

The Outlaws



WE DONT NEED NO STINKING NOTAMS!

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Chapter One

At first, Chuck pushed the thought back in his mind.

The sun was hot on his shoulders and small rivulets of sweat broke from underneath the head band of his cap and trickled down his temples as he watched the Stearmans and the Fleets take off from the small grass airstrip.

Around him, sitting on wooden benches that served as bleachers, were young children sitting next to their parents eating hot dogs and licking ice cream cones as their moms and dads fanned themselves with show programs. Here and there were elderly people, some in wheelchairs, others pushing walkers. Chuck supposed that they had been brought to the show from their nursing homes for the day. Shielding their eyes against the brilliant August afternoon sun, the crowd, their heads tilted back, watched and pointed skyward, as they exclaimed excitement to one another when a five plane formation of antique airplanes, all bi-wing relics of the Twenties and Thirties, all trailing columns of white smoke, clattered and roared overhead in a fly-by to open the afternoon's show.

The all-volunteer air show, a take-off on the golden days of barnstorming, was held every Sunday afternoon during the summer, and it had been years since he had visited and paid his admission to watch the show and to wander through the sparse crowds it attracted.

Overhead, Piper Cubs and biplanes, lovingly cared for during the cold winter months, blew white smoke from their exhausts as the pilots and crews re-enacted aerial ribbon cuts, flour sack bombings and wing walking.

There was even a parachute jump with the jumper trailing an American flag as he descended that took place to open the show that was accompanied by an off-pitch rendition of the national anthem sung by a young soloist from a local high school. It was all very hammy and entertaining. The taped calliope music playing from loud speakers placed on telephone poles behind the bleachers gave the air show a circus-like atmosphere; the announcer stood on the airfield waving a red cane like a sideshow barker while wearing his white, skimmer hat, and he excitedly described the aerial maneuvers taking place in the warm, hazy sky above; he was doing his best to heighten an afternoon's excitement while attempting to take the crowd back to a 1929 summer.

But what got Chuck's gall was the parachute jump. There was nothing 1929 about it whatsoever. A single jumper riding in the front seat of a red-and-white Stearman exited high over the heads of the crowd as "Oh, say can you see..." was warbled badly, and the jumper fell to his canopy's opening a few thousand feet above the ground. What blossomed open above was a square parachute. A yellow and blue, square parachute, known as a "ram air canopy" that resembled an aircraft wing. He grumbled to himself that if one was to go to all the trouble to put on an old-time air show,

then at the very least, an old-time parachute, a round parachute should have been used.

Late in the afternoon, the air show ended, and the crowd melted away to their cars and vans and left a dusty trail out the front gate and onto the paved highway beyond. As Chuck sat behind the steering wheel of his battered Ford pick-up truck inching along in line slowly moving forward to exit the airfield's grassy parking lot, the thought that he had been pushing back into his mind began to take a clearer, more commanding focus.

He could not announce to the world what he was about to do, but he could swear to secrecy the few people that he would invite to do it with him. There were many that he knew, hundreds around the world who might be interested. But he could not risk announcing it over his computer on a social website. It would attract the attention of the wrong people, namely, the people who enforced the rules that had held him back until now. As he drove the long trip back to his small airfield tucked away in the woods, he thought that the whole idea might be for naught.



He had purchased the airfield property seven years ago and had been told by the realtor that she had been told that the grass strip and the fields around it had once been used by a skydiving club on the week-ends. She walked him out to a small open field next to the dilapidated tin-roofed hangar and scuffed the dry hay and grass away with her foot. Be-

neath the detritus of mown clippings was a layer of small, brown river rock - pea gravel.

Back then, before he purchased the property, the realtor had also told him that the 40-acre parcel was previously owned by a very old man who had passed away. His family had insisted that the entire property be sold as it stood, that even the airplane and the tools stored in the hangar and the barn had to be included in the sale. They lived far away and had no interest in trying to sell the land and the equipment piecemeal.

Then the realtor led him over to the hangar and slid the door aside revealing a Cessna 180 Skywagon, its paint peeling and its leading edges pitted. Was it flyable, he asked the realtor? She wasn't a pilot, and she said she knew nothing about airplanes. He could not quite believe his eyes. His last airplane was a 180 as well. The paint scheme was even the same color, green and white. Did the family know what was in the hangar, he asked?

She sighed, saying that their attorney had sent her a bill of sale for the airplane, telling her that they did not want the airplane and to assign its ownership to who ever bought the property. Then she said that it had become very apparent to her in the course of dealing with the family over the phone that they were only interested in selling the property as quickly as possible and getting the money for it. She added that they were quite anxious to sell, and she thought that they would probably accept any reasonable offer.

As he considered the purchase, one of the many odd things about the property was that

he could find no evidence of the airfield on the aerial sectionals, the aviation maps for the region. None. It was if the airfield never existed or maybe it had just not been used for so long that that it was no longer mapped as an airfield. Another interesting thing about the property that caught his eye was that the airfield had been cared for. Its entire length had been mowed carefully, it seemed, on a regular basis. When asked about that, the realtor shrugged her shoulders and said that perhaps a neighbor kept it up, but she really did not know who cared for it.

Chuck had long ago been forced to stop parachuting and flying by his declining health and convinced both himself and his wife that his only reason for buying the place was that once the old farmhouse was rehabilitated, it would be a fine place to live out their elder years, maybe raise a few chickens and one or two head of beef cattle. It would be a fine place, quiet and remote.

There was a padlocked room built into the far corner of the hangar and he had asked the realtor if she had a key to it. She said that the family did but, as yet, they had not sent it to her. She went on say that the room was just a storage room full of old tools and some parachuting knick-knacks, and that the family had told her that it was fine with them if the lock was broken off. So, with the realtor watching, Chuck found a crow bar and twisted the lock from its hasp.

As Chuck pulled the door open, he could not believe what he was seeing. Chuck looked at his wife, Joanne, his eyes wide and his

mouth slightly agape. She had a slight smile on her face and was slowly shaking her head which was burrowed within her raised shoulders. Hanging on racks constructed of galvanized steel pipe were six sets of parachute gear, complete rigs, seemingly ready to jump.

The main containers were all military surplus, olive-drab B-4s each marked with a sewn-on white tag along its ripcord cover; the tags were neatly lettered in black ink indicating what kind of parachute was packed inside. There were four "7-TU" canopies and two "Para Commanders." All but one of the reserve parachutes attached to the chest rings of the main harnesses were tagged as "T7A" and one was marked "Lopo." Each reserve had a mounted metal panel painted crinkle black, and each panel held a Swiss stopwatch and a surplus aircraft altimeter.

Chuck pulled the packing card from every reserve and looked to see when they had last been packed. Each card was blank. There was no rigger's signature, yet each reserve had been sealed by red thread and a flattened lead swedge. There were no initials left by the seal press on the swedges. So, to Chuck's amazement, there was no indication as to when the reserves had last been packed, or who packed them.

Hanging neatly on another similar rack were six faded, black, double-zipper jumpsuits, and six pairs of worn French jump boots in various sizes. On a wall nearby, hanging by their laces was a pair of worn and scuffed Cocorans. And neatly balanced on the rack above the suits and boots were three old

football helmets of various colors and three, scarred, white Bell helmets.

His mind was awirl with questions. How long had this gear been here? Who was the old man who had died? The realtor had given him the name before he actually closed on the property, and it did not register as someone he knew or had ever heard of. Did the gear all belong to him? Then he thought that the old man must have operated a small commercial skydiving center, not a club, at some point. But he could not be sure.

The real estate agent watched quizzically as Chuck leaned into the gear, getting his face close to it while he sniffed; it did not smell musty or rotted. In fact, the room seemed very dry to him. He had to see. He unhooked one of the reserves from its harness and pushed back the pack flaps far enough to expose some canopy material. He pulled enough of it out to be able to give it a small pop test by snapping the material between his hands as a shoe shine man might snap rag to see if the weave spread or ripped. It did not, indicating it was good. And he buried his face into the nylon fabric and smelled it, too. There seemed to be nothing wrong with it. It looked brand new to him. Serviceable and jumpable.

Looking around the room further, there were many familiar pieces of parachute gear here and there. On one wall hanging from a nail were several main and reserve ripcords. On another nail were yellow static lines and a few pairs of goggles. On another nail hung kicker plates, an A3 pilot chute and two MA-1 pilot chutes. In a box shoved under a cabinet

were neatly rolled and stacked yellow crepe paper wind drift indicators.

Who would leave all of this? Why was it still here? Everything in the room looked serviceable and ready to jump. It was like he had walked into some sort of gag. He thought to himself that maybe it was a set-up. Maybe old friends had somehow elaborately done this to screw with him. Then he thought to himself, *"Bullshit! Who would go to all this trouble just for a laugh or two?"*

Leaving the door to the room open, he turned and walked out to look the airplane over. The Hobbs meter showed 912 hours on it. Since what?, he thought. He looked behind the seat and in the pocket, he found a small canvas case with the registration papers and engine and airframe log books. It was a 1956 model. It had been given an annual inspection within the last year. The compression ratings showed no weak cylinders. Its oil had been changed and analyzed and there was nothing in the logs to indicate that it wasn't airworthy. The keys hung in the ignition switch. He flipped the master switch on and the battery showed good.

With great effort, he and his wife pushed the airplane out of the hangar and he pulled the propeller through four times, then he crawled in the pilot's seat. There were no other seats in the cabin. He had spotted them stacked in a corner of the hangar. The airplane had obviously been used as a jump airplane. Feeling at home in it, he primed it with a few strokes and holding the brakes, he turned the ignition and magneto switches on

and pulled the starter handle. The engine turned over sluggishly once, then twice and it started blowing away a small hurricane of blue smoke from the oil that had gathered in the cylinders from being static so long.

He let the engine warm up watching the temperature and oil pressure gauges closely. The oil pressure was good, and once the temperature had increased sufficiently, he pushed the throttle forward up to about 2,200 rpm, and he performed a magneto check. There was little rpm drop in either magneto. He then held the brakes firm and pushed the throttle fully forward. The engine's tachometer showed it was developing full power. He pulled the throttle back to idle and exercised the propeller a few times and it operated normally. Then watching left and right, the yoke as he watched the ailerons rise and fall on each wing, and then he flexed the elevator several times. The rudder pedals seemed to have the right amount of tension. The airplane seemed completely airworthy. With his wife standing off to one side watching, he reached down and shut the engine off and turned the master off. For a long moment, as the propeller clacked to a stop, he leaned back in the seat and was filled with amazement.



He and his wife bought the property. A friend of his, a retired parachute rigger came by now and then and together they would get the old parachute gear out, inspect it and repack it, all the while promising that one day

they would get it out and jump it. Then they would laugh and it never happened.

He bought a very expensive dehumidifier and kept the storage room dry and clean. Having the gear became a kind of comfort to him, a reminder of his days past when he was an active skydiver.

The airplane was a different story. In the beginning, after they bought the property, he flew it nearly every day. He lavished money on it. He washed it. He waxed it. Most days, he flew it with the right door off, leaving it leaning against the hangar wall. Having the wind rush swirl around him as he flew was another cheering reminder of his past when he would fly jumpers between his skydiving.



But time was taking its toll on Chuck as glaucoma began to affect his vision. And there were the minor painful twinges in his chest that came during the night. Soon, a doctor had diagnosed mild angina and he began taking medicine for it. He could still see to fly and make out the eye chart but never told his flight surgeon about the angina, always seeing another doctor, in another town for his needs. Then after his biennial flight physical turned up an abnormality when the doctor listened to his chest, an EKG was ordered. His medical was withheld. He could no longer legally fly.



He was still thinking about the idea as

drove home from the old time air show that evening. He laughed to himself thinking that maybe the idea was a form of delusional dementia. He had not flown the old 180 in a year now, having parked it when the doctor told him that he could not renew his medical certificate. His heart had become too frail, his vision now a little more blurred. So the green and white Cessna had sat forlornly in the rusty tin hangar next to the barn gathering bird droppings on her wings along with a thick coat of dust on her windshield. He could not bear to sell it. So, every few weeks, he would go out to the hangar and try to start her, just to hear her run.

Lately though, the battery was weak, and he feared a few cylinders might have low compression, and all he could do was to just stand and look at her, her tires now low and squat.

In the storage room, still locked away, was the old parachute equipment. The B-4 containers with the orange and white gores, the T-7A reserve canopies packed in chest packs; the worn and scuffed French boots that were always a size or two too big for those who might have rented them; the now faded black twin-zippered jumpsuits with patches sewn on the elbows and the plastic football helmets; it was all there, kept dry, and still useable just where he had left everything.



When he arrived home from the air show, the idea still played in his head. He kept saying to himself, *"You are either going to kill*

yourself or they are going to put you in jail for this." But then another voice would argue, *"So what? You've lived 75 years. How much longer do you have?"* and he would laugh at himself.

He had not even so much as consumed a beer for several years. He had lived cautiously. Life had become a predictable routine of meals at the same time, endless hours reading Facebook posts, bedtime at the same time every night, taking his medicine without fail between his first and second cup of coffee right at seven every morning, watching his every step, so as not to fall and look foolish if the paramedics were called. He had lapsed into the comfortable routine of old age and that was nagging him. And, it was making him angry and frustrated.

What bothered him as much were the old friends he knew, the many who had begun jumping out of airplanes and flying some 60 years ago, about the time that he had. He knew that they were at home like he was probably sitting on a couch with the television on across the room as they peered at their computer screens reading social media posts.

On the social websites, he was frequently in contact with many of those who weren't yet dead as they relived their lives and immersed themselves in their lost youths, writing posts and re-counting the adventures and good times they had experienced all those years ago.

They seemed to live their lives vicariously on the computer now, trying to find something they had lost, as they had grown older while becoming fathers and grandfathers and trying

to live up to what tradition had told them they should become across the jobs and careers and marriages, children and grandchildren. It seemed that every day as he read their words posted on the computer, he could palpably sense the regret of losing their youth, their longing for a freer and more exciting part of their lives that, to most of them, seemed forever gone, only alive in the haze of memories and faded details.



It took him days to work up the courage to call his old friend, Buzz, out in Utah. Buzz had worked on the railroad for many years after they had last jumped together. They were close friends but the years and circumstances had pulled them apart. They spoke infrequently on the phone, and he chatted with Buzz now and then on the social media. In the old days, they were inseparable.

Down south, just after they had each gotten their pilot licenses, if the jumpers were few at the club, they delighted in the time they spent just wandering above the country together in a yellow Piper Cub and landing in farmers' fields.

The two had nearly lost their hard-earned pilot licenses when someone called the local sheriff with the N-number of the Cub. It seemed that someone was flying low, up and down the river, bombing fishermen in their boats with tomatoes and oranges. Their counter-alibis saved them and the fun they had was a source of a hilarious memory brought

up nearly every time they spoke on the phone over the years.

He knew that if anyone in the entire world would be agreeable to take part in what he was thinking, it might be Buzz. Buzz's wife had passed on a few years earlier, and they had no children, so he figured Buzz might have little to lose if things went south.



But before he would call Buzz, he would have to tell his wife. She was nobody's fool. She would see him fiddling again with the airplane. She would see him repacking the old parachutes. She was going to ask questions. She would be suspicious. So he figured the best thing was to do would just be up front with her. He waited until what he thought would be the right time and across the kitchen table he laid it all out.

She listened patiently to his every detail, his every reason. At first, the whole plan was laughable to her but she kept a straight face, a serious look in her eyes. Finally, as he expended every plausible reason and every made up excuse he could manufacture, she leaned across the table, gently moved his coffee cup to the side and laid a hand on his, and she softly said, "We can't live forever can we?" Then she rose from the kitchen table, turned her back to him as she walked out into the dining room, disappearing around the corner where he could not see her, and she dabbed her eyes with her apron, cleared her throat and said loudly, so he could hear her, "I won-

dered how long it would take you?"

"You mean you knew I would?" he said, turning his head towards the kitchen door.

"Yes. I could sense it in you."

"How?"

"I knew when you said you wanted to go off to the air show by yourself. I knew then, and I have known for a long time that you were going to do something like this. I just didn't know when."

"You're not angry?" he asked.

"No. Just a little afraid, that's all."

"You still love me?"

"More than any horny old 75 year old I know."

He rose from the table and walked into the dining room and wrapped his arms around her, then he pulled away and looked into her face. "I love you, too!" he said.

"Now, go. Go play with that damned airplane. I've got muffins to bake."

He smiled at her as he turned to go outside and as he opened the screen door to leave for the hangar, Joanne said, "Wait!"

He turned to look at her before she spoke again.

"You know if you guys do this, you're going to be outlaws. You with no medical..."

"I know. Might even get caught and go to jail, too."

She laughed and said, "I'll bring you cookies and maybe a file."

He thought to himself as he pushed the screen door open wide, *I'll never live that long.* Her words echoed in his head, *"We can't live forever can we?"*

He was heading for the hangar to air up the 180's tires and wait for the call from Buzz.

Chapter Two

"Death is not to fear, not living life is."

A week passed after Chuck called Buzz and told him what he was going to do. Buzz asked few questions, but said that he would get back to him and let him know if he was in. Chuck had not heard back from him, and fearing that Buzz just figured that he'd gone 'round the bend, he was beginning to reconsider the whole thing, maybe put it in the same "Silly Ideas" file as some of his other past notions such as watching "Riverdance" and then thinking that learning to tap dance would be fun. His feet didn't think so.

But then, late the following Saturday afternoon, just about sunset, someone knocked at the front door. Chuck put down his magazine and went to see who was there. Standing on the stoop beyond the dark mesh of the screen door stood Buzz, still sporting the crew cut of his youth, albeit a sparse one, thin and gray. With his back to the house, Buzz had turned to look out across the property when Chuck pushed the door open. Hearing the squeak of the hinges, he wheeled around to see Chuck standing behind him.

"You suck at directions!" said Buzz smiling. "If it weren't for that old fart at the gas station down the road, I'd have wound up in East Bumfuck. Glad you weren't spotting today." And he roared with laughter.

Chuck gathered his emotions quickly, choking back a quick gasp of air as if he'd

seen a ghost, a welcome one that nearly made him cry. But he didn't.

"But you're here, right? That's all that counts! When I didn't hear, I thought..."

Looking beyond Buzz for a brief second, Chuck noticed that parked in the driveway was an old, battered, cream-colored Volkswagen micro-bus, a camper. At Buzz's feet sat an olive-drab parachute kit bag.

Chuck pushed the screen door open and stepped out and into Buzz's arms. They hugged each other tightly for a few seconds before stepping back.

"Who's that!" called Joanne from the kitchen.

"It's Buzz! It's Buzz! He's here!"

Joanne took in a deep breath and thought, "*Damn!*" But she quickly whisked her apron off and threw it across the back of a dining room chair as she walked into the front room where she stopped and stood watching them through the screen door with her arms crossed over her chest, and she sighed in resignation. She had secretly hoped that Buzz wouldn't come. Buzz had always seemed to lead Chuck astray, the two of them always getting drunk and doing silly things together. But now, she thought, since Chuck had laid off the booze, things might be a little different and they were older, too...

"I thought you weren't going to come." said Chuck.

"Oh, ye of little faith." said Buzz, "If I wasn't coming, why am I standing here with a pocket full of cash from selling nearly everything I owned, house and all? And why did I

buy that ratty-ass '67 bus, the one out there that tortured my boney butt all the way here from Salt Lake City? And tell me why every pair of underwear I have is packed in that damned kit bag?" His eyes twinkled as he added, "And I sure as hell hope that you don't think that I'm sleeping in that fucking barn over there. It's probably full of sheep shit."

"Of course not..." said Chuck, quickly getting back into the rhythm of wise-cracking with Buzz - a habit that they had cultivated years ago as young jumpers. "There's no sheep. I'm putting you up in the hangar. That's where the bird shit is."

And they laughed together and reached for the other's hand to shake.

Then Chuck said, "But what's with the VW bus? You couldn't afford a real van?"

Buzz feigned indignity and said, "I come in the spirit of things that will be, oh, Lord Smart Ass, ergo the camper. It's what all the real hippies drive. And, I went to an army surplus store and found the only luggage a real sky-diver ever owned, thus the kit bag, the icing on my cake. Besides, you don't rate Louis Vuitton. Got any more silly-assed questions?"

"Well..." said Chuck, "I really wouldn't have cared if you showed up here riding a donkey and carrying your shit in a grocery bag. I'm just tickled pink that you came."

Joanne couldn't help but loose a small smile sensing Chuck's deep happiness. Her resentment began to melt some.

"Buzz? Are you hungry?" she asked meekly.

Buzz peered over Chuck's shoulder trying

to see inside. "Who's that?"

"You remember my lovely Joanne. Com'on, I want to reintroduce you to the love of my life." Joanne and Buzz had met briefly many years back, but Chuck wasn't certain that Buzz would remember her.

As they went through the screen door, Chuck pointed in the air and said, "Your bedroom's at the top of the stairs to the right."

Buzz walked directly to Joanne and avoided her outstretched hand and he pulled her to him in a hug. "Old bastard sure knows how to pick 'em." he said as they embraced. Joanne liked the crush of Buzz's leather flight jacket. "What's for dinner?" he asked, turning her loose. Chuck stood to one side beaming at the pair, happy that Buzz still liked her and proud that his friend was in his home.

Then, a bit snappishly Joanne said, "*Well!* How do you do to you, too!" She felt a little angry that Buzz had just walked through the door after all these years and the first thing out of his mouth was "What's for dinner?" But she quickly recovered, remembering that Buzz could have a certain demanding way and she gathered her composure.

She cleared her voice and said, "Sorry. I have no idea what I'm going to feed the two of you. Give me a few minutes and I'll get something going." As she started back towards the kitchen, she smiled to herself thinking that this was just the beginning and she'd better get used to it. Then over her shoulder, she said, "Buzz... *mi casa es tu casa.*"

Buzz winked at Chuck and said, "I like her! What's she still doing with you?"

"I'm charming and extremely sexy, unlike some old farts I know."

Buzz harrumphed and grinned.

"Where's that airplane?" asked Buzz.

"Com'on. Let's walk out to the hangar."

"Got any beer?" asked Buzz.

"Haven't had a drink in years." said Chuck.

"Are you shittin' me?"

"Nope."

"Why?"

"Supposed to be bad for me, I guess. I've forgotten why I stopped, really." Chuck was lying. He had nearly died from alcohol induced pancreatitis and stopped drinking because it would have killed him if he had kept it up. He didn't want to admit it.

"Well, I've got a cooler in the camper. You mind if I grab one?"

"Not a problem. I'll meet you over at the hangar."



Buzz and Chuck met at the 180 sitting just inside the hangar's entrance with just its nose illuminated by the sunlight. It sat dusty and covered with bird droppings, seeming to await rediscovery. "Sweet!" said Buzz. "Looks like it could use some attention. How does it run?"

"Was running fine when I parked it, but I suspect one or two cylinders might need honing and rings."

"We can do that. Shit. No problem." said Buzz slowly walked around the airplane

examining it slowly and stopped at the co-pilot's door to the cockpit. He opened it and peered inside looking at the Hobbs meter. "Hell, that ain't much time. When'd you fly it last?"

"It's been a while. But if we do a few things, she'll be plenty airworthy."

Buzz touched the tip of his boot to the low tire. "Needs some air."

"Got a compressor right over there. But, com'ere. I want to show you something else."

Buzz followed Chuck over to the door of the equipment room and he heard the hum of the dehumidifier running inside.

"What's in there?"

"You'll see." said Chuck as he fumbled in his pocket for his keys. "Just wait."

Chuck unlocked the door, swung it open and waved Buzz through.

The second Buzz stepped in, Chuck flipped on the light switch and Buzz stopped in his tracks. "Leapin' lizards, Daddy Warbucks! What the fuck!?" exclaimed Buzz, his eyes wide. "Did all this come with the place!?" he asked as he walked over to the equipment racks.

"Yep. And it's all in first class shape and airworthy, too."

"Holy crap!" said Buzz.

"Everything we need." said Chuck. "Every bit serviceable."

"Any squares?"

"Not a one. It's all old school stuff. Cheapos and a few Para-Commanders."

"Talk about going back in time." said Buzz.

"Who left it here? I mean, it was here

when you bought the place?"

"Yeah. We never have found out who, exactly, the original owner was. I mean, we do know his name, but, the way the sale was handled, we never met him. Mainly because he was dead. His family sold us the place which included the airplane and all the parachute gear. And if he was a jumper, I never heard of him. His family just wanted the place off their hands after he died."

Then Buzz said something prophetic. "This is all like in a dream."

"Not dreaming." said Chuck, "Just got lucky, that's all. Com'on, let's go get something eat. We'll go over all this some more later."

"Yeah, okay. I want to get reacquainted with Joanne some more anyway. You're getting boring."

"Fuck you, too." said Chuck without cracking a smile and they both laughed that easy, comfortable way that old friends do.



Joanne and Chuck had met at a drop zone in Florida soon after she had divorced. Her friends had convinced her to leave the kids with a babysitter for the day and to go with them and have some fun. So, they went to a local drop zone to watch the jumpers and have a picnic lunch.

She was a stunning, shapely young brunette then. Chuck was flying that day and saw her standing at the fence when he would land to pick up another load of jumpers. For him, it

was love at first sight. For her, it wasn't that at all. He had already been married twice and, to her, it seemed that the only thing he cared about was parachutes and parties.

But after many attempts, he convinced her to try making a first jump. Like he had many years before, she fell in love with skydiving; then she fell in love with Chuck. He showed a fast devotion to her children, a boy and a girl, and never attempted to exclude them from their life. That was 22 years ago.

Stand the two, Chuck and Joanne, together and it looked like she might be 15 years younger, but the truth is that they are the same age. She loves to sing and is a member of several local church choirs. Often, she is featured as a soloist soprano. Some mornings, after breakfast, she would walk far off into the palmetto scrubs and just sing high and lonely refrains, practicing for an upcoming performance. If Chuck wasn't busy feeding and watering animals somewhere on the property, he would pull up a broken-down ladder back chair on the back porch and just sit listening to her. The combined sight of the early mist layered in tree branches, moss hanging down like lacy dark stalactites and the lemon sun rising and throwing beams of pale light across the yard coupled with the sound of her voice rising and settling would often bring tears to Chuck's eyes.

For many years, she had been his only companion and friend - by choice. He long missed the camaraderie of the jumpers that were his social circle years back and was content to keep his own company. He was often

left unfulfilled and bored by those locals he knew nearby, having nothing of any real substance in common with them.

Talking with them about flying or jumping left them hollow-eyed and blank faced. His men friends now-a-days were good for conversations about fishing, the weather and hog prices. In part, what he was planning was a cure for that ill.

The two of them were the other's best friends and still vital in their passion for each other, and most mornings she had to push Chuck away as she tried to cook breakfast or simply dry her hair. He was worse than a twenty year old some days, and she told him so. But she was always willing and some nights as things in the bedroom calmed down, they would lay still holding each other and joking about how sorry they felt for the wrinkled old souls who had lost the spark.

Joanne stopped jumping before Chuck mostly due to the time she needed to raise the kids. In her time, she had won a few accuracy meets and had come away from the sport injury free. Chuck stayed active until he began to sense that the sport he had once known was changing. To him, it seemed that there was a lawyer around every corner and the clubs that jumped for the fun of it, and not profit, didn't exist anymore.

But what was really bothering him the most was the loss. His friends were growing older and drifting away. The older he got, the more he began to notice when he got to the drop zone on Saturday mornings, friends like Joe or Dean or Ric just weren't showing up as

often. Their excuses about their absences were always weak. "I had to take the kids to..." or "The wife wanted me to go with her and..." or "I had a lot of work to bring home and..." and so-on.

Chuck, too, was drifting away; he found himself spending some Saturday mornings at the pool with Joanne's children instead of being at the drop zone. Then, there were things that growing children do, activities: piano recitals, science fairs, basketball and football games, proms and the like that he felt he just could not miss. His parachute gear sat in the trunk of his car, packed, ready to jump. At first he skipped week-end, then there a few more missed week-ends. Soon, months were passing without making a single jump.

What began as just a missed week-end took on a snowball effect. And something else was happening. And Chuck did not care for it much. The aircraft being used got bigger and bigger. In the beginning, it was new and great fun to be able to jump with seven or eight people at a time. First, it was a Skyvan, then later a DC-3.

But, before long, if you just wanted to make an accuracy jump, your name waited on the manifest, as excuses were made that there weren't enough people waiting to take up the 182. The large relative work groups were getting a cliquishness about them.

He could put up with it well enough, but the day arrived that he parked his car at the chain link fence and watched as a group of twenty jumpers, their helmets swinging in their hands, and all yukking it up with each

other as they waddled towards a DC-3, and he just started his car, backed out and went home. As he grew older, he more and more regretted that decision.

Then came the first big operation to fix an ulcer. It was six months later after his recovery that he wanted to jump again and he found a small group operating a Cessna 180 just outside of a small rural town. He had old gear, a Para-Commander in a Pioneer four pin container. Naturally, his reserve was a chest mounted T-7A. He didn't know what a three-ring release was. A few jumpers laughed at his Capewells. He tried his hand at packing a square, and it felt strange to him. No one coached him before he borrowed and jumped his first square.

An early square parachute, when it opened, it nearly knocked him out. Then it began to spin. Not knowing how to stop the spin, he cut it away and rode his reserve to the ground.

Then, on the next jump with it, he had not been taught that a square should be flown more like an airplane, its user making a measured approach and being mindful of its higher speed and rapid altitude loss in steep turns. In a fateful attempt to show off his accuracy skills, he hook-turned it too close to the ground. When he left the hospital a month later, even though Joanne had promised herself she would never say anything more about it, Chuck knew that if he wasn't going to lose her, he would need to forget about jumping for a while.

He continued to fly his old 180 until the

business of not being able to renew his medical reared its head. Then he made another decision that he would regret even more than not jumping anymore; he sold the airplane. He would later tell Joanne that he felt like someone had shot his dog.



But Chuck settled down, focused on raising children and those children had children and he became a grandfather. For years, there was little contact with the old jumpers he knew. Now and then, one might swing by the house and spend a day or two and the memories and the beer would flow and for a time, even though Chuck felt the pangs of not flying or jumping for a few days, when the visitor was gone, he went back to work doing everyday things and soon things returned to normal.

But then came the computer. Everyone was buying them and it became a part of the new normal. And with it, came an awareness of social websites like Facebook. It was great fun, at first, as Chuck found old friends and new ones, too. As time passed, he could, at least, relive the glory days of his youth swapping tales. The computer and Facebook also brought pain. The old crowd was passing away. Every day, it seemed, he read of one more ash dive and he winced.



When Chuck and Buzz were jumping and

flying together back in their twenty-something's, not once, did either of them ever give a serious thought to death or dying. Sure, now and then, word would come from a passer-through of an accident somewhere else and someone had died; sometimes it was more than one someone at a time. But for Chuck and Buzz, there were parties to have, jumps to make, big haired women to bed, locals to impress, airplanes with which to flat-hat across the pea gravel at sunset to impress a mooning crowd of beer drinking jumpers. Death happened somewhere else.

But with the computer and the internet and Facebooking, Chuck's age was starting to come too apparent to him. He wanted to find that crowd he knew before it was too late and he stood alone.



Then Joanne made a suggestion that changed everything. "Let's go find a place in the country. Let's get away from the city." They put the word out to a realtor that they were looking for a country home. Never once in their contacts with real estate agents did the words, "airplane" or "airstrip" ever come up.



After supper, Chuck, Joanne and Buzz took seats in the wooden rocking chairs on the porch that overlooked the airstrip and the property. Buzz had helped Chuck feed and

water the beef cows before locking the chickens away for the night.

"Quite a nice little farm and airport you got here, stud. Ya'll got a name for it?"

Chuck laughed and looked at Joanne and she smiled. "Yeah. We call it "The Farm."

Buzz rolled his eyes and said, "Damn creative there, Shakespeare."

They all chuckled quietly at that.

For a moment, they were silent. Then Buzz said, "Okay. Let's go over the plan again. I'm pretty sure I got the gist of it when you called. But, if we're going to go to jail at some point in the future, I like to get every little detail about this crime that you are, ahem, that "*we*" are getting ready to commit."

Joanne shifted uneasily in her rocker and then with her elbow resting on the chair's arm, she propped her chin on her fist and stared at Chuck, not saying anything for a second. Then she said, "Yes, Shakespeare, do pray, please tell us all about it."

"Ahem..." Chuck cleared his throat dramatically, then he began...

"It's not complicated. The plan is simple. We forget the F.A.A. We forget the U.S.P.A. I know some guys, a few are on Facebook, that I will invite to come jump. No young guys, no students; guys that I know haven't jumped in a while. We form a secret society. We don't tell anybody. Everyone is sworn to secrecy. Maybe we find one or two who want to fly again, but like me, the regs say they can't. We forget everything and we just have a good time. We get together once a month or so, maybe twice a month and we band together like we used to.

No one is forced to do anything but show up.

They bring what they want to jump or they use our gear, it doesn't make any difference. We all subscribe to one edict and that is that death is not to fear, not living life is. Who knows how long we have left. Our pasts will become our futures. And what's left of our futures will be happier like we were in the past."

"Damn!" said Buzz, "Sounds like you've been rehearsing this for a while."

Then Buzz added, "But why don't we nail down some fine points first?"

Chapter Three

"A Roll of the Dice"

"Okay, let's talk fine points."

In a short while, as the sun began to set, Joanne yawned and told Chuck and Buzz that she was tired and she wanted to go crawl in bed and read.

As she rose to her feet, she leaned over and kissed Chuck on the cheek and said, "Love you. See you when you come up." Chuck patted her softly on the shoulder and said, "Night." Buzz cleared his throat loudly, theatrically, and then he said, "What about me? Don't I get a good-night kiss, too?" Chuck laughed at that. Joanne stood straight up, put her hands on her hips, silent for a second staring at Buzz then she said, "You shave today?" Buzz answered "No." Then she said, "He did..." nodding in Chuck's direction, "...think about it." Buzz and Chuck looked at each blankly before Chuck stuck his tongue out at Buzz and said, "Nah. Nah. Nah." And their laughter rose as Joanne disappeared through the screen door.

After they settled down, and with dark setting in all around, Buzz and Chuck sat silently rocking, the porch boards squeaking under the chair runners then Chuck said, almost in a whisper, "There are no fine points."

"What?" said Buzz

"It's simple. No rules. No fine points. We're going run this club like we jumped and flew in the old days. If there is any such thing as fine

points, they will be doing the things that need to be done in order to get this going. First thing tomorrow, I'm gonna call for three loads of pea gravel for the target and a truckload of stone so guys can make fire pits and I'm gonna buy a big 'fridge to put in the hangar."

