

Note: This story is an excerpt from my recent book, *The Last Summer*, which tells the tale of an aging barnstormer, Doc, who flies the Midwest every summer in his Jenny JN-4 hopping paying passengers. He thinks that this summer will be his last flying rides until he accidentally meets a young West Virginia girl, Frances, who he nicknames, “Butterfly.” One day, as their relationship grows closer and closer, they are out flying together in the Jenny when this happens. Only the *true* old school skydiver will understand or appreciate this story.

MM

### **Morgan’s Wish**

It was just across the state line, near Trevors, Indiana, a thousand feet over a forever expanse of endless rows of jade green summer corn interspersed by patches of brown alfalfa that Doc spotted it, and he said to Frances through the gosport tube, “Look over there to the right. See that?”

She turned her head and it took a minute, but finally she said, “I ain’t never seen no square silo before.”

“Butterfly...” said Doc, “...that’s not a silo. I think it’s a parachute loft.” Then he said, “Look! There’s an airplane parked in that small hangar next to it.”

Frances had no idea what a parachute loft was, but the fact that an airplane was down there excited her and she said, “Wanna let’s drop in and visit?”

“Why not?” responded Doc and he eased the Jenny’s throttle back and began a slow descent to the left and spiraled down over the now visible outline of a grass airstrip below.

On final for landing, Doc could see that, adjacent to the building he thought was a loft, there was another building that looked something like a

long Quonset hut. A single car and a pick-up truck were parked on the far side of the hut. Then he spotted it. As he looked over the cockpit's rim, about 50 yards away from the hut, out beyond the tiny airstrip was tan colored circle. He knew immediately what it was - a pea gravel pit about twenty yards in diameter. This place was a drop zone. An old jumper like Doc needed no more evidence than these things to tell him that a skydiving club or maybe a commercial parachute center was in operation here. Now, *he* was excited.

The grass strip was immaculately mowed and the Jenny's wheels found it as smooth as carpet; and at a small pointed marker, there was a short taxiway that led Doc to a parking area in front of the hut. As Doc shut the engine down and the propeller wound slowly to a clacking stop, he saw that an overhang shielded the wooden entrance door to the hut, and a single, black, fifty-five gallon drum with the word "trash" stenciled in white letters across its side sat next to the door.

Doc and Frances deplaned the Jenny and stood next to it for a short minute stretching their legs and looking around. Doc saw it after Frances pointed to it. On the far side of the hangar was a brick fire pit encircled by wooden benches. And Doc could also see that the airplane sitting in the hangar was a red, white and black Cessna 170, a four place bird.

The place seemed deserted and a bit strange. Something about the little airstrip seemed off, but Doc couldn't put his finger on it. As he stood ruminating about that, the door to the hut opened and out stepped a man that appeared to be in his fifties.

With no fanfare or introduction, the man strode quickly towards Doc and Frances and he pointed at the Jenny, and he said, "I'll be damned. Don't see many of those around here!" And he moved closer to Doc first, and he extended his hand and he said, "I'm Joe."

Doc took his hand and shook it. And as he introduced himself and then Frances, he looked into Joe's face. Joe had deep set and friendly dark eyes, a welcoming smile and smooth features and his carriage seemed to indicate

gregariousness. He wore no hat and his hair was silver and fine and tousled by the light wind. A thin moustache under his nose matched the color of his hair.

“We’re not open today, but you’re welcome anyway.” said Joe.

Doc said, “Oh. We’re not after anything. We were just out flying around and spotted your place, and thought we’d come have a look-see.”

“Well, I’m glad you did.” said Joe. “We don’t get a lot of visitors around here during the week, especially ones flying antique airplanes. The week-ends are our busy times.”

Frances had wandered over to the small T-hangar and remembering Doc’s admonishment not to touch other people’s airplanes without their permission, she was leaning far out over her toes looking through the left window at the interior of the 170. She wondered where the right side door was and why there was no co-pilot’s seat in it until she spotted both things sitting up against the hangar wall.

Doc asked of Joe, “Are you a commercial center?”

Joe laughed at that causing Doc to wonder what was funny, before Joe answered, “Nope.”

“A club?”

“ ‘Nope’ to that, too,” said Joe.

