viet Nam, he had never so much as gotten a scratch. After his retirement from the Navy, he went back to school to get a Masters in Business Administration and while in school, he happened to meet a pretty blond. She was a few years younger than he, and she was into skydiving with the small university sport parachute club, the same club that Jose' had founded and still jumped with occasionally. To impress the pretty blond, Sam, who had always done his best to avoid leaving an airplane in flight, decided to make a jump. It would be one jump only and that would be it. But the rush appealed the fighter pilot

side of him and he made another and then another. The pretty blond moved on but the fascination with skydiving stuck with Sam.

With the sound of Jose's motorcycle drawing near, Sam quickly finished his story.

Sam and Jose' became fast friends through the club and made many skydives together. As time progressed, they parted ways. Sam, for professional reasons, took a job in California. Jose' stayed in Mississippi and raised a family, ultimately retiring as a mechanical engineer. But they stayed in touch through routine phone calls and visits whenever Sam returned home to Hattiesburg to be with family. Whenever he did come home, even as the number of jumps he had accumulated in California had grown to well over 4000, he always treated Jose', his original instructor and jumpmaster, like a brother. But as time went on, Sam began to experience an odd phenomena.

The first time, it seemed a fluke. He was bounding down a long flight of stairs at his workplace when he heard a crack, like the sound of a dry twig having been stepped on. And that was followed by a sharp pain in his right leg just below the knee. At first, Sam chalked it up to a muscle

cramp ignoring the snapping sound. In short time, the pain subsided further causing him to think he had just sprained a muscle. Then one morning as he shaved, thinking his imagination was playing tricks on him, he noticed a minor change in the sclera, the whites of his eyes. There seemed to be a very faint grey-bluish tint to them.

The gate clanked when Jose' dropped it into place and got back on the motorcycle and accelerated towards the hangar. Chuck, Joanne and Sam looked in the direction of the gate hearing the muffled "br-a-a-p, br-a-a-p" of the Harley. Sam spoke with urgency finishing his explanation.

Due to a genetic anomaly, Sam had developed late onset osteogenesis imperfect – brittle bone disease – and as time went on, frequent minor bone fractures became a common occurrence with him. It reached the point that trying to move too quickly across a room was treacherous.

He was forced to retire all together as the condition worsened. And, of course, the skydiving had become a forbidden pastime. Worse, the loss of his skydiving and his close communion with the friends that he jumped with was as depressing as the disease itself. Then due to infections and the ensuing sepsis, the amputations began. First, he

had to give up his left foot. And a year later, his right arm, just below the elbow. And, finally, the right leg at the knee went as well. He bruised easily and lost most of his fine motor skills. All of that began his days confined to a wheel chair and a life of confinement.

When Jose' had called, he had just been told by the doctors that he might live another year.



As Jose' came down the road, he saw the van parked next to the hangar and thought nothing of it. By that time, Chuck, Joanne, Sam and Buzz, who had just walked up had moved into the hangar and out of the bright sunshine.

Jose' rolled to a stop on the far side of the hangar and parked his Harley. He set his helmet on the fuel tank and took his leathers off and draped them across the saddle of the bike, and he had just turned to walk into the hangar when Sam yelled, "Hey asshole!" Jose' instantly knew the voice and ran to the open door of the hangar and trying to adjust his eyes to the darkness, he first saw Chuck and Joanne standing next to the wheel chair. The bent form sitting in the chair caused him to think that it wasn't Sam.

Sam spoke first, saying “Just like your ass to be late.” And he laughed. Jose’s took a cautious step forward then and as he saw Sam and recognized him, he took a sharp breath. “Sam?!”

“In the flesh, bro.”

Jose’ was instantly overcome at the sight of his once virile friend. And he squatted next to the chair as Sam held out his left hand.

A lump burned in Jose’s throat as he took Sam’s hand without shaking it. “What the hell...” said Jose’, “...you never said.”

“I guess I should have.”

“When did you bounce?”

Sam softly laughed at that, Jose’ thinking that Sam had gotten hurt jumping. He nearly apologized for laughing. Instead, he said,

“I didn’t. I did this shaving.” And Jose’ tried to laugh but he could not. Jose’ looked up at Chuck and Joanne with a plea of bewilderment in his eyes before asking, “Com’on, man, what the...?”

Then Sam squeezed Jose's hand and said, "You got a beer around here somewhere..." And he paused before saying, "...and maybe a straw."

"We'll find one." said Joanne. Buzz was quiet, standing off to one side thinking this was not the time to do anything but listen.

Chuck looked first at Joanne, then at Buzz and he said, "Let's go over to the house and get some beers and give these guys some time to get reacquainted. They shook their heads in unison and the three of them began walking out of the hangar as Jose' pulled up an old milk crate and sat next to Sam.

"Shit, man..." said Jose', "...what has happened? Why didn't you tell me?"