"And, let's be clear about this..." Chuck continued, "...we're going to do all of our own work on the bird, all of it. No hundred hour inspections, no annuals, none of it. We'll do the work when it needs it. Shit! If we need an alternator, we'll go to NAPA. You and I both know what we're doing and we can buy any part for it that we need off of the internet. Damn, man. I used buy starter motor brushes for my Howard starter from the Singer Sewing Machine company. After all these years of doing our own maintenance, the only thing that separates us from being real airframe and power plant mechanics is a piece of paper. And while I'm ranting, we're going to pack our own reserves when we think they need it. If somebody needs refresher training, we do it. I think the only rule that should be is that the beer doesn't come out until bird's in the hangar. And maybe one other little rule: no drugs, that is unless someone needs medical weed. Agreed?"

Buzz nodded his agreement repeatedly and a large grin grew wide on his face. He was actually stifling a laugh.

Then not being able to help himself, Buzz said, "So, you are saying we might break a law or two here..." and he guffawed.

Trying to remain serious, Chuck added empathically, "And!...beyond the absolute rule

of secrecy about this place will be the rule that anyone we induct doesn't have to jump if they don't want to. They should just be able to show up, crank up a camp fire and be with friends. Period."

There was a momentary silence between them then Chuck said, "Yeah, smartass, we're going to be outlaws." And they both chuckled.

"So..." asked Buzz, "...what do you want to do tomorrow, that is after you've ordered gravel and rock?"

"Let's run some electrical and water hook-ups for campers and build a latrine. I don't want everybody tromping through the house all the time."

"Who we gonna invite, I mean "induct" first?"

"Let's give ourselves a few days to think about that, but I think that the first ones ought to be guys who we know personally, that we've actually jumped or flown with in the past. You know, keep it tight in the beginning. Then, if they show up and we're comfortable with them, we can invite a few more. Roger?"

"Right!" said Buzz. "Where we going to start? I mean, have you thought of a few already?"

"Yep. Of course. You to begin with and there is another. I'll get to him later, but first, I've gotta question?"

"Alright." replied Buzz.

"When are we going to start? I mean, we can both fly and we have the gear. Right?"

Buzz lifted the beer can at his feet and took a long sip. Then he reached in his pocket

and took out a pack of Camels, shook one out and stuck it between his lips and raised his Zippo to light it; then he flipped the cover back with a "click" and lit his cigarette. As he slowly released the first puff into the air, he closed the lighter's lid with a soft "clank." Then he held the lighter up to the light coming from the window behind him and he looked pensively at the red-and-blue 82nd Airborne Division insignia engraved in the lighter's case; then he took another sip of beer before putting the lighter in his pocket and saying, "Ain't no time like the present, buddy. How about we get it on tomorrow? If the weather allows...."

"You're on!" said Chuck.

Neither man slept much that night.



Buzz was last up the next morning. He slowly made his way down the stairs, and he walked into the kitchen where Joanne was standing at the sink looking out the window at the hangar.

"Mornin' !" said Buzz brightly.

Joanne turned to face him saying, "Oh, hey! How'd you sleep?"

"A little fitfully, I'm afraid."

"Same with him." said Joanne nodding outside. "I guess you guys are a little nervous about today, huh?"

"Are you?" asked Buzz.

"Like I told him, I'm a little afraid of the whole thing. But I guess you two know what you're doing."

"How do you really feel about all this?"

At first, Joanne put the question off and asked Buzz if he wanted coffee. Buzz said that he did, and she handed him a cup and pointed at the percolator sitting on the stove. For a moment, there was silence between the two of them. Then Joanne said this...

"Buzz, I can't count the number of times that he has said that the three most alive times of his life were when he married me, the time he spent fighting Charlie and his time as a jumper and jump pilot. I've watched him slowly slide downhill over the last few years, especially since he lost his medical. Our life together is wonderful and, at our age, surprisingly erotic and I wouldn't change it for the world. But he needs something back that he's lost. I'm gonna keep a brave face, be his best cheerleader and not be selfish about this. If he messes up and gets hurt or dies, well, we'll... I'll deal with it."

"I'm impressed and maybe jealous, too." said Buzz.

Then what she said next surprised him.

"But damn, you know what? I think it's going to supercharge him somehow. I can't tell you why I feel that way. But these last few weeks, I've sensed something. It's like he's on some kind of super Geritol. It's weird. The medications he's been taking, the blood thinners and all, were causing big liver spots on his arms and now...well...they are disappearing. Go figure."

Buzz had poured himself a cup of coffee and was leaning against the counter sipping it. When she said that, he laughed out loud, almost spitting his coffee on the floor. Joanne

laughed herself. Then she said, "He's out in the hangar. Go. I'll call you guys when breakfast is ready."

"Great! What you fixing?"

"S.O.S. Now get out of my kitchen."

"Good old shit-on-a-shingle. Yum-m-m. My favorite." Buzz said with a raised eyebrow and a mock shiver.

Then she said, "Wait! Why'd you laugh?"

"Because the same thing is happening to me; I'm turning into a teenager again."

"What do you mean?" asked Joanne.

"You'll blush."

"No. I won't."

"Yes, you will. At least, you'll think I'm crass."

"Try me." said Joanne. Then she added, "I've known you for years. Being crass is a foregone conclusion with you."

Then Buzz, his demeanor suddenly changing, he somewhat somberly said, "I'm having erections again. That hasn't happened since I lost my wife. It started as soon as I decided to come do this with Chuck."

"Well, that's good isn't it?"

"Well, it's sure as hell interesting. I'll give you that."

Joanne was blushing slightly when she said, "I'll call you guys when the food's ready." And she turned back towards the sink.



As Buzz walked out the door that morning, he looked skyward. It had dawned gray and cloudy and the ceiling was low. He esti-

mated the cloud base was about 1,200 feet, and he thought to himself that outlaws they may be, but they weren't stupid outlaws.

As he got closer to the hangar, he could hear the rattle of an air compressor running and saw Chuck standing at the open cowl hatch of the 180, just removing a funnel. As Chuck wiped his hands on a rag, Buzz noticed an empty oil container lying on the ground at Chuck's feet. Chuck heard Buzz approaching and turned towards him and said, "Mornin' sleepyhead!"

Buzz stopped and stood directly in front of the airplane studying its low tires. Then he said, "Want me to air them?"

"That'd be great."

"Okay. Got an air gauge around here somewhere?"

"Look over there in the bottom big drawer of my tool chest." Buzz went over to the large, red tool chest and pulled out the drawer.

As he walked over to air compressor to get the hose, he said to Chuck, "That woman in there really loves you. You know that?"

"Yeah, I know. It's reciprocal. What'd she say to you?"

"She said she'd call us when breakfast is ready."

"Besides that? I know she said something else."

Buzz paused for a second then he lied, "She said that we're a coupla damn fools."

Chuck laughed and said, "I know that. What else did she say?"

"She's afraid."

"I know that, too. I also know she wants

me to do this." Chuck stuffed his rag in his back pocket and then he said, "I also know she's behind us one hundred percent. She's been there. All the days on the drop zones and airports. It's in her blood, too. She misses the people like I do."

Buzz then said, "That's a big reason why I'm here. Not just to jump. I could have gone to any of the big centers and made tandems, and you know I did a few times. It's funny. I couldn't believe it when they used a fucking GPS to spot. I asked one of the young guys on the ground if they were going to throw a wind drift indicator and he looked at me like I had snakes crawling out of my ears. When that little light went on, we un-assed that airplane just because the god damn pilot said it was time to go. All I could think about was Lake Michigan. I actually felt sorry for some of them. I actually had one of them tell me that he didn't know what "PLF" meant."

Then Buzz said, "All that aside, and I want you to know that whatever happens, I'm one hundred percent with you on all this, too, but I've got a simple question..."

"Yeah?"

"I've got a feeling that for as long as this lasts, this whole "outlaw" thing is going to be an absolute kick in the pants, but you know as well as I do, that one of these days, I don't know when, one of those grey sedans with a couple of guys wearing bad suits is going to show up, flash a federal badge and ask us for log books, licenses and paperwork. What we gonna do then? Run? I'm too fucking old to run."

Chuck nearly doubled over with laughter at that.

"No shit. I'm serious."

Chuck stopped laughing and stared at Buzz for a brief second. Then Chuck asked, "How old are you?" knowing full well what the answer would be.

"You know perfectly well that we are the same age!"

"Right. The two of us are a three quarters-of-a-century old. Three quarters-of-a-fucking-century! We're the proverbial Sunshine Boys. We *are* the Grumpy Old Men. Fuck! As far as the F.A.A. is concerned, we would probably be The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight."

Buzz laughed at that.

"Here's what I think. At least what I hope. I hope that the day an F.A.A. man shows up here, that he is of the school that understands that old foolish guys like us that fly and jump, those that are doing things safely are doing them because they *are* safe and not because some silly pencil pusher wrote a regulation without actually knowing what is safe, because he didn't have the experience to know any differently. Let's hope that guy understands the difference between our experience and some bullshit regulations, and he decides that because of our age, that we're not worth raising hell with. Beyond that, it's a roll of the dice."

"And if he doesn't? What then?"

"Well, I hope you like boloney sandwiches and Kool-Aid because I hear that's what they serve in the jails now-a-days."

"Is the boloney fried?" asked Buzz dead-

pan. "Cause I like it fried. With ketchup. On white bread"

As they were laughing, Joanne called from the house that breakfast was ready.

They turned and began walking towards the house. As they did, Buzz looked up and said, "It looks like we're grounded today."

"We're gonna make it hard for 'em to catch us, anyway." said Chuck.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for one thing, we'll have our fuel trucked in. I know a guy, a small oil and gas distributor. He's got av-gas. Then, as long as we stick to ourselves, don't operate on a regular schedule, and don't try to jump or fly too often, we shouldn't attract much attention. Nearest town is 30 miles away, so that's in our favor. Besides, most people don't call the authorities unless you buzz their house or cause their chickens to stop laying or molest their teenage daughter."

"Hell...said Buzz, "I can barely molest myself these days."

"That's your business." said Chuck dryly. "Let's go eat."

"But I'm trying." said Buzz. And he laughed at himself.



After breakfast, Chuck made his calls for the gravel and rock. Then because the ceiling was so low, the two of them decided to take the 180 up for a few circuits around the small grass airstrip.

Walking across the runway, Buzz compli-

mented Chuck on the condition of the grass.
"It's damn near perfect."

"Yeah...", said Chuck, "...I work on it almost constantly. When I bought the place, it looked nearly like it does now because someone, I never found out who, was keeping it up."

"Must have been a neighbor." said Buzz.

"That's what I thought, too. I checked around and no one seemed to know who it might be. But, you know, I've had this eerie feeling that whoever it was is still around and is watching what I do here. I've never seen anyone trespassing, but I just have this feeling."

"Well, maybe, one these days, whoever it is will show himself."

"I hope."



After pushing the 180 out of the hangar, the two gave the airplane a thorough walk-around and a complete inspection. Buzz put the co-pilot's seat on the rails and installed the seatbelts. Chuck clambered into the pilot's seat and Buzz gave the prop a few dry turns before climbing in himself. The airplane didn't hesitate to start when Chuck engaged the starter, and they gave the engine a long warm-up before checking the magnetos; neither of which showed more than a 50 r.p.m. drop. Checking the wind, they taxied out to the far end of the runway and swung the airplane around for a take-off that would have them pass near Joanne and the house at the far end. They both could see that she was stand-

ing in the yard.

"You nervous?" asked Buzz.

"Nah." Chuck said. "You?"

"I gotta pee."

"You want out?"

"Not on your life! Give this thing some power and shut-up."

Chuck eased the throttle to the stop and took some slack out of the yoke as the 180 began to roll forward. As her tail began to lift, Chuck glanced at Buzz, who was smiling; Chuck locked the throttle full in and raised his right hand in a fist which Buzz bumped with his closed fist. Once he had climbed to about 150 feet, Chuck looked down and out towards his wing-tip and cleared himself left and began a slow turn in that direction to fly just over Joanne who was waving at them with both arms as the Cessna roared just feet over her head.

Chapter Four

The Lazarus Effect

Chuck leveled off at about 700 feet as he circled left over his property. He leaned back into his seat and pulled the throttle back to a cruise setting and looked over at Buzz who was silently taking a long look around at the scenery that surrounded the farm. Chuck slowly climbed until the airplane was just skimming the bottom of the cloud base. Small rivulets of water ran up the windscreen.

"Nervous?" asked Buzz.

"Not a bit, my man. In fact, I think I just had an orgasm." And Chuck laughed heartily.

"Naw..." said Buzz with a look of mock shock on his face. "...really?"

"It's like having sex. It's been a few years since I've flown. I should have had one."

"Feels good, huh?" said Buzz, his voice raised to overcome the engine noise.

"I tell you what it really feels like..." answered Chuck, "...it feels like every day for the thousandth time."

Buzz had a questioning look on his face. "You take it for a minute." said Chuck. Buzz put his left hand on the throttle and raised his right hand to the yoke then set the toes of his boots on the rudder pedals. "Go where you want, but let's keep the field in sight just in case."

"Roger!" said Buzz and he began a slow, shallow banked turn to the right.

"Yeah." said Chuck, "I was actually a bit nervous to tell you the truth, right up until

she got her tail in the air, then it was like riding a bicycle. There's no substitute for thousands of hours of 180 time, is there?"

"Nope!" and they smiled at each other.

"Let's shoot a few touch-and-goes. Wanna?"

"Okay..." said Buzz, "You first."

Chuck took the controls back, and the two were like a couple of giddy ten year olds on Christmas morning; after making several touch downs each, they began shooting landings in a contest to see who could land the shortest or land on a certain spot.

"Hey, hot shot!..." yelled Buzz, "...see that tall weed, the one with the purple flowers on it? Bet'cha you can't put your wheels on it." There was no such weed.

"Watch this shit!" Chuck said as he sharply slipped the airplane to lose altitude and set up on a short final; he then grabbed the flap handle and pulled the flaps to a full 40 degrees, chopped the power and he flew a nearly full-stall approach right down to the runway's edge before adding just enough power to drop it at the start of the strip.

"Nailed it, you fuck!" yelled Chuck.

"No you din't."

"Okay, you do it then."

"Okay." After he took the controls back, Buzz flew a tight landing pattern and repeated what Chuck had just done but came in a little too fast and went 20 yards beyond where Chuck had touched down.

Chuck laughed out loud and lightly punched Buzz in the arm and said, "Whose de man?! Whose de man!"

Buzz grinned widely and braked hard to a full stop, looking at the wing gauges, "Time for a little juice, don't you think?" And they taxied to the hangar.

Joanne had stood in the yard, her arms clenched across her chest shivering from the morning chill and watched every landing and take-off, and she smiled broadly at the welcome sound of the airplane's 230 horsepower growl as it spun up on every take-off. Chuck and Buzz were too busy laughing and cutting up to wave at her on every pass, but they knew she was there. Every touch-and-go was another brightly wrapped package to savor for the pair, and they were finally back in their element. Almost.

"I'm ready to get a rig on." said Buzz as they swung the tail of the 180 around in front of the hangar and shut its engine down. "Wish the weather was better."

"Maybe it will be tomorrow." said Chuck. "I'm ready, too." He wasn't, but that's what he said to Buzz. Buzz was lying a little bit himself. It had been many years since either of them had jumped, and each had a few demons to wrestle.

But for the time being, the two were ecstatic as they parked the 180. As soon as Chuck swung his legs from the seat and put his foot on the step to get out, he vaguely noticed something different. His left knee did not hurt. An old skydiving injury, his knee had been a constant source of irritation over the years. When he stepped to the ground, he awaited the bite. But it did not come and he uttered a soft, "H-m-m?" to himself. He stood

for a brief second waiting on the familiar dull pain to return but, oddly, it wasn't there.

On the other side of the aircraft, Buzz had stepped to the ground and came around the tail quickly and stood next to Chuck. "Something wrong?" asked Buzz.

"No. Nope. It's just that..."

In that second, Joanne was standing in front of them, smiling, her eyes moist. "Well, you fools happy?"

Chuck took a step towards her and gathered her up in his arms and hugged her. Then he lifted her off of the ground and spun her half-a-turn and set her down. "I'm back in the air, girl!" he said. Buzz laughed and threw his arms wide open. "Now me!" he said jubilantly.

In mock derision, Joanne perched her hands on her hips and said, "I'm only married to one of you, but what the hell..." and with that she nestled herself against Buzz and hugged him briefly before asking, "You two want coffee?" They nodded yes, then Buzz said, "Let's go buy some oranges and tomatoes!" Chuck laughed at that and said, "You trying to get us thrown in jail early?"

"I was kidding."

Later that afternoon, the sky began to clear with broken scud layers passing overhead. Buzz and Chuck had spent most of the afternoon packing the parachutes they would use the next day. As Chuck sat on the sleeve of his Para-Commander stowing suspension lines, Buzz sat near-by sipping a Budweiser while relaxing in a folding chair that he had pulled out of his camper. For a time, the two said little until Buzz broke the silence.

"How long has it been for you?"

"What do you mean?" asked Chuck.

"How long since you jumped?"

"Oh. I don't know really. The shit hit the fan when I had about 1,200 jumps. I had stopped logging them by then. Maybe 15 years? I don't know."

Buzz laughed and said, "We gonna make each other do static lines?"

"Your ass."

Then Buzz said, "Well, it's a damn good thing we're outlaws now. We can do what we want."

"You mean what we think we can get away with?" said Chuck.

"That, too."

Then Chuck pulled another stow into a rubber band and said, "I'm just going to start with a clear-and-pull and see where it goes."

"That's good for me, too." said Buzz.

Then Buzz said, "Okay, I'm gonna cut the bullshit..."

"What?" asked Chuck.

"I gotta admit I'm a little spooked."

"Of what?"

"Well, for one, I'm not afraid of dying or even getting hurt. But I am a little worried that I won't remember all the little shit."

Chuck responded, "There is no little shit. You must remember how to spot, right?"

"Yeah."

"And you certainly remember how to exit, arch and pull a ripcord?"

"Yep."

"Then what the fuck else is there?"

Buzz was silent for a second, then said,

"Not much else, I guess."

"Right," said Chuck, "...we can do this. The only thing worrying me right now is that you'll crash my fucking airplane."

To that, Buzz said, "P-h-f-f-t!"

And the two of them smiled at each other.

Then Chuck said, "Here's the deal I think. You know what happened this morning?"

"No, what?"

"I could tell. We might be old as fuck, but there are things we know, things that are never forgotten. This morning, it hit me the second I pushed the throttle into the instrument panel, I was back in the only real element that I've ever known. This parachute I'm sitting on, or ones just like it, have been my beds more times than I can count. You, too. It's who we are, champ. It's how we grew up."

"I'll give you that."

"Yeah, shit, jumping and flying are truly in our blood, part of our fucking DNA."

"I guess that it's age that's made me a little afraid."

"Well, you're not the Lone Ranger here. I think that getting older blinds us to who we really are, who we really were. I know it's affected me. The injuries, the money worries, the responsibilities, all that crap. It sneaks up on us. And then there is the business of how old guys are supposed to act. Ever ask yourself why you grunt when you get up out of a chair and there is not a fucking thing wrong with you?"

"Yeah! Why do we do that?"

"Well, I do it now because a few things actually do hurt. But when I started doing it, I

think it was because it's what my old man did when I was growing up. I started doing it because a part of me thought that's what you do when you get older."

"You got a point there buckaroo. Yeah! Now that I think of it. Yeah."

Then Buzz said, "It's like when you have to buy reading glasses to see the fine print. You put them on and you automatically begin to think that wearing white socks and open-toed sandals would be a good look with a pair of plaid shorts and a polo shirt at the shuffle-board court."

Chuck laughed, saying "You're just a born comedian, ain't you?"

Then what Buzz said next surprised Chuck.

"Remember when we got out of the airplane today?"

"U-m-m. Yeah..."

"I felt like I was twenty-eight again. I have all day. I'm horny as shit and I haven't been this randy for years."

Chuck thought about his knee and then said, "Well, maybe we got a fountain of youth here. Legend says there was supposed to be one around here somewhere."

Buzz jumped to his feet and said, "Yeah, right. I'm going out back and take a leak."

"Be careful! Ponce de León may be lurking back there somewhere."

"Yeah. Right. Smart ass. I'll give him my regards."



When Buzz, still zipping up his pants, walked back into the hangar, Chuck said, "I'm gonna call a few guys tonight. You want to listen in?"

"Bears shit in the woods? Who you gonna call?"

"The first is Cliff. You remember him?"

"Yeah, crazy asshole! Where's he living now?"

"Last I heard was Texas. I've got an old phone number. I hope it works."

Buzz sat quietly in his chair for a second, then he said, very softly, almost inaudibly, "It's the Lazarus effect."

"Wha'd you say?" asked Chuck.

Then Buzz said it louder, "It's the Lazarus effect, ain't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Lazarus rose from the dead, didn't he?"

"Still not quite with you there, bud. Explain."

"Okay, in the Bible, Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead, didn't he?"

"I suppose. I'm not a Bible thumper."

"Well, I'm not either. But this whole outlaw thing is kind of like that. We shed all the rules. We thumb our noses at everybody and everything. We jump and fly like we were twenty-something again and everything else can go to hell. It's like we are rising from the slow death of old age and are born again. Lazarus rising from the dead. Or in our case, nearly dead. Get it?"

"So that's why my knee doesn't hurt and you are horny? Lazarus?" With that, Chuck rolled over on his side laughing.

"Jesus. You're funny!" Chuck said as he sat back up. He layered the Para-Commander in the backpack tray and began closing it.

"Speaking of funny..." Chuck said as he grunted trying to bring the two side flaps across so he could insert the ripcord pins, "...I don't remember having to strain this hard to close a backpack."

"Let me do it." said Buzz.

"Okay, Laz, have at it." and Chuck rose to his feet and backed a step away.

Buzz grinned and stretched both his arms out and flexed his biceps showing off like a weight lifter might, then he interlaced both hands knitting his fingers together and held them out at arm's length before cracking his knuckles, saying, "Prepared to be amazed." And he knelt at the backpack and pulled it to him. Then in a matter of seconds, he had slipped the first two pins in the cones, closed and tucked the top flap, then repositioned the pins and closed the bottom flap. He then jumped to his feet, bowed with a flourish and said " Voilà!" Then he said, smugly, "I told ya, twenty-eight; I'm twenty-eight again!"

Chuck rolled his eyes, shook his head and said, "Yeah, okay, there Laz. Let's go make some phone calls."



As the pair began to walk back to the house, they heard the sound of an aircraft engine in the distance. As they began to cross the runway, they saw, far off in the distance, just skimming the tree tops, the silhouette of

a low-wing, single-engine airplane. It seemed to be on a long final for a landing.

"Who is it?" asked Buzz.

"I have no freaking idea."

"Think we oughta get off the runway?"

"Seems like a good idea to me."

Whoever was flying the airplane never reduced the power as the airplane settled to within a few feet above the grass and seemingly aimed directly at the two of them. For the briefest second, Chuck and Buzz stood frozen standing on the runway watching the airplane before Chuck nudged Buzz with a slight push of his shoulder and said, "Go! This asshole's gonna mow us down!"

With that, the pair leapt to the side as a red Pawnee swept by them, its roaring 235 horsepower engine obviously at full power; just before the airplane reached the tree line at the far end of the runway, the Pawnee's pilot pulled up sharply, missing the tree branches by inches, and rose high into the air while executing a full hammerhead turn back towards the runway. But on its descent back towards the runway, the engine went abruptly silent and the prop stood still. The airplane had either suffered an engine failure or the pilot was intentionally going to make a dead-stick landing.

"Maybe it's Bob Hoover!" said Buzz and he laughed.

"He's dead." said Chuck straight-faced.

"I know that." Buzz answered in a whine. "I was kidding."

"I know that, too." said Chuck as the Pawnee touched down and hushed silently by

them in a flawless landing roll-out. Then they heard the starter whine, the engine came back to life and the Pawnee slowed and spun lazily back in their direction and stopped momentarily before taxing forward towards them. But before releasing his brakes to taxi, the pilot held tight, and used the throttle and elevator to raise the Pawnee's tail in the air a few feet as if performing a curtsy, as if to say, "Hello!" Then he gently lowered the tail to the grass and taxied forward before stopping and shutting down just in front of Chuck and Buzz.

The curtsy was an old air show trick Chuck had seen many pilots perform, especially when flying Piper Cubs while doing clown acts.

The pair laughed out loud at the curtsy then Chuck asked Buzz, "See anything funny about that airplane?" as the old crop duster taxied towards them.

"M-m-m-m...it's a Piper?" Buzz said brightly and sarcastically.

Chuck laughed and said, "No. There's not the hint of an N-number on it. Anywhere. "

Buzz grinned and hummed the tune from the "Twilight Zone."

There was a bit of sun glare on the wind-screen of the Pawnee and neither Chuck nor Buzz could clearly see the pilot's face until a hand grasped the window edge and a foot swung out of the Pawnee's cockpit as the pilot stepped to the wing walk. With his back to the pair, he slipped a white flight helmet off, threw it into the seat and reached into the turtle-deck to retrieve a wide brimmed, straw Panama hat and positioned it just so on his head

before walking off the wing and stepping to the ground. As he did, he turned towards Chuck and Buzz and waved.

"I knew he'd come." whispered Chuck under his breath as the man's face came into full view.

"What?" said Buzz.

"Never mind. Shut-up. Let's see who he is."

Seemingly in his late seventies and thin built, wearing wire rim spectacles, the pilot sported a wide grin as he stepped towards the pair.

"Hey there! Hope you guys don't mind the intrusion."

"Naw. Not at all..." said Chuck as he stepped forward to take the man's outstretched hand. "Not at all...but...do you always make hammerhead dead stick landings?" And Chuck laughed easily, softly.

"Hell, I used to do it nearly every week-end when I was doing air shows, but since I retired...well, since I had to retire, I do it now just because it's fun. And I like controlling the energy. Have a thing for that."

Buzz was shifting back and forth on his feet next to Chuck and Chuck knew that he was dying to say something.

"WHAT?!" What?!" exclaimed Chuck softly.

"I told you." said Buzz quietly.

"And I told you, he's dead."

"He is." interrupted the pilot. "But it's a common mistake. I know I look a lot like him. But nobody will ever fly a Shrike like he did." And the pilot ran his finger across his trim and thin silver mustache as if pondering his

next words. Then he said, "I knew that guy, Bob, and I'm not him. I'll never be as good as he was then." The word *'then'* hung in the air for a brief second.

The pilot introduced himself as "Charlie" and asked if it was a problem if he flew in and out once in a while. Chuck answered no, he was welcome.

Then Charlie said, "I live not too far away..." and pointing at the Pawnee, he said, "... I like to get the old girl out and just go fly, and this looks like a fine place to hang out once in a while."

Chuck couldn't help himself. "How come there's no N-number on your Pawnee?"

Charlie chuckled at that. Then he said, "Well, I'm like you guys."

"What do you mean?" said a surprised Chuck.

Buzz started to say something but held his words.

"Well, I'm not exactly legal since they took my medical."

Chuck and Buzz both laughed out loud at that. Then Buzz said, "We have no idea what you are talking about,"

"Yes, you do." said Chuck looking at Buzz. "I've been waiting on Charlie. I just didn't know who he was until this minute."

Buzz cocked his head and looked quizzically at Chuck, then at Charlie.

Then Chuck said to Charlie who was wearing a big smile. "You mowed the grass in the years before I bought the place, didn't you?"

Charlie nodded that he did.

"And the airplane and all the gear, it was yours, wasn't it?"

Charlie nodded yes again.

"Why?"

"I had to fake it. My bat-shit crazy family who never so much as said "kiss-my-ass" to me, just wanted the inheritance when I died. So, I went into cahoots with the realtor and the attorney and told them just the sort of buyer I was looking for. You were him."

"But what about your family? Didn't they get suspicious?"

"Not after the lawyer told them the proceeds all went to charity, which they did. Shit, I had enough money secretly squirreled away after doing air shows and making hidden investments for 40 years, I didn't need what the farm brought."

"But still. Why?" asked Chuck.

"To find you guys."

"What do you mean?"

"After I retired, was forced to retire, I did exactly the same thing that you're spinning up here and now. Then after a few years, all my buddies had gotten their wings and flown west and my rotten-ass family was starting to sniff around making nice with me, kissing my ass. So-o-o...because I'm a bit of an asshole, I decided to have some fun. I faked my death, quite nicely I think..."

Chuck nodded his head.

"...and by altering some facts, I found you and hoped that you would do what you are doing. I don't jump anymore, don't even want to, but I can fly the hell out of that 180 over there and most of all, I just need to be around

my kind of people. Savvy?"

Buzz was completely transfixed listening to Charlie and when the conversation lapsed for a second said, "Shit. This is too much. I need a beer and a cigarette."

"Go look in the hopper." said Charlie.

Buzz said, "Huh?"

"Go. Look in the hopper of the Pawnee. It's not a spray plane anymore, so I cleaned it out there's no fertilizer in it. But better."

Chuck laughed out loud.

As Chuck and Charlie watched, Buzz walked around the wing of the Pawnee, climbed up on the wing walk and unlatched the hopper door and bent over to look inside the tank. "Yow-e-e-e!" said Buzz, his voice an echo from within the hopper. "There's six cases of Budweiser in here!"

Charlie said, "Well, it's not nice to come to a party empty-handed. Help yourself!"

Then Charlie said, "Next time, I'll fill the hopper with ice water and I'll put the beer in that." Then he threw his head back laughing loudly and said, "But I promise not to dead stick with that load."

Chuck thought to himself, "I'll bet."

Then Charlie asked, "You got more folks coming?"

"I hope so..." said Chuck, "...me and Buzz here were going to make some calls when you showed up."

"Good." said Charlie. "Maybe you could make a few calls for me. I'd love to see these guys again but I don't want anyone to know that I'm still around just yet." And Charlie reached in his flight suit pocket and retrieved

a slip of paper and handed it to Chuck.

Chuck reached out to take the paper and looked long and hard at Charlie, studying the details of his face before reading the names. Charlie winked at him.

Chuck unfolded the paper and read the names written there. Having done so, he raised his head slowly and looked at Charlie with a faint questioning frown.

Chapter Five

Chuck knew the names on the paper. The surprise was that Charlie knew them as well. First, there was Rick in Florida. Chuck had known his dad many years back and remembered Rick as just a kid hanging out on the drop zone and holding tension for people packing parachutes.

And Charlie also knew Jose' up in Mississippi. He laughed to himself because he knew that Jose' damn near got busted by the local sheriff up there for buzzing chicken houses in his Cessna 172, after a farmer swore out a warrant saying that he had made his chickens nervous and an entire flock had keeled over dead. The farmer couldn't prove it, so Jose' was off the hook. Chuck figured Jose would be a natural outlaw but he was puzzled that Charlie knew Rick and Jose', both old friends, but Chuck had never met Charlie before today. For the moment, he would say nothing about it.

Buzz and Charlie unloaded the beer from the hopper and put it in the hangar. Joanne had brought out two cups of coffee and Chuck introduced her to Charlie. Joanne nearly overplayed her hand when she saw Charlie as she almost came running out the door when she saw the Pawnee. When he introduced the two, Chuck missed the look between them as she pretended she was pleased to "meet" Charlie. She was excited to see Charlie again. Pretending not to know him was hard.



You see, Charlie, looking to meet Chuck, had flown in the day that Charlie was at the old time air show. But, of course, Chuck wasn't there.

Joanne was standing at the kitchen window looking out at her roses in the garden when she heard Charlie make his first pass over the airstrip. She ran to the screen door, pushed it open and stepped out on the porch just in time to see Charlie make his signature Hammer Head-to-Dead Stick landing, and watched as he re-fired the engine and taxied to a stop just out front of the hangar.

As the Pawnee's propeller clacked slowly to a stop, Charlie unlatched his seat belt and slowly edged his harness off of his shoulders and sat, momentarily, just taking a long look around. As he did, Joanne had stepped off of the porch, waving, and she walked across the strip to greet him. She had no idea who Charlie was at the moment, but with Chuck away for the day, she was happy to have some company. Visiting pilots were always a welcome sight.

Charlie stepped down from the Pawnee's wing and introduced himself to Joanne using only his first name. He asked if she owned the property now, to which she responded that she did and quickly added that she let her husband, Chuck, live there with her if he behaved. Charlie laughed easily at the joke. Joanne felt an immediate connection with Charlie, and she was instantly at ease with him. She liked people who laughed at her sense of humor and sarcasm. It was a big reason that

she had fallen in love with Chuck in their early days together. She didn't take herself too seriously, and she was always the first one to point out and laugh at her own faults.

After some small talk about how nice the property and airstrip looked, and watching Charlie walk slowly around the 180 sitting forlornly sitting in the hangar covered with bird droppings and stopping to kick once at a low tire, she began explaining to him that Chuck had not been able to fly the airplane for a time and why that was. She silently fended away a seeming off-handed insult when Charlie chortled to himself at her explanation. Deciding to ignore that, she invited Charlie to come to the house and have coffee. He agreed and together they walked back across the runway and went into the house.

Once in the house, Charlie seemed to know exactly where everything was and went to the small round table in the center of the kitchen and pulled out a chair and took a seat, as Joanne busied herself turning the flame on underneath the percolator. While the coffee was heating, she slid into a chair across from Charlie and sat down. Something inside her had spoken to her and she leaned back in her chair and said, probing, "How do you know Chuck?"

"I don't."

Joanne sat silent.

"Not really. But I know quite a bit about him...and you."

Joanne's back stiffened some.

"You bought the place from me."

"But!..."

Charlie loosed a small laugh and said, reassuringly, "I'm not a ghost, Joanne."

Then Charlie went on to lay out the whole story for her about faking his death and why he did it and how he wanted the place to go to someone like Chuck. Joanne accepted that as truth, but it wasn't the whole truth.

As the pot on the stove began to gurgle, Joanne's inner voices persisted, and she said, "Why am I getting the feeling that there is more to your story than you are saying?"

"Because I think I know him and many like him, and I think he's planning something that..."

"I already know that, Charlie."

There was a long silence between them as she rose and went to the stove to get the pot and two cups.

"Cream or sugar?"

"Both." said Charlie. And Joanne set the cups out along with the sugar bowl and a can of condensed milk.