Doc stood quietly looking at Joe with a blank face.

Before Doc could respond to that, Joe continued, “Oh, I guess you could say that we’re a kind of ‘club,’ but not in the conventional sense, really.” And he let it go at that before saying, “Say. Would guys like a cup of coffee?”

Doc said, “With all my heart.” and he yelled at Frances, “Want some coffee?” And Frances turned and answered she would, and she began walking back towards Doc and Joe.

As Joe led Doc and Frances into the hut, a welcome wave of air conditioned cold air washed over them. As he held the door open, Joe asked, “So tell me, where are you guys from?”

And Doc explained to him that he was a writer barnstorming the Midwest and how he had met Frances and how they had teamed up. He went on to fill

in a few other details about how long he had been barnstorming and he told Joe that he was an ex-skydiver as well and that's why the place had gotten his attention.

"Is that a loft next door?" asked Doc.

Joe shook his head yes and said, "It sure is!" And he seemed to say that with a certain flare of satisfaction. "I'll give you a tour after I get your coffee."

Inside, standing off of the right wall of the hut was a highly polished bar with a grand, ornately framed mirror mounted on the wall behind it. At one end of the bar sat a microwave oven. Joe motioned to the bar and its stools and he said, "Climb up there and have a seat. Coffee 'ill be along in a minute. I've got to run back and get some clean cups." And he walked to a door at the back of the room and disappeared through it.

Doc slid up on his bar stool and began to look around the room. Just beyond the bar, and beneath it, sat an old-time cold drink cooler, the kind with sliding doors on top. The doors were spotted with decals from skydiving clubs around the country, both military and civilian. On the wall to one side of the mirror was an old, neon Schlitz beer sign flashing a flickering red light in its glass tubes, and on the other side of that was large poster advertising the 1968 National Parachute Championships. It showed a jumper dressed in black exiting an airplane silhouetted against an orange sunset.

The entire front room of the hut seemed to be a kind of dimly lit lounge with a Rock-Ola juke box standing in the corner of the back wall, it's red and yellow lights shining across a polished, black-and-white linoleum floor set in a checkered pattern. The room's ceiling was covered with an old orange and white parachute canopy that made the room appear as if it actually *was* under an open parachute. In the middle of the room, in front of the bar, there were ten round tables, each set with four cane back chairs with round seats; the tables were scattered across the floor, and each table had a small glass globe with a red candle, the kind with a plastic fishnet covering so often seen in bars. Doc could also see on the wall next to the rear door a large cork board with patches from many different parachute clubs.

But, when he turned and looked behind himself, what had really grabbed Doc's attention were the large words, "History & Knowledge" written in Olde English gold leaf letters across the top edge of the bar's mirror. Also interesting were the silver tankards, each sitting on small individual wooden shelves that lined the sides and bottom of the mirror. There were, perhaps, 30 of them. The engraving on each was too small to read from where he sat. Three of them were turned upside down. He sat staring at the inverse three, and he made a mental note to ask about these things.

Doc sat at the bar waiting for Joe to return with the coffee cups and he began studying the many framed photographs on the walls. He knew most of the faces in the pictures. He saw Ed Fitch and Gene Paul Thacker and Dan Poynter and Ed Crane and Norm Heaton and Lew Sanborn and Ted Strong. He saw Tiny Broadwick and Susan Joerns and Muriel Simbro. Maybe he had not met each one personally but he knew who these people were. The entire room's walls seemed to be a tribute to most of the luminaries and pioneers of parachuting, both male and female.

Just then, Joe walked back into the bar with another man close behind him. The man was slight and tanned with heavily tattooed forearms. He walked with a slight limp. One tattoo Doc could just make out was the faded red and blue crest of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division on the man's arm. Across the front of the yellow t-shirt the man wore were printed the words, "I Jumped The Cross." He smiled faintly as he circled around behind the bar, and then he reached across the bar to grasp Doc's hand. "I'm Dean." he said, and again Doc introduced himself and Frances who was slowly walking along the far wall studying each photo intently. She stopped and looked at Dean, raised her hand in a wave and she said, "Hey, there!"