Sam waited a second before answering. Then he said, "You were just too excited about what you guys have gotten into here, and the last thing I wanted to do was piss on your parade. Besides, I needed a road trip, and this didn't seem that far."

In a few minutes, Jose' looked over as Joanne walked back in the hangar carrying two beers, one with a bent

flexible paper straw in it. She handed Sam his beer and he said, "Thanks." Jose' took his silently. Joanne understood the silence and had turned to walk away when Sam said, "Are you seriously married to that guy, Chuck?" And he grinned widely.

Joanne stopped in her tracks and without looking back, she said, "I might be had." Then, looking back over her shoulder, with a smile on her face, she said, "Is anything on you working other than your mouth and that left arm?" Then she turned completely around to face them squarely only to see both Jose' and Sam grinning. Jose' was shaking his head and shielding his eyes with his hand as an embarrassed school boy would. From that moment on, Sam and Joanne were fast friends and the jiving and joking, always full of sexual innuendo between them, never stopped. Even in front of Chuck, who, as I said, liked Sam from the beginning. He took it all very good-naturedly and laughed with them.



With no words spoken, everyone stayed away from the hangar for a time, knowing that Jose' and Sam needed some serious time to catch-up. Jose' didn't say it, he did

not need to, but he was a bit stunned seeing his old friend bent and hunched forward in the motorized wheel chair.

“Why didn’t you tell me on the phone?” asked Jose’.

Sam thought about his answer for a few seconds, then he said, “I wasn’t sure where to begin. I’m sorry. Really. But...”

Jose’ patiently waited.

“I had a favor to ask.”

Jose’ took a drink of his beer and said nothing trying to process what he saw before him, the picture of a still vital and whole Sam danced across his thoughts.

“But, I guess...” said Sam, “...I should start at the beginning.” And he went into detail about the disease and how he had progressed to the state he was in now. At times, he watched Jose’ literally wince, but Sam recounted the blow-by-blow progression of the disease, the breaking bones and the amputations. But he left out the last thing his doctors had told him about his life expectancy, for the time being. He had a favor to ask Jose’ and he did not want his impending and early fate to hang as a sword over Jose’s

neck and make him feel pressured and obligated. Maybe he would not need to, he thought to himself.

Sam finished his story, which Jose' had not interrupted once and he apologized again.

"I'm really sorry for showing up like this, and I guess I'm a bit selfish. But..."

"Naw." said Jose. "But what?"

"Well, there was another reason that I wanted to come see this place and catch up with you."

"What was that?" said Jose' feeling a bit more settled now.

"When you described what you guys were up to, I knew..." and Sam silenced himself.

"Knew?"

"Well, shit, Jose'...", said Sam, "I may as well drop it on you."

"I'm ready."

“You told me about what you guys were doing and how the rules didn’t make any difference here, that you guys considered yourselves outlaws.”

“Com’on, man, tell me what’s on your mind.”

“I told myself that I wasn’t going to, but, Jose’, the docs have told me that I don’t have that much longer.”

“No shit!? Christ, man, how long are they giving you?”

“Maybe a year.”

“Crap.”

“Yeah, I know. But listen. It’s cool. I’m not afraid or anything.” said Sam.

Jose’ fell dead-silent, not really wanting to hear what Sam was going to ask him next. He presumed that Sam was about to ask him to conduct an ash dive. Ash dives, the scattering of a dead skydiver’s cremated remains, weren’t something he particularly enjoyed doing.

“But I have a big favor to ask you.” said Sam.

Here it comes..., thought Jose’.

“I want to make one more jump.” said Sam.

Jose' blew a small puff of air from his cheeks.

"Is that all?" asked a secretly relieved Jose', and he said that as calmly as if Sam had just asked him to hand him another beer. That was before Sam said, "The problem is that I can't leave the chair. A tandem jump attached to another jumper would probably break every bone in body."

"Oh!" said Jose'. "M-m-m-m."

A second passed between them, a dead silent second, before Jose' said, "No problem."

Then Jose' said, meekly, "I think."

"I know that's a hell of a thing to ask." said Sam. "Actually, I kind of feel terrible asking it."

Jose' was looking at Sam appearing a bit absent-minded.

"Maybe we should forget I ever asked it." said Sam. He waited for Jose' to say okay, but he underestimated Jose'.



"Egg in a pillow, my friend." Jose' was a retired mechanical engineer and he was already making a plan.

“What?” asked Sam.

Jose’ smile and repeated himself. He said the words slowly, deliberately. “Egg. In. A. Pillow.”

Then Jose’ said the most surprising thing to Sam. “Piece of cake, buddy. Piece of cake.”

Jose’ reached over to his friend and placed his hand on Sam’s arm and then he said, “Leave it to me. Let’s find you a place to bunk, get you squared away, and tonight, at the fire, we’ll talk it over.”

Jose’ looked at Sam intently then, and he said, “You may just be the answer to a problem.”

To be continued....