Charlie was the first to speak. "See, Joanne, I know a lot about Chuck because of what the realtor told me. She gave me all the details I needed. I sensed that if he was given an opportunity, he would, sooner or later do what I did some years back."

Joanne waited to hear what Charlie would say next. As Charlie stirred his coffee, she sipped hers and watched his face, studying his wire rim glasses and his thin silver mustache and for just a second or two she reminisced about having met Bob Hoover one day at Oshkosh just after he dead-sticked the Shrike Commander and landed. The resem-

blance was strong and she wondered...

"No, Joanne, I'm not him." Charlie quietly said. "But as I've said many times before, I wish I was who he was then. But now I'm too old."

Joanne, a bit shocked, said, "If you're not a ghost, you are at least a mind reader. And you are making me just a little afraid."

Charlie sipped his coffee and peered over the edge of his cup then said, "Don't be. I'm harmless."

Joanne leaned back in her chair trying to relax holding her cup to her mouth with both hands.

"I just have a sense about some things. That's all. People look at me and my resemblance to Hoover and they think that I'm him. But everyone knows that that Hoover died. He's no more. I'm just Charlie now, an old air show pilot."

Joanne, fighting confusion, finally lowered her cup to a spot on the table in front of her, and still grasping it looked squarely into Charlie's eyes and said, "Okay. Let's set that aside for a minute. But what are you trying to tell me about Chuck that I don't already know? Like, for instance, he's gonna come back from that damned air show today and tell me he's going to start jumping again, right?"

"Maybe. Like I said, dear, I'm not a mind reader. But in the years before I decided to sell the airstrip, I had a bunch of old friends who used to come here periodically and we, well..."

"You had an outlaw parachute center, right? We have the gear and there's the pea gravel and it's not a stretch to think..." Then

she said, "...I mean, Chuck and I both jumped together for years. We can smell a drop zone a mile away."

"Sort of. Well, yes. That's true. All of my old buddies were more or less in the same boat as I was then. You see, the Feds had taken my flight physical and my insurance coverage got dropped, so air shows, in fact, flying was out." Charlie stopped talking for a second as if what he had just said caused him pain, but he soon continued, "For a while, I kind of enjoyed the forced retirement. But then..."

Joanne interrupted, sounding a little annoyed, "You said, to hell with it, what are they gonna do to me, anyway? Right? Right? That's what you thought, isn't it?" With her voice raised some, she continued, "I think that's what's on Chuck's mind right now. He went to that god damned air show today, without me, I might add, I know, to make a decision. I know the old fart! And, I think he's going to come home today and say, "Screw it. I'm going to start jumping and flying again." Then Joanne caught herself, a bit red faced, and she said, sheepishly, "Oh! I'm so sorry, Charlie. I don't even know you and..."

"Forget it!" laughed Charlie. "I like your honesty. It's not the first time a woman has cussed in my presence, or at me."

And they laughed together at that.

Then after a long sip of her coffee, Joanne had noticeably calmed down some and she said, "So tell me. What *were* you and your buddies doing here anyway?."

"Yeah..." said Charlie, "There were five of us in the end."

"They died off?"

"All but me." Charlie said a bit morosely, then he brightened a bit and said, "But we had so much fun and good times before it all dissipated."

Joanne watched Charlie, her eyes soft and attentive, as he continued.

"None of us were legal at all when we started. A few of us were experienced, very experienced, pilots who lost our physicals but not our ability. The rest were all jumpers who either had had medical problems, or thought they were too old, or just wanted to be around people who they had something in common with. No one had jumped in many years when we got started. Like what I'm hoping Chuck will do, we started with only a few guys and only invited in one or two people we could trust at a time. At one point, we had maybe fifteen or so jumpers and pilots, and we met here a few times every month. We changed the dates often and told everybody by phone when we would get together. Sometimes it was a week-end and other times we gathered on a week day, just to throw off the suspicious and the curious. Sometimes, we didn't fly or jump at all. Sometimes, we just built a big fire and sat around drinking and telling war stories and remembering."

"How long did you guys get together?"

"About five years. The last member died the year before you guys bought the property."

Joanne got up to get the coffee pot. Charlie waved her off, saying, "No more for me, thanks."

When she returned to the table and sat

down, Charlie said this. "If Chuck is at all like we were, he'll do what we did and you don't need to be afraid. It's too late in life for anyone like us to be afraid anyway."

"You know how old we are?"

"Yep. Did my homework. But, listen, here's the thing I can tell you. Once it starts, you are going to see some beautiful changes in Chuck, and I think yourself. That's why I tried to set this up, banking on the fact that the airplane and the gear, the remoteness of the property would set someone's gears spinning...if it was the right person."

"Beautiful changes?" said Joanne. "Like what?"

"There will be many. But please allow me, for my own entertainment, to be a bit mysterious here and just say that if Chuck is going to do what I think he will, you will both begin to see changes."

Joanne was hearing what Charlie said but she was still confused as what his point might be, then he added, "Let's just say that Chuck will be a lot more animated at home, if you get my drift."

"Oh!.." Then her eyes widened some and she said, "Really?!"

"Really. Trust me."

Then Charlie turned in his seat and looked out the kitchen window for a long minute before asking, "Still afraid?"

"Not really. Nervous, maybe. I just know he's gonna come busting through the door and say he's gonna fire up that airplane and call a friend and they're just going to start jumping come hell-or-high water."

"Don't you think he needs it?"

"I do, but I'm still nervous. What if...?"

"My lady, we all gotta go sometime. The question is, do we go happy or do we go just so-so or do we go miserable and unfulfilled?"

"I guess you're right."

"Darn right, I am. Right, that is."

And they both laughed easily together.

"Wanna have some fun with this?"

"Fun's good." said Joanne with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, why don't you give me the names and phone numbers of a few of his closest old friends, write them on a slip of paper. I'll give Chuck some time to get this rolling, that is if he's going to, and I'll fly over and visit and introduce myself and before I leave, I'll hand him the paper and tell him that they are my friends and they'd like to get involved too. But first, you call them and tell them what's going on, and tell them to act surprised when Chuck calls them. It'll blow his mind that we have the same friends but that he never heard of me."

Joanne laughed and said, "That's devious."

"Yep. The trick will be to act as all this is just a happy coincidence."

Joanne's face went a bit slack then she said, "Why do I trust you? What if you are just a demented old man who wants somehow to hurt us or to hurt Chuck?"

Charlie was silent a second or two after she said that. Then he said, "I'm glad that you are suspicious about all this, but the sad truth is that all my friends are gone now. I miss them. I need some new ones, people like

me. The chicken farmers and rednecks around here bore me silly and I'd..."

Joanne raised her hand, interrupting Charlie again. "I know. Sometimes I feel the same way, and I know that Chuck is more affected by not being with his old buddies way more than I am."

Charlie smiled.

"Charlie..." she continued, "...I kind of feel like you showing up here and laying all this out is a weird dream. I don't know why you waited this long to spring this, but..."

"I was busy doing things in other places. I have worked on and off for a long time in the field of energy management, you know, when I wasn't flying air shows." Charlie added then, "I guess you could say that I'm a full time energy management consultant now. Charlie had just told Joanne the whole truth, but she did not know it yet. In time she would.

"Well, Charlie, in a strange, unexplainable way..." Joanne said, "...I'm starting to feel like we are on the verge of an adventure, but if this goes the way you, I...Oh! Crap, we think it might, it ought to be fun. But let's not keep Chuck hanging out there too long with the secret name thing, okay?"

"Agreed. We'll just do it a few times...for fun."

Charlie got up from his chair and took his empty cup over to the sink and rinsed it out. As he placed it in the dish drainer, he turned and said, "Well, it's been fun, but I gotta run."

"How do I get in touch with you?" asked Joanne.

"Don't have phone anymore, so that's out.

I spend most of my time hopping around the country hanging out at air shows now. But I'll be by here every few days or so. Hang a white towel at the end of the clothesline if he decides to go through with it. When I see it, I'll drop in. If you forget the towel, just click your heels three times and say my name. I'll get the message."

"Fair enough." said Joanne. And she broke out in a laugh.

She walked Charlie to the front door and pushed the screen door open for him.

Charlie walked out and just before he took his first step off of the porch, he turned and looked back at Joanne and said, "Chuck's lucky to have you."

"That's sweet!" said Joanne and she leaned forward and lightly kissed Charlie on the cheek and she said, "I'm not as afraid as I was."

"It'll be all right." said Charlie. "I promise. And don't forget, we only get one ride. Grab the brass ring."

Joanne held up her left hand and displayed her wedding band and she said, "I've already got one...for better or worse."

Charlie laughed and bound off the porch and headed for the Pawnee saying over his shoulder, "Atta girl! See you before you know it."



So Chuck called Rick and Jose, both of whom played along after getting calls from Joanne. She had now become a willing party to

what was about to unfold.

As Buzz sat watching television in the front room, Chuck finished his calls and turned to Joanne who was just finishing up washing the supper dishes and straightening up the kitchen. As he placed the receiver in the hook of the wall phone, he stood silently for a minute rubbing his chin and admiring Joanne's behind. Then he said, "You know, I've got the oddest feeling that both those guys had no idea who Charlie is but they wouldn't admit to it. Maybe they're just having the same kind of memory problems I'm having."

Joanne never turned from the sink trying to hide the hint of a smile and said, "Honey, you'd forget your ass if it wasn't screwed on."

Chuck laughed and said, "Speaking of asses, yours is looking particularly good tonight."

"Forget it, chum. Not tonight, I'm going to have a headache. Let's wait until Buzz isn't in the house."

"Your loss."

"Our loss." said Joanne, "Now go away. I've got work to do. Take Buzz a beer."

Chuck walked into the living room and sat on the couch next to Buzz while handing him the beer. "They comin'?" asked Buzz.

"Yeah. Both of them said they had some stuff to get out of the way, but they know the plan and they seem eager to get here. They said they'd call before showing up."

"Cool!" said Buzz as he lifted the tab on his beer can.

"You ready to get it on tomorrow?"

"Yeah. If the damn weather gets right.

Shit. We only need a few thousand feet."



Buzz, as usual, was last out of bed and picked up a cup of coffee on his way out to the hangar. Chuck had been up for over an hour and was in the hanger, duct taping a loose seat belt end in the back of the 180 when Buzz leaned in the cabin and said "What's up, Doc!" in his best Bugs Bunny voice, which was always just nothing more than a put-on nasal twang.

Then Buzz said, "Looks good this morning, don't it?"

The clouds were breaking up and a light haze shadowed the runway ends but it was a typical Florida morning, somewhat muggy, but as the sun rose it would get drier, warmer and clear today. They each knew that, and they also knew that it was time. They had each packed a Para-Commander for themselves and set up their reserves they way the liked. Chuck had reversed his snaps liking his reserve to ride high on his chest. Buzz left his alone, not much caring if his rode a little low.

"Flip for it?"

"For what?" asked Chuck.

"Who's first?"

"Me. This was my idea in the first place and I should inaugurate things."

"You trust me to fly?"

"No..." said Chuck, "...but do I have a choice?"

They both laughed.

"Of course, I trust you to fly."

Joanne appeared in the open maw of the hanger and asked, "You guys want some eggs?" Her question didn't sound like an earnest question but more an excuse to see what they were up to. Chuck and Buzz both knew that.

Chuck looked at Buzz, who shook his head no to the eggs, and then he said, "Maybe later, sweetheart."

"You guys are going up, aren't you?"

"It'll be fine." said Chuck.

"Oh! I know..." said Joanne, "I'm just being a nervous old hen."

"Nothing to be nervous about." said Chuck. "Go get me a couple of wind drift indicators out of the equipment room, okay?" He was trying to keep her busy.

He asked Buzz to stay by the airplane and Chuck followed Joanne into the room and said, "Let's not get all screwed up tight here, sweetheart."

"I won't. I'm just nervous."

"It's okay." Then Chuck lifted his main off of the rack and slipped into it like he was just putting on a shirt, and then lifted his reserve from the rack by the carrying handle. With his other hand, he took a helmet off of a nail on the wall and walked back in to the hangar.

"You ready?" asked Buzz.

"Yeah! Let's push her out."



So, Chuck put his gear down and the three of them pushed the 180 out into the early sunlight. Joanne handed the yellow wind

drift indicators to Chuck, who stuck them in the pilot's seat pocket behind Buzz, who was already in his seat and waiting to start the engine.

As Chuck put his main on and bent to affix his leg straps, he felt something odd. He felt nothing. He wasn't anxious. He wasn't nervous. He wasn't scared. Even though many years had passed since his last jump, simply standing at the open door of the airplane bending to fix his leg straps, pulling his chest strap snug, checking that all of his quick ejects were closed, snapping into place both sides of his reserve and shifting it into position, then reaching back to find his reserve tie-downs and snapping the links into place before snugging up the belly band, then tucking the ends of the straps between the back cushion and the pack tray and then jumping up and down a few inches just to settle everything into place was all there, everyday normal, just as if his last jump had taken place an hour ago. It was all like breathing. The motions, the contortions, the feel of the equipment resting on his shoulders, the pressure of his leg straps tight in his groin, even standing slightly hunched over under the wing, all of it was the most natural feeling in the world.

He waddled over to Joanne who had sat on the grass a few feet away from the airplane and bent to give her a kiss on the top of her head. She looked into his eye sweetly, pursed her lips in a mock kiss and slapped him on the leg lightly as a send off.

Chuck then looked back at Buzz and gave him a quick thumbs-up as Buzz pulled the

starter handle and the prop on the 180 began to turn with a high whine. As the engine caught and fired, Chuck backed into the door edge and sat on the floor and set his helmet off to his side behind him. He rested his feet on the pipe step as they turned to taxi out towards the far end of the runway. He waved to Joanne, who blew him a kiss. Buzz laughed and leaned forward in his seat and gave her a smart salute. Joanne jumped up and stood with her feet together as soldier might and saluted them both, holding it briefly as they taxied away from her. Then she shoved her hands into her jean pockets and walked slowly across the still dewy grass of the runway towards the pea gravel pit.

As they taxied away, Chuck watched the tree tops which were still, and looked at the limp orange windsock and he smiled to himself. At the runway's end, Buzz throttled up and swung the 180 around, pointing it down the runway before stopping to do a run-up and magneto check. As he switched between magnetos and watched the drop in revolutions in each, he checked the carburetor heat and looked down at Chuck, who had scooted into position on the floor with his back against the instrument panel.

Chuck again signaled a thumbs-up and Buzz slowly pushed the throttle forward. As first, the ruts in the runway's end made the take-off roll a bit bumpy, but then as the weight began lifting off of the mains and the 180's tail began to rise, the take-off became smooth and the steady drone of the engine took the bird into the air. Chuck busied him-

self watching the pines and the scrub oaks that bordered the strip begin to disappear behind the airplane's fuselage.

In a short minute, the 180 was airborne and tilted skyward. Buzz looked down at Chuck who was beaming, his eyes sparkling and happy, and together they laughed. As Buzz lowered his right hand to adjust the trim wheel a bit, there seemed to be a kind of re-birth between them, an agreement that they trusted each other and no words were needed between them. This was how they grew together as men and as friends, and they were home together once again. Chuck had no need to tell Buzz what he wanted and when he wanted it, and Buzz set about the business of climbing out to an altitude where throwing the wind drift indicators would happen.

Chuck reached over and pulled his helmet to him and turned it upside down to run his hand around the sweatband before slipping it over his head. He ran the chin straps through the d-rings and cinched the strap in place under his chin. Then he reached behind Buzz and pulled the wind drift indicators from the map pocket. As he watched the landscape grow further away outside the open door, he pulled the masking tape back from the edge of each indicator - tape that held each foot-wide indicator tightly rolled - and he unfurled a few inches of crepe paper back from their edges so they would unroll and deploy easily. Seeing that Chuck was almost ready to go, Buzz reached over and lightly tapped Chuck's shoulder, and when Chuck looked up at him, Buzz nodded his head ready.

Chuck leaned around the door post and looked along the forward line of the 180s engine cowling. Then he leaned further out. With his left hand, he pointed slightly right and Buzz adjusted the line of flight five degrees right with a toe's nudge of the right rudder pedal. With the wind drift indicators poised and held high ready-to-throw with his right hand, Chuck pointed right again and again the airplane skidded slightly right.

On his knees now, Chuck was looking straight down and then...whoosh! Chuck thrust the wind drift indicators hard down away from the airplane's slip stream and they were gone! And as Buzz turned slowly to the right, rolling into a twenty degree bank, the two of them watched intently as the yellow crepe paper rolls slowly unfurled to their full fifteen foot length and they began a willowy, lazy drift together towards the earth. Being in no particular hurry, Buzz and Chuck watched as the fluttering yellow lengths of crepe paper slowly drifted and spiraled downwards towards the airstrip. In a few moments, each wind drift indicator had collapsed to the ground like ropes falling in a heap, twenty yards away from the light brown circle of the pea gravel target below.

Seeing where the indicators had landed, Buzz knew exactly what to do and flew out beyond the target about a half-a-mile before turning back in towards the target about 3,000 feet below them. Chuck, still on his knees in the open door leaned back and pulled the belly band on reserve a bit tighter and tapped the covers on his shot-and-a-half

Capewell canopy releases at each shoulder. He then nodded to Buzz that he was ready, and Buzz slowly began to throttle back. In short order, Chuck held out his left hand, and with his rotated hand pointed his thumb left, and Buzz held down the left rudder pedal slightly until Chuck made a fist, his signal to hold it there, fly that line.

Chuck, now sitting in the door, his left foot out on the piece of galvanized pipe, a length of pipe that served as a step, his other leg dangling just beneath the airplane, and he looked straight down and out the door now, still holding a closed fist in the air before he looked at Buzz and yelled, "We're back, baby!"

Then with no hesitation at all, he put his left hand out and grasped the wing strut and in one fast, fluid motion he pulled himself out, shifting his full weight to his left foot already placed on the pipe, and pushed himself away from the strut and fell gracefully away. Once away from the airplane, he briefly assumed a relaxed arch, his head high, his arms stretched wide as a splayed frog, his legs slightly apart and tucked in a semi-crouch underneath him, and with another smooth as silk reflex action, he moved his left arm and hand around to the front of his head, then he hooked his right thumb into his ripcord handle mounted near his armpit on the right lift web of his harness and smoothly brought the gleaming handle from its elastic retaining pouch. And he held that position for a few seconds and he fell further away and grew smaller and smaller in Buzz's view.

Looking into Buzz's face as he did, he con-

tinued falling for a few more seconds and then with a short tug on the ripcord handle to pull the ripcord's pins away and open the pack, Chuck's pilot chute burst from between the flaps of the backpack and it blossomed as an open umbrella might; and like an anchor thrown into the sea of air around him, it held fast and as Chuck fell away from it, its bridle line grew taut and extracted the black-and-red sleeve of his main as he fell further away while the Para-Commander's lines fully extended.

Chuck was as stable and controlled with his exit and his ripcord pull as he had been thirty years before, and he knew to be watching over his shoulder for any trouble or malfunctions that might arise as his Para-Commander began to open. With a barely audible rustle, the nylon taffeta of canopy billowed full, it's panels breathing like gills as Chuck loosed a soft grunt and settled firm in the parachute's harness. The canopy was full and complete; and for a few long seconds, Chuck marveled at the beauty of its shape and colors with the morning sun overhead, a bright patch of light beyond the gauzy haze of the parachute's fabric.

>>> Buzz, his eyes glued on Chuck's canopy until it opened fully, had, in the meantime, pulled the throttle back to idle, pushed the fuel mixture to full rich, pushed in and locked the propeller control then eased the carburetor heat knob out, closed the cowl flaps and began a wide circle around the descending Chuck on his way to landing the airplane.

On the ground below, with happy, warm, salty tears streaming down her cheeks, a re-

lived Joanne lay on the grass near the pea gravel and half-cried half-laughed in happiness at what she had just witnessed. To her, the fully open canopy seemed almost as a faceted jewel set against the sun.

While Buzz was on his way down to land, Chuck, with his hands on his steering toggles, was maneuvering as deftly as he ever had towards a landing in the pea gravel below. As much as she feared this day, Joanne was elated that they were all together again, doing what they had spent the majority of their youth doing many years ago. As she alternated her view between the descending green and white airplane and the red, white and blue Para- Commander slowly descending in the azure air above her, a flushed warm feeling overcame her like that of the matron of a family reunited after a long absence, happy that a lost part of their lives had returned.

Above her, at about 2,500 feet, Chuck had looked up on opening and had quickly given the canopy a once over and saw no tears or strains in the fabric holding him aloft. Then for a few long seconds, he looked down over his property below; he saw Joanne laying in the grass near the target, her hand shielding her eyes from the sun, and he looked out at the early morning haze that lay along the horizon beyond, then he looked down at the black scuffed tips of his boots; boots that felt as familiar and comfortable to him as the day he had shoved back in the closet so many years ago; then he turned the canopy first left 360 degrees, then right 360 degrees, not because he needed the course correction but because

the wind on his face felt good, and it was fun, and he took in a sharp breath choking back a pang of emotion; then he settled down and began his approach to the target below.

As he did, he realized that the old habit of wanting to land in the pea gravel, a source of sky diving pride was as strong now as it ever was. But then he thought differently of a fast downwind approach and its possible painful consequences, and he decided that a nice easy, slow parachute landing fall and impacting gently might be better on his old legs and ankles, and he put his feet together and turned the canopy to face into the wind.

In the last two hundred feet before he landed, he noticed that Joanne was on her feet now, still shielding her eyes. Then, with a soft crash, the ground rose up and met him and there was no textbook, five point parachute landing fall, just an easy thump in the soft cushion of the gravel and he was a heap nestled in the depressions of the small pebbles as his canopy billowed and settled over him like a quilt thrown across a bed. Quickly he realized that Joanne was by his side and had placed a hand on his shoulder - just for a brief second. Chuck stilled his breath, rolled to his side and sat upright and waited for pain to arrive from somewhere in his legs or... But it did not, and he began to breathe again. Behind him, the 180 hushed quietly by and eased down softly and silently on to the grass runway.

The he heard the 180 throttle up as Buzz swung its tail in place in front to the hanger and shut the engine down.

Buzz was beaming as he walked across the runway towards the pea gravel where Joanne and Chuck were already in the process on gathering up Chuck's gear. The grass around the pea gravel had already dried enough in the warm sunlight that Chuck had decided to go ahead and lay the rig out and pack it.

Buzz was still smiling as he approached Chuck and extended a hand to congratulate him. "That was sweet!" said Buzz. "Yeah." said Chuck, "And you wanna know the best part?"

"What?"

"Nothing hurts!"

Buzz threw his head back and laughed, then said, "Is it my turn?"

"Absoltively!" said Chuck who was now standing next to a smiling Joanne with his arm around her waist. "Go get your shit on."

"Roger that!" and Buzz wheeled to head back over to the hanger to get his gear.

As he walked away, Chuck leaned into Joanne's ear and whispered, "Wear the purple shorty tonight, daddy's back in town."

Joanne pulled her head back some, smiling demurely and said, "And, what, big daddy, will your wear?"

Chuck just laughed at that.

"One small request, though."

"What?"

"Make sure he sleeps in his van tonight."

Then Chuck said something in jest he immediately regretted. "Okay, if he's still alive, I will."

Chapter Six

Buzz seemed in no hurry to get his gear on and make a jump after Chuck landed. He had what you might call a case of "The Gloom Fear." The condition seemed to be the curse of some first jump students, no matter how well they had been trained or rehearsed. The mind filled with excuses and second thoughts and doubt clouded what they had learned, and worse yet, the gloom fear was responsible for many a poor or weak body position on exit.

No matter how many times an instructor would ask his student if they felt ready, no matter how affirmative the student's response to any questioning might have been, on exit, it might take an extra hard slap on the thigh or backpack, or a awfully loud yell close to the ear to get the student to unfreeze and push off. In the military, the preferred method of motivating a jumper frozen in the door was frequently a boot delivered squarely to the butt.

Buzz was taking a very long time checking his gear and getting ready to go, but Chuck, having said what he had said earlier and regretting it, not wanting to portend the future, stayed silent and patient as Buzz ambled aimlessly back and forth to the equipment room. With all the hubbub and back slapping and reliving of every detail of Chuck's jump earlier, everyone had skipped lunch, and soon, Joanne came across the airstrip with a plate of tuna salad sandwiches and a jug of sweet tea. Buzz was all too happy to grab a sandwich and pull up his folding chair, saying there was

no hurry and besides, he was starving.

To eat his sandwich, Chuck sat down cross legged on the sandy floor of the hangar near Buzz, and when Joanne went back to the house to get more ice for the drinks, Chuck asked Buzz if everything was okay.

Buzz, his cheeks full of bread and tuna, stopped chewing for a second, then swallowed hard and looked squarely at Chuck and he said, morosely, "I think I'm a little afraid." And his voice trailed off.

He went on, "I can't tell you how supremely happy I was flying you on that load. I can't. But watching you get out and exit, I got a slight burning in my throat."

"Really. Why?" asked Chuck.

"I don't know...really."

"Is it what you said before, about the details?"

"No. And I do not understand my hold up."

"How many years has it been for us?" asked Chuck.

"Shit, man. I don't know. Many."

Then Chuck said this: "Wanna know something?"

"What?"

"I was about to shit my pants this morning."

"No shit! I mean, for real?!" said Buzz, surprised.

"Yep. I was bugged from the time I went to bed last night right up until we turned on jump run."

"What got you over it?"

"You. I wasn't about to back out of all of this with you here."

"You son-of-a-bitch." said Buzz with a wrinkled brow.

Chuck laughed out loud.

"Now you're laying a fucking guilt trip on me, huh?" Buzz paused for a second, then gruffly said, "Asshole."

Chuck said, "That's what friends do, hot rod."

There was a moment's silence between them, then Buzz said, "And now, I'm supposed to get all gung-ho, yell 'Airborne!' and double-time to the fucking airplane screaming 'All the way!,' right? *Right!?*"

"No!..." said Chuck, "But that would be funny as hell!"

Buzz snorted softly. And they laughed together.

Then Chuck continued, "Listen, numbnuts. There is not a single nerve or bone or muscle in your body that doesn't know how to fall out of airplanes just as well as you fly them. It's in your fucking DNA, just like it's in mine. I just decided this morning to forget everything and let that take over."

"Numbnuts, huh?! 'Numbnuts,' you say?!"

"Yeah, numbnuts!" and Chuck bared his teeth with an exaggerated Cheshire cat grin meant to tease.

Buzz set his tea glass on the floor, abruptly stood up and said, "Fire up that fucking airplane. I'll use the same spot."

Chuck leaned over to look at the orange windsock and it was standing out about two feet indicating a southern breeze of about seven knots steady and he said, "You sure about that?"

"Yeah. Let's go!" And Buzz walked over to his gear that sat in a pile a few yards away from the 180 and picked up his main by the lift web and slipped into it. "Come on!" he yelled. "I ain't got all fucking day, ya know!" Buzz leaned over to snap his leg straps in place, then he clipped his reserve into his main harness D-rings, affixed his quick releases into his reserve tie-downs, then he reached over to pick up his helmet and said, "You waiting on me, you're backing up."

Chuck was laughing when he walked from the shade of the hangar into the light of the early afternoon sun. "You want me to do a pin check?"

"I cocked 'em already."

Chuck ignored that and walked around back of Buzz and opened the center flap on his four-pin backpack and ran his fingers along the ripcord cable, checked that the ripcord wasn't kinked, and he looked to see that there was no obstruction at the mouth of the ripcord housing, then snapped the flap closed. He briefly looked at Buzz's reserve tie-downs then circled around front of Buzz and with a rip of the Velcro closure pulled his reserve pin cover open and looked at those pins closely. "You happy?" asked Buzz, a bit snarky.

"Yep! Let's go." said Chuck.

Buzz walked stiff-legged to the door edge of the 180, turned, sat down, and he slid in on the floor backwards to lean against the cabin wall behind Chuck's seat as Chuck pulled the starter handle, and the airplane's engine coughed once and started. "Wake me up when we get on jump run!" yelled Buzz trying to act

nonchalant. Chuck yelled back, "Okay! Sweet dreams, numbnuts!" and he laughed.

"Fuck you. FLY!" answered Buzz.

Chuck leaned forward in his seat and saw the windsock had raised somewhat more indicating the wind speed was now about 10 knots, about 12 miles an hour. But it was steady, and he decided to say nothing about it. But he changed his mind and over his shoulder as taxied and out and stopped to do his run-up, he turned and in a serious voice, he said, "The wind's up some. Might want to take it long a bit, roger?"

Buzz yelled, "Got it. Long it will be."

With that, and the run-up complete, Chuck slowly brought the RPM up and took off into the wind.



Nothing was said between them on the climb to altitude. Then Chuck turned on jump run and held his hand down where Buzz could see it and gave him a thumbs-up. Buzz had been watching the altimeter mounted on his reserve, and he noted that it indicated 3'200 feet. He thought that was good. He would have a little time in free fall to get good and stable. He had purposely spent the ten minutes to jump run trying to clear his mind and think of nothing but a solid exit and he pictured that in his mind as they climbed.

He thought it kind of odd that the moment that Chuck began his take-off run, a sense of calm and well-being had washed over him. He thought about Chuck telling him that as he

had exited on his jump today, he had experienced a sense of peace, like a homecoming. When he had heard that earlier, he had brushed it off. It was a strange phenomena but it was true nonetheless. The jangled nerves he was feeling on the ground were not there anymore, and as he slid into the door and looked down at the pea gravel target coming into view, he looked over at Chuck and smiled broadly. With that, Chuck smiled in return and knew that Buzz was once again in his element and in control.

Buzz peered around the door post and via a hand signal asked for a ten degree course correction. Chuck, signaling mock derision for not having flown a perfect jump run needing any correction at all, screwed up his face and stuck his tongue out at Buzz. Buzz returned the gesture and then focused on Chuck's automatic adjustment that would bring the airplane directly over the target below. Now, Buzz's head was pointed straight down at the ground and his fist was raised and closed signaling to hold it there, and with no other gesture he stepped off and into the sky.

His exit became the perfect and immediate return to a stable arch which he held for about seven seconds as Chuck turned the airplane right and banked to watch him fall away. Then Chuck watched as Buzz moved his right hand in to his chest and removed his ripcord handle from its pocket and held it taut at the end of its cable for a second. Then, with a quick extension of his right arm as his left arm kept his body falling steady, he pulled his ripcord.

As with Chuck before, his pilot chute appeared and wavered into the air over him and extracted the sleeve from Buzz's backpack. Once the suspension lines had completely elongated and the canopy began to blossom over Buzz's head, the yellow and blue fabric of the canopy formed an ugly bulge to one side, and the colors of the canopy became a swirling gnarled mass flapping at the end of its suspension lines 20 feet over Buzz's head.

In a matter of milliseconds, Chuck, whose adrenalin had not even reached his brain yet, watched as Buzz immediately opened the covers on his Capewells and cut-a-way going back into free fall clear of the twisted, spinning mass over him; and then within seconds, over Buzz, a pure white canopy, Buzz's reserve parachute, practically exploded, breathed in and out once or twice expanding to its round fullness and blossomed completely.

Chuck started laughing out loud and screamed "Way to go, you son-of-a-bitch! WAY TO GO!" Then he quickly closed the cowl flaps, shuttered all his engine controls and threw the 180 into a hard side slip in order to get to the ground as quickly as possible. As the airplane protested the dangerously high air speed, the wind howling harshly in the open door, Chuck never let his eyes leave Buzz who was drifting towards the scrub pines and the scrawny blackjack oaks that surrounded the air strip.

In quick time, Chuck saw Buzz descend into a small island of trees and then lost sight of him. Nearly simultaneously Chuck swung into a quarter-of-a-mile final approach for the

grass strip ahead. He reached to his side and with a bit of a hard pull dropped forty degrees of flaps on the wing to kill off his air speed.

Landing abruptly, he braked hard and steered the airplane just off the strip and stopped. Chuck shut the master switch off, having already pulled the mixture out and turned the magnetos off; he leaped from the still rocking airplane, its propeller just clicking to a halt and ran over to the fence and climbed over it. Just ahead of him as he ran towards the white of the canopy that hung in the tress ahead, he yelled for Buzz a few times. Over his shoulder, he saw Joanne coming up fast behind him.

"Hey, asshole, you okay? Buzz! Answer me!"

"Buzz!" yelled Joanne. "Buzz!"

Once the two got further into the trees, they found Buzz standing with his back to them obviously relieving himself next to a tree; the tree in which his harness and canopy hung. The white nylon canopy and grey harness seemed to dripping down through the skeletal branches of the young oak.

"You sure as hell know how to put on a show." said Chuck, "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, just a few scratches."

"Your face is bleeding a little. Lem'me look." said Joanne. Buzz bent towards her. "Oh. It's just a small scratch. When you get back to the house, we'll clean it up and put some stuff on it."

Chuck asked, "Anything else hurt?"

"Just my pride. Who the hell packed that thing, anyway?" asked Buzz.

"You did!" and Chuck laughed loudly.

"Well, I'm gonna kick my ass!"

"Probably not your fault, really. Might have just been a rotten gummy band."

"I'm still gonna kick my ass. I should have caught that."

"Maybe..." said Chuck. "But, I won't tell anybody if you don't."

"Except for me." said Joanne sarcastically. "I'm gonna tell the F.A.A. when I call 'em."

And they all laughed at that as they began picking parts of Buzz's gear out of the tree. The canopy slid down fairly easily and as it did, Buzz asked Chuck if he saw where his main parachute and sleeve landed. Chuck said that he was busy watching Buzz descend, and he hadn't seen where it went.

"I did." said Joanne quietly and she smirked, then she laughed out loud a bit hysterically. "I'm sorry. I can't help it. I was gonna wait until we got back to show it to you. But I can't help it. By the way..." she paused for effect, "...you're going to need a ladder."

"Why?" Asked Chuck and Buzz simultaneously.

"It's on the roof of the house. Looks like a dead snake, a really big dead snake lying up there. And I want it off right now!" And she laughed some more and dabbed at her tearing eyes with a finger tip.



The sun was setting all pink and orange just over the trees at the end of the airstrip after they had finished supper that night and

Chuck said, "You know what?"

"What?" said Buzz.

"I think we need to build a fire tonight and commemorate today some way."

"How?"

"I've got an idea. When Joanne finishes the dishes, let's go build a fire. Roger?"

Just then the phone on the kitchen wall rang.

Chuck heard Joanne answer it and then there was some muted, unintelligible conversation and then Joanne yelled to Chuck sitting out on the porch, his rocking chair creaking, "Hey, husband! You know somebody named Rick? He says you owe him money and he'll be here tomorrow to collect it."