Joe had carried in two heavy white porcelain coffee mugs and he set them on the bar and turned to take a steaming carafe from the coffee maker sitting on the bar's rear counter. He poured both mugs full and slid them in Doc's direction across the bar. By that time, Frances had returned to the bar and crawled up on a stool next to Doc.

"You guys own this place?" asked Doc.

Dean and Joe, who were now sitting on their own stools behind the bar facing Doc, turned and looked at one another before Joe said, "We all do." And they both smiled broadly and knowingly as if answering with inside information.

Doc laughed and said, "We?"

The Dean said, "Yep. All of us."

"So...you are a club?"

"Nope." said Dean.

"I'm a bit confused." said Doc. "Outside, you said you this wasn't a skydiving center."

"That's right." said Joe.

"And you said you weren't really a club, either."

"Right!" said Joe with a bit of a mischievous smile on his face, obviously enjoying Doc's confusion.

"But you do jump here. Right?"

"Every week-end the weather lets us."

"And you are neither a center or a club?"

Joe and Dean shook their heads no in unison.

Then with a tinge of agitated sarcasm in his voice, Doc said, "So you're a cult?"

Joe leaned across the bar, got close to Doc's face, and nearly in a whisper, he said, "You're getting warm."

Doc reared back a little on his stool. "Aw-w-w. *Com'on.*" His look was one of mild astonishment mixed with consternation.

"You were closer than you think." said Dean. Then he asked Doc, "How long you guys got? I mean, do you want a little tour?"

Frances was completely silent, not really understanding what was happening. But now Doc was intrigued and he said, "We're barnstomers. It's Friday and we've got all the time in the world. Besides, I'm a writer and you've got my curiosity up."

“Good!” said Joe. “Bring your cups, your curiosity and com’on.”

With that, Joe and Dean came from behind the bar and led Doc and Frances through the door at the rear of the room.

Over the door of the rear room was a sign. It said, “No Beer In Here!”

The room beyond the door was dim with just the light from small rectangular windows near the ceiling until Joe flipped on a light switch inside the door, and the room exploded slowly in flickering light - light from two long rows of brilliant neon lights that stitched the length of the ceiling - and lit the room that was some 60 feet long. Just inside the room, Doc and Frances stopped cold to stare. Joe and Dean stood to one side.

Under the lights, two long tables sitting parallel to one another extended into the room, each was about four foot wide and seemed to be over 40 feet long. Each table’s surface was polished and gleaming oak and the tables stood nearly hip high.

“Jesus H. Christ!” exclaimed Doc. “Those are the prettiest packing tables I’ve ever seen.”

“Custom built!” said Dean. “Did it ourselves.” he said as he beamed.

Doc bend down and saw that neatly arranged under each table were fids, small wooden paddles to help close parachute packs and tension plates to keep parachutes stretched out and line separators to keep parachute lines straight and red nylon shot bags, nylon tubes filled with lead shot to hold down down parachute material.

“Guess I don’t need to tell you that this is our equipment room, huh?” said Joe.

On the outside of the tables running the length of the room were equipment racks made of galvanized pipe. On the racks hung parachute containers ready to jump, it appeared. At first glance it looked like there were over 40 main parachutes of all types hanging on the racks along with various kinds of reserve - emergency - parachutes. Doc also spotted a few old time seat packs and pilot emergency rigs.

Joe waved Doc to him. “I want to show you something.”

Doc slowly followed Joe along the row of racks. The racks were marked in sections. As he followed Joe, he read the placards and labels. The first section was labeled with small signs that said, "C-8 TU" and "C-9 LL" and "T-10 LL." Those parachutes were all packed in olive drab colored military surplus four pin containers with old-style two stage canopy releases. The next row of parachutes were labeled "PC" or "PAP." Each of those were packed in sage green Pioneer four pin containers with shot-and-a-half canopy releases. Next to each of the round parachutes were reserve parachutes each numbered to correspond to the parachute it hung next to. Some were labeled "T7A" and others "NavCon." And the last row of containers were labeled "Swallow" and "Hawk." Each of those rigs was a newer style dual container with the reserve and the main parachutes, both to be worn on the back.

Another rack held wrist mounted altimeters and helmets with differing names stenciled on them. A row of coat hooks at the far end of the room supported gold or black or white or blue double-zipper jump suits and below each jumpsuit rested a pair of French Paraboots, some shined, some scuffed and worn. On a shelf above, arranged neatly, was a line of white Bell helmets and a few old football helmets.