Chuck laughed and said, "Tell his ass I'll pay him back when I'm stone cold dead. But if he wants to come try to collect, I'll be here. You can also tell him that he can bring all the beer he owes me, too."

Joanne laughed and there was a bit more mumbled conversation. Then silence and she came to the screen door and looked out saying, "He'll be here on his bike about ten-ish."

"Copy!" said Chuck. "Thanks!"

"Rick?" asked Buzz as he lit his cigarette.

"Yeah. We knew his dad."

Buzz thought about that for a second and then said, "Oh, yeah. I remember his dad. And now the boy's about our age, right."

"A little younger than us but we jumped with him for a time before we parted ways. Pudgy-faced back then. I'll know him when I see him tomorrow. You will, too."

It was quiet for a minute with the falling

darkness punctuated by the high calls of a whippoorwill far out in the scrub.

"Still can't figure out how Charlie knows him and we didn't know Charlie. For some reason, in the back of my mind, I sort of figured we'd see him today."

Joanne was eavesdropping just inside the screen door and she smiled to herself.

Then Chuck said to Buzz, "Com'on. Let's go build a fire and get this little illegal DZ off on the right foot. Run out to your camper and get me a beer, will ya?"

"You gonna drink a beer?" asked Buzz.

"Just one. I earned it today. I feel like a million bucks. One can't hurt."

"Yeah, me too." said Buzz, "It's funny..."

"What?"

"I was fightin' it. The whole thing. Before you pissed me off this afternoon..."

"I pissed you off?"

"Yeah. 'Numbnuts.' Remember?"

Chuck laughed and said, "You know fucking a-well I was goading you, right?"

"Yeah. And I'm glad you did. Anyway..."

"What? Spit it out."

"...I was feeling like a real pussy until you cranked up the bird and started to taxi. Then, it was like some sort of magic. All of a sudden, I don't know, maybe it was everything - having the gear on, the smell of exhaust coming in the door, the sounds, just bumping along on the grass - I took a deep breath and, for some reason, it was like I had just made a jump an hour before. Everything was so familiar again."

"It happened to me, too." answered Chuck.

Then Chuck said, "But you, brother, you put me to shame today."

"Whadda you mean?"

"You were all worried about the small shit, the details, remember?"

"Yeah."

"Well, remembering, as you did, as well as you did, how to flip the covers off of those shot-and-a-halves and pull the rings as smoothly and together like that. And I watched you as you went back into free fall before you launched your reserve. It was all just textbook."

"What did you expect? I'm a fucking sky god."

"H-m-m-pf. Yeah, right. Anyway, I can't fault you for the tree landing. But you did good today. I knew you wouldn't have a problem once you got your knees in the breeze again."

After a short second, Buzz stood up to go get some beers out of his coolers, but then he stopped and asked Chuck, "You not worried that maybe we'll get busted?"

"Too old to sweat the small shit, my man."

They laughed together at that. Then Chuck, somewhat impatiently said, "You gonna get that beer or what? We damn sure ain't getting' any younger here."



As Buzz disappeared into the darkness towards his camper, Chuck had piled up a few dry twigs and put a match to them when Joanne materialized at his side with a can of

cold Budweiser. As she gave it to him, she leaned over and put her arms around him. "Buzz gave me the beer to give to you. Said he had to go to the bathroom."

"I'm just to drink the one. Celebrate, you know..."

"figured you might." said Joanne.

The small flames from the fire in the rock circle had begun to throw sprays of sparks upwards towards the dark purple of the night sky above. Then she kissed him long on the cheek and with her two hands, one on each side of his face, she turned his head towards hers so they were face-to-face and she said, "You old fart. I love you so much. I was with you up there today. And, I will be with you every day, you know that. This is something we both need. But take easy on the booze, please."

"I will. I promise."

"Fine. I'm counting on it."

"You gonna stay out here with us for a while?"

"Nope. You know how much I hate mosquitoes and I just know they're sharpening their little beaks as we speak."

She was still holding his face as she said, "Make Buzz sleep in his camper tonight. When you come to bed, I'll be the one wearing the flimsy blue satin thing."

Chuck did his best Snivley McRotten pretend-evil laugh and Joanne tenderly slapped his face and turned back towards the house saying, "Don't be too late. I need my beauty sleep."

Chuck simply answered lowly, almost under his breath, "Airborne!"

Chapter Seven

"It's a Fatboy! I guarantee it. A Fatboy." Chuck had licked his right index finger, wetting it, and held it high in the air as if checking the wind direction.

Buzz, sitting on the ground replacing all of the rubber band stows in his sleeve, looked at Chuck quizzically as the far away unmistakable rumbling throb grew louder. "Now, how in the hell do you know that?"

"I'm clairvoyant. That's all. Just call me Carnac." And he smiled broadly.

"Yeah, right. And does Rick drive a Harley?"

"Yeah."

"And, of course, you knew that?"

"Uh-huh." said Chuck matter-of-factly.

"Dipshit." said Buzz.

Right then, the motorcycle's engine grew quiet, and a tinny horn honked far down the road towards the gate. Buzz rose from the ground slapping the sand from his rear end with both hands and started towards his camper saying, "I'll go let him in."

"Roger that."

Soon the camper, leading a thin haze of dust came back down the sandy road towards the hangar with Rick following on his Fatboy; the motorcycle towed a small two wheel baggage trailer. Chuck laughed when he saw the trailer thinking to himself that in the old days, everything a jumper wandering the country on a motorcycle used to need was tied to the frame behind the seat, and usually the jumper was wearing his helmet and parachutes.

Times had changed.

Buzz was climbing out of the VW as Rick pulled the bike to a stop and lowered the kickstand. Then he yelled "Hey!" at Chuck as he peeled his helmet off his head and lowered it to the top of fuel tank. As Joanne appeared from the house across the runway, come to greet Rick, Chuck stuffed a red oil rag in his back pocket and stepped towards Rick extending his hand.

"God damn, man!" It's good to see you guys!" said Rick pumping Chuck's hand.

"It's been a while, huh?" said Buzz who walked up and took Rick's hand after Chuck stepped away.

"You know Joanne, right?" asked Chuck.

"Yeah!" said Rick, and Joanne came to him and hugged him. "Does he know?" Rick whispered in her ear as they held each other. Joanne imperceptively shook her head no and she backed away. "Damn, girl! You are hot as ever." said Rick.

"A-w-w. Go on with your crap." answered Joanne, nearly blushing. "No. Really!" said Rick.

Chuck and Buzz stood silently a few feet away, then Chuck looked at Buzz and gave him one of his sarcastic Cheshire grins underscored with an icy glare and said, "How's your wife, Rick?"

Rick got the message and turned his attention to Chuck quickly saying, "Not happy I'm here, that's for sure. But I bought her a new...well...almost new car as a part of deal to stay off my back, so she's happy, I guess."

"How long you staying?" asked Chuck.

"Just a few days, to get a feel for things."

Joanne said, "I'm going back in and fix everybody some lunch. I'll holler when it's ready."

Chuck was dying to ask Rick how he knew Charlie, but decided to wait and maybe slip it in the conversation later. In a few minutes, Chuck, Buzz and Rick were in the throes of rapid fire questions and answers and catching up.

After a short lull in the conversation, as they sat on the porch at the house, Rick looked at Chuck and in his most serious voice, asked, "How long you think we're gonna get away with it?"

"Right up until we don't." said Chuck, deadpan.

And so it went.



Soon, within weeks of Rick's arrival, there came Jose' from up in Mississippi, flew his 172 in, then Dick from Ripplemead in Virginia and Tim from Perris, flew his Fleet all the way from California. And more old jumpers and pilots, by invitation, were on the way. In another week, Rick returned after spending enough time at home to justify another "fishing trip." Then came the first time that all the early outlaws were together at once.

The common fascination for all of them was that the farm was a place for people their age who wanted to jump again in the way that sport of parachuting had had its beginnings. The other draw was that all of them had de-

cided that the time they might be able to spend together, however brief and infrequent those times might be, were infinitely better and far more exciting than spending time on their computers reminiscing or living their retired lives doing what was expected of aging men. And it went without saying, that everyone understood the risks.

Some of the outlaws were pilots with expired or nonexistent medical certificates; some had not flown in years, forced to leave the sky when the cost to own a two-seater puddle jumper had reached the price of a small house, and fuel prices per gallon were more expensive than a fifth of bad whiskey; some were jumpers who illegally did their own rigging, packing their own reserves; others were expert craftsmen but without the proper licenses to fix their own airplanes but better mechanics than many found in approved shops; some were jumpers who had been to Woodstock and some who had not jumped in decades; old jumpers whose last parachutes were round, not the shape of a mattress; some were men who had lived on C-rations in snake infested jungles and not Meals-Ready-to-Eat in the desert; some were men who felt that people who could dance and do didos in wind tunnels but who had never experienced the fear of a night jump from 7,200 feet, free falling in pitch blackness towards an unforgiving earth, doomed to die should an altimeter fail, were pussies; some of them had become men listening to Jimmy Hendrix and Janis Joplin and The Rolling Stones accompanied by the rhythmic, deadly clatter of a M-60 machine

gun; but more than anything else, they were all unique in their love of the sky and the adventure it held.

In an effort to be unpredictable and fly under the radar of the locals and the F.A.A., a telephone chain had been established to let all the group members know when the drop zone would be open. As time progressed, the outlaw members were able to predict when that would be, and were ready whenever the phone rang.

Others had asked Chuck and Joanne if they could just stay at the farm. Having no outside attachments and having received permission, they had either purchased small campers or an old Winnebago which were permanently parked, and they came and went as they wished. They pitched in to pay electric bills and brought their own food. In time, an outside shower was built and, of course, Buzz and Chuck had already built a privy, so all the comforts of home were in place.

Some had arrived with long un-jumped parachute gear or log books that showed their last flight hour logged years previous. As the group grew, there was an unspoken agreement that whatever a new outlaw wished to do, jump or fly or just hang out was alright with the group. The camaraderie was the most important issue.

If someone brought old gear, Chuck and Buzz only asked that they all go over it together and ensure that it was jumpable and safe to use. There was never dissention. Most of the older guys brought the military surplus of their day. A few did bring in a square para-

chute or two. And the unspoken rule was that all gear belonged to the group commonly. If something got broken or needed replacing, every member pitched in what he could and there was never dispute about what was contributed.

A few were pilots who had not flown in many years. That was fine. As the rules no longer mattered, the most current of the pilots put the co-pilot's seat in the 180 and then acting as a check pilot or, if necessary, as an informal instructor rode alongside of the rusty of the aviators in the group until they were comfortable and there was a mutual agreement between Chuck and Buzz that they were ready to solo again. The whole point being that they were to become competent enough once more to fly jumpers.

As for the inactive jumpers, they were asked to demonstrate some degree of proficiency. In a few cases, as the group grew, one or two actually made static line jumps, their parachutes being automatically opened, before returning to free fall and the pulling of their own ripcords. One of the new guys had not jumped in 47 years. He was the most perfect "newbie" and had not forgotten a single thing about skydiving, except how wonderful he felt both physically and emotionally back in the old days. Once at the farm, his body and his mind began to respond to the activity and the camaraderie, and even he was surprised at his own rejuvenation.

That seemed to be an interesting common thread among every new outlaw. It might take several visits to the farm before it happened.

Joanne off-handedly commented on it one night as the group sat around the ritual campfire ever present in the evenings.

During a lull in the joking and the general mirth and the imbibing of many alcoholic beverages, she innocently said, "I'm sitting here looking at the fire lighting up you old farts and making bets with myself as to which one of you is going do some sophomoric thing like streaking again."

Buzz jumped to his feet, raised his hand, and said, "Put your money on me, ma'am!" Then, after looking around at each other slowly, every old man sitting in the circle stood to attention and raised his hand. "Oh, shit!" snapped Joanne, "Sit your asses down. I was kidding."

But she wasn't kidding. As time had gone along, she had been closely watching the entire group as everyone went about their days on the farm. Whether they be jumping or flying or just sitting around shooting the breeze, there had seemed to be a shift in each one. Their strides were more relaxed; some had seemed to lose creases in their foreheads; those who stooped when they walked had seemed to stand taller; a few even begun to play hackey-sack and were quite good at it. It seemed that between jumps there was always a Frisbee in the air. Someone had erected a pole with a loudspeaker atop it outside his camper. Afterwards, the farm's atmosphere was continually punctuated with the music of the Sixties.

Charlie had begun to show up occasionally and in the evenings, if it wasn't raining, he would unroll a sleeping bag and crawl up under the wing of his Pawnee. The next morning would always find him first up with a small fire built and a tiny percolator heating his coffee. If it rained, Joanne made him come in the house and sleep on the couch.

It was a rainy evening that Chuck and Charlie sat on the porch rocking back and forth slowly sipping on a last cup of coffee. The night was quiet and everyone else had gone to bed. This was Chuck's favorite time of night. He talked with Charlie about that, not yet asking how he knew Rick and Jose'.

"I love being on an airport, any airport at night." said Chuck, just making idle conversation.

"Me, too." said Charlie, then he asked, "You ever walk down a runway in the middle of the night and think about what's out there? I mean, what's really out there?"

"I'm not sure I'm following you." answered Chuck.

"Well, it's a sort of game I play with myself..." said Charlie, "...when the day is over and the light is falling on my little airstrip. I walk down the runway, look up into the night sky, study the stars, and I ask myself if I might be from another place; after all, whenever I land an airplane, I'm itching to get back up as soon as possible again."

"Still not with you, yet."

"Well, my question, really, is that when I'm flying or jumping like I used to, and I land,

put my feet on the ground, am I really just a visitor from somewhere else? Think about it some. The only time we pilots and jumpers feel at home is when we are with other jumpers and pilots and the airport, the drop zone is the real planet on which we belong; the sky is where we really come from; we are from out there somewhere and everything outside of that is foreign to us. It's why you were drawn here and all these guys come here, to go back to where you are really from, the sky, because you were homesick for your friends who live there, too. Could that be?"

Chuck watched Charlie's face in the dim light cast from the living room lights behind them but said nothing.

After a brief pause, Charlie continued, "To me, when I fly, it's like I leave this planet and return home. It seems that way, not always in the front of my thinking, but the feeling is always the trace of a homecoming, something more known, more tangible than anything I've done on the ground. I watch skydivers now, and they seem to have embraced the feeling more than even pilots who need mechanical contrivances. They use the sky; they don't just fall through it anymore. They have learned and taught one another how to move across it, to use it as dolphins might use the sea, in synchronicity with precision and grace."

Chuck thought about that for a brief second and then he said, "Naw." And he added, "I don't believe that at all."

But he did. Chuck felt that that kind of thinking was something that others might laugh at. The fact was that Chuck, for as long

that he had been a pilot and a jumper, had always felt strongly, very strongly, indeed, that the world outside his world of airplanes and parachutes was like a moonscape, gray and dry, devoid of the real life and the emotion he felt in the sky. He only ever felt like himself when he was with Joanne, or flying or jumping, or with his friends with whom he shared the sky. Now with the farm, his airstrip and like-minded friends his age, he was happy once again, and the only thought that made him shudder now was that he knew that it had to have an end. He wasn't sure when or how that was going to happen so he kept pushing the thought back in his head.

One thing that made more sense to him than anything else that Charlie had just said was something that actually validated the game that Charlie said he played. From his first ride in an airplane, his first time at the controls of one, his very first jump and almost every flight hour flown or jump he'd made since the beginning, there had been a baffling feeling of naturalness. He had struggled with many other things in life: school, work, finances, relationships, raising children, many of things that life required him to perform or master. But not the things of the sky.

Every time he had put on a parachute, every time he had flown an airplane, every time since he was a first jump student and even as a fledgling pilot, every time he sat and looked across the complexities of an instrument panel, there had never been any sort of real apprehension, no real fear of the consequences of a mistake; there had only been the

comfort of a feeling of belonging; a ghost sense of knowing. There had not been a single day of his existence that at some point, he marveled at the normalness of his life in the sky. What was abnormal to him was the way he often interacted with the people and the events of the world beyond aviation and skydiving. Mostly that resulted in impatience and aggravation and a burning desire to find an airport or a drop zone lounge and the refuge of that world.

Attempting to throw Charlie off, Chuck said, "But, you know, Charlie, we do belong to a kind of very unique club don't we?" And Chuck feigned a yawn. He knew all this was just a kind of wishful thinking that might bring ridicule if he voiced it aloud. Better to let somebody like Charlie play the mystic.

" 'Deed we do!" said Charlie, and then Charlie decided that it was time to seek the sleeping bag and he yawned himself sensing a certain tinge of ill-ease in Chuck.

Chuck had forgotten to challenge Charlie about how he knew Rick and Jose'.

As Charlie stood from his chair, he stretched his arms out wide, yawned again and turned to go inside, then he stopped and said, "Joanne gave me their names and numbers." And he laughed. "They were in on it, too."

It took Chuck a minute to put the pieces together and he laughed. "But how did you...?"

"I was here. Came to meet you when you went to the airshow. It was a set-up. I like messing with people's heads."

"Lovely sense of humor." said Chuck a bit

miffed. "And I suppose the game you said you like to play...?"

"Oh! That's true. Every word of it." Then, as Charlie opened the screen door ready to step inside, he said, "Why do you think those guys sound asleep out there would risk jail or fines to come break the rules when they do? It's how they think, too. They're outlaws with you now like my guys were when I ran this place so long ago. They want to be home with people who don't care if they're different. They're sky people, Chuck. This is their world here, a place where no one will stop them from returning to the sky."

Chapter Eight

Hank slowly opened his eyes, threw his sleeping bag aside, swung his legs off of the hard, plywood bench that served as a bunk, and he put his bare feet on the buckled and cracked linoleum floor of the well-used camper he had purchased for a few hundred dollars; for a long moment, he just sat on the edge of the bench staring blankly at the early light coming through the frosted glass slats of the camper's window; then he slipped on a pair of worn and scuffed Para-Mocs, looked momentarily at the nail of his right big toe just starting to show through the tatty leather of the soft, brown boot and as the cowhide laces dragged the floor, he rose and staggered to the door and cracked it open, squinting as he let in a bright shaft of the early morning sun.

Stumbling some, he gingerly stepped out and stood erect, arching his back to relieve the soreness as he looked down the length of the dewy grass air strip for a brief second before peering up to study the cloudless sky overhead. Having eased the dull pain in his back, he stood straight and he ran his hands over his face; his whiskers felt like heavy grit sandpaper, his tongue felt thick and he had a mild headache.

Then he spat, hacked up a wad of phlegm and spat again before walking out of sight behind the camper to urinate. Zipping up his threadbare, patchwork jeans, he yawned and looked down at the faded, yellow tee shirt he

was wearing; between its rips and holes, he read the up-side-down printing, "Turkey Chute, Z-Hills, 1977," and he laughed out loud. Before arriving, he had dug the shirt out of a box of clothes he had not worn in years in the hopes that it would give him some additional credence among the outlaws.

"15,695 days or 43 years thereabouts." he thought to himself. Always good with numbers, Hank had done the math. That was the approximate number of days and years since his last jump. The thought simultaneously made him sad and nervously excited. He wondered if today, he would restart the clock. But hangover or not, this morning Hank felt an energy he had not felt in years, and he was at once hungry and horny and he needed coffee.

Then he tightened his belt a notch, scratched his behind, rubbed his privates - the stiffness he felt made him smile. From the moment he began the trek to get to the farm, he had felt a returning sense of anticipation reminiscent of his days as a first jump student; it had even spread to his libido, which was once again, shall we say, growing.

In his hand, he held a crinkled tube of Colgate toothpaste and he squeezed a strip out on a finger, and using his finger as a toothbrush, he began brushing his teeth. As he did, he raised a leg slightly to break wind. In a moment, he walked over to the water spigot, cracked it open with a squeak, and it gushed forth a strong flow of chilly water; stooping over, he took a mouthful of water directly from the faucet, stood erect, swished that around a few times and spat the tooth-

paste out. That done, he cupped his hands together, filled them with the cold water, and he briskly washed his face. Taking another handful, he ran that through his hair, using his fingers to comb what little hair he had left on his head.

The smell of coffee was strong in the morning air; so, too, were the mixed fragrances' of the roses and the Stargazer lilies that grew in abundance in Joanne's gardens that surrounded the farm house. He knew, because he'd been told last night, that a large coffee pot stood on the workbench in the hangar, and he decided to explore in that direction first.



He had arrived just as dark had fallen the night before and was welcomed by the gang who sat around the evening fire. The bed of his GMC pick-up held a cooler full of Pabst and several more cases of it were stacked behind the cab. All of that, he happily shared. Chuck and Rick helped him back his camper into a slot, a small campsite set-up that was recessed in the tree line. Several similar sites had been prepared in the wood line along the length of the airstrip. Chuck and Buzz had spent weeks clearing sites and installing water lines and electrical hook-ups for each site. Users were only asked to chip in to help defray the electricity costs. The water from the farm's deep artesian well smelled vaguely of sulphur, but it was free and plentiful.

Hank was in his late sixties and like all of

the outlaws he had been invited by another member to join in. His story could have been that of anyone of the outlaws.

When he was very young, he was drafted into the military, the U.S. Army, to be specific. Being a high school drop-out, he had no real skills and soon found a home in the infantry. His basic training cadre called him a "leg." He did not like the derision in their voice when they used the term. He did like the look of the parachutist's wings, the patches sewn onto their fatigue uniforms. Those cadre were called "Airborne" and they wore an arched tab on their shoulders that said so. He admired their carriage, their swagger. He admired the starched razor-like creases of their fatigue shirts and pants. He admired and envied the glass-like shine of the Cocoran jump boots they wore. The other cadre who were not the "Airborne" seemed somehow slovenly and less military.

He made up his mind, in spite of the fact that he never volunteered for anything, that he would make an exception and he would volunteer to go to jump school. He wanted to be called "Airborne." He wanted to jump out of airplanes. Soon, he was not just "U.S. Army Infantry" but he was "U.S. Army Airborne Infantry." He would spend the rest of his life indentifying as just that: "Airborne."

Once he was trained and made his five qualifying troop jumps, he graduated from his three weeks at jump school and was assigned to an airborne division. In his case, he was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Then two things hap-

pened to him nearly simultaneously.

The first was that he watched a demonstration; a free-fall jump made by the U.S. Army Parachute Team, "The Golden Knights." Once the Team's C-47 aircraft reached its designated jump altitude of 12,500 feet, he watched the six dark figures exit the airplane and go into free-fall, and he watched the crimson plumes of red smoke the Golden Knights left behind as they plummeted in formation towards Sicily drop zone at 120 miles an hour. Then at 2,500 feet above the ground, they simultaneously opened their parachutes, and under their lo-po, diamond-patterned, gold and black canopies, they turned and maneuvered and they zeroed in on the target, a small, white cloth cross spread in the sand in front of the viewing stands, and each team member landed within ten feet of their target.

In moments, gathered before an applauding audience of families and dignitaries in the bleachers, they stood line abreast at attention in their black jumpsuits, each holding a crisp salute at the edge of their garrison cap; each green cap they wore was adorned with the circle of the red, white and blue airborne glider patch. Hank marveled.

This was not like the mass troop drops that he had experienced so far. This was not parachuting from an aircraft as just one of hundreds of soldiers that filled the sky after blindly shuffling to the door of a rattling, cavernous aluminum tube and stepping out into a propeller blast that jerked the jumper sideways as a barely controllable olive drab parachute blossomed behind them and 65 or 100

pounds of external equipment - rifles and radios and ruck sacks - strapped and bound the jumper's body. What he thought he saw as the Knights, in unison, fell in formation for sixty seconds towards the sandy expanse of Sicily drop zone and then opened their highly-controllable parachutes that day, was a beautiful vision of his future - if only the second thing had not happened.

No sooner, it seemed, than Hank had seen the demonstration and found out that he could learn to be a skydiver at a sport parachute club on base, which he pursued eagerly, and then after he joined a club and learned how to skydive, then making his first two sport jumps, his orders, his assignment to the war in Viet Nam arrived. So, with two sport jumps under his belt, he headed off for 14 months in the jungles and rice paddies of Southeast Asia.

He survived that, and deciding that he had had enough of what turned out to be the disappointing slog of endless rain and the seeming nonsensical destruction that war brings to all its participants, he left the military when his time was up. One factor that helped him decide that the military was no longer for him was that in the entire time he fought the war, not once did he, an airborne soldier, make a single jump. Not once. But the experience of making the two sport parachute jumps he had made before leaving for Viet Nam stayed with him vividly.

So, once back home, he sought the nearest sky diving club. What he found there was himself, in the flesh. The jumpers in his small

club were mostly veterans just like himself with a few hippy college kids and the odd college professor thrown in for good measure. They spoke his language, the language of static lines, backpacks, ripcords, pack opening bands, pilot chutes, stories told of the war, nights in the jungles; they came to the small drop zone in their Dodge Super Bees, their Pontiac GTOs, their campers and the occasional junker Jaguar XKE convertible; they brought their dogs, big ones and little ones - small dogs, like balls of cotton with tiny legs; yappy dogs that squirted pee with every step - and they brought a few young children and maybe a wife nursing a baby from an exposed breast; they left the racial strife and the politics and the national division caused by war and prejudice out there somewhere.

The drop zone, the club, the jumping, the occasional broken bone, the practical jokes, the endless, raucous parties that commenced when the sun began to set, the rituals of the making of Cardinals and Popes, their music, "Light My Fire," "Magic Carpet Ride," "Get On Up," "Blue Rondo a la Turk," played loud on eight track tape players; they ate pre-made Stewart Sandwiches heated in an electric oven, they drank the awful grapefruit of Fresca from emerald-colored glass bottles; they slept in cars, under packing tables, in empty airplanes and covered the floors of someone's apartment, snoring piles of quilted sleeping bags; they talked of the weather, finding a hole in the overcast, the spot, the high winds, the jumpable ceilings, the training of students; they got drunk and rode the rotating

beacon; they spoke of shot bags, packing mats, line separators, Capewells, French boots, Bell helmets, KAP-3s, Sentinels, packing tables, T-7As, holding tension, gravel plugs, MA-1s, double-Ls, 7-TUs, Para-Commanders, conicals, smoke brackets. All these things and more was their world.

For most of them, during that time, this was the only world that mattered. Yes, during the week, they worked for the phone company, they sold shoes, they made big money as salvage divers, they taught college classes, they flipped hamburgers, but for many of the Hanks, from Friday night until Sunday night, skydiving and it's world was what they existed to belong to.

There was always a core membership, a dedicated band that showed up on Friday night or early Saturday morning, usually seven or eight die-hard regulars who filled the manifest. Occasionally, they were joined by jumpers from far-a-way. Club memberships were small in number, no more than 15 or 20 people, sometimes less than that, and they jumped from a borrowed Cessna 172 or worse, a cramped, hard-to-exit, Piper Tri-Pacer. Their small drop zones might be an out-of-the-way struggling country airport or a grass field, a cow pasture bordered by scrub trees but big enough from which to operate a four place airplane. Sometimes, the "club" was actually a business called a "center" run by a jumper slash pilot who could not hold a job elsewhere because he was consumed by parachutes and airplanes.

Now and then, a member or two of the

Golden Knights, the Army Team, might drop by a club or a center for a week-end or a regional parachute competition. The student jumpers would ask who they were, and once told, they would hang close-by believing the rumor that swirled around the Knights that "Every night with a Golden Knight is a Golden Knight." Only the Knights themselves knew. And they weren't talking.

In Hank's day, there was never talk of legal waivers to hold anyone blameless. The local Federal Aviation Administration was usually only represented by a rumor that a reserve parachute should be repacked every sixty or ninety days - who knew? - by a licensed parachute rigger. One hundred hour inspections, annual inspections of jump airplanes were a hit-and-miss proposition depending on how frequently anyone ever encountered an F.A.A. man - if ever. The smaller a club, the less frequently they gathered and jumped, and the thought of adhering to regulations was practically non-existent because the regulations themselves had mainly yet to be written.

Jump runs above 10,000 feet without supplemental oxygen were the norm, even if it did take the airplane more than 30 minutes to get to altitude. A blatant violation of F.A.A. rules; but nobody gave a shit. Most of the time everyone on-board including the pilot, was hung over from the night before anyway - so a little wooziness or nausea was common place with or without oxygen.

The fact of the matter was that most jumpers and pilots had never *heard* of the over 30 minute rule to begin with. A skydive

by jumpers with a club out of the boonies from 14,000 feet was lauded by everyone present as a Local World Record, talked about endlessly for weeks afterward, and the jumpers involved were revered by less experienced jumpers who knew no better or who had never heard of Joe Kittinger who, on August the 16th, 1960, had made a jump from over 100,000 feet.

A jumper with 175 jumps in those days was considered a deity by some in the smaller clubs. Parachute licenses issued by the Parachute Club of America were numbered lower than 2,000 and were not unusual because across the entire United States, there were probably less than 25,000 sport jumpers, and many of those had fewer than 10 jumps. A Gold Wing holder, so certified by the U.S.P.A. for having made 1,000 jumps or more could have actually walked on water.

The jumpers of Hank's day were people who belonged to a unique clique and they knew it. And they were always ready to tell you about it. Their co-workers at their day jobs weren't safe from constant attempts of recruitment into the world of parachutes; their families mostly, not all, thought they had stripped their gears; they were generally single and those that were married were usually married to a mate that had made at least a few jumps. Many wives and girlfriends who were club members gave as good as they got on a drop zone and were respected by their male counterparts. Some of the best female skydivers in the world started with small clubs.

But something happened along the way to Hank. It was the same thing that had happened to many of the outlaws: life interfered. A bad marriage, a sick child, a new job, the loss of a job - just the myriad of life circumstances - and Hank drifted away from the sport. Each day he drifted, each week he drifted, each year he drifted, and in time, skydiving and the friends and the good times were in the rear-view mirror. But not forgotten. They couldn't be forgotten.

Unlike many activities that may be called "sports," things like baseball, or football, or hockey, the act of jumping from airplanes is different in its effects on man. Similar to flying in its consequence, parachuting, any sort of parachuting, whether it be a military troop jump or the act of skydiving alters something profound in the human psyche. The friends made, the camaraderie are after-effects. But to voluntarily step into the open door of an aircraft in flight and jump from it - not an airplane with bullet holes in it or a wing on fire - requires a conscious decision, one made that is in direct violation of everything that man fears.

The dreams of the tormented involve stepping from a cliff and falling unchecked into a dark abyss. Man cannot stand on the edge of a high place without having an adrenalin reaction. A fear of heights is one of the most common of fears akin to that of the fear of the unknowns in the darkness of a cave or the sight of a coiled snake. It is primal, traceable back millions of years to the earliest of humans who were ground dwellers forced from the trees

through evolution. A single parachute jump made by a conscious decision changes something deep and profound in the spiritual core.



Hank had been reflecting on the years just before Cliff had called. His third marriage had ended in shambles as did the first two; his last girl friend stole his car in the middle of the night and took off to god-knows-where, but that was okay; it was going to be repossessed anyway. She wouldn't get far. He didn't even call the cops. Now, he drove the aging GMC that he had traded a farmer friend in return for a few back-breaking days loading hay bales on to flat bed trucks. In the months before Cliff called, Hank's life had become a feather in the wind, drifting here and there, never settling. He needed an anchor. Then, as if someone had laid a warm hand on his shoulder, the world of parachutes and its people came calling. He needed a return to his roots and skydiving was it, and so he loaded up the old truck and left for Florida.

What really brought Hank to the little grass airstrip last night beyond the invitation of an old jumping friend, was the same driving force that had brought many of the outlaws to Chuck's farm in spite of the risks it might pose. Those could be familial dispersion, the threat of arrest or fines, the chance of an injury to an older body that had grown brittle and weak over time. In spite of these things, the primal urge to bring the courage to well, to be young just once more, to feel the rush of wind

back against the skin again, to sit among peers and laugh and be congratulated on one's resurrection as a skydiver could bring a man or a woman back into the circle of life again, and that's why Hank came to the farm.



Following his nose and the smell of coffee, Hank shuffled across the runway and at the hangar door, he stopped and peered into the shadows.

"Hey, sleepyhead!" said Cliff. He was sitting in Buzz's lawn chair with his feet propped up on a case of Aeroshell oil. After getting the approval of the other outlaws, Cliff had made the call to Hank inviting him to join.

"Hey." said Hank as he tried to focus on Cliff, not even knowing at first who it was speaking to him.

Not fully able to see inside the hangar, Hank took a few tentative steps forward and stood in the darkness for a second or two just to get his bearing. Then the silhouette became clear and he recognized Cliff. "Well..." said Hank, "I see you still have that fungus on your face."

Cliff howled with laughter and said, "If you are referring to my sophisticated, and I might add, debonair mustache and goatee, yes, I still have the fungus."

Hank was actually a bit jealous thinking that Cliff, one of the earliest 'D' license holders in the country, was aging significantly better than he was. And the fact was that Cliff was probably eighty years old by now...well, that

only heightened his envy.

"You get tired of jumping with teenagers?" asked Hank.

"Can't hold a candle to us ancient Texicans." said Cliff smiling.

"You still jumping that flying mattress?" said Hank with a mild hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Here, Hank was poking fun at something he had never done - that is, jumping a square ram air parachute, an air foil. He was a bit jealous - and afraid - of that as well. Every jump that Hank had ever made was with a round, parabolic canopy. Newer square parachutes, parachutes that appeared as inflatable wings, like sections of an airplane's wing, had just been introduced as Hank drew away from the sport. He had seen them in use many times since and he had marveled at their speed, their accuracy in the right hands; he had also seen things he had never imagined that parachutes could do: 20 skydivers, their parachutes linked together with their feet, one flying just above the other in a great undulating formation; a jumper underneath a tiny flying wing, approaching a pond of water and foot skiing at 30 miles-an-hour just skimming the water's surface; it was a whole different world when square parachutes arrived and he was fearful that he couldn't even learn to pack one with its rings and ropes, and like trying to fold a fitted bed sheet, just packing one looked like a frustrating process to him.

Cliff snorted, "Yeah. But don't worry. We've got an old Switlik twill canopy in a seat pack just waiting on you. That is what you

last jumped, right?"

And they both laughed together at the absurdity of that.

Hank's eyes had adjusted well to the dim light of the hangar and he saw the sign again. He had caught a glimpse of a similar sign as he arrived in the late dusk of the earlier evening. Hanging from the hangar's roof beam by chains and carefully lettered, it said, "LEAVE IT AT THE GATE!"