"I know that those are all round parachutes, but what are the 'Swallows' and 'Hawks'?" asked Doc.

Dean answered, "Oh. Those are the air foils."

"You mean 'squares'?" said Doc.

"No." said Dean adamantly, seemingly a bit offended. "They are not '*square*,' and they *never* were. They are rectangular!" An awkward second of silence passed before Dean said, "Sorry. It's a point of distinction with us. These are flying wings, airfoils, and we do not call them 'parachutes.'"

And Joe said, "And that's why so many people have died or gotten seriously injured jumping them thinking that they are 'parachutes.' You *descend* more or less controlled and somewhat slowly under a *real* parachute. But, you *fly* an airfoil, like an airplane. And airplanes can kill you. And that's what regular people are not taught."

*"If they are taught anything at all!"* said Dean in a low voice almost a growl. And he looked at Joe and their eyes met in agreement.

"Sorry." said Joe. "Like some other things, it's a bit of a touchy subject with us. Suffice it to say, we do teach people how to fly the so called, 'squares.'"

Doc did not know what to say to that, so he simply waited and listened. He was feeling a bit injured having so many thousands of jumps himself, almost as if he had been scolded. He knew full well what a 'square' parachute was having been around them and used them since the early days of their introduction and development. It nearly seemed as if these guys had something against them. It was another small mystery about these people he wanted to solve.

"Wanna see the classroom?" said Joe looking at Doc.

A bit happy the subject had changed, Doc nodded yes, and he said, "Certainly."

Again, Joe opened a door at the back of the equipment room and flipped on a light switch and again, another room lit up. Doc had his cup to his lips as they walked into it, and it was all he could do to not spray a mouthful out in front of himself.

With wide eyes, Doc looked out across the room and his mouth fell open a bit.

Inside, along the walls of white, were three free-standing Singer 9710 heavy-duty, industrial sewing machines; machines that would easily stitch several layers of nylon webbing together along with your hand if you were not careful. If that wasn't enough, the room held a number of smaller medium-duty sewing machines sitting atop large polished tables, and next to each of those tables sat a small desk, each desk outfitted with goose neck lamps. On the far wall was a projection screen and hanging from the ceiling was projector platform. On the other wall was a work bench with a vice. And lying upon the bench were leather mallets, link separators and various other parachute rigging tools and equipment.

"This is our classroom." said Joe.

“Looks more like a riggers shop.” said Doc.

“Well, it’s that, too. We teach rigging in here among other things.”

“Wanna see the loft?” asked Dean.

Doc turned and looked at him and shook his head yes.

With that, Dean opened a door at the side of the classroom and stepped into a very short hallway with Doc and Frances in trail before opening a second door. In so doing, a burst of cool air rushed over Doc and Francis and Dean proudly said, “Climate controlled, my friends.”

Doc stepped inside the loft and looked up into the three story square shaft of the building at the multiple parachutes, each hanging on individual, motorized hooks in the cool drying air. There were canopies of all kinds billowing gently in the slow moving breeze and the familiar smell of rip-stop nylon overtook Doc and he smiled.

Doc turned to Dean with Joe looking at Doc over Dean’s shoulder and he said, “Look guys, I don’t want to be too personal, but I feel like I’m standing in the middle of a skydiver’s dream. What the hell is this place if you are not a center or a club? I know you were kidding when you said I was getting warm when I suggested that you might be a ‘cult,’ but Jesus...”

Joe said, “You’re not the Lone Ranger. Anyone who has ever visited here, that didn’t know what we do, has had the same reaction.”

Dean then said, “Com’on. Let’s go back to the bar and we’ll make some sense out of what you’ve just seen.”

Once everyone was back at the bar with Doc and Francis sitting on one side, and Joe and Dean sitting on the other side, Joe asked the pair if they like a beer. Doc had finished his coffee and he shook his head no as did Frances.

Doc sat for a few quiet moments looking at the words on the mirror before slowly looking around the entire room. Joe and Dean had helped themselves to cold beers from the cooler, and each took a few sips. Joe lit a cigarette and placed it in a large green ashtray that he had pulled from under the bar. “Can’t do this when anybody else is here. “ he said. “Smoking bother you?”