As Hank reached for a Styrofoam cup from a stack sitting next to the big coffee percolator that sat on the work bench under the sign, he asked Cliff, "Leave it at the gate?" What's that all about?"

Cliff answered, "It's Chuck's way of telling us that if somebody starts talking about politics or religion, they get booted the fuck off the drop zone."

Hank laughed at that and said, "Sounds like he and I think the same." And then he thought to himself how much he liked this place already, and he drew his coffee from the pot.

Sipping at his cup of coffee, Hank slowly walked around the 180 looking it over. "Nice old bird." he said. "It's Saturday. What time you guys gonna get a load up?" Just then, Jose' and Buzz appeared in the maw of the hanger with their own coffee cups in hand. Buzz was attempting to stifle a yawn and Jose' was barefooted hopping on one foot trying to dislodge a sand spur. "Yeow! Yeow! Fucking nasty little things." he muttered.

"It's Florida. Sand spur capitol of the world." said Buzz emphatically. "Yeow!" an-

swered Jose'.

Cliff answered Hank's question. "Anytime somebody wants to." Then in an attempt at early morning humor, Cliff added, "If somebody don't wanna, we don't wanna." No one laughed. But he kept trying; this time with a corny Spanish accent, "E-e-f somebody wanna, we find a pilot around here somewhere. Si! Maybe one e-e-s-e not shitfaced, señor." Then everyone laughed.

Chuck and Joanne came walking in from the house as a rooster crowed over in the co-op. Small wisps of morning dew heated by the warmth of the early sun had turned to miniature specters of vapor that rose into the air along the length of the runway as the sound of Charlie's Pawnee grew louder in the distance.

"Who's that?" asked Hank.

"The ghost of Bob Hoover." answered Cliff flatly.

Hank looked at Cliff blankly. "What the hell are you talking about?" said Hank.

"The ghost of Hoover. You wait."

Just then, the sound of the Pawnee grew to a crescendo as the red flash of the airplane flashed by the hangar filling the cavern of the building with its sound. In a millisecond, the sound waned and grew immediately silent as everyone made for the opening of the hangar to watch.

"Hank! Meet Charlie!" said Chuck loudly as the airplane rose abruptly up 200 feet into the morning air, fishtailed hard and dove back towards the ground with its nose at a steep angle of attack. The only sound to be heard was the rush of the airplane's building air-

speed as it dived towards the runway. In brief seconds, the Pawnee, its propeller at a complete dead stop flashed by the small group of people clustered in front of the hangar and hushed down without a sound on the runway's wet grass.

"Bob." said Hank. "Bob. Hoover's first name was "Bob," not "Charlie."

"We know that." said Buzz. "We just like to think of him that way. Besides. Wait 'til he gets out. He sure as hell looks like Hoover."



Not knowing the other was doing it, Chuck and Joanne both wore small, imperceptible smiles. Joanne had finally confessed to Chuck about her secret meeting with Charlie and the trick they had conjured. Chuck had let her think he was pissed about it for a day or two before he used that as a sort of inducement to have make-up sex a night later. In the dark, as they held each other, he confessed, laughing, that he had had a chat with Charlie and he knew all about it. Joanne lightly slapped Chuck's face and softly said, "You are a sneaky son-of-a-bitch and I'm never having sex with you again!" Chuck was silent for a second, then chuckled and said, "Oh, yeah. I was gonna cut you off anyway." And they fell asleep in each other's arms.

Neither one had yet shared their knowledge of who they *thought* Charlie was with any of the outlaws. But, before long, Chuck and Buzz would discuss it and what Buzz had to say about who or what he

thought Charlie might be would surprise Chuck.



Now, several months along, the outlaw club, the little airfield and the farm began to hum. There was a small group that came to stay as long as they could. There were those who came when they could. A few had flown in. There was a red and white clipped-wing Cub tied down next to a tent. Further along the strip sat a yellow, two-hole Stearman tucked back into the trees evading property taxes in its home county flown in by a jumper from down near the Everglades. It wasn't that he was a tax evader per se, it was just that paying taxes on an airplane built to train pilots 80 years ago, somehow went against his grain.

Everyone who came to jump or just visit were only there because they had been invited by an outlaw, only after a unanimous camp-fire council of at least three members had approved the invitation. It was a rule that could never be broken. The fear, of course, was that the group would be discovered by the wrong people. No one swore an oath of silence, but it was implied and trust was always the key issue when the council heard a request to admit a new outlaw.

The interesting thing was that because the group was doing something illegal on many fronts - flying with expired medicals or no medical at all due to health issues, no recent jump experience, doing their own uncertified

aircraft maintenance, never filing any sort of "Notice to Airmen," never using a transponder, packing their own reserves, giving flight instruction without an instructor rating, soloing deserving flight students with the express intent of making jump pilots out them (Who cares if they only have 25 hours total; isn't that why they made parachutes in the first place?) and the list went on - they had formed a sort of thieves bond, one that everyone treasured and honored. No one talked outside of the airport to anyone about the club or its members, ever. Trips to the farm were called "fishing trips," "vacations," and whatever other excuse an outlaw could use to spend a few days on the drop zone. Chuck and Buzz ran the phone notification system and jumps days were randomly scheduled. If the weather was bad, so what? The beer drinking just moved to the hangar.



There is an old drinking fraternity called The Turtles. When someone is challenged by another Turtle member with the question, "Are you a Turtle?" that person should know that every Turtle owns a diabetic donkey and the correct response is, "You bet your sweet ass I am!" A wrong answer would be a reason to buy the house a drink. The outlaws of the farm had a different take on that ritual.

It came one muggy night as twelve outlaws, the largest group to gather at one time, had had a particularly good day. The weather had been cooperative and six of the outlaws

had made resurrection jumps, the first they had made in many years, all clear-and pulls - and everyone was in a high jovial mood. There had only been one minor injury and that was to Arvel's pride. He had managed to land on his ass in a pile of chicken shit after putting a Double 'L' into the coop.

But sometime during the day as everyone was packing or kicking back, some jubilant soul hollered, "Are we outlaws!" For a moment, no one said a word, then Jose' stood erect from his seat on the ground, placed his right hand over his heart, raised his empty soda can high in the air and said, with a straight face, like a defiant response to demanding god, "We don't need no stinking NOTAMS!" With that, he placed his can on the ground, slammed his foot on it, crushing it, spit loudly like a gypsy issuing a curse and quietly sat down again like nothing had ever happened.

For a long moment, there was complete silence from everyone and then Buzz, who had been stowing his lines, simply fell over in a heap nearly gagging with laughter. It took two milliseconds after that and everyone was in tears laughing. It became the outlaw's mantra; the phrase said everything there was to say about the outlaw philosophy. "We don't need no stinking NOTAMS!" became the common response to nearly every question on the drop zone.

"You want a beer?"

"We don't need no stinking NOTAMs!" was a "yes."

"I'm gonna make a sandwich."

"We don't need no stinking NOTAMs" was

either "Okay." or it could be interpreted as "Wait! I'm coming along."

And on it went. Especially at night when the fire was lit and the beer flowed.

Somebody would fart - an especially notable fart. Weak farts would not evoke a response. Memorable farts would cause this:

Everyone present would stand, raise their beer high in the air, put their hand on their chest and holler "WE DON'T NEED NO STINKING NOTAMS!" then spit, mocking disgust and crush their beer can with their foot - or make like they did; if the one in their hand was full. As much as they all tried to perform the sacrament in a serious manner, it never failed to produce raucous laughter. Even Joanne, when she visited the guys at the fire, would take part in it, and it always made her laugh. New outlaws who did not know the correct response when a good fart was offered were made "Beer Runners" serving beer to the other outlaws on request until another new guy came along and failed the response.



Nobody much noticed, but Chuck did. As the outlaws grew in number, Joanne would occasionally disappear into her sewing room on the second floor of the old farmhouse. It was her special place where she could read or paint, if she wished. Often she would use the room to practice her singing. When she closed the door, it was an unspoken request to Chuck that she needed some time and space and he honored that. But, lately, she had

spent more time than usual upstairs and Chuck began to worry that something might be amiss. When she was out of the room and doing chores or visiting with the guys, she seemed perfectly normal. But Chuck thought the inordinate time she was spending in the room, especially during the day needed some investigation.

So over coffee one morning, he innocently asked Joanne if everything with her was okay?

"Why?" she asked.

"Oh, no reason, just curious." Chuck responded.

She knew why he asked and simply said, "It's a surprise. Don't worry. It's all good."

With that, Chuck refilled his cup and headed for the hangar.

Later that night, Joanne leaned forward across the sink and peered out the window waiting to see if the guys had built a fire and she saw the orange and yellow flames licking at the darkness. Drying her hands quickly, she untied her apron and half-sprinted up the stairs to her sewing room; there was a manila folder lying on her table and she whisked it away and headed back down stairs.

In a few minutes, she appeared at the fire ring, folder in hand and she stood silently just dimly lit by the fire's light as the guys talked and joked. Chuck looked up and spotted her and said, "Hey, sweetheart!" and he spied the folder.

"What 'cha got there?"

"What I've been working on. I figured you guys needed a patch or something."

"Lemme see." said Chuck, and he reached

for the folder. Opening it, he saw this and he laughed, saying, "Damn girl! This is great!" and he passed it to Buzz.



"The emblem's great!" said Buzz, holding it up to catch the light from the fire so he could see it better, "But he's ugly as sin." And he laughed.

"I used you as the model." said Joanne, feigning indignation.

"Oh," said Buzz, "Then he's purty as hell and sexy, too." And he passed the folder to Arvel, who looked at it and immediately said, "We need tee shirts!"

Joanne laughed, saying, "Predictable." under her breath.

When the folder finally got around to Cliff, the last to see it, he studied it at length. Everyone was quiet, waiting to see what his response would be. His silence was making Joanne a bit angry because Cliff had a habit of being a tad sarcastic about everything and she was already formulating a snappy come-back when Cliff looked her square in the eye, and in the most ceremonious manner he could muster, he slowly rose to his feet, stood at atten-

tion, slowly raised his beer can in the air, slowly placed his right hand over his heart, and in the most serious voice he haltingly said, "We. Don't. Need. No. Stinking. NOTAMS!" Then he spit once. Then twice. Then a third time. Then he stomped his foot on the ground and he slowly sat back down.

And unanimously then, every outlaw stood before the fire, and like a well rehearsed drill team, repeated the official salute, saying in unison, "We don't need no stinking NOTAMs!" and they spit three times, stomped their feet and sat back down. The official Outlaw emblem had been come to be and it was good.

And Arvel said, "What about hats? It would look great on a hat."

Chapter Nine

Every drop zone has that one place for food and beer or both. The Inn at Orange, The Rumble Seat, The Green Door where the beer was cheap but cold, the Dairy Queen and its Blue Plate Specials or the M&J Drive-In where the food was so-so but the matronly owner had a big heart and she ran a tab for hungry pilots and jumpers when things got tight.

The Outlaws have such a place. Just down Highway 35, about two miles from the farm, was the Rainbow Truck Stop, Diner, Bar, Bait Shop and Marina. That was the business name on the weathered and peeling sign out front; but everybody there around just called it "The Bo." It consisted of two old mobile homes, nestled, one to either side of a one-room shack thirty yards off the highway

at the edge of an ashen-colored, crushed oyster shell parking lot. The place sat on the bank of a still water and nameless three-acre lake; its tannin-stained water, the color of strong tea, was made dark by the rotting mats of fallen leaves that gathered and floated en masse along the surface at the water's edge; the rotting leaves were the detritus shed of oaks draped with gently swaying flows of gray and lacy moss that overhung the lake's edge; and the water gently and nearly imperceptibly swirled around cypress pilings - century old posts - that supported an undulating and rickety pier that extended out the back door of the shack; the pier, the marina part of the establishment, was a treacherous four foot wide walkway with loose, curled up boards hammered into the frame with nail heads bent to stub the unsuspecting bare toe. The "lake," a generous description for it, was actually an old mining pond, set in an ancient sinkhole fed by the subterranean aquifers that laced the ground beneath the landscape; it was one of the hundreds of deep and permanent puddles that spot the state of Florida.

When Buck started to lose his eyesight with the cataracts, he had sold his big Kenworth tractor that he used to haul citrus up the East Coast to Philly and New York. Once he paid off the truck, he had a few thousand as a down payment that he originally used to buy the old fish camp building, which is what The Bo actually was in the beginning; just a bait store, sometimes a country store that sold Nabs, chewing tobacco, soft drinks and, now and then, some home-made hooch

when nobody was looking. But Buck and Sherry, his voluptuous wife of twenty years were eternal optimists, and they figured that with some additions and a few improvements, maybe a bigger parking lot for the few timber trucks that ran the road up to the paper mill, they could turn the fish camp into a thriving business.

Like I said, The Bo began with a ramshackle one-room building made from graying hand-milled cypress logs some seventy years ago. On the roadside, it has a single door for an entrance with tin Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola signs tacked to it, and the screen door had a Merita Bread sign on its push bar. There was no restroom, just an open outhouse set off on the edge of the Blackjack oaks and palmetto clumps that surrounded the property. Inside, scattered across the buckled, bare wood floor, there were a few broken ladder back chairs; in the center stood a rusting, squat, pot-belly stove, its black chimney pipe thrust up through a leaking roof, and a long white cooler lay along one wall with top doors that slid aside so you could fish a soda from its icy water. Icy, that is, when the compressor worked - which was not often - so mainly, the previous owner had to use large blocks of ice chipped to pieces with an ice pick in order to keep the drinks and the fish bait, mostly catatonic red worms, packed in small, round cartons of decaying compost, cold.

At the back of building was another door that when opened, exposed a short sandy trail down to the dock. Some of the year, if there had been enough rain, the lake's water only

rose to within a few feet of the dock's deck. But most of the year, the dock's pilings were about a foot short of the water's edge and, besides, if anyone did want to put a boat in, they just as well put it in from the shore to keep from walking on the dock. Buck kept a fifty gallon barrel of gas out near the pier with a hand pump in it. He had a rule that he would only sell a minimum of three gallons at a time, and he charged twice what he paid for it. In Buck's mind, the gas sales really made it the 'marina' part.

But the main thing for Buck wasn't the fishing, which wasn't great, anyway; it was the selling of beer and whiskey. So Buck and Sherry figured that the way to get folks to come was also having a bar and a grill. So they went over to Volusia, and they found two repossessed single-wide trailers in disrepair and had them pulled up alongside the bait shop. In one trailer, they gutted the bedrooms but kept the bathroom and they turned that trailer into the bar. Buck made a heavy investment in top-of-the-line Styrofoam coolers, big ones, to keep the beer cold. They had a septic tank installed, not wanting their drunk patrons to take a leak outside or risk getting snake bit down at the outhouse in the dark.

They gutted the other trailer, too, and they put in five second-hand tables and a variety of used chairs, and they set up a propane griddle, and they brought in a second-hand refrigerator that matched the 1950s avocado color of the one that the trailer already had. That trailer became the diner. Morgan County had very lax zoning regulations - actually no

enforced zoning regulations at all - so the electrical work and the plumbing was mainly done with garden hoses and a lot of black electrical tape and that wasn't a problem.



Sherry had a trick up her sleeve that she used on Saturday nights to up the beer sales. One that became a standing bet; often a bet taken just to see Sherry perform it. As the night grew late and the drunks got drunker, Shirley would begin to boast loudly that she could serve beer to anybody there without using her hands. After the regular patrons looked around to see if there was anyone new in the bar willing to take her up on it, and seeing no new faces because they were all pretty much the same crowd every Saturday night, someone would relent, laughing, and hold a ten dollar bill in the air, and Sherry would go into action.

It was a performance that she charged ten dollars to see anyway - bet or no bet. But the standing wager made to the inebriated was that if she was successful, and she always was, the challenging customer paid for a round for the house and also paid her the ten dollars. If she wasn't successful, the customer's beer was free for the night.

As earlier indicated, Sherry was 'voluptuous,' that is, "well endowed." The good Lord had been more than generous and made her so ample that if she wore just the right brassiere, one that firmly held her breasts in place and pushed them way up like a Victori-

an corset, she could balance a glass of beer in the cleavage between her gifts, carefully walk to a customer's table without spilling a drop thereby allowing the customer to carefully lift the glass away from its padded cradle and set it on the table.

She was so good at it, that she had the guy who serviced the Rock-Ola juke box install a special hoochie-coochie record, and her trick consisted of Buck carefully filling a well-situated beer glass perched strategically within the valley of her expansive chest; then he would run to put a quarter in the juke box to play her music. As the record changed, and the hypnotic highs and lows of the flute rose through the first few scratchy tracks of the record, Sherry would arch her back slightly, extend her arms, wriggling her outstretched fingers and sway her fleshy hips slightly, enticingly, as if dancing a sort of hula; then she would turn slowly in the direction of the challenger's table and make her way, sliding provocatively, hips swinging to and fro slowly and suggestively, across the floor with the drink nested securely in the vale of her greatness; in the background, the rhythmic tune of a side-show snake charmer played and the red and yellow lights of the juke box flashed across the nicotine stained, pine paneled walls of the smoke-filled, old mobile home.

When Sherry arrived at the bettor's table, the challenging customer gently extracted the glass and it was set on the table, and she would curtsy to the customer then turn to the sparse crowd and, like a magician, she would hold her hands out and flash her palms

first up, then down, to show they were empty and the sparse crowd would applaud. Then Sherry would turn slowly back to the challenger, and she would deftly pluck the ten dollar from his still upheld hand, smile, and tuck the bill into its new home next to her heart.



Among the outlaws, her performance became a sort of analogy with its own "Huzzah!" meaningful only to the outlaws. It was often yelled loudly back at the farm whenever someone made a resurrection jump, or became a Cardinal, or did anything noteworthy in spite of their age or infirmities. Across the drop zone, in those times, you might hear the cries of "Sherry On!" as in "Carry On!" It became a salute to what an old broad like Sherry could do at her age as well as an acknowledgment, a sign of respect to every outlaw's willingness to flaunt their years and the rules.



Some of the outlaws made The Bo their unofficial place to hang out, maybe to eat some breakfast, which was mainly a menu of white bread toast, grape jelly from an open jar with a spoon in it, scrambled eggs, a few pieces of Jimmy Dean sausage or Spam or fried balogna and undercooked hash browns. If they ate lunch or dinner there, it was a choice of a hot dog boiled in dirty water with canned chili lavished on it, if you wanted, or a greasy cheeseburger garnished with wilted lettuce

and a slice of pallid tomato or chipped-beef on toast. On special nights, Sherry offered her special entrée, a luke-warm, open-faced roast beef and gravy sandwich made fresh from a can. Sherry's first marriage was to an ex-Army mess sergeant, and he had taught her how to make shit-on-a-shingle and it was delicious. Her cooking rarely ever gave anybody diarrhea. Rarely.



Except for Pat. He had been to The Bo last night and was still suffering some with loose bowels, so he had been up since just after sunrise and was in the hangar having made coffee in the big percolator that sat on the workbench. As the pot burbled and the strong aroma filled the hangar bay, Pat nervously pre-flighted the 180. He closely scrutinized every rivet, every hinge on every control surface; he unscrewed, time and again the engine's oil stick to check the engine's oil level. He looked over every safety wire tie. He stood at the wing tip and flexed the wings looking for any signs of buckling sheet metal along the wings surface, a signal that could indicate spar damage; there was no sign of distress whatsoever. He checked the tire pressure and the tail wheel springs. He drained the fuel sumps twice. Once he even laid his fingers aside his brachial artery in his neck to feel his elevated pulse.

With a grand total of 25 flight hours - 15 in the front seat of the clipped wing Cub with Greg flying as instructor, which Greg was not

- at least not a certified, tested by the F.A.A. Certified Flight Instructor; then he received 2 hours of stick time instruction in the Stearman with Chuck coaching him through the old bi-plane's intercom, and the remainder of the 25 hours was flying from the left seat of the 180 with Buzz as co-pilot and acting as yet another *ne officialis* instructor. He had a feeling Buzz was going to solo him this morning. Little did he know.



When the outlaws first began to gather at the farm, after the day's jumping had ceased and the fire was lit, Pat had often bemoaned the fact that he had never finished his training to get his Private Pilot's ticket so many years ago. Now with the Cub and the Stearman, both perfect trainers sitting on the field, unused most of the time, several of the outlaws suggested that as long as they were breaking all the rules anyway, why not get Pat up-to-speed so they would, at least, have another jump pilot? And so, the next morning, Greg put him in the front seat of the venerable Cub and talked him through a take-off.

Pat was a nervous but natural pilot. He remembered a great deal of his initial training that he received at his local airport just before his wife delivered their first child. Not being able to justify the expense when there was formula and diapers to buy, then the expense of raising yet one more child, and then saving for the impending college expense for two children, Pat not only stopped flying, he stopped

skydiving, as well, for the reason that his wife's first pregnancy was difficult. But the love of both things never left him. And when Cliff had called him and asked him if he wanted to join the Outlaws, Pat's wife gave him the nod, and much like Joanne had for Chuck, resigned herself to the potential dangers of the future. Their children were grown and Pat had become increasingly restless having exhausted any pleasure that sitting in a bass boat all day long or swinging at a golf ball might bring. She thought, he'll make a few jumps and get it out of his system and come home to stay.

But Pat continued to come to the farm as often as he could. The outlaws were refilling a long empty hole in his happiness, and he always returned home giddy and whistling waiting for the phone to ring to let him know that a date had been set for the outlaws to gather again. His wife had told him that he could go anytime the urge struck, but he had thought to himself that for her understanding and keeping her fears to herself, not being a drag on his fun, he owed her as much time as he gave to the resurgence of his hobbies. And he gave more. But when the flying lessons began at the farm, knowing the F.A.A. would never give him a medical again because of his heart, he decided to grab as much flight time as he could - especially because it was only costing him the price of fuel. So he would leave home on Friday nights, arriving at the farm late to sleep in his car and then drive back home late Sunday afternoon.

Buzz had told him last week-end that he was ready to solo him in the Cub soon. But Pat had a sneaking suspicion, knowing Buzz and his tendency to pull jokes on people, that he was going to pull something on him, but he wasn't sure what. At The Bo last night, just before Buzz headed back to the farm, he had told Pat to be up early and pre-flight the 180 because he had changed his mind and he wanted to give him a few more hours of instruction before soloing him. Pat agreed. Then he had one more chili dog and a few more beers before heading back to the farm himself. During the night, he trotted back and forth to the privy several times as the chili dog made its way through his system, but around four in the morning, he finally dug some Imodium out of his bag and took a handful. That calmed things down and he slept for an hour before the sunlight began to fill the car. Then he opened the car door, slipped his pants on along with his old Para Gear sweatshirt and headed for the hangar. Except for the 180, the hangar was empty, so he flipped on the light and fixed the coffee and set about pre-flying the Cessna.



Down the airfield, he began to hear the stirring of the other outlaws greeting the day. There was joking and complaints of hangovers and Joanne in the farmhouse yelling at Buzz to get the fuck out her kitchen and then yelling at Chuck to get Buzz the fuck out her

kitchen, all the usual things one would hear on a Saturday morning at the farm.

Then he heard the high rasp of a moped speeding towards the hangar from the last campsite down the field. It was Cliff who rode the chainsaw on wheels everywhere much to the consternation of almost everyone. In a minute, he slid the bike through the open hangar door and laid it on its side, still moving, as he stepped off it, saying loudly "GOOD MORNING! YOU FUCKING OXYGENARIANS!" then laughed his ass off. But suddenly, he looked at Pat, lowered his head like he was praying, put his hands together in front of face, mocking repentance, bowing quickly and repeatedly, he said, "OH! I *am* sorry master. I sense you were lulled by the charms of Lady Sherry and her humungous dancing tits last night, were you not?"

Pat just said, "Fuck you." and they laughed together.

"Got the shits?" asked Buzz as he walked through the hangar door.

"Nope." said Pat, then he sheepishly added, "Well, yes, a little."

"That'll teach you." said Chuck as he made his appearance just behind Buzz.

Then, a little mysteriously, Chuck, Buzz and Cliff all went into the equipment room together and shut the door behind them and left Pat just standing in the middle of the hangar nursing his coffee cup wondering what was going on.

In a minute, the three of them came back through the door. They all had their mains slung over their shoulders and were carrying

their reserves in their hands. Buzz had slipped on his white frap hat and had a grin on his face. Then Buzz said, "We need a pilot, Pat."

Pat let the coffee cup tilt a little spilling a few drops on the ground. "Me?!"

"Yeah! We elected you this morning. That is, if you're not too busy making shit house runs."

"You think...?" Pat said.

"We've got parachutes." said Cliff, "Just get us a few hundred feet off the ground."

"But, what if I ding it?"

"You won't." said Buzz. "And if you do, we'll fix it, if you don't die." Then Chuck added, "If you do die, we'll fix it anyway right after we dig you up and kill you again."

And everyone had a big laugh over that, except Pat, who just chuckled nervously.



So they pushed the 180 out of the hangar. Cliff, Chuck and Buzz finished putting their gear on as Pat was already in the pilot's seat waiting. Cliff and Chuck got on the floor in the back, and Buzz slid in on the floor on the co-pilot's side and sat with his back to the instrument panel. "Pretend we're not here." said Buzz looking up into Pat's face which seemed somewhat drawn and serious.

But something had clicked in Pat. The thought running through his mind was that these guys trusted him. They had all had a hand in training him. He thought that they would not have concocted this if they didn't believe he was capable. And with that thinking

as his mantle, Pat flipped the master on, gave the engine a shot of prime, pushed the mixture to full rich and turned the magnetos to "Both," pulled the starter handle, and the propeller began to turn, and the engine caught and ran. He eased the throttle forward, looked back at Cliff and Chuck who were smiling at him and they both gave him a thumbs-up.

Watching the windsock, it indicated to him that he needed to taxi to the far end of the runway and take-off from there. So he gave the engine more throttle and began his taxi run down the strip. As he passed the farm house, he saw Joanne standing outside waving at him; as he passed each campsite along the strip, the other outlaws stood in small knots and each man snapped to attention and smartly saluted him as he passed. At the runway's end, he turned the airplane upwind and stopped and did his run-up and magneto check. He looked back at Cliff and Chuck and then into Buzz's face. They all nodded and he pushed the throttle full forward and began his take-off run.

He never noticed the additional weight as the 180 gathered speed. Soon the tail lifted and then the weight came off the landing gear and the airplane was airborne. He let the airplane tell him what it wanted and he reacted as naturally as any experienced pilot might have. As the airplane broke ground, he realized that all three men with him were clapping and simultaneously whistling the "William Tell Overture," the Lone Ranger's theme, as loud as they could. Pat was beaming as he focused on flying the airplane but his concentration

suffered some as he looked over at the seven outlaws present all lined up along the runway with their pants down and their bare behinds flashing as he passed them climbing.



Buzz told Pat as they climbed to just give them 3,500 feet, that they would all get out on the same pass. Pat gave them four thousand feet having let Buzz throw a wind drift indicator at about 2,000 feet. With not much wind aloft, Buzz decide to just take the exit point out about an eighth of a mile. As they swung in on jump run, Buzz asked for few corrections and needed to coach Pat some as he was trying to give them banked turns. But he quickly got the hang of cross-controlling the airplane to deliver flat turns. Pat had gotten so busy that he had completely forgotten that in a few minutes, he would be solo in the airplane and would need to land with no else but himself at the controls.



On his knees now, looking straight down at the ground and then along the forward fuselage of the 180, Buzz flipped Pat quick course corrections and then he looked back at Cliff and Chuck on their knees and waiting. Buzz looked over at Pat and before Pat could stop him, Buzz reached under the yoke and switched the magnetos to "Off" and withdrew his hand appearing to take the keys. The engine immediately sputtered. Then he grinned

at Pat, yelled, "Adios, amigo!" and he dove head first out the door into free fall. Right on his back followed Cliff and Chuck who both simultaneously yelped "Yee-haw!" on the way out the door. And they were gone and it was very quiet with the propeller now dead stopped and staring through the windscreen at Pat. The only noise then was the sound of Pat's heart beating loudly in his ears. The wind noise from the open door, the wind that now swirled around his head, seemingly from all directions at once, rose to a crescendo.

Pat quickly gathered his wits and first he laughed out loud nearly manically then he drew quiet and began talking to himself. First, he reminded himself of something important.

"Okay," he thought, "I've got plenty of altitude. I can take my time. Okay." Then he thought, *"Shit. This is a hell of way to do my first solo."* And he cursed Buzz.

Then he said aloud, "Lean back. Take a deep breath." And he slowly drew air into his lungs.

More deep breaths over the next few seconds and he could feel his pulse slowing. He consciously un-tensed his legs and arms and took a long look outside the cockpit at the early morning landscape. For a few long seconds, he oddly allowed himself to be distracted by the orderly rows of orange trees in the far distance; long running emerald colored stripes in columns of twenties and thirty rows that stretched away and away, and he thought that someone could get lost in those groves.

But suddenly, a jolt of adrenalin caused him to take a sharp breath and focus on the

altimeter in front of him. The dial said, "2,850 feet! We must land soon! Do something!"

Pat instinctively kept an eye on his air-speed, not wanting to let the 180 stall, and he began to consider his options. His mind told him that the keys had gone out the door with Buzz, and the engine wasn't running because it wasn't starved for fuel or it had not suffered a catastrophic mechanical breakdown. But, in spite of that, every pilot has certain instinctive inviolable key lessons built in, nay, hammered into them by every flight instructor whether or not the instructor was, in truth, a certified representative of the F.A.A.

One of those lessons becomes a voice that takes command.

In Pat's case, the command, the order - loud, clear - was, "*Do a cockpit check! Do a panel scan! Do it now!*" Some pilots have said that when certain in-flight emergencies have occurred, they have actually heard the true voice of their best flight instructors: inflections, slang, dialect, tenor and tremor, as if the instructor had leaned over and had spoken in their ear.

So, hearing the voice, he immediately dropped his right hand down to his side, and he placed it on the fuel selector valve, then he looked at the selector handle which was positioned at "Both," meaning that the fuel was simultaneously being drawn from both the left and right tanks. "*Check!*" Then he raised his head and looked upwards, over the doors, left and right, at the fuel gauges to ensure that they showed fuel in the wing tanks; the quivering left needle was indicating one-quarter of

a tank; the right needle showed a needle width less. More than enough fuel remained. "Check!" Then he returned his eyes to the horizon ahead and saw that the nose was still slightly below the horizon; then he looked at the rate-of-climb indicator where the needle indicated a shallow descent of about 300 feet a minute. "Check!" Then he saw them as he turned his attention to the carburetor heat, throttle and propeller controls in the center console. *The keys were in the magneto switch after all!* But the switch was "Off."

"I'll be fucked." softly said Pat to himself. Buzz had faked it.

All it would have taken then to restart the engine would have been to make sure the master was "On," turn the magnetos to "Both," push the mixture in to "Full Rich," push the carburetor heat control to the panel and pull the starter handle. And the engine would have started.

But in the few minutes that the engine had been stopped, Pat's natural ability as a pilot had taken over and he decided to keep the 180 a glider and land it as a glider.

Pat was the sort of pilot who early in his training had quickly learned that airplanes, the larger percentage of them, will fly as long as they have the right relative airspeed across their wings. Dedicated gliders with their thin, long wings will even climb in the heat of a thermal, a rising shaft of warm air. The Wright Brothers first flew pure gliders, and then by adding a rudimentary motor, they flew an air machine, a powered airplane. Most airplanes are gliders first in principle, some better, some

worse without a running engine.

Pat had decided to turn the tables. He kept the descending canopies of Buzz, Chuck and Cliff in sight as they settled to the ground near the pea gravel. He doggedly determined that the trick played on him would cause them to sweat.

On the ground, Buzz was silent but looking skyward at the 180 with its still motionless propeller; a propeller which Pat had bumped to the horizontal position using just the starter motor. That's a sort of sign that a pilot knows he's going to land with a dead engine and if he's not very successful and he ground loops the airplane, skidding it sideways into a wing dragging slide and instant course reversal, or worse, nosing the airplane over onto its back, at least he might not bend the propeller and that might save stress on the engine's crankshaft. The sheet metal on the airplane might need fixing, but at least, hopefully, the engine will not need to be rebuilt.

Pat was now passing through 1,000 feet above the ground directly over the airstrip and holding a shallow left bank. "Shit," said Chuck, his vision fixated on the old airplane, "...he should seen them by now."

Cliff softly said, "Maybe we fucked up."

"God damn, Pat!" exclaimed Chuck, as he watched the airplane continue to lose altitude in the bank. "Look at the fucking panel, you asshole."

Then he looked at Cliff and Buzz who had turned their heads towards him, surprised. "WELL! Shit! All he's gotta do is look down at

the fucking panel!" snapped Chuck. "If he fucks up my airplane..."

Then the three grew silent. Everyone did; except for Joanne who was standing next to Chuck. "What did you guys do?" she softly insisted.

"In a minute!" said Chuck. Joanne didn't like being put off, but she decided to wait for the answer. She folded her arms across her chest and bit her lip slightly waiting to see what was going to happen. She felt her neck become flush.

Now, off in the distance, the 180 had turned final and Pat was lined up on the runway, ready to land. The airplane felt a little fast and a little high, so Pat dropped his hand to the flap handle and grasping it, he pushed the release button in with his thumb and slowly began adding flap to create some drag. But instead of releasing the button and locking the flaps in at ten degrees, the first notch, he kept his right hand on the handle with the button depressed and began using the flaps like an air brake; handle down when he didn't need the drag, pull it up some when he needed the drag. It was a technique that only instinctive high time pilots teach themselves or learn from someone who knows how to do it.

500 feet high now, one-quarter of a mile from the runways threshold, settling now like a Great Blue Heron, its wings extended, silently gliding down, following an invisible thread to the runway's end, the 180 was on a steady approach to the ground. At 250 feet above the ground and the landing all but made, Pat eased the flap handle back down and placed

his right hand in his lap, felt that only his toes touched the bottoms of the rudder pedals, held the yoke handle with only his thumb and the index and middle fingers of his left hand, a gentle touch so as to not over correct, reacting to the subtleties of a very light quartering wind on the nose.

There were ten people standing around and across the pea gravel target and if a pin had fallen, they would have heard it hit the ground. Buzz, Chuck and Cliff were not breathing. Just then a rooster crowed in the coop and Joanne jumped some looking in that direction, and when she turned her head back towards the 180, the airplane was hushing into a three point touchdown 30 yards past the threshold and with a solid, soft thud, Pat firmly put all three wheels in the grass simultaneously; as the airplane rolled forward, he slowly pulled the yoke fully back towards his chest; holding it there. He had brought the elevators full up to keep the tail down and just let the airplane roll, without braking, as he corrected its heading with delicate pushes on the rudder pedals left and right, left and right.

With Pat's successful landing made, there rose the cries of "Sherry On!" from all watching, except that is, for Chuck, Buzz, Cliff and Joanne who sighed in relief.

Joanne, standing at Chuck's side, thrust a gentle elbow into Chuck's ribs and demanded, "All right! What did you jerks do?"

"Buzz switched the mags off when we exited. But..."

"What?!" said Joanne, "*You did what!?*"

"It was Buzz's idea." said Chuck in a high

voice like a defensive child.

Joanne stepped around Chuck and slugged Buzz in the shoulder - hard.

"Wha...!?" exclaimed Buzz.

"Asshole!" said Joanne, her eyes flashing, her cheeks red. "ASSHOLE!"

Buzz started to laugh and she slugged him again harder and Buzz ran away a few steps, still laughing.

"Goddamn teenagers!" muttered Joanne.

Just then, Pat had reached a point on the runway adjacent to the pea gravel and with the last energy left in the still rolling airplane, he stood on the left brake, pivoted and turned towards the crowd and stopped. He allowed a few seconds to pass quietly for dramatic effect, then he reached down, turned the mags on, pulled the starter handle and the engine fired and the airplane sat idling, its propeller throwing off fine plumes of mist that had gathered on the propeller during the airplane's descent.

Cliff said, "I'll be a son-of-a-bitch."

"Yes, you are." said Joanne, "You all are."

After a long few seconds at idle, Pat turned the airplane in the direction of the hangar and taxied to its open door, gave the throttle a push and spun the airplane around, pulled the mixture out and turned the magnetos to off. As the propeller stopped turning, he pulled the keys from the switch, released the leg and chest straps of the emergency parachute he was wearing and he stepped out to the ground on slightly unsteady legs. Once his legs settled down, he walked out away from the door and began a long ramble towards the

pea gravel.

Half-way there, with the small crowd waiting, a few clapping, he stopped and went to his car. He opened the trunk and leaned in to retrieve a single case of Budweiser beer that he had stashed there. He tucked the case under his arm and walked to the waiting crowd.

Approaching the pea gravel, as calm as you please, he walked directly to Chuck, Buzz and Cliff who were standing together half-way expecting a fight, and he stopped in front of them and slowly placed the case of Budweiser at their feet, and then he took one step back.

Then Pat very formally said, "Gentlemen, I think the tradition dictates that the first of any deed performed or the loss of any ripcord requires of the perpetrator the penance of a case of beer. Buzz threw his back and laughed. Chuck and Cliff looked at each other, nodding their heads in agreement while shrugging their shoulders as in "He's right, you know."

Then Pat, still acting stiffly proper, continued his address saying, "I am sorry that I have only one case to give for the reason that I have just made my first solo and my first dead stick landing. But it will have to do." And he smiled broadly.

Buzz had stopped laughing and all those gathered around waited to hear what he would say next as Pat fished in his pocket and brought out the set of airplane keys, held them by two fingers at the end of his extended arm and then stepping forward, half kneeling, he gingerly laid them on the case of beer and he calmly said, "Perhaps, you may need the-

se."

And, as he stood erect, he looked at everyone gathered there and he said, loudly and resolutely, "We don't need no stinking NOTAMS!"

With that, everyone present had a great laugh and a few guys stepped forward to pat him on the back as he shook the hands of Chuck and Buzz and Cliff. Joanne walked up to him and kissed him on the cheek and whispered, "Good job, Pat!" and as she started walking back to house, she turned and glared sternly at the three culprits who were avoiding her eye contact.



Joanne's diary was telling.

"Dear Diary,

Today, that bunch of assholes could have killed Pat, but they didn't and they all laughed about it. And what makes it all so baffling, was that Pat wasn't even angry. Sometimes, I just don't understand men, especially jumpers and pilots. Put them together and they start acting like school boys. It makes me angry and yet I laugh with them. Is there something wrong with me?"

She had begun keeping the diary when Buzz first arrived. She knew jumpers. She knew pilots. She knew what they were like when they were together.



After Pat had landed and things settled

down, a few of the guys went back up and made a few more jumps. Pat stayed on the ground the rest of the day thinking that he had pushed his luck and would like to just spend some time reflecting on what he had done. In fact, he sought out Buzz and asked him to fly safety pilot so he get a few hours of Cub time.

Buzz congratulated him for being such a good sport about the whole shutting the magnetos off thing, but then Buzz asked him why he wanted more time with him. Pat laughed and said that he wanted to practice more dead stick landings, only with the engine idling, but landing never using its additional power. He liked the idea of pretending the airplane was without power and refining the techniques it took to land it accurately every time sans power. Buzz agreed and told him that Charlie, with his habit of doing dead stick landings whenever he visited, would be proud.

As it grew dark, everyone decided that it was time to get a fire going and break out the beer. Charlie had flown in and was going to overnight on the couch in the house. After supper, Chuck, Joanne, Buzz, Cliff and the entire bunch that had arrived Friday night were sitting around laughing about the joke on Pat. Jose' had been quiet most of the evening, just pensively nursing his beer and laughing now and then and said that he never wanted to see that many wrinkly old bare asses lined up along the runway again as long as he lived.

That drew peals of laughter. After a few hours, Joanne decided to head to bed and she

kissed Chuck on the cheek, saying, "Please don't do anything else stupid today." He smiled and patted her on the behind as she rose to leave for the house.

Once Jose' was sure that she was out of earshot, he waited on the conversation to lull, then he said, quite blankly, "Let's do a chicken pass tomorrow."

After a few seconds of silence had passed, Randy said, "Are you proposing what I think you are?"

Chuck said, "Leave me out of this. I want to live."

Everybody laughed except Eric who hadn't quite caught on yet saying, "A chicken pass?"

Randy said, "Yeah. We steal one of her chickens and do a pass with it, you know, like a baton pass, but with a chicken."

Eric said, "Oh, shit, what if we drop it?"

Jose' roared with laughter and said, "The damn things have wings, don't they?"

Eric said, "Yeah, but..."

Jose' cut him off saying, "Tell you what. Let's build a tiny harness and use that old rig out there and make a chicken canopy and hook that up to a static line to a simple pack. That way, after we pass it, whoever has it can just grab the static line and deploy the bird's rig when he deploys his own. Or he can just hang on to the chicken and land with it.

Chuck now had his head between his hands and lowered into his lap laughing his ass off mumbling, "She's gonna blame me, I just know it. Not only will she kill me, we'll never have sex again the rest of my natural life."

Buzz had gone off to take a leak and was just walking back into the light of the fire zip-ping up pants as everyone was chortling and making jokes about teaching chickens to sky-dive. "What's going on?" he asked.

"We're gonna to teach one of those chicken over there to skydive."

Buzz laughed and said, "That's perfect! Chuck is never gonna get laid again."

And a great howl rose into the air.



The next morning, Jose' was sitting at the Singer when Buzz, coffee cup in hand, walked into the equipment room.

"Wha'cha doin'?" asked Buzz.

"Making a Chicken-Commander." was Jose's singular reply.

"You do know that Joanne is going miss that chicken sooner or later, don't you?"

"Shit, man, she's got at least twenty out there. She can't keep track of all of them."

"She's got names for all of them." said Buzz.

"If it buys the farm, we'll suggest a fox drug one off."

"I'm telling you. Right after she makes Chuck confess, which he will, she's gonna take a broom to the rest of us."

Jose' kept sewing, pushing the remnant sections of an old, un-airworthy canopy through the foot of the Singer.

"I can run faster than she can." And the Singer continued to make its ratcheting sound as it rhythmically pushed the needle into the fabric.

Jose' stopped his sewing for a second and asked Buzz, "I need a design for the harness. What do you think? A single crotch strap and just something to fit around its body under its wings, sort of like a dog collar?"

Buzz, with his cup to his lips, snorted a laugh spitting some coffee on the floor and said, "Shit! That's funny. I never thought of a chicken having a crotch before!"

"Well, what would you call that area between their drumsticks?" said Jose' and he started laughing.

"Dark meat?" answered Buzz and that really set the two of them to laughing even harder.

Just then, Chuck and Pat walked through the door and asked what was so funny?

"Do chickens have 'crotches'?" said Jose'.

"Oh, shit." said Chuck as he peered over Jose's shoulder at the mini-parachute he was making. "We're really going to do this, huh?"

"Yup!" answered Buzz and Jose' nearly simultaneously.

So, after working on it most of the day, Jose had produced a simple harness made of tubular nylon, a chopped up old T-7A for a canopy and a small container made from a burlap bag he had found out in the hangar. The parachute was like a da Vinci design with just four sides and four suspension lines, but how much parachute would a chicken need? And everyone who saw Jose's creation reasoned that the chicken was going to be just fine and not even going to need a parachute anyway if the Great Chicken Pass was successful. After all, the whole idea of the pass

was that one jumper in free fall would pass the chicken to another jumper in free fall. And certainly, with two experienced jumpers performing the pass, the chicken would be just fine. No worries, right? A few of the guys even reasoned that chickens have wings and therefore if the chicken did somehow get loose during the jump, it could just fly to the ground. It would land safely, right? When the jump was over, they would sneak the chicken back into Joanne's flock and everything would be cool, right?



So it became a coordinated effort involving too many people to ever keep a secret. Since it was Jose's idea to begin with, he would have to steal the chicken when Joanne wasn't looking. Since she could see the coop from the kitchen window, someone would need to signal when she wasn't in the kitchen. That would be Chuck.

Then, Jose', after stealing the chicken would need to dash across the runway to the hangar, fit the harness to the chicken and slip it into the airplane unseen where the other jumpers, those who be making the pass, would be waiting, suited up, ready-to-go. Pat asked if he could fly the load and got permission.

So a great clandestine operation, which was aptly named, "Col. Sanders," the Great Chicken Pass was set for the following weekend.

Chapter Ten

It was the following Saturday morning. Operation Col. Sanders was on.

Late Friday night, after Joanne had gone to bed, the guys sat around the fire drinking beer and scheming. Everyone was concerned with one problem: the best time to steal the chicken. It would need to be well after breakfast, so that Joanne might be concerned with other things or doing chores around the house, some activity where she would be well out-of-sight of the coop.

It was agreed that Chuck would begin dropping vague hints to distract her right after breakfast. Perhaps something was needed at

the grocery store? Joanne was always up to get in the car and go somewhere. The problem was that Saturdays weren't usually her shopping days as she preferred to be around when the gang was skydiving. Chuck felt a little guilty about trying to pull the wool over Joanne's eyes, but skydivers are not known for letting little things like shame or being sexually denied get in the way of doing something stupid. He assured everyone that he would drop some hint and when she was occupied, once the coast was clear, he would step to the screen door and wave and the operation would begin. Then he said, if a problem arose, he would start flashing the porch light on-and-off which could be seen up and down the airstrip and everyone should just wait until he gave the all clear wave again.

Since it had been Jose's idea to make the chicken pass in the first place, he was chosen to make the grab. Then he would then make the run from the coop to the airplane where Pat and Cliff and Buzz would be ready to crank up and go. They argued good-naturedly about what their exit altitude would be. Cliff and Buzz wanted to go high, at least 7,200 feet, so they could get a thirty second delay out of the jump. Of everyone there, for the time being, they were the best relative workers having made a few hook-ups in recent weeks. As relative work was a skill they had not practiced in many years, their attempts were actually more akin to a game of aerial bumper cars, but they had managed several short-duration hook-ups lately and that made them the most qualified of all of the outlaws.

Everyone else either had not jumped in many years and were only making clear-and-pulls, or were planning to jump soon and were just hanging out, opting not to jump yet but just be with their friends.

Jose' had a question or two as he pulled the tab on a beer can.

"Which chicken should I take?" he asked.

"Dude! A chicken is a chicken. Just get the nearest one to the gate." said Arvel, a bit snappishly.

Chuck obviously wasn't listening when the question was asked. And he wasn't the only one. Either that or no one there knew a damn thing about chickens.

"Grab the biggest one you can find." said Buzz, "I want one big enough to hang on to when I exit."



The plan had changed some since its conception.

Now the plan was that Buzz and Cliff would make the jump, that's true. Buzz would exit first and Cliff would follow right on his heels. Jose' had made a rig that did sort of resemble a dog's harness; one that could be slipped on the chicken quickly. It had a loop that fit over the chicken's head and around its neck, and that was connected to a belly band with a Velcro closure, one that went around the chicken's body and under its wings. The parachute container was merely a small bur-lap sleeve and it was closed with break cord, and the apex of the handmade four corner

canopy was tied to the static line with break cord as well. The little canopy's suspension lines were attached at a single point on the harness. Jose' had used a few bricks tied together with twine to test drop the rig from a tall ladder behind the hanger a few times. The ladder wasn't quite high enough and the "test chicken" was barely getting line stretch before it hit the ground. But Jose' wasn't worried. The rig was very simple and would open just fine, he figured. The static line had been fashioned from an old roll of tubular nylon Jose' had found in a box under the work bench while rummaging around the equipment room.

On exit, Buzz would tuck the chicken under his arm and control his free fall with his other arm. Then as soon as possible after exit, Cliff would swoop down into position in front of Buzz, and Buzz would hand him the chicken. Then Buzz would then hook the static line to Cliff's harness. That way, if Cliff should drop the chicken when he opened, the chicken's parachute would open by static line and the chicken would float safely to earth. Everyone thought the entire sequence wasn't too complicated. But, secretly, everyone but Buzz, Cliff and Jose' thought the chicken was going to die.



So around the fire Friday night, Cliff and Buzz used a half-inflated football as a chicken and they practiced passing the "bird," "dirt-diving" the jump, as it were, over and over again only occasionally getting carried away

and throwing and dropping the football in the dark to cheers of "Sherry On!" They would pretend to exit the airplane with the football-chicken and counting out loud, acting as if free falling, they would, very seriously, meet up in a kind of ground ballet, imitating their hand-off and pretending to hook up the static line. Their times and precision were entirely relevant to the amount of beer they had consumed as the night wore on. The dirt diving and beer drinking eventually gave way to just sitting across the fire from one another and throwing the football back and forth. By then, the "chicken" had lost all of its air and the game ended when the football accidentally fell in the fire and no one bothered to retrieve it. Around 11:30 that night, they all agreed that the dirt-dives had given them the needed amount of proficiency the jump required. It was also agreed that Col. Sanders would be the first jump of the day on Saturday if Jose', Buzz, Cliff and Pat weren't too hung over and they could all get to the hangar at approximately some time before noon.



The farm was like a week-end Disneyland to the outlaws. By the time that Operation Col. Sanders had been conceived, the group's number had grown to 14 members. Some, like Buzz and Hank, had become pretty much full-time residents there. They had come to respect Chuck and Joanne's privacy and quiet time, usually hanging out in their respective camp sites and parking spots until they saw Chuck

appear over at the hangar in the mornings. The original plan that everyone would be notified by phone when the drop zone would be open had gone by the wayside.

Instead, week-ends resembled nearly every old time parachute club across America. Friday afternoons and into the evenings, the gate could be heard clanging shut and there would be headlights coming down the dusty road towards the air strip. Nearly every week-end, late Friday evening, the throaty growl of Rick's Fat Boy could be heard in the distance and in the morning, the motorcycle and its tiny trailer would be parked alongside the hangar and Rick would be snoozing on the ground outside if it wasn't raining, or in the 180 if it was, curled up and snoring in his sleeping bag.

Nearly every week-end now, by the time the sun was rising in Saturday morning's sky, the drop zone and airstrip had a small collection of cars and pick-up trucks pulled up around the hangar and there would be at least eight people standing around or sitting on the hangar's sandy floor drinking coffee and maybe a few were sitting on sleeves stowing lines and packing parachutes.

In many ways, coming through the farm's gate was like a visit back in time. Over the loudspeaker that had been rigged, Steppenwolf was performing "Magic Carpet Ride" or the detested "MacArthur Park" might play to a chorus of jeers and boos and laughter from everyone present. Whoever was in charge of the music that day would play it just to piss everyone off.

As guys drove up and got out of their vehicles, you could see the week before on their faces, but the more the small group grew in members, as people showed up at the drop zone where waves were exchanged or hands were shook, you could also see faces brighten and postures ease. There was an eagerness to catch-up; a visible sense of renewal seemed to permeate the air strip. Since the beginning, as the weeks passed, and those weeks became months, old bonds seemed to grow stronger and new ones were formed. There were jump stories told and memories shared and a phenomenon grew larger. Joanne had noticed it first: youthfulness had set in on most of the outlaws. At first, some walked in a stooped-over limping gait; some had grown large in the midsection; eyes had bags beneath them; groans and grunts could be heard when standing or even sitting.

For the most part now, all the outlaws who arrived on the week-ends were cheerful and laughing as child might at the gates of the Magic Kingdom; eager to see their friends and spend the next few days immersed in the companionship and what Saturday and Sunday might hold. No one went home on Saturday nights. People either slept in their cars, or in pup tents, or on the worn-out couch in the hangar. Some like Hank and Buzz had their campers. A few flew their airplanes in and they slept under the wings.

The nights around the fire were not always the rowdy affairs of their youths; there was, in the beginning, some of that, a few streakers, a few practical jokes were played, but as time

passed, there settled in a sense of calm and peace among the outlaws. Men rose from their packing mats on the ground without halting and steadying themselves; they threw Frisbees and crawled in and out of airplanes without groans or complaints of pain; they drank gustily, even Chuck, who seemed not the least bothered by alcohol anymore; they laughed at everything; the spring in their step had returned.

They all knew what the potential price could be for their lawlessness, what with the flaunting of the regulations and all. But the things that tied them all together were simple: it was their right as human beings not to be told what they could or could not do. And they had a right to grow old in any manner they wished. And that one big thing they wanted to do beyond enjoying the settled pleasure of each other's company was to find gratification in the sky. Their vow to one another was that they would, as long as they could, if their bodies held up and the law didn't cuff them, keep the air above them as their playground and their domain. It was the one place they all shared as home; it had made their youths rich and now it was making their waning time a treasure.



Saturday morning dawned bright and clear; the usual Florida coastal cumulus clouds were nowhere to be seen. Chuck was already in the hangar and standing on a step stool looking into the oil hatch on the 180's

cowling.

From behind him, Pat who had quietly strode in, said "What'cha looking for?"

"Nothing really." said Chuck, "I just like to make sure everything I can see looks copasetic."

In the next second, Pat had a fuel tester in his hand and was drawing a sample from the gascolator. "Looks good to me." he said as he held it up to the light, "No water there." Then he moved to the tank drain under the right wing.

"Thanks." said Chuck. "You ready to haul a chicken?"

Pat laughed out loud and then held his hand to his mouth to stifle any further noise.

"She's not around." Chuck said as he stepped down from the stool and pulled it away. "She's still washing up the breakfast dishes. She told me that after she makes the bed, she was going to head up to her sewing room and start making some new curtains."

Pat smiled but said nothing as he pushed the tester into the wing drain.

"We'll let her get into that a little while before we take the chicken up." said Chuck.

About that time, Buzz, Cliff and Jose' came walking in the hangar together.

"Twenty bucks!" said Jose'.

"Bullshit. You're on!" said Buzz.

"What the hell you guys talking about?" asked Chuck.

"Jose' bet me twenty bucks that I'd either drop the chicken or we wouldn't make the pass."

"Each count?" asked Pat.

"Yep!" said Jose', "I'm going to make a fast \$40 bucks today." And he threw his head back and loosed that forced, high-pitched laugh he did when he thought he was being funny. Then he said, "These two old geezers are going to fuck this up so-o-o bad. Anybody else on?"

Chuck said, "Oh, what the fuck. I'll take that action. Fact is, I'll up it. \$50 each count. You on, wetback?"

"Wait a minute, gringo."

And with that, Jose' pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and looked into it. After a second rifling through the bills in it, he said, "Fuckin' A! You're on."

Chuck smiled and said, "Done."

Pat said, "Damn, I'm glad I'm just flying. Then he said, "Wait a minute. I've got another one."

Everybody stood silent waiting to see what he was going say.

"I'll bet everybody here that Jose' gets caught stealing the chicken."

"Put your money where your mouth is." And with that, Jose' pulled \$25 out of his wallet and placed it up on the cowlings. Pat reached in his back pocket, pulled his out his nylon wallet and after unpeeling the Velcro closure, he drew out a twenty and a five and slapped the money on top of Jose's money. "Done!"

Jose' was the only one to take that bet.



Normally Chuck would finish his eggs and coffee and scoot his chair back from the table;

then he would walk over to Joanne washing dishes at the sink, grab her from behind, wrap his arms around her, give her a hug and kiss her on the neck before gently patting her behind and vanishing out the door for the hangar. But before leaving for the hangar this morning, he unconsciously began to hover.

That was Joanne's word for it - "hovering." Whenever he had something on his mind, Chuck would hover. He might just get another cup of coffee and stand around sipping on it while Joanne finished cleaning the dishes or wiping down the stove. He wouldn't say anything. Just sip. Or he might sit back down and drum his fingers on the table. Whatever his reason for it, he had something he wanted to say; perhaps he wanted to go fishing by himself, maybe go down to the river to crab, or he wanted to spend more money on airplane parts; whatever it was that preoccupied him, he would always begin hovering before speaking. It was a kind of a building up of courage to speak or act. Joanne didn't care if he went fishing or crabbing or spent money on the airplane, but he thought she might and that would cause him to wonder what she might say to his wishes. He had a built-in guilty conscience that way, even if there was nothing to be guilty about.

But this morning before he left for the hangar, he began hovering some and Joanne had not said a word, but she knew something was up. She could feel it. But she went about her business and pushed her concern aside. She felt as if Chuck was watching her; but shortly, she said she was going to make cur-

tains, and relieved that he didn't have to drop any diversionary hints, he immediately said he'd be out at the hangar and he kissed her on the cheek and walked out the door.

She smiled to herself as she headed up the stairs to her sewing room thinking that he had a way of finding things to surprise her; sometimes it was small gift of fine chocolate, which she purely loved, or it might be a special plant or a flower that he'd found down by the river that he would present her with at lunch. She assured herself that was why he was hovering as she sat down at her sewing table and began shearing cotton cloth with her scissors.



At the hangar, Cliff and Buzz had set their gear out and were ready to help Pat push the 180 out of the hangar.

Chuck figured that enough time had passed now. So he told everyone to get ready and he walked back over to the house carrying a rake, so that he could pretend to be cleaning up pine needles if Joanne suddenly appeared before the guys could get the chicken rigged up and take off. Down the airstrip at one of the campsites, the rest of the week-end's outlaws were waiting while attempting to look preoccupied, peering under the raised hood of a pick-up truck or just sitting around in their lawn chairs. A few were attempting to play hackey-sack which, at their age, looked more akin to two guys trying to stomp out a brush fire with their bare feet.

When Chuck got to the house, he gingerly opened the screen door, trying to eliminate the squeak of its hinges. He didn't go in. He simply leaned far enough in that he could listen for the noise of the sewing machine upstairs. He could hear its muffled rhythmic thump against the floor as Joanne pumped the treadle. He stepped back out and waved furiously at the hangar and the guys.

Seeing Chuck wave, Jose' immediately began a sprint towards the coop. The coop was basically a wood frame affair covered in chicken wire all around with one very flimsy door made of weathered two-by-fours. When Jose' took off, Cliff and Buzz began slipping on their gear. Pat crawled up into the pilot's seat of the 180 and fastened the quick ejectors on his emergency parachute. Cliff and Buzz then went to stand on the lee side of the 180 at the open door of the airplane, which was positioned away from sight of the house.

During his all out dash to the coop, right in the middle of the runway which was still a bit wet with the morning dew, Jose's foot slipped and his left knee went "pop!" His long-healed sheared ligament had torn loose again and a pain signal shot up his thigh, entered his sciatic nerve, rocketed up his spine and followed the path of the medulla oblongata, exploding in his brain like July fireworks, and he yelped a muffled cry as he tumbled across the ground seeing nothing but brilliant sparkling stars in front of his eyes.

Ever committed to his compatriots and Operation Col. Sanders, Jose' mustered great strength, blinked his eyes several times to

clear his vision and valiantly struggled to his feet and continued to imitate running, half-limping, half-hopping towards the coop dragging his injured leg like a shuffling Quasimodo. It struck him then that he still had to get the damned chicken and run back to the airplane with it. "Shit! Shit!

Shit!" he muttered under his breath. Then as he breathlessly approached the coop door, while Chuck stood watching from the porch and nearly gagging trying not to laugh out loud, Jose weirdly thought to himself that he was about to lose his bet with Pat. "Fuck!" he said very loudly - forgetting that Joanne was sewing just upstairs - as he reached the coop's gate.

You may remember, dear reader, that I had earlier said that no one there knew a damn thing about chickens and here is the result of that:

When Jose' reached the coop's gate, out-of-breath, nearly blinded by the excruciating pain in his knee, determined not to lose a bet, he appeared there looking like an enraged gorilla charging out of the mist, spittle flying from its mouth and bellowing "Fuck!" as he snatched the door open. One second, twenty chickens and one very protective rooster were serenely scratching away at the loose sand on their happy savanna, calmly looking for the odd six-legged snack to further the day's egg production.

The next second, with what was, for all intents-and-purposes, World War Three charging into their happy home, every last one of those chickens exploded into a clucking,

squawking, screaming panic of flying feathers with spooked birds skittering in every direction.

A few who leaped into the air made it all the way into the lower scraggly branches of a Black Jack oak tree which stood in the middle of the coop. All, that is, except for the rooster who stood his ground, defiantly erect, his inflamed red combs standing on end, his long elegant tail feathers waving like multi-colored battle flags, his head cocked, his one threatening eye glaring, ready for a donnybrook, and his was the first neck Jose's hand found.

What Jose' snatched up was a handful of angry hurt. Screeching and squawking, its wings flapping wildly, the enraged rooster began an all out attack, its spurs digging away at Jose's body as Jose' whirled around and headed back for the airplane; in the process, forgetting to pull the coop gate closed.

As he ran back, using a sort of hop-skip-hop-skip trying to stay off his knee, Jose was able to get both of the rooster's wings under his arms, while holding it tightly to his stomach. He looked like a gimped-up running back going for a touchdown.

Upstairs, Joanne had heard the ruckus and began running down the stairs towards the porch door. Chuck was standing half-in, half-out of the door, still stifling his laughter while his hand was poised at the light switch. With Jose' now half way across the runway on his way back to the airplane, Chuck felt a gentle hand fall across his shoulder and the soft words came to his ears, "Don't you move a muscle, buster. He's mine!"

Joanne turned and opened the broom closet door in the entrance hallway and extracted a large straw broom hanging from a nail inside the closet. Then she shoved Chuck out the door and stood at his side quietly and calmly as Jose' disappeared around the nose of the airplane heading for Cliff and Buzz, who were all suited up and waiting with the harness. Then Joanne leaped off of the porch and began a dash across the yard and onto the runway towards the waiting airplane.

At the door of the airplane, Cliff and Buzz and Jose' struggled with the rooster who was not being at all cooperative and had bloodied Jose' up pretty well with his slashing spurs. With his hands wet and sticky from the blood that oozed down his forearms, Jose was finally able to close the Velcro on the harness and Buzz tucked the bird tightly under his arms and shooched as far back in to the airplane's cabin as he could. Cliff followed and was sitting in the door with his feet on the step of the airplane as Pat, who had been completely absorbed watching the trio trying to get the bird harnessed, flipped on the master and the mags, and then he reached for the starter handle. As he did, he looked up and he saw her!

Joanne, her eyes flashing, her face flushed, stood directly in front of the airplane, her legs apart, her broom held at high port arms across her chest like a soldier ready to make a bayonet thrust. She glared at Pat, who had slumped in his seat some, and she made a fast slashing motion across her throat with one hand.

Pat said, "U-m-m, guys, I think we're screwed."

"What!" said Buzz.

Cliff said nothing.

Jose' tried to run but his injury slowed him down as Joanne approached the airplane and began wildly flailing away at the first target she saw. The first strike hit Jose' squarely in the back knocking him to the ground. He rolled over cradling his knee with both hands grimacing in pain.

"Give me back my god damn chicken!" Joanne screamed at them as she moved towards the open door of the airplane with Buzz and Cliff now cowering back in the far corner of the cabin.

"GIVE IT!" she demanded as she leaned in the door. Meanwhile, Pat, trying vainly not to laugh, was frozen, pressed against the left-hand door with nowhere to run or hide.

The rooster, seemingly exhausted, was softly whimpering muted clucks up under Buzz's arm and for the moment, had stopped thrashing. As Joanne dropped her broom and leaned in to retrieve the rooster, it suddenly exploded to life and headed for the open door, of course, still wearing its miniature parachute. Joanne grabbed for it but missed, and it hit the ground running with Joanne following. But the bird was too fast and it disappeared into the palmetto thickets behind the hangar.



Chuck, on the other hand, now had his

own problems. He had leapt off the porch to follow Joanne and as he did, out of the corner of his eye, he saw chickens; a lot of them; brown ones, red ones, white ones, who had all, it seemed, found the open coop door and freedom. They were flooding the yard and scrambling in various directions. The other outlaws, who, at first, were frozen in disbelief when they saw Joanne attack Jose', ran to the aid of Chuck who was very unsuccessfully attempting to run down the loose birds.

So the picture was that of eight or nine old men all chasing down squawking, very fast moving chickens in various directions across the yard, the airstrip and the pea gravel, while an infuriated woman was thrashing four old men cowering near an airplane with a broom. And about that time, Charlie had turned final a half-a-mile out in his red Pawnee intent on making his usually unannounced screaming low pass across the field. Fortunately, he spotted the men and the chickens zipping to-and-fro across the runway and the drop zone, and he decided to just circle the field at about four hundred feet until he could figure out what the hell was going on.

Add to all of that, down the sandy road, a black sedan carrying two men wearing grey suits - a sedan sporting U.S. Government license plates - had just pulled up to the gate.

Chapter Eleven

Julian and Roger sat in their car at the gate and read the signs. The one on the right read, "Leave It at The Gate!" The one on the left read, "Private!"

"Leave what at the gate?" said Roger. They looked quizzically at one another and shrugged their shoulders before Roger opened his door and got out. There was no lock on the gate, just a chain loosely wrapped around a wooden post to keep the gate shut. He looked at Julian sitting behind the car's steering wheel, peering over the rims of his sunglasses which were pushed down to the tip of his nose, and Julian silently nodded, "Go ahead." Then Roger unwrapped the chain and pushed the gate open wide enough so that the car could pass through.

Overhead, the fading drone of Charlie's Pawnee caught Julian's attention and he leaned far enough over the steering wheel to peer upwards through the windshield to just get a glimpse of the airplane as it circled back towards the air strip. Roger slid back into his seat, shut his door, and asked Julian, "Ready?" Julian said, "Rog." And he accelerated slowly forward.

"That's Charlie." said Julian.

Roger laughed and said, "I know. I figured he'd be around here somewhere."

"It'll be good to see the old guy again." said Julian. "I wonder how old he is now."

"Got to be at least 90 by now."

Julian laughed, more of a ironic grunt, really than a laugh, and he said, "I'm glad to see him still at it. I never agreed with them taking his medical."

"Yeah. Me neither." said Roger.

As the farmhouse and the hangar began to come into view, Julian said, "Ready to shake some folks up?"

Roger really laughed at that before saying, "We ought to have our asses kicked, you know?"



Charlie had not noticed the car coming down the road when he decided to land. The airstrip was clear of people chasing chickens now, but he decided set-up a long final to land at the far end of the strip in a normal fashion and slow down early in case someone darted out on the runway ahead. As he flared and gently braked to slow his roll-out, he looked to the right of the Pawnee's nose and saw Chuck, Buzz, Cliff and Pat scrambling back and forth out in the palmetto scrub, heads down, obviously looking for something. Laying in front of the hangar, flat on his back was Jose'. Joanne was marching briskly back towards the house with a broom in her hands. Charlie had no idea as to what was going on as he taxied off to the side of the runway and shut the airplane's engine down. Once the propeller stopped turning, he slipped his shoulder harness off and began climbing out of the cockpit.

Just arriving at the hangar was the black sedan, and seeing that, Charlie nearly climbed back in the cockpit. Then he recognized the driver of the car. The sunglasses were the give-a-way. He chuckled to himself and thought this was going to be good.



Having put the broom back in the closet,

Joanne, in a very determined fashion, turned to go back outside, and she slammed the screen door shut behind her and walked over to the coop's gate where some of the outlaws were busy herding chickens. Arvel was the first to speak. "We didn't do nothing."

"I know that!" barked Joanne, still angry and nearly on the verge of tears. "Please, just help me get them all back in." Arvel answered that they would, and he yelled, "Com'on guys!" at the others who were heading back towards the coop, each with a bird tucked under their arm or cradled against their chest. Joanne stood at the gate waiting as the guys each gently placed their catches on the ground and turned back towards the campsites.



No one wanted to go near the hangar for two reasons: The first was that the morning's guilty parties were still there and everyone knew this wasn't over yet. The second reason was the sight of the black sedan pulling up. Just its color made it seem ominous. Especially since the two people - both appearing to be in their late sixties - who were getting out of it were wearing nearly identical grey suits, white shirts, thin ties and black, low quarter shoes, and they looked official. No one was quite sure as to what kind of "official" they might be. So they all gathered around the ashes of last night's fire, some sitting on logs, others in lawn chairs and everyone waited remaining silent.

A few guys did say "Hey!" to Charlie as he

ambled by slowly on the way to the hangar. Tom and Hank were standing together as Charlie walked up to them and asked, "What's happening?"

Tom and Hank simultaneously laughed nervously and then Hank said, "Failed chicken pass."

Tom, trying not laugh, added in a hushed tone, "*Badly* failed chicken pass."

"The chicken escaped!" said Hank, trying to muffle a laugh but it was no use and the two of them lost it. As Tom and Hank were all but holding their sides guffawing, Charlie said, "Quick! Tell me what happened." And they did. Then Hank said, "And I think the chicken called the F.A.A." And with that, Kelly whispered loud enough for everyone to hear, "We don't need no stinking NOTAMS!" and nine people burst into laughter.

"Okay, shit, guys, let's shut the fuck up." Hank admonished everyone, attempting a failed effort at some sense of decorum, before Kelly said, "Is there such a thing a NOTAM for falling chickens?" and that set everyone, including Charlie into further peals of laughter.