Frances said nothing. She only glared at Doc for a second before shifting her gaze away knowing that Doc was going to smoke, too. Seeing Frances look away, Doc shook a Camel from his pack and lit it with his Zippo. But knowing she disapproved, his conscious attacked him and he quickly crushed the cigarette in the ashtray.

Then he looked first at Joe, then at Dean, and he said, "I've got about a zillion questions. You know that?"

Joe shook his head yes as did Dean. Then Dean said, "Fire away."

"Well, there is one thing I haven't seen here that I've seen on almost every drop zone I ever jumped at."

"What's that?" asked Joe.

"Well, usually there is a price list posted somewhere."

"Right." said Dean.

"Where's yours?" asked Doc.

"We don't have one." said Joe.

Doc threw his head back and laughed and he said, "So, I could jump here for free?"

With that, Joe and Dean each slowly turned and faced each other and wide conspiratorial smiles grew across their faces. Then Joe picked his cigarette up from the ashtray, flicked away the grey worm of ash and said, "Well, now that you mention it..."

Before Joe could say another word, Dean put a hand on Joe's arm and said, "Let me take this one, okay."

Joe laughed and said, "You got it."

Then Dean looked at Doc and he said, "I'm gonna answer your question, but first, let me ask *you* a question."

Doc said, "All right."

"When did you start skydiving?"

Doc immediately asked himself, "*What the hell does that have to do with anything,*" before he said, "Back in the Sixties."

Dean shook his head and then he said, "Well, someone like you might appreciate our answer, and the answer is that jumpers here pay a different price."

Frances looked at Doc who had slightly cocked his head as a quizzical look crossed his face.

"Bear with me..." said Dean, "...the answer to your question is a bit complicated but it will come clear soon enough. Sure you don't want that beer to drink while I answer your question."

Doc rapped a knuckle on the bar, as if to say "Hit me."

Joe slid the cooler door open, withdrew a beer and popped the tab and slid the can across the bar towards Doc. "Sure you don't want one there, young lady?" Joe asked Frances. She smiled demurely and said, "Could I have some more of that coffee?"

"You bet'cha." said Joe and he rose to get the carafe. As he poured Frances another cup, Dean resumed with his answer.

"I asked you when you started jumping because the answer is one that jumpers like you who started early would better understand than newer jumpers."

He continued. "The most direct answer to what jumps cost here is "nothing." But there are requirements."

"I'll try to be as brief as I can and if you have questions, stop me."

Dean looked at Joe and nodded for him to proceed.

"Here's the deal..." said Dean, "...we call ourselves, "Legacy Skydivers." We serve a responsibility to skydiving's history and knowledge." And Dean watched Doc's eyes as they shifted up to the words written on the mirror.

"Some years back, a few of us who had started back when you did, in the late Fifties and early Sixties, watched an evolution beginning. One of commercialization, profiteering and a lack of regard for our roots that, in the end, meant that even though a jumper could fall well, could maneuver a canopy excellently, the focus was growing on skydiving for the masses, and it

also meant that jumpers no longer were as they were in the beginning – different, a breed apart.

So, we set out, in our own small way, to create a group of jumpers who are that ‘breed apart.’ You can look at it this way: Our people are the difference between those who run for fun, and those who run to be the best.

We became monistic in our devotion to preserving the history of the sport, enhancing the skills of our jumpers and becoming a group that remains the ‘breed apart.’ We do not advertise that or boast about it. We hold our pride within ourselves and consider it a sin to ever display anything other than a quiet dignity about our skills and knowledge.”

“But all of this...” and Doc swept a hand around the room. “...how?”

Dean said, “Let go back to the beginning a little more.”

Doc was leaning forward now and he took a long swig from his beer.

“About twenty years ago now, we had a small club that jumped here. There were about ten of us early on who worked over in Muncie at different jobs. None of this was here then. We’d rent a 172 and a local pilot would fly us a few loads every week-end.”

Dean looked at Joe ,and Joe said, “A very few loads.”

“We actually spent most of our time sitting around and talking about what was going on everywhere else. You know, at Orange and Indiantown and places like that. We shared gear and drank beer and partied nights. Most of us thought we were pretty special as there were no other jumpers around here then. Every now and then somebody would talk some nurse or a girlfriend in making a jump, or some kid from the local college would show up wanting to know how he could get started.

So, we charged ‘em a few bucks, spent a few hours with them teaching parachute landing falls and making mock exits from the airplane’s door, and we’d put them out on a static line and that was it. No one was thinking about the future much. We were just having a good time.”

Joe interrupted as if on cue, and he said, “Until Morgan showed up.”

“Yeah...” said Dean, “...Morgan.”

“Who’s he?”

“First cup on the left.” and Dean turned and pointed at the top tankard to the left which was one of the three that were upside down.”

“ “Who *was* he?,” is actually the right question.” said Dean. “His ashes are out there now.” and he looked and pointed at the front door.

Doc nodded that he understood, and he looked at Frances who was looking at him with a question on her face.

“Ashdive.” said Doc. “I’ll explain later.”

She nodded okay.

“Anyway, Morgan shows up. He was just out of the Army, a lifer.”

“Retired career military.” said Doc as he looked at Frances. She shook her head that she understood.

“He’d been in twenty-five years and had managed several military sport parachute clubs. The last one at Fort Dodson.” said Dean.

“He knew just about every jumper in the country.” said Joe.

“Well, he made a few jumps with us, and he was the one who brought it up in the first place.”

“Brought it up...?” asked Doc.

“What was starting to happen to the sport.”

“What was that?” asked Doc.

“Tandems.” said Dean.

Doc said then, “Listen, I’m sorry, but let me interrupt you for a second. She’s just learning all of this, and I want her to understand.”

“Go ahead.” said Dean and he lifted his can to take a sip of beer.

“Butterfly, a tandem jump is when another jumper hooks you to him and makes his jump. It’s like you are taking a long free fall ride with him. He does everything. He helps you get in the airplane. He helps you leave the airplane. He’s strapped you to himself and you free fall along with him. Then he opens his parachute, a big one designed to hold two people and he guides it to the ground and you land soft like. You pay a lot of money to do that. It’s sort of like an amusement park ride at the fair. You made a jump but because he’s in

control of everything, you really didn't. Most people might make one or two tandem jumps with that guy but most of them never become real jumpers. It was just a thrill ride to them. Savvy?"

She shook her head that she understood and took a sip of her coffee and never took her eyes off of Doc. He smiled at her and said, "Good."

Then he turned back to Dean and said, "Sorry. Go ahead."

Dean and Joe both laughed while looking at Frances before Joe said, "He's a pretty good teacher, huh?"

She shook her yes.

"Anyway, Morgan was pretty emphatic about what he thought was going to happen to the sport money-wise with the advent of tandems. He was also very alarmed about the rising prices in general due to bigger aircraft and insurance costs and all that. And he pretty much knew that tandems were going to be a source of big money for commercial skydiving centers. But his biggest worry was that so many people would start jumping that way, that some very important things would get lost in the shuffle."

And Dean pointed to the mirror.

"So after he got to know us, he challenged us."

Joe piped up and said, "We didn't realize it so much at the time, but he shared his dying wish with us and we bought into it. This all started with Morgan."

"So, on the charter, we called it "Morgan's Wish."

"You had a charter?" asked Doc and he laughed softly nearly under his breath. "Sorry." he said, "I just never heard of a skydiving club that had a charter."

Dean said, "That's okay. Back then, we didn't either."

Joe interjected, "Actually, we were never an official club. We were just a bunch of guys who jumped together on the week-ends."

"Then Morgan came along. We didn't know that he was sick for quite some time. But he had this charisma about him."

"Did he ever." said Joe.

Dean laughed softly. "Yeah."

Doc asked, "So this whole thing here was his idea?"

"No. Not all of it. We've evolved." said Joe.

Dean then said, "The whole idea was to preserve the sport in anyway we could that avoided commercialism and promoted its history."

"Morgan had this idea that if we became jumpers who valued our roots and stuck by them, that no matter what happened out there..." and Dean swept the room grandly with an arm, "...there would always be jumpers who were still the breed apart."