As Charlie listened, while trying vainly to regain his composure, out of the corner of his eye, he was watching what was happening over at the hangar. Chuck had seen the sedan pull up and watched as the two gentlemen got out; he stopped looking for the rooster to go see who they were.

Charlie continued to watch the events at the hangar as he half-listened to Tom and Hank as they articulated the morning's show in a very animated fashion with a lot of waving

of hands. As Charlie stood nodding his head up and down at the details, he saw one of the men reach into his inner breast pocket, as did the other man, and they were each holding up something that appeared as ID cases for Chuck to inspect. Chuck seemed to be peering very closely at one man's identification. In a moment, they returned their cases to their pockets and continued speaking with Chuck.

Having seen the sedan themselves, Pat, Cliff and Buzz were standing, actually hiding, now at the rear of the hangar out of sight of the two visitors, but within the sight of the other outlaws and Charlie over at the fire pit. Joanne had seen the car pull up and watched as the men got out and approached Chuck, but she was busy seeing to her upset chickens, and she didn't particularly give a damn who they were or what they wanted.



The identification cards read, "United States of America. Department of Transportation. Federal Aviation Administration." The gold badges were stamped, "Federal Aviation Inspector."

As Roger closed his ID case, he said, "Chuck, I'm Roger Ward and this is Julian Walker. We're with the Jacksonville Flight Standards District Office."

Chuck felt a mild surge of adrenalin but that quickly subsided as he took a long, deep, nearly imperceptible breath and slowly allowed it to escape. His first reaction was to be defiant, wanting to tell them that this is pri-

vate property and without a warrant of some kind, they had no right to be here. This wasn't a public airport and that they just couldn't walk in and start asking questions or making demands to see log books, aircraft records, licenses and so-on. But wisdom prevailed, and he quickly decided the best defense was no defense at all and the less fuss made the better. He decided to be nonchalant. Agreeable.

"It's nice to meet you both." said Chuck. "What brings you guys out this way?"

"Oh..." said Julian, "...we heard some things were happening here and we thought we'd take a ride and just have a look-see."

"Well, welcome to my little paradise in the scrubs."

And Chuck smiled broadly hoping to be as off-putting and suave as possible. "How about a glass of iced tea? I'm sure the wife could rustle..." Then it hit Chuck that this was no time to ask anything of Joanne. "Let me go see if she's got some made. Have a look around. Make yourselves at home."

Something told Joanne that the two gentlemen were not good news, and she decided to forget about the rooster for the time being and she began walking towards the hangar. Buzz, Cliff and Pat had all sat down and were leaning against the hangar wall, still out of sight, straining to hear what was being said out front. Jose' had seen the car coming and had quickly hobbled into the equipment room to hide and was laying on the work bench, still in pain.

As Joanne began walking towards the hangar, Charlie told Hank and the others to

stay where they were for the time being, and he began walking briskly towards the hangar.

"You guys jumping here today?" asked Julian.

Roger and Julian were going to have a little fun with the outlaws. But not too much.

Chuck said that they hadn't planned on jumping today.

He went onto say that he and his friends, all old jumpers and pilots were just hanging out and they were all going down to the river to do some crabbing a little later in the day. The thought in his mind was that if the airplanes weren't flying and nobody was jumping, then nobody was doing anything that they shouldn't be doing - technically.

Charlie had decided that it might be a tad on the cruel side if he let the joke go on, and he was worried that tempers might flare, so he sped up his pace towards the small group standing in front of the hangar. He and Joanne arrived at the same time. Her face was still a bit flushed but she was smiling and about to reach out to shake the gentlemen's hands and welcome them when Charlie said, "Chuck, Joanne, I want you meet some friends of mine."

"We've just met." said Chuck.

"No. No. You haven't." interrupted Charlie.

Chuck looked at Charlie blankly. Joanne overheard that and she decided to drop her hand and step back for the moment to hear what Charlie might say next. She then walked to Chuck's side opposite the two men in suits and was silent. "Guys, this is my wife, Joanne." said Chuck. Then she reached out to

shake their hands. They reciprocated and as they did Charlie interjected, "They are friends of mine."

"Show 'em, Roger." said Charlie.

Roger laughed, as did Julian, and Roger extracted his ID case from his breast pocket again and fished a small white card from it. He handed the card to Chuck to read. Printed on it were the words,

"Rumbleseat Cardinal Buff."

Roger then proudly said, "We are original Hermosa Beach Cardinals."

Roger studied the card closely barely believing what he was seeing. He knew the holder of one of those cards was a jumper and a very old jumper at that. It was as if he'd been shown the secret password to an exclusive society, one that existed in ancient times like the Knights Templar.

Then, in a stunning surprise, Julian produced his - an exact duplicate of Roger's card - from his ID case and handed it to Chuck and said, "We're like you, sort of outlaws, but a different kind."

Chuck leaned forward to peer at Julian's card which Julian proudly held high and close to Chuck's face. Julian then turned slightly and held it up for Joanne to study. As she looked at it, a broad smile came over her face and the tension left her body.

Then in another astonishing twist, Charlie cleared his voice loudly, "A-hem!" Chuck and Joanne's heads turned simultaneously in his

direction where he stood beaming, his Rumbleseat card held in front of his face; a face which was lit by a certain, "Got'cha!" kind of smirk.

Chuck and Joanne were both struck speechless as Roger began to explain. Charlie stood by closely and shook his head empathically as Roger spoke.

"Chuck, we know exactly what's up here, the same as we did when Charlie owned the place."

He asked for a few minutes of uninterrupted time to explain. Chuck nodded okay.

"Chuck, there are as many outlaws in the F.A.A. as there are outside of it. Only we don't refer to ourselves as "outlaws." We prefer to think more in terms of "guardians."

Julian jumped in, "Most of us that consider ourselves guardians are old jumpers and pilots."

Roger picked it up, "There is an unspoken clique of inspectors who agree on several things. One of those things is that many of the rules the F.A.A. wants enforced are absurd breaches of common sense. Those of us who are guardians know that the last thing that the little guy who flies or jumps for fun wants to do is to kill himself or hurt anyone else."

Julian added quickly, "The people we need to regulate are those who stuff hundreds of ignorant souls into an aluminum tube, feed them a handful of free peanuts and then fly them from A to B at 35,000 feet above the ground, and make money off it. So much money that they can buy the insurance it takes to cover their ass when something

breaks and they lose one of the tubes and all the souls in it."

Chuck's jaw was a bit slack as he listened to something that he had never heard in his entire time as a pilot or jumper; especially given that what he was hearing was coming from the mouth of anyone connected with the F.A.A.

"In all the time that Charlie's outlaws operated out of here, we kept his ass covered," said Roger. "And the only caveat we had with him, and it's the same for you, was don't kill anybody. Have all the fun you want. But keep it safe."

Julian said, "We were powerless to stop his medical from being renewed because we are not with the Flight Surgeon's office. We wish it could have been different."

Charlie said, "I miss the doing the shows."

"We know," said Roger, "But at least, as long as you stay close to us, the other guardians in the office will keep you covered."

Joanne was as stupefied as Chuck was. She then said, "How long have you guys been doing this?"

"There have been guardians even before the F.A.A. was called the F.A.A."

"Really!?"

"Yes, ma'am. Even back in the late Twenties, when the Department of Commerce ran things, even before the Civil Aeronautics Board that came later, there were small groups of inspectors who believed that if anyone seriously tried to enforce some of the rules about maintenance and licensing, all the little guy pilots and the people that just wanted a

low cost way to fly would be destroyed and kept out of the sky. It's been the same for jumpers in a way, what with the advent of rising litigation and the increasing costs of insurance and needing to adhere to stringent regulations."

Julian then said, "A lot of us feel that the simple act of putting on a parachute and jumping out of an airplane had gotten so wrought with rules that the last thing we wanted to do was to become just another thorn in everyone's side. So we turn a blind eye. No one can tell us to write up what we choose not to see."



It had been too much for Cliff, Buzz and Pat to withstand and they were starting to feel like cowards for not being at Chuck's side if he was getting busted by the feds, so they decided to come out of hiding and walk around front of the hangar. None of them knew what to expect.

They had all sheepishly appeared in the background and stood listening to what Roger and Julian were saying. Cliff noticed the small white card in Julian's hand and motioned to see it. Wide-eyed after looking at it, he held it up so that Buzz and Pat could see. Buzz understood perfectly well what it meant. His eyes grew large. Pat had no real idea what it meant because, as a jumper, it was well before his time, and few of the jumpers of the Eighties knew of the Rumbleseat and what it was famous for; but he figured that he was supposed

to be impressed, too, so he acted accordingly vigorously shaking his head up-and-down.

Just then, Roger noticed what he first thought was a small dog running across the runway. But it wasn't a dog; it was the rooster heading at breakneck speed for the coop trailing its little static line with its wee backpack wobbling on its back.

Roger said, "Is that a chicken?! What's that on its back?"

"A parachute." said Jose' who had come out of hiding himself, having hobbled up behind everyone as Julian and Roger explained who they were.

"A parachute!" exclaimed Roger as he threw his head back laughing.

"He got away." said Buzz a little sheepishly.

So, there they all were. Two guys from the F.A.A. who weren't there as the F.A.A. but as angels of a sort; a chicken wearing a parachute dragging its static line behind him and running for his life across the runway; an illegal pilot, make that many illegal pilots; a bloodied and limping skydiver; an ageless ex-airshow performer with a bad heart and failing hearing; an angry woman who had just chased five grown men into the Florida woods while swinging a broom; and quite a number of people who just wanted to fly and jump and drink beer and be in one another's company. All of whom, under ordinary circumstances, would have been living their lives on the couch staring at their computers.

Even Joanne began to laugh then. The scene was just too ludicrous.



Julian asked if they might spend the night and get to know the guys. They told Chuck that they had brought beer, some food and their sleeping bags.

Chuck was flabbergasted. This was something that he never expected. Of course, he agreed.

As the day went on, and Chuck got to know Julian and Roger better, he discovered that there was little that they didn't already know about the farm having visited many times in the past. Roger and Julian had been jump pilots and skydivers out in California during the Sixties and had been recruited by the Department of Transportation after they returned from Viet Nam. They had a hard time explaining how they had managed to stay together as friends both in the military and in civilian life, except to say that they had lost touch with each other after Nam and were reunited after both had been assigned to the Jacksonville FSDO where they met up once again. That was many years ago and they were both nearing retirement. Roger said more than once that day, and Julian agreed, that they felt that working secretly as 'guardians' was pre-ordained somehow for the two of them. It was a covert responsibility that they took seriously.



Hank had gone looking for the rooster and

found it. It was perched high up in the coop house rafters, too exhausted to fight, its fleshy claws barely clinging to a crossbeam. It sat up there making constant weak clucking noises like a dripping faucet, the static line hanging down, still wearing the small backpack, which had slid sideways on the bird's body looking like some sort of grotesque growth. Hank spent some time sweet talking it and finally was able to extract the bird and get the little backpack off. The rest of the birds, still traumatized, were gathered in feathery mounds in the coop's corners. It would take the rest of the day for them to resume scratching and pecking away at the pen's dirt floor. The rooster eventually appeared in their midst and again took up a position as the flock's protector.

Hank went to Joanne to tell her that her chickens were put back up. He knocked on the screen door holding the parachute in his hand, trying not to laugh and told her through the door's mesh the birds were safe, and he apologized for the one hundredth time for everyone's foolishness.



Her diary entry that day read: *"They damn near killed my rooster today. It was cruel and stupid. Then the feds showed up. So why am I laughing?"*



Late in the afternoon, Chuck walked into

the kitchen and said, very contritely, "I'm really sorry, sweetheart, and I feel terrible about it."

"You should be!" she snapped. "But I can't stay mad at you guys. The rooster's back and I think Jose' will never look at chickens the same way again. I hope he's all right."

Chuck laughed. Then after a seconds pause, he said, "Oh! You mean Jose'! "Yeah, he's out there taking a nap now. I think he took a half a bottle of APC's." He almost said out loud, "*We gave the rooster a few APC's, too.*" But he didn't, choosing ever having sex again over a lifetime of celibacy.

"Where in the hell did you find APC's!?"

She stopped what she was doing and looked squarely at him, saying, "Chuck, that stuff could give an elephant cancer."

Chuck didn't say anything.

Then Joanne, ever the one to drive a point home said, "Talk about living dangerously. I wonder how many vets died from being given that stuff like it was candy?"

"Yeah, good old aspirin-phenacetin-caffeine. We didn't really have any APCs, he just took a bunch of ibuprofen, but Jose' still calls any medicine that. You know...?"

"Uh-huh, I know. You can take the grunt out of the Army, but you can't take the Army out of the grunt."

Chuck laughed and kissed Joanne, saying, "We good then?"

She shook her "Yes," but she was clearly still miffed.



Roger and Julian had shed their suits and ties, pulled on some jeans and their old Rumbleseat t-shirts and found a clear spot on down the flight line a little way, and they pitched a small tent. The water and electricity hook-ups were a new twist for them, and they agreed that the next time they visited, they would bring more creature comforts.

As the day turned to late afternoon, everyone had silently decided that after the morning's excitement, it might be best just to take it easy, drink a few cold brews and settle in for the night. It wasn't long before a fire was set and roaring and the music from the speakers took everyone back to the late Sixties. Charlie had brought his gear and decided to sleep under the wing of his Pawnee.

Soon, pork and beans were bubbling away in dented pans set next to the coals, and a few guys were holding charred hot dogs skewered on sticks over the flames. Joanne had set out a whole baked ham draped in plastic wrap and placed a fresh loaf of white bread next to it telling everyone to help themselves. Several of the guys were being extra complimentary to her, and Chuck made a point of standing next to her with his arm around her waist. Roger and Julian brought a large cooler from the trunk of their car and set it not far away from the fire. Iced down inside it, there were cans of Coors and Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. They told everyone to take whatever they wanted and when it was gone, it was gone.

At first, Roger and Julian took seats on a log next to each other and made small talk

with various people and listened to a number of oft told war stories and *"no shit, there I was, thought I was gonna die"* tales. Roger and Julian chipped in a few of their own. As it got later in the evening, Joanne, as usual, was first to head to the house and to bed. Chuck stayed behind. This was one of his favorite times with the guys and he wouldn't come in until much later.

Once Joanne had walked away to the house and shut the porch light off so it would not attract bugs, the conversation at the fire turned to the chicken pass. In hushed tones and somewhat stifled laughter Jose' got the ribbing of his life. He said little but was gracious about it as he bent forward several times to massage his knee. Someone asked if he was going to get it looked at. "Naw.." he said, "...it took a long time, but it healed pretty much on its own before. I just have to take it easy for a while."

Then, during a lull in the conversation, Buzz stood and walked over to the cooler and withdrew a beer can dripping with ice water and he said, "So, I guess with you guys looking out for us, there's not a lot we have to worry about now."

Roger answered, "I assume you are talking to us?"

"Yes, sir. If what I heard is right..."

"Mavericks." said Julian. "The gung-ho young guys."

"I'm sorry..." said Buzz and everyone around the fire was quiet waiting to hear the next thing Julian would say.

Roger then said, "Buzz, it's the young gun

inspectors out to make a name for themselves you still need to worry about. The farm is in our jurisdiction and as long as we can, we can probably head off any problems that might come your way. But Julian and I are both ready to retire now and we can't cover you guys forever. Then, on the other hand, how long can you guys keep it up? A few more years, maybe? But rest assured, we'll cover your asses as long as we can."

Everyone sitting around the fire who had heard what Roger just said all offered their thanks by saying it out loud or nodding their heads.

Then Julian said, "Look. Everyone here is playing out a fantasy and you all know it. Roger and I know that you know what you are doing, but be aware that we are taking an even bigger risk than you are by going along with it. Our pensions could be at stake. So, as long as you guys play it safe, don't do anything stupid, don't kill anybody, we all should be good."

Once again, everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

Then Jose' said, "Let's hope the damn rooster don't squeal." And with that, the mood lightened and everyone had a good laugh.

For a long while, everyone was still up, awake and sitting at the fire, was in a bit of a reflective mood and quiet. Then Julian spoke up saying, "I'm ready again."

"Ready for what?" asked Roger.

"Let's jump tomorrow, if the weather's good."

"I've got a better idea. Let's don't and say

we did. At least until some things happen."

All the outlaws, including Charlie who was yawning repeatedly and about ready to go get in his sleeping bag, waited to hear what Roger would say next.

Roger looked at Chuck and asked, "Have you guy's built a suspended harness?"

Chuck answered, "Well, no..."

"And another quick question." said Roger. How many of you guys doing the flying have practiced spins in a while?"

Pat said nothing, as spins weren't something that he had even attempted yet. No one had brought it up. Secretly, the thought of doing an intentional spin made him fearful.

Chuck tried to answer, saying, "Well, ah..."

"That's what I thought." said Roger. "Let's work on those things, you know just as a favor to us old fed types before Julian and I make a jump again. Okay?"

The entire group was nodding their approval and making small talk about how practicing cut-a-ways would be a good idea, and how no one had even considered practicing spins and what a great idea that was.

Kelly, who had been attentive but mostly quiet all night, waited for a lull in the conversation, then he stood and turned, looking in Roger's direction, and he said, "May I have demonstration, sir?"

"Oh, shit. Here we go." said Buzz. And everyone fell quiet. Except for Cliff. He got very excited. He hadn't seen a Cardinal demo in years. "Hell, yeah!" he blurted.

Roger said nothing for a long second then

slowly raised his head and looked Kelly squarely in the eye and said, "Be here next Saturday night, oh, neophyte shithead, and you buy the beer."

Kelly said, "Thank you, kind sir." And he sat back down, smiling.



It was entirely possible that in the entire history of sport parachuting from its inception to the present day, not once, not a single time, had an *F.A.A. Inspector* ever given a Cardinal Puff demo. And now, the same F.A.A. Inspector in the person of a *Certified Hermosa Beach Rumble Seat Cardinal Puff* had agreed to test an outlaw. True skydiving history was in the offing.



Early Sunday morning brought a golden-pink sunrise, and the fire's ashes were still warm with rising wisps of smoke rising into the cool air when the distinct sound of two radial engines being synchronized began to be heard. The first up was Charlie, who stood near his Pawnee rubbing his eyes and looking eastward as the Beechcraft D18's silhouetted features grew detailed low on the horizon, and the sound of two growling R-985 engines grew sweeter.

It was a D18-S, actually, one with a small door, and it flew an overhead approach to a wide downwind leg, and as its landing gear lowered and locked into place, it began to set

up on a base leg for a landing on the grass of the 2'800 foot airstrip.

Charlie thought to himself, *"I wondered how long it would be before trouble showed up."*

Chapter Twelve

But Charlie meant 'trouble' in a good way.

Penny had a way of enlivening everything, and just as he thought that to himself, he saw the Twin Beech's landing gear tuck back up into the wheel wells and the flaps slid back in the wing's trailing edges and the airplane steeply turned on to a low base leg. Charlie laughed to himself as he heard the liquid, clattering-pop of its radial engines decrease in revolutions. Then Penny smartly turned on to a low hushed final approach, gliding now, aimed straight at the runway's end.

Hank stepped from his trailer blinking his eyes, peering towards the sunrise, looking eastward trying to see what was going to land. Down the field a ways, Roger was climbing out of his tent while pulling his pants up around his waist. He stood cinching up his belt, pulling it snug, watching the Beech. Julian stuck his head out of the slit in his tent flaps, having heard the Beech on its overhead approach to the downwind leg. Chuck stepped out on the front porch, his coffee cup in his hand, and he scratched his behind through his boxer shorts as he looked down the strip. Jose', his knee feeling a little better, had taken a trip to the Bo after everyone had gone to bed last night, and he was unconscious in his sleeping bag next to his Fat Boy.

As the Beech slipped down a nearly silent final, Penny looked intently at what airspace she could see ahead of her. The farm had no Unicom, but she depressed her microphone

button and quickly announced her intentions in the blind, just in case there was unseen traffic. Seeing no other airplanes near her, Penny reached over and pushed both throttle handles smoothly and quickly forward to the stops, while looking at her propeller controls and mixture to ensure she would get the maximum effect. The gear lights had blinked off, both wheels were up. Concentrating on her altitude now with both engines developing their full 900 combined horse power, the twin-ruddered airplane was now indicating air speed of 195 knots, over 200 miles-an-hour, as it passed above the runway and roared abreast of the pea gravel pit, its propeller tips just 14 inches above the runway. As it passed, loose detritus on the runway - grass clippings and fine sand - swirled in its wake and then gently floated back to earth.

The deep whine of the Beech's engines caused Joanne to rear straight up in bed, and she leaned over to peer out the window in an attempt to see what was happening. The rooster crowed loudly several times in rapid succession. The rest of flock, still upset from yesterday's wild tumult began squawking and running in circles, afraid of the rolling thunder of the Beech's engines now at absolute full power. Roger smiled to himself thinking that he didn't know who this was, but he was going get his ID case and have some fun with this pilot, if everyone else played along. Julian was still too hung-over to give a damn about what was going on, and he collapsed back on to his sleeping bag. Cliff and Buzz stood next to each other, half-dressed watching the polished sil-

ver Beech's high-speed, down-on-the-deck pass, one that elicited excited whoops from the two of them, especially when they noticed the Beech had an open door on its left side. It was a jump airplane!

Penny held the Beech down close to the ground until the last 200 hundred feet of runway and the tall pines thrusting upward beyond, before pulling smoothly and steeply into the powder blue haze of the early morning sky. The feathered needles of the pines swayed to-and-fro in the aircraft's roiling wake as she nearly brushed their tops passing over them by just inches; then as she climbed, passing through 350 feet, she executed a full, smooth-as-silk 360 degree left aileron roll, taking the airplane from right-side-up to fully inverted to right-side-up again in one complete motion; that was accompanied by the rising shouts and cheers of everyone awake enough to see it. It was a hell of a way to start the day.

Charlie started laughing to himself, then tried to calm himself by taking slow breaths to slow his pulse down. Victory Rolls always made him feel giddy and childlike, causing his heart to race, not only when he had performed them in the past but whenever he saw anyone else do one. For Charlie, the maneuver was the kind of an aerobatic exercise that airplanes were made for if you were a pilot who enjoyed pushing the envelope.

The roll complete, Penny entered into a gentle shallow banked turn to the left and looked below - even though she didn't need to - at the small airstrip as habit kicked in to mentally gauge its length. She had operated

in-and-out of Charlie's place many times in the past, so she knew that the Beech could easily perform landings and take-offs at the farm with room to spare. Even when loaded with jumpers. Then she looked quickly into the airspace around her as far as she could see, ensuring as she did frequently, that there was no other traffic in the air, and she brought the throttles back while rolling out of her left hand bank, maneuvering on to a downwind leg at about 800 feet above the ground.

She lowered ten degrees of flaps to slow the airplane. As she turned onto base leg, she moved the round knob of the undercarriage selector wheel to "up," and with the whine of the electric motors in the wings, the landing gear slowly and satisfyingly "clunked" 'down and locked' as the lights glowing green on her panel indicated; she added another 20 degrees of flaps before turning final. Once committed to her final approach, she set the Beech up for a full-flap wheel landing while ensuring that the airplane's tail wheel was still locked. Over her head, she reached without looking to grasp the car-like window winder to crank in a turn of rudder trim.

Now, everyone but Jose' and Julian was outside, including Joanne, who had appeared next to Chuck on the porch, still wrapping her house coat around herself.

"Who is that?" she asked.

"I don't know, sweets." answered Chuck.
"Guess we'll find out in a minute."

Now, with the golden-orange rising sun silhouetting its twin-dorsal tail form, its pro-

pellers appearing as shimmering silver discs, its wheels lowered and locked into position, its Wasp Junior engines popping and crackling at fast idle in the distance, the stubby, twin engine airplane, at "Vref," the "over-the-hedge" airspeed of eighty knots, slowly slid its way down an invisible slope to the runway's threshold.

As the airplane crossed just above the beginning of the runway, Penny held the yoke firm just allowing the wheels to touch the ground softly with a barely audible thump; then she pushed the yoke forward and allowed its wheels to fully settle on to the grass taking the full weight of the airplane. As the airplane rolled along at decreasing speed down the runway on just its main gear, its now glistening black tires made wet with the morning dew, threw fine sprays of watery mist up under the wing.

Now Penny kept the yoke pushed just far enough away from her lap keeping the tail off the ground until the airplane lost enough airspeed to cease flying thereby allowing the tail to begin to lower on its own.

As the tail wheel made contact with the ground and gently hopped once, then twice, she eased the yoke slightly rearward allowing the tail to firmly settle before Penny brought the yoke towards her chest to bring the elevator full up to keep the tail down, and as she did, she shifted her gaze up and to the left of the nose so as to see forward to taxi. Her right hand held the throttle knobs gently as she imperceptibly rocked them to-and-fro inside her fist to shift power between the engines to

taxi. Like most good twin engine pilots, she only used her brakes when absolutely necessary to avoid brake wear and disc overheat.

Seeing Charlie standing next to his Pawnee, she slid open the cockpit window and threw out an enthusiastic waving hand.



Penny taxied off of the runway and swung the tail of the Beech around, and as she did, she pulled the throttles back to the stops and shut down the engines. She then slid out of her seat and walking stooped through the cargo compartment, she headed for the exit door at the rear of the hold.

Moving at a trot, Buzz and Cliff were anxious to meet whoever was flying the venerable twin engine, and they did.

They arrived at the door at the precise second that Penny did. Penny was wearing her standard tan flight suit that was zipped just far enough up the middle to only partially cover a heavenly bosom. God had obviously been pleased with his creation when he invented Penny because he had endowed her well. And as she leaned over to put her head out of the Beech's small door, Buzz and Cliff both were presented a a face full of Penny's cleavage, and that must have resulted in speech impediments for both of them as they were simultaneously struck silent.

"Hi!" said Penny brightly with a smile and a brief laugh at the looks on Buzz and Cliff's faces', looks of astonishment. "And your names are?" asked Penny.

Stuttering some, first at the sight of a woman pilot and secondly at the beautiful sight before them, Buzz and Cliff managed to utter stuttering responses. "He's...he's Cliff...", said Buzz, "...and I am, too. I mean, er, ah, I'm Buzz."

"Yeah." said Cliff.

Penny waited a half second for the two of them to back up a step, and she managed a very graceful short hop to the ground and stood erect before them as she became quickly conscious of her appearance. She pulled the zipper an inch upwards before reaching to shake their hands. "I'm Penny Wright." she offered; then she said, "Am I interrupting?"

Just then Charlie brushed quickly past Buzz and Cliff and swept her up in his arms and the two hugged firmly and warmly for long seconds. "I'm so-o-o-o happy to see you girl!" said Charlie as he turned her loose and backed a foot away. "Me as well, you old air reprobate." she said. "I've not seen you for ages. Thought I would take a few days from FedEx and come see what you and the guys are up to."

"Got a new bunch here now. Place doesn't belong to me anymore." Charlie said.

"Wha-a-a..." said Penny in a high pitched whine, "When I heard you bought the farm, I knew it couldn't be true, then I saw you cross underneath me a few weeks ago..."

"Yeah, did that on purpose. I was going to try to pull into formation with you and surprise you, but I knew that I couldn't keep up, so just went under you to say "Hi."

At nights, most nights, Penny is a pilot for FedEx flying a Caravan feeder route from Jacksonville to Atlanta. The job pays her better than her alimony does. Married twice, neither husband was interested in aviation. She fought the F.A.A. for years about her eyesight, eyesight that would not allow her to get a Second or First Class medical. Still in her thirties when she divorced her last husband, she had dreamed of flying commercially; flying anything commercially, as long as she got paid to do it; but she had been limited to a Third Class medical due to her very poor eyesight with or without glasses. Of course, that kept her from flying any sort of paying job.

Then one day, once single, she took the last of her savings and hitched rides with long haul truckers to New York City and there, she used nearly her last dime to buy corrective vision surgery before the procedure was widely accepted. After hitching back to Jacksonville, risking the chance of infection, she rented a hangar at an outlying airport. She had no airplane then and took a job fueling airplanes and cutting grass to pay her hangar rent. She was going to own an airplane, not just any airplane, and once it was hers, she was going to sleep next to it. You might say Penny was a bit obsessed with flying. She made her meals on a hot plate in the hangar, slept on a surplus Army cot in the hangar and washed up in the Fixed Base Operator's restroom. Once a week, she splurged and checked in to a nearby Motel Six to get a good night's sleep in a

real bed and take a long, luxurious bath. She had three goals and three goals only. The first two were to get her First Class medical and her Commercial and Instrument ratings. The third was to buy an airplane. But not just any airplane; she wanted a Twin Beech.



There is a small story behind Penny that few knew. Her name was actually Sarah. In the early Fifties, she grew up watching Sky King re-runs on television. She became enamored with flying and with the character of "Penny" on the weekly series. As a child, her bedroom walls were covered with promotional posters and black-and-white glossy photos of the Cessna T-50, a twin engine "Bamboo Bomber" nick named "Songbird" that Sky King flew in the early television shows. There was a certain music that the airplane's twin 245 horsepower Jacobs radial engines played for her as Sky King and his niece, Penny chased down outlaws and rescued the lost, all from the cockpit of the old military trainer. It made no difference to Penny when the producers retired Paul Mantz's Bamboo Bomber due to wood rot and switched to using the sleeker Cessna 310 for later shows. The image of her future self at the controls of the stubby old T-50 was indelibly etched in her consciousness.

From the age of seven on, Penny did all the normal girl things, but her interest in flying was the thrust of her being. As a part of her future fantasy, she began referring to herself as "Penny."

Her mother and father played along, thinking that the image she had of herself was that of an imaginary friend common to many children, and the fancy would disappear with age. It didn't, and the name stuck as she would respond to no other name. Ultimately, her parents decided that it made no difference what name Penny called herself as long as it made her happy.

She was a beauty with long red hair, well proportioned even at an early age and she was the constant object of attention of nearly every boy in school. But after school, if they wanted her attention or any shred of it, they would have to peddle their wares at the airport, where rain or shine, she spent her spare time.

Even then, she was usually following a flight instructor around asking endless questions about things like density altitude or how to fly an ADF approach; and those boys who did not share her aerial passions were soon enough ignored and left following her around looking for the proverbial pat-on-the-head, and not getting it they returned to other pursuits like baseball or football. So she got the reputation of being "stuck up" and even "weird" but she could have cared less as the only thing that really concerned her was making enough money to buy the next flying lesson.

Before long, once in college, Penny did allow herself to be distracted by young men. And, ultimately, she would marry one who found out quickly that he took second place to flying and so he looked elsewhere for attention, and that was the first divorce.

Then, in her late twenties, the scenario would repeat itself. Penny decided then that even though men had their uses and she was particularly fond of some of the more passionate uses, she could avail herself of men pretty much anytime she wished. Her beauty was an instant Polaris for most males, the needles of their yearning instantly swinging in her direction when she came near. She was aware of that, and as an adult now, she had no qualms about using it to her advantage and for her pleasure. What the men she dated didn't know about her desires, she was happy to teach them. They were always appreciative.

In time her passion for the T-50 waned. It was becoming increasingly obvious to her that the airplane, with its wooden airframe and wooden spar, was not one in which she wanted invest her time and money, especially after she had been given her first ride in a Twin Beech. The D-18 immediately replaced the lust she had for the Bomber, and she set out to find one she could afford. She found it sitting forlornly at a small dirt airstrip in south Louisiana, grounded with some damage to one wing and an engine after a gear collapse. The owner had been a small drop zone operator who now lived on a sail boat avoiding his creditors, and he practically gave it to her for the hauling away.

So, she gathered her help, pulled its wings off and had it trucked to Jacksonville and there began a complete restoration of the venerable old freighter that she lovingly named "Songbird." That was ten years ago. Now, Penny had landed at the farm after exercising

the Beech for an hour and she was anxious to see what Charlie was up to.



Before Penny and Charlie had a chance to get reacquainted and get caught up, they each realized that there was a clump of six outlaws gathered at the small door of Beech, some with their heads shoved inside looking at the Beech's sparse interior. There was a rising murmur from the group, all to do with whether or not they could jump from the Beech?

Penny saw and heard that and, laughing, raised her voice saying, "You guys want to jump this?"

Immediately all the heads of the outlaws gathered at the airplane's door swiveled towards her, and there fell upon them an awkward silence and quizzical looks came on their faces in unison.

It took a second.

"Oh!" Penny said, "My airplane, I mean."

And everyone laughed.

"I can put my foot in it, can't I?" she said to Charlie who was still laughing. And he shook his head yes. "Joanne is gonna love you!"

"Who's Joanne?" asked Penny.

"Chuck's wife. They own the place now." answered Charlie. "Com'on. I'll introduce you." And he took Penny's hand and they started walking towards the house.

Joanne saw them coming and said, "Oh, crap. I'd better get dressed!" and she wheeled and went back through the door. Chuck was

still standing there in his boxer shorts with his now empty cup in his hand, a bit distracted by the sight of the shiny Beech and its gorgeous red head pilot out on his little grass strip.

"Hey!" yelled Joanne, "You, too, dufus! You are not going to make a good impression."

"Oh!" said Chuck, "Oh, yeah. Guess I'd better." Then he yelled at Charlie, "Give us a minute. She's indecent."

"Asshole." Joanne muttered softly to herself as she ran up the stairs to the bedroom.

While Chuck and Joanne were getting dressed, Penny and Charlie took seats on the porch rockers and they waited for them to return. "Who are all these guys?" asked Penny sweeping her hand across the vista of the airfield.

"Charlie thought for the briefest second and said, "You remember my crowd that hung out here in the past?"

"Yeah." she said, "But I don't recognize these guys."

"Oh." said Charlie, "They're the same people, just different faces and names."

Penny looked at Charlie as a question mark crossed her face.

"Yeah, girl..." continued Charlie, "All the old crows either went west or had to quit for one reason or another."

"You mean some of them died?"

"Had to." said Charlie. "We all knew it was coming one day or another. I'm the survivor, I guess you could say. 95 next month."

"No shit?!" said Penny.

"Yep. After they all disappeared, I had to

sell the place to keep it."

"You want to run that by me again." said Penny.

And Charlie told her the whole story as quickly as he could before Chuck and Joanne finished dressing.

"Do they know?" and Penny motioned her head back over her shoulder.

"Yes, ma'am. They are co-conspirators now."

And with Chuck's footsteps growing louder as he came back down the stairs behind them, Charlie said, "These guys are the outlaws now and I love them as much as the ones that passed or left. We have just as much fun."

Penny shook her head knowingly and gave Charlie a far away sweet look, one that said her heart was warmed and that she understood.