"Well, my curiosity is now on fire. What did the charter say?" asked Doc who was now dying to run for his writing satchel. He needed to take notes. So, he took a handful of napkins from a dispenser on the bar and pulled his ball point out and began writing key words down. "Sorry..." said Doc. "I hope you don't mind if I take a few notes. It's in the blood, you know."

Joe and Dean looked at each other then back at Doc and shook their heads yes. "Why the hell not?" said Dean.

Frances slid her bar stool a little closer to Doc so she could see what he was writing.

"Where was I?" said Dean.

"There would always be jumpers who were the breed apart." said Frances and she smiled.

"Right." said Dean. "Anyway, at the time, none of us had any money to speak of..."

"Wait. Please." said Doc. "Would you go back to the charter. What did it say exactly?"

"You're going to laugh." said Joe.

"If he does, he won't get anymore free beer." said Dean, and the four of them laughed together.

Doc raised his left hand and placed his right hand on his chest and said, "Swear to God, I won't."

“Well, the whole thing was pretty simple.” Dean continued, “Over beer, around a fire on the week-ends, with Morgan egging us on and making suggestions, we all came to an agreement that as a group, we would commit ourselves to not only keeping the history, but becoming scholars of it and we would insure that no student of ours would be surface trained. There would be no more \$50 three-hour first jump courses given here.”

Doc was using up napkins at a rapid pace.

Joe then said, “What the charter says is simple: “Keep the past. Learn.””

“That’s it?!” said Doc with wide eyes. “Keep the past? Learn?”

After stunned second, Doc said, “That isn’t much of a charter.”

Joe then said, quite sharply, “It is when you take the words seriously and that is what we did and do.”

“What do you mean?” asked Doc.

Joe had taken over the narrative then and he said, “Well, for starters, every student we take in has to pass a selection committee.”

“Really!?” said Doc, a little astonished.

“Really. And here’s why.”

Doc silently scribbled.

“The candidate has to agree to several things. The first is, the completion of a forty hour initial training session spread out over a period of weeks. The selection guys are looking for earnestness and commitment to our values.”

“Really!? Forty hours?”

“Yep. That was Morgan’s doing. Came out of his days running a military club.”

Joe said, “We don’t charge anybody a thing.”

Then Dean said, “But the requirements dictate that they learn the basics of everything from free fall body positions to canopy control to packing to certain rigging skills. And more.”

Joe stood up, straightened his pant legs and stretched his arms out and said, “Doc, let’s take a piss break. I’m going to run back to the office and get you something that will show you how serious we are.”

Doc looked at Frances who was vigorously shaking head yes, yes, yes. “I do gotta go.” she said.

Dean said, “It’s right back there.” and he pointed to a door in the far corner.

Frances slid down off of her stool and trotted quickly in the direction of the restroom. When she arrived at the door, she stopped and stared at the sign on the door for a long moment. “Something the matter?” asked Dean.

“I’m not a Unisex.” said Frances very seriously.

Dean looked at Doc, and Doc laughing, told Frances, “Means you are either a man or a woman. Go on in.”

With that, she shook her head that she understood and she quickly disappeared through the door.”

Dean was desperately trying not to laugh out loud but his shoulders were shaking when Doc looked at him and said, a little too loudly, “Bit of a hillbilly.”

While Frances was in the bathroom, Joe sauntered into the lounge. He walked around the bar and took his seat on his stool and set what appeared to be a bound pamphlet on the bar in front of Doc. “Turn to the first page of that.” said Joe.

Frances had finished and was climbing back on to her stool as Doc studied the pamphlet’s cover. The title simply said, “Legacy Course Work.” Doc slowly turned the cover aside, and he bent his head to study the table of contents.

“Holy *shit*.” said Doc softly. “Are you guys serious?”

Doc was slowly running his finger down the list of subjects in the table of contents when Joe said, “Yes. Quite.”

Dean then said, “See, here’s the deal.” And he paused waiting for Doc to raise his head and look at him. “What we know is that most jumpers learn by hearsay. Their knowledge might increase over time. But our guys are taught and practiced in nearly every aspect of skydiving before they ever make their first jump. It’s part of what they commit to.”

“Says here you teach hand deployment of reserves.”