As Chuck, Joanne, Charlie and Penny sat around the dining room table and sipped on coffee, a knock came at the screen door.

"Entrer, s'il vous plaît" said Chuck in his best mock Cajun drawl. And Julian and Roger appeared in the archway between the living room and kitchen. They each had their ID cases open and their badges flashing, each stifling a laugh. Then they simultaneously realized who Penny was as they sheepishly folded their cases and stuck them in their pockets.

Penny took a look at their faces, and after a fast second's silence said, "Look! It's the

Lone Ranger and Tonto!"

Chuck and Joanne didn't laugh at first, but as Charlie, Penny, Roger and Julian cracked up, it dawned on them that there was a history between all of them and they, too, shared a laugh.

Julian then said, "Ugh, kemosabe, me no think she illegal here." Roger answered, "Yeah, she's probably the only thing legal on this whole freaking airport."



And they were right. Penny had worked too long and hard and sacrificed too much to be anything but legal as far as the F.A.A. went. The Songbird's logbooks were as immaculate as the birth of Jesus. Her personal logbook was up-to-date to the day and Hobbes meter reading in her airplane.

"You come to fly jumpers?" asked Roger.

Penny said, "I dunno, maybe."



Meanwhile, Hank, who had yet to make a jump since arriving, was busy. He had been preoccupied several ways since he arrived. One way was that, for weeks now, as he had spent time around the fire at nights with the other guys talking about the first jumps that they had made since joining the group, he had drunk the beer and laughed it up contributing a number of jump stories himself.

Secretly, as he tried to fit in, he was starting to become fearful that he might be one of

the few hanging back. He feared that the longer he held off making a jump, he might be considered cowardly. In truth, the other outlaws, especially the ones who hadn't jumped as yet, harbored similar thoughts. They were all wrong. Nobody thought any such thing. They were too busy being happy in the company of their kind.

His real problem among the many excuses he was making to himself were the "What ifs?" They had set in, and it seemed that all he could think about was getting injured. Or worse. Before coming to the farm, Hank had become a loner and, except for the outlaws, his friends were few. But if he became seriously injured, what then? Who would care for him? Would he become even more indigent than he already was? But these things were really excuses; excuses that helped him sidestep his real fear: that of dying.

But he made a decision. While everyone was still waking up, sitting around drinking coffee, waiting to see what was up with Chuck, and if Penny was going to fly jumpers in the Beech, and just generally waiting to see what was going to happen that day, Hank disappeared over to the hangar and went into the equipment room, closing the door behind him. He wanted to try something.

Once in the equipment room, he walked to the rack where all the old B-4 mains hung waiting, and he lifted one from the rack. He wanted the old feeling to return. He slowly sat the rig on the packing table and just stood there holding it upright looking at it thoughtfully. He ran his hands over the main lift

webs. He held the leg straps and the quick ejects in his hands. He put his hand on the ripcord handle. He seemed to actually caress it. He slid his hand under the main lift web, and he pulled the top cover of the shot-and-a-half down and he hooked a finger tip into the metal cable of the release ring. He gave the ring a quick, smart pull and the male end of the riser jumped loose. He held the end of the riser in his hand for a minute studying it. Then he fitted it back into the female receiver, snapped the catch back in place with a "click!" and then slipped the top cover in its groove and snapped it shut. He repeated the process with the other riser and its Capewell.

Then he turned the rig around and began to carefully inspect the back of the rig. He ran his fingers along the fine springs of the pack opening bands, even closely inspecting the nylon tabs used to hook the bands into their eyes along the hard ridge of the flaps. He opened the Velcro closure of the Bendix tube fixture and looked up into the cable housing.

As he did this, what he wanted to happen began.

There seemed to wash over him the edgy nervousness of his first jump. He stood looking at the rig and letting his mind take him back to the first day. That day, even considering he had been well trained in the things that all students learn: the parachute landing falls, how to maneuver a canopy, what the different kinds of malfunctions were, what caused them and how to react in an emergency, how to hand deploy a reserve, what not to do in an airplane on the way up, how to protect your

reserve ripcord handle, what to do in case of a parachute inadvertently opening in the airplane; he wanted to remember it all; he let it flood his mind.

In so doing, he felt his fears begin to slowly, slowly abate.

He picked the rig up and slid first his right arm into the webbing and let the weight of the parachute settle gently onto his shoulder. Then he slid his other arm into the harness and he pulled it up onto his other shoulder, and he merely let the full weight of the rig settle on his shoulders; he stood there for a long moment remembering how it used to feel, the comfort of it. He breathed deeply, singling out the aroma of the parachute's nylon webbing.

Then he stepped a few feet away from the table and bent over at the waist, letting the rig's legs straps dangle behind him. Then he slowly hooked his thumbs into the edges of the saddle and pulled it up underneath his buttocks. Then, methodically, he reached between his legs, found the end of the first leg strap and brought up into the crease of his crotch and he snapped the strap's quick ejector into the V ring pushing down on the ejector's cover to ensure it was closed. He pulled the loose end of the leg strap snug, feeling the pressure against his leg. He repeated that with the other leg strap and stood erect while pulling them both snug. As he neatly folded the remnant ends of each leg strap and tucking their ends into their elastic keepers, he smiled.

As he stood there quietly with the full weight of that old parachute on his shoulders,

the excitement of that first day came flooding back and it washed over him, the warm water of going home again, and he quickly caught himself in a halting sob. A salty tear ran down his face, joyfully. It was something that he thought that he might never experience again. Then he laughed and he took a long, very deep breath. And as he exhaled, he knew his gloom fear was defeated. He was ready to get back in an airplane and jump once again.

Chapter Thirteen

On his knees, behind the pilot's seat now, Hank felt back around behind himself and hooking his thumbs in it, he pulled the saddle of his harness just a bit further up under his rump, and then he reached up under his reserve to ensure that the latches of his quick ejects on his leg straps were secure. There were a few idle moments between watching the altimeter mounted on his reserve parachute show a steady increase in altitude, and just looking out across the emerald green orange groves that surrounded the farm, and he allowed his mind to drift.

Every minute or so, he looked up at the long needle of the altimeter on the 180's instrument panel as it slowly wound its clockwise path through the 100 foot increments on its luminous face. Passing through 2,000 feet, Pat turned and looked back as Hank pulled the lemon-colored wind drift indicator from inside the front of his jump suit where he had tucked it before take-off. He peeled back a bit of the masking tape holding the roll closed, and he gathered a few folds of the crepe paper in his hand so the indicator would unfurl quickly when it was thrown.

He was a bit ashamed of himself when he thought back to just days earlier as he had fretted about any possible consequences that might come from what he was about to do. "*Shit!...*," he thought, "*...why did I ever stop doing this?*" While he looked out at the few, slowly building cotton-white cumulus clouds

rising upwards in the surrounding sky that would, in a few hours, certainly become passing rain showers that would water the groves beyond, he continued to muse, "*This is home.*" Jumping out of airplanes was everyday for the hundredth time usual for Hank, and he very briefly considered the things that had pulled him away from the sport for so long. As he did, he could think of no concrete, viable reason he should have allowed it all to happen.

But he quickly returned his focus back to the now as he edged up close to the rim of the open door to look down, and he put his head into the slipstream of the rushing wind beyond. With his head out the door, his frap hat began to billow away from his ears, and he tugged quickly at the chin strap to snug it a bit. Then to align the aircraft for the wind drift indicator toss, he held his left hand up and pointed right and extended all five fingers, a motion asking Pat for a correction of five degrees of the airplane's course. Pat obliged with a gentle cross-controlled skid and the airplane slid slowly five degrees right. To stop the turn, Hank held a clenched fist up where Pat could see it. Then, Pat heard a muffled "swhish" as Hank forcefully threw the indicator straight down and out of the aircraft's prop blast. Hank pulled his hand back into the cabin and grasped the door's edge so he could lean out to keep the unfurling yellow streamer in sight while Pat gently banked the Skywagon to the right to circle over the undulating indicator as it descended.

There had been no wind when they left the ground and it now appeared that a mild

breeze may have kicked up as the willowy paper streamer drifted with the wind above the long green slash of the airstrip below, appearing to be destined for a crumpled landing a short distance from the bowl of tan pea gravel rock, Hank's target that lay next to the runway.



"I'd like to just make a jump all by myself if you'd let me." Hank had asked.

Chuck rubbed his chin for a minute and said, "Yeah, I suppose so." After thoughtfully pausing, he added, "Yeah, why not?"

"I'd like to at least hit terminal."

Again, Chuck nodded okay.

Sunday night Hank had cornered Chuck and asked him to run over a few things because he wanted to get started jumping again.

Earlier in the day, the guys had built a practice cut-a-way platform, a training device with a mock aircraft door just like students used in the old days, and Hank had made several successful cut-a-ways and practice reserve deployments using it.

Julian and Roger were impressed by the earnest effort that the outlaws had put into building the cut-a-way trainer. Elevated some eight feet off the ground, the trainer had steps leading up to a six-by-six foot platform. Mounted along the platform's edge, a plywood cut-out represented an aircraft's open door. Two large pines had been cut and sunk in the ground about ten feet apart and a steel cable was stretched between them with a trolley

that ran along the cable. Suspended from the trolley was a pair of risers.

Once a jumper was ready to practice, he sat in the mock door, hooked up the risers to an old harness he wore, and then he would make a mock exit by pushing off the platform simulating a stable arch. In a few seconds as he hung under the trolley, still holding the arch, pretending to be in free fall, he would pull a dummy ripcord handle. In seconds, whoever was instructing that day would yell, "Lineover, lineover, lineover!" or "Bag lock, bag lock, bag lock!"

Then the jumper would need to do these things in rapid succession: First, look back to see what was over his head. Next, pretending to see a malfunction of some sort, he would simultaneously release his risers using his shot-and-a-half Capewells to cut himself away from the problem overhead, so that he would cleanly fall away in order that he might deploy his reserve parachute. In truth, he would only drop about a foot-and-a-half to the ground and land on his feet. Next, still role playing, he would cover his open Capewells with an arm thrown across them to prevent a snagged canopy during the deployment of his emergency parachute. Then he pretended to go back into freefall holding a stable arch. Then, he would roll slightly to his side as he simulated the pulling of a reserve ripcord.

A few of the outlaws taking part in the training, at first, didn't do so well in their practice; they were rusty performing things like not pulling both release rings simultaneously, causing them to dangle at an odd angle

and increasing the possibility of a canopy entanglement, or not covering the open Capewells when they imitated pulling their reserve ripcords. But Hank seemed to be doing everything perfectly and impressed both Chuck and Buzz who he had asked to oversee his refresher training.

Little details like using a crooked arm thrown across a set of open Capewells during a chest-mounted reserve deployment to prevent a reserve canopy snag were precisely the sort of things that Roger wanted to see when he asked the group to get some currency practice. Many of the outlaws had long forgotten vital, small details like that when it came to reflecting on jumps that some of them had made as many as twenty or twenty-five years prior. In some ways, retraining each other was very much akin to being first jump students all over again. And they were having fun doing it.

Joanne wasted no time painting the entire training platform green and white to match the 180's paint scheme, and she also painted the Outlaw club emblem on it. The drawing that she had designed, the elegantly mustachioed, old skydiver, flinty-eyed, set in his purpose and wearing his worn frap hat, looked out from the training platform and gave the entire drop zone and airstrip a proper air of dignified symbolism and it was a thing of beauty.



Nights spent around the fire had become a

sort of classroom and boozy roundtable discussion with various guys throwing questions out for others to answer, and then everybody getting a chance to hear the answers or make remarks.

Someone would say, "Okay, you've got a line over. There's just one line over your canopy but it's turned your canopy into a giant brassier. And the canopy is slowly spinning."

"I'd just cut the line!" somebody says!

"With what?"

"My fucking hook-knife. That's what!" Then that same somebody would sheepishly say, "If I had a fucking hook-knife." And everyone would laugh, but they would all be thinking that they needed a hook-knife.

Those were the sort of issues that popped up that got everyone to thinking more about what they might do in order to get better prepared to get back in the sky. Even the outlaws who had shown up early and who had already made a few jumps were beginning to rethink how well prepared they had been.

What began to happen was that the entire group of outlaws had made a kind of unspoken, unanimous decision to be less haphazard about jumping after so many years away, and in the case of the pilots, their flying might need some polishing as well. It was all precisely what the F.A.A. Inspector-cum-Guardian, Roger, wanted to see happen. It was sort of like starting over for many of the guys and they were enjoying it. So, as a group, the outlaws got on the same footing. One day, it might be practicing parachute landing falls; another day, they might confine themselves to

going over emergency procedures.

But before that all began to really fall into place, there would be this jump that Hank would make today. It would illustrate exactly why Roger had been concerned.



The yellow wind drift indicator gently corkscrewed itself into the ground and lay in a twisted heap about thirty yards downwind from the pea gravel. So, for all intents and purposes, Hank and Pat agreed that no extended spot to exit the aircraft was needed, and just getting out directly over the peas would work just fine. By the time the wind drift indicator had landed, the nearly empty airplane with just two passengers and its light fuel load was indicating a robust climb of 700 feet-a-minute and had reached an altitude of 3,500 feet; Pat then banked and swung into a wide left turn thinking that by the next pass over the target, he'd easily have 4,500 feet and Hank could get out there. He turned and asked Hank if 4,500 feet was high enough and Hank nodded it was.

Scooting across the aircraft floor, Hank situated himself to sit on the very edge of the open door with his left foot resting out on the 180's step; his other leg dangled in the wind and once in place and ready to jump, he paused and took a deep breath, then he took stock of himself. He felt a slight excited twinge of adrenalin, not fear. This was the happiest place he'd been since he could not remember when. He laughed to himself as the pea gravel

and the small airport began to slide directly beneath him.

As the jump ship's faint, dark shadow rippled snake-like across the ground below, slithering over trees and cars, Hank briefly looked at the grinning Pat, then he looked down at the altimeter and stop watch mounted on top of his reserve parachute; pushing the stem of the stopwatch down to start its countdown. Then, in one quick and fluid motion, he straightened his left leg, put his weight on his foot, rose into the air while gripping the aircraft's wing strut, and he pulled himself out, pivoted on his foot, spinning into the direction of flight and pushed off backwards into the sky, and he fell away.



With his back arched markedly, his arms and legs outstretched, he continued looking upwards into Pat's smiling face, a face growing smaller back up in the cockpit as Hank fell towards earth.

One thousand,
one second, the stopwatch said.

Two thousand,

Hank began to feel the pressure of the relative air against his chest and legs as the experience of hundreds of past jumps took control of his muscle memory.

Three thousand,

Four thousand,

Flat and stable now but wobbling slightly like he was balanced on the point of a fulcrum, Hank began to sense the gathering pull

of gravity, the increase in speed against his arms and hands, and in his ears, the wind noise grew more intense as if he'd rolled the window down in a speeding car. And the stop watch said,

Five thousand,

Six thousand,

The rush of wind slowly ceased in his consciousness and was soon replaced by an awe he'd not felt in years, and he looked down at the altimeter and it said 4,000 feet.

Seven thousand,

The muscle memory returned to him the ability to begin use the relative air through which he fell as a bird might use its wings and he experimented with a slow half-turn to the right so that he could see the expanse of the horizon beyond, and he smiled.

Eight thousand,

Nine thousand,

And in sheer glee, Hank threw his head back and brought his knees underneath himself and slowly rolled into a back flip, a playful expression of the joy he was feeling,

Ten thousand,

And rolling out of the back flip, his head returning to level, he checked his altimeter and it said 3,500 feet.

Eleven thousand,

And Hank became absorbed in the free fall simply resting face down on the air's cushion and,

Twelve thousand,

And then the stopwatch said,

Fourteen thousand,

And Hank dropped his right hand slightly

back towards his side, brought his left hand across in front of himself, and he executed a full, flat and stable but slow three hundred and sixty degree turn to the right as he dropped his head some to glance at the altimeter which said,

3,500 feet!

And Hank finished the right turn and began a left turn,

Sixteen thousand,

Seventeen thousand,

And the outlaws watching him from the ground drew quiet. Penny took in a sharp breath. Joanne hugged her arms tightly across her chest. Jose' said "Shit!" loudly. Chuck, his head cranked painfully straight up, stopped breathing.

Eighteen thousand,

Hank looked at the altimeter and it said,
3.500 feet!!

And the stopwatch said,

Twenty seconds,

And, as Hank looked down - suddenly! - the trees and the airstrip and the land all around exploded in his face! The panorama magnified itself in all directions as the last second view of a wall might appear in the instant before a violent collision with its surface.

And Hank wrenched his ripcord from its elastic pocket, and he punched it savagely away from himself and he closed his eyes and he solemnly said, "Fuck!"

And because he had allowed himself to keep his head low, his body followed, vastly and quickly increasing the speed of his fall, causing his parachute to detonate open above

him, and the sudden opening shock knocked his breath away as his parachute saved his life.

And for a few seconds afterwards, Hank, his arms hanging listlessly at his sides, sat motionless in the saddle of the harness he had so carefully pulled under his behind as his heartbeat thundered in his ears.

And with the hard opening shock of the parachute, Hank looked down at the altimeter and the jammed altimeter's pointer jittered awake and it said,

150 feet.

One hundred and fifty feet.

It also said, two seconds from dying.

And the relieved outlaws all cursed silently under their breath, and Joanne heaved and collapsed hard on the ground and sat cross-legged breathless, and Penny sighed her breath away and looked down hard, staring at the ground, and Chuck let his chin touch his chest and it remained there as he allowed himself to breathe again. Buzz shook his head and went to sit on a log near the fire ring and sat for a long moment bent over with his head laid on his arms that were crossed and resting his knees. And Roger and Julian turned to one another and shook their heads and said, "Damn!" together.

And Hank, making no effort to control its direction, landed hard under his parachute, having made no effort to remain standing, instead just falling to ground in a heap as the stopwatch said,

Twenty-eight thousand,

And the altimeter said zero once again.

As he gathered his wits, Hank sat up and looked at the stopwatch and he feebly pushed the stem inward, clicking it off, and it said 32 *seconds*, and it stopped the motion of its hand. Then Hank rolled on to his back, and lay there spread-eagled and still, his suspension lines and parachute partially draped over him, and he looked deep into the brilliant blue of the sky and he slowly closed his eyes. The thundering pulse of his heartbeat remained in his ears as he quietly cursed himself.



Hank did not get up. He feared his legs might not work. He felt like a fool. A very lucky fool. Only the ground rush had saved him.

As he opened his eyes, the brilliant sun beyond caused the surrounding circle of faces peering down at him, some faces solemn, some faces smiling, other faces just blank, ghostly outlines, hard to make out. Then a voice said, "Are you all right?"

Hank did not know how to answer that.

Then another voice said, "Where's your ripcord? Did you drop it?"

Hank said nothing.

Then another voice said, "You know the price! You owe us a case of beer."

And Hank, knowing the skydiver's law, the one about dropping a ripcord, understood the penalty he must pay, and he said lowly..."Shit."

Chapter Fourteen

And so, the outlaws had all learned a valuable lesson when Hank became fixated and had not noticed that his altimeter had malfunctioned. It was just the sort of thing that Roger and Julian had had in mind when they pushed for refresher training. They did not gloat about it, neither was much said by anyone, once it became evident that the instruments and equipment that Charlie had left behind when he sold the farm were many years old and needed a thorough going over. It's always been said that it's the little things that kill skydivers. And pilots.

So the outlaws, en masse, collectively started from scratch, checking not only their equipment more completely but their attitudes as well. It more or less went against the grain of the spirit of the entire endeavor and the spirit of the outlaws in general, but a rule was imposed, group imposed, that any new member inducted into the group got a complete refresher course before being allowed to jump. The outlaws who had seen Hank smoke it down so close that day would not argue with it. It was also taken seriously under the watchful, time to time, visits by Roger and Julian who felt more at ease now about the outlaw's safety, spending less time at the farm believing that Hank had driven their point home.

Hank became the cheerleader and assumed the role of Safety Officer *se constitue* for the outlaws. Who better? And everyone

agreed. His near death experience had elected him.

All of that did not mean that Hank would escape the inevitable goosing by the rest of the outlaws, and it earned him the nickname, "Groundrush." And so, there were now two outlaws with nicknames.



Jose', nicknamed, "Rooster," had been gone all day.

Chuck asked Joanne if she'd seen him, thinking that he might have gone home. But that didn't make sense, because the small road trailer he usually pulled behind his Fat Boy was still parked beside the hangar.

For weeks, during his visits, Jose' had pumped Rick for hours, extracting from him everything that Rick knew about Harleys. Finally, the day had come when Jose' came thundering down the sandy road on his own Fat Boy and matching road trailer.

Like Rick, Jose' had also erected a two man tent that he slept in next to the hangar, and Chuck thinking he might be sick, or at the least, really hung over from a trip to the Bo, peeked inside and all he found was Jose's crumpled sleeping bag and a bag of dirty laundry.

Chuck was concerned because yesterday, Jose' had been acting a bit sullen, still nursing his knee after the infamous Chicken Pass debacle some time back. He really wanted to make a few more jumps before he had to get home to catch up on chores, but the knee was

giving him fits and no amount of ibuprofen seemed to help, so no jumping for him.

When asked, Buzz said that he thought that he had heard Jose's motorcycle fire up well before sunrise and thought that he had heard it heading for the gate. But other than that, he knew nothing.

So Chuck shrugged his shoulders, fired up the airplane and took Hank and Tom for a quick hop-and-pop before lunch. Hank had recovered from his near-death experience and was more eager than ever to keep jumping and sought every opportunity to do so, but he had become a bit of an old maid from a safety standpoint. insisting on pin checks and getting all the altimeters checked at an instrument overhaul shop in Jacksonville.



Chuck and Joanne had taken a few altimeters to Jacksonville to be checked and calibrated and had arrived back early in the afternoon, and the day was uneventful at the farm. Everyone was present that night at the fire ring, except for Jose' who was still missing. Julian, Roger and Penny were there from Jacksonville and so were Tom, Cliff, Pat, Hank, Arvel, Tim and most of the outlaws. Charlie flew in about dusk with three cases of Budweiser loaded in the hopper of the Pawnee, much to everyone's delight. Joanne had made large Dutch oven of beef stew and brought it and a few loaves of homemade bread over from the house. So no one had to cook for themselves. Besides, Joanne's cooking was far superior to any hot dog turned to

charcoal on a stick.

The night was clear, cool and the mosquitoes had seemingly decided stay home, and as usual, after a few hours, stomachs' were full and the beer flowed. But the question was in the air, what the hell had happened to Jose'? The general consensus seemed to be that maybe he had gone over to Deland to get his knee looked at. Yeah! That's it, everyone agreed. Tim tried for the sixth time to make Cardinal and failing that decided it was better just to throw up and fall asleep in his lawn chair. Roger was quite proud of himself that he still remembered all the moves. Drunk on his ass, he asked if there were any more candidates, and secretly hoping that there were not, he was met with silence.

Soon, the rumble of the Fat Boy could be heard coming down the sandy road towards the farm. Because of the darkness and the glare from the roaring fire, no one could see the hangar, and shortly the noise of the motorcycle went silent. There was a hush at the fire ring waiting to see if Jose' would appear. In a moment, he ambled into the flickering light of the fire raising hand to silently say "Hey" to all the outlaws.

Buzz was first to talk. "Where the hell you been, hot rod? We've been worried about you all day."

Jose' said nothing as he bent over the cooler, opened it and fished around in it for a beer.

Then as he walked over to take a seat on one the logs that surrounded the fire ring, he said, "Had a little business to tend to over in

Deland."

"What's her name?" said Hank laughing.

"Tat." said Jose'.

Just then, Joanne noticed something odd about Jose's arm just barely illuminated by the yellow light of the fire.

"Tat?" said Buzz. "What? Is she..."

Joanne got to her feet and walked over and stood directly in front of Jose'. Looking up at her, he smiled broadly and said, "Hello, missy. What's up?"

"What's that on your arm?" Joanne quietly asked.

"Oh, nothing." said Jose'.

"Yes, it is." Joanne insisted. "Lem'me see." she softly commanded.

Jose' hesitated for just a second, then raised his arm up into the light. Then he said, "Gotta go back tomorrow. The power went out and they couldn't finish it today."

"Awesome! Ain't it." he proudly added.



Joanne smiled broadly, leaned over and

softly kissed Jose' on the forehead and said, Yes it is, my man. Yes, it is! The she said, "And now, you truly are an outlaw, you old ParaGeezer."

Then she added, "And you've made me famous."

There wasn't a man or a woman at the fire that night that wasn't somehow contemplating getting that same tattoo and Jose' knew it. He wondered who would be next. And as each outlaw took their turn looking closely at what Jose' had done that day, he knew that he would be forever remembered as an Outlaw.



The times that Charlie wasn't around, sometimes for weeks, questions swirled in hushed tones about him among the outlaws.

Chuck and Buzz passed their questions back and forth more openly during those times that a number of the outlaws had gone home to spend some time catching up with their families, or were off fishing or crabbing over at the Chassahowitzka River.

"Every time I have ever asked him where he goes after he leaves here..." Chuck confided in Buzz while gapping spark plugs one afternoon, "...he always gives me vague answers."

"Like what?" asked Buzz.

"Well, the other night just before we all turned in, I asked him where he's living now."

"Yeah..."

"He said, he's got a small camper set up on his airstrip near Jacksonville, but he did not actually say, "Jacksonville," now that I

think about it."

"What'd he say?"

"He said, 'Up that way.'" He was pointing in the direction of Jacksonville and, at the time, I just assumed that."

"What do you really think?"

"I'm not sure."

And they were quiet for a moment until Chuck said, "And there's something else that has kinda made me wonder. More than a few things really."

"Do tell."

"Well, I got on You Tube the other night and I watched about a dozen videos about Hoover."

"Aw, shit..." said Buzz, "Not that! Com'on. You think he's Hoover reincarnate or something? You know damn good and well he's dead."

"Of course not, fuzz nuts! I just think, well, maybe, if he faked his death to get rid of this place, why couldn't he...?"

"Why the fuck would he do that?"

And they were silent again, until...

"Maybe that was the whole plan. Maybe he wanted to just disappear completely for reasons only he knows. Maybe we are doing something from his past that he just can't turn loose of."

"But, still..." Buzz said, "...why?"

"I'm not sure. But the more of those videos I watched, the spookier it got. His mannerisms are all the same. The way he smiles. The way he gestures with his hands. Even the damn Panama hat! It's just all too much coincidence, that's all I'm sayin'."

Buzz said, "M-m-m-..."

"And there's something else. He has said time and again, that his thing is 'energy management.' At first, I took that to mean 'energy management' like in using the energy of the airplane to do maneuvers like when you use the speed of the downside of a loop to climb up the other side. Like that, you know?"

"Or maybe he just knows a lot about electricity?" and Buzz laughed softly at his own joke.

"Funny, asshole."

"I wish you'd quit calling me names. You could hurt my feelings, you know." And Buzz grinned. Chuck looked at him, shook his head and made a show of rolling his eyes.

"You don't have feelings."

And together they laughed that easy laugh they did when things reflected their long standing bond, one marked by mutual self-deprecating sarcasm.

"Okay, okay..." said Buzz, "What are you driving at, exactly?"

"You're gonna laugh."

"No, I won't. Maybe." said Buzz, "Try me."

"Okay, for one minute..." Chuck said, and he rubbed his chin, "...think about this. He set us up. Not in a bad way, of course. But the selling of the farm, the airplane, the gear, the pea gravel, all of it...to me. To me and Joanne, of all people. Seeing what I'm, what we are, doing now with it all..."

"How did he know? Is that what you are going for?" asked Buzz.

"Yeah! I mean, how could he have possibly known seven years ago what I would decide to

do now? Joanne told me what he said to her when he came by the day that I went to the air show by myself, the day that I decided to do all this. I mean, he told her 'that he'd done his homework' and he knew a lot about us, figuring I was just the type that would start up an outlaw group. How the sam hell could he know that!? I mean, Jesus! Really!?"

"Calm down, there Kemosabe." said Buzz and he laughed a small laugh.

"Sorry. It's just that, well, it's kind of worked on me that he knew so well what I was going to do and he had never actually met me. And his statements about being *into* energy management. I sometimes wonder if he really means "energy manipulation." We had a conversation one night, not long ago, about a game he plays with himself about not being from here, this reality, about how he pretends he's really a visitor from the sky. And that's where his real home is. I swear, it's like he's from the future or something."

"Maybe he is. In a way..." said Buzz.

Chuck stared blankly at Buzz.

"I'm sorry." said Chuck, a bit incredulously. 'Maybe he is...' Is that what you just said?"

"Yeah." said Buzz.

Then what he said next caused Chuck to set his spark plug on the workbench and turn to stare directly into Buzz's face.

"Maybe we do know each other pretty well." said Buzz, "But we've also been apart for a long time."

"I know that." said Chuck. "So?"

"Well, I got interested in some things a

long time ago. Some things that most people don't like to think about or talk about."

"Shit, here it comes." said Chuck, and he pointed a finger overhead at the sign, the one that said, "Leave It at the Gate."

"This is not about fucking politics or religion, you asshole. Just shut-up and listen."

"Uh. Okay." said Chuck and he pulled up a plastic milk case he used to store spare parts in and he sat down looking at Buzz while crossing his legs like a woman might.

"That makes you look gay." said Buzz and he laughed.

"Oh. Sorry." said Chuck, and he uncrossed his legs and sat looking at Buzz now with both feet flat on the floor and with his elbows propped on his knees, his chin resting in his hands in mock anticipation of what Buzz would say next.

"Seriously..." said Buzz, "All I want to say is that there things we don't understand, but that may be, if you are willing to consider them. I read a book once that talked about the possibility that some people die and come back as guides, you know, to help other people. I'm just spit-ballin' here, but what if Hoover did die and he came back and he somehow guided the sale of the farm and all of this to you? I'm just sayin', "what if," you know? If the book I read was somehow right, Charlie could be something more than what we know. Again, I'm just saying."

And everything he just said, he made sound something like an apology, the tone of his voice low and hushed.

Hearing that, Chuck sat up straight,

crossed his arms over his chest and then he pursed his lips before saying, "That's a strange "what if" coming from you there, hot rod."

And they simply sat and stared at one another for a short minute before Buzz said, "Naw...no. Nope!" And he laughed at himself loudly but Chuck did not.

As Buzz's laughter trailed off, Chuck continued to stay silent looking sternly into Buzz's eyes which made Buzz a little self-conscious, perhaps a little nervous.

A long minute passed before Buzz cracked and softly yelled, "WHAT!?.....*what?*"

A large smile slowly appeared on Chuck's face, and then he stood erect and slowly started to walk past Buzz as Buzz turned to look up into Chuck's face. In that instant, Chuck stopped next to Buzz and laid a hand on his shoulder, and then he said,

"Maybe. Maybe, my friend."

And they spoke no more of it.

Chapter Fifteen

Dreams are funny things.

Chuck stood in the middle of his green grass runway in his pajamas. As he looked down at the corduroy, fleece lined bedroom slippers on his feet, he snickered to himself. He never wore pajamas, he hated them. *And, whose slippers were these?*, he asked himself. His were very old and supple leather. It was all wrong.

Even the sky was wrong, especially for this time of the morning. The sky was filled with the shimmering pale aqua light of what seemed to be the aurora borealis. Yet, the sky around the wavering bands of light was bright saffron and pink, the colors of a rising sun that was not there.

And high in the air overhead was a noiseless yellow Piper Cub. He thought to himself that he knew the Cub. Maybe he knew the pilot, the one called The Flying Farmer. And suddenly, with no landing at all, the Cub hovered in the air before him as the old pilot clambered from its cockpit and stepped to the ground.

The Farmer's full bushy grey beard hung across the top of his worn denim overalls, barely disguising a twinkling grin and flashing blue eyes. "You having fun now?" asked the old Piper Cub pilot. "Thought I'd find you here."

"Me?" answered Chuck, but he never moved his lips with the answer, the words

seeming to project from his mind in the direction of The Farmer. "I guess so."

"You guess so!?" answered the The Farmer. "This is all what you wanted, isn't it?"

"What is?"

The Farmer seemed a bit exasperated with his response. "This!" And he continued, "The farm, the airstrip, the pea gravel, the old Skywagon, the outlaws."

Chuck looked around and saw nothing but a rusty fallen down tin roofed hangar, the airstrip had disappeared and now the emerald grass field that stretched far away into the distance was grown tall with high un-mown grass, and across the way, the old farmhouse, its paint peeling and a screen door hanging by one hinge blocking an open door, its tattered curtains gently blowing in the humid breeze of dawn.

There was no farm, no airstrip, at least not one that he could land on, no airplane, no outlaws.

"This isn't what I imagined at all." said Chuck feeling a bit nervous and perhaps a little scared.

"But it's the story that you tell yourself. The one about the old men who had dreams of flying and skydiving again and how they came together and how they flaunted convention deciding that living their dreams again, too, was more important than living dull existences that stretched endlessly into their deaths. That was the fantasy that you had wasn't it?"

"Yes. But it's not here now!" and Chuck could feel himself getting angry. Where had it all gone?

The Farmer slowly turned and walked back to his Cub, and suddenly he was waving out the cockpit window from above Chuck as the Cub rose straight into the air and disappeared. Just blinked off.

And for what seemed a very long minute, Chuck stood on the field looking down at the stripes of his pajamas then he looked up and saw the campsites that lined the airstrip. He looked to his left and saw the hangar with the white nose of the 180 just peeking out at the daylight. He looked to his right and looked lovingly at the crisp white paint of the old two story farmhouse and the screen door that hung on both hinges and the pretty yellow curtains of the porch door beyond. And over there, the risers of the cut-a-way trainer hung still in the early morning mist. And next to the hangar were parked the two Fat Boy motorcycles and the two tents pitched next to them. And far down the strip was the red and white Super Cub and the yellow Stearman. And the fire ring slowly emitted the cold smoke of last night's ashes in rising curls.

And he opened his eyes when the rooster crowed and he sat slowly up in bed and he lifted the bed covers feeling foolish as he looked down at his naked body and he laid his hand on Joanne who shuttered a slight moan and he stood and looked out the window, happy to be alive and ready to have another day with the outlaws, his wife, his airplane and his dream.



He knew the adventures would continue...

About Mike Marcon

Mike Marcon began his career as a sport parachutist in 1962. He became a pilot in 1967. He is published by Random House, Prentice-Hall and Hilltop Publishers. All of his works may be found on Amazon. Visit his website at: www.mikemarcon.rocks