“Yep. Everybody makes their first jumps on early style simply modified round parachutes.”

“No cut-a-ways?”

“Nope. That comes later.” said Dean.

Doc’s mouth was slightly ajar.

“And “Canopy Construction?” asked Doc.

“Every seam, every tab, even how much gut is in 550 cord. Our guys can name every part of any canopy they jump, from apex to suspension lines, even speed links.”

“Sewing? You teach them sewing?”

Joe laughed and said, “You saw the 9710s and the other machines. Every one of our people can make a parachute, a simple one from start to finish. Even construct the harnesses.”

“Christ!” said Doc.

Doc raised his finger back to the top of the contents.

“I haven’t heard the term, “French Frog,” for thirty years.”

“It’s history.” said Joe.

“Spotting? You teach students how to spot?”

“From the get-go.” said Dean.

“Are you starting to get the picture?” asked Dean.

“Yeah. Definitely...but “Aircraft Maintenance?” exclaimed Doc with incredulousness in his voice.

“If it has to do with parachuting, we teach it.” said Dean.

“There’s not one of our guys who can’t completely unzip that airplane out there, remove every screw and inspection cover, run the cables for broken wire, change the oil, clean the filters, inspect the hinges, anything that needs doing to assist in a 100 hour or annual inspection. They all know that airplane inside and out.”

“If you are going to jump it, you should know something about it,” Joe said. “We don’t expect anybody to learn to fly but a few have.”

Frances nudged Doc and he looked at her and she was smiling.

“History. It says, ‘History.’”

“We take them all the way back to Leonardo. We teach them about Switlick and even who made parachutes during the war. We teach them about Istel. They all know how we got here and can recite it. Everything.”

Dean put his hand flat on the bar and leaned into Doc’s face moving his hand towards Doc. He waited until Doc gave him his full attention.

“See, Doc...” said Dean, “...there are skydivers, then there are sport parachutists. It’s running for fun or to be the best. It’s why we have a selection committee. Morgan felt, and we do, too, that you can go to the drop zone, pay your money and call yourself a “skydiver,” or you can commit to what it should mean to be a jumper and then live up to it.”

“But...” said Doc, “How are guys paying for all of this? I mean, shit...”

“In the beginning, we went to a bank and ten of us co-signed a note for this little patch of alfalfa and a run-out, tired old Cessna 170, that one out there. It took us a while, but we decided that everyone here would contribute what they could each month, and we would do what we had to do to make up any difference. We don’t charge anything to any member. We only ask commitment. Everyone here understands that we stay open by contribution. Hell, even that beer you are drinking is a contribution. The guys only contribute what they can. Some guys even tithe a portion of their pay every month. It comes in by check and we put it in the bank. Once a month, we all meet, we all go over the expenses and we pay the bills. We haven’t been short for many years now.”

Joe and Dean then became silent.

Doc was still looking at the table of contents.

“After the forty hours?...”

“They make their first jump. Then they start progression.” said Joe.

“Progression?”

“Yes. It’s old school all the way. Dummy ripcord pulls, three clear-and-pulls, then longer and longer delays, all using rounds of course. Then on to

Para-Commanders, then on to airfoils. In the beginning, every jump they make is with an assigned mentor.”

Joe then said this, “Doc, every jumper here works on becoming a licensed skydiver. And they do. Night jumps, water jumps, the whole enchillada. They they work on becoming Instructors. We encourage our guys to go jump at centers and regular clubs whenever they wish. Some have even jumped with military demonstration teams. That’s where all the patches and decals come from...” and Joe pointed to the wall, “...they bring ‘em back and display them.”

“Every jumper here is assigned a mentor until they begin making the longer delays and doing relative work.” said Dean.

“Do you recall that I said, “Monastic?” asked Joe.

Doc shook his head yes and raised a finger asking Joe to wait. He then looked at Frances, and before he could say anything, she smiled and empathically said, “I *know* what “monks” are. I ain’t some stupid ‘hillbilly’ ya know.”

Doc looked at her for the longest moment, and then he placed a hand on her arm and he said, “I said it with affection.”

“She smiled at him, and then she reared back and punched him in the right arm as hard as she could. He grimaced and said, “Yeow!” He looked at her with painful surprise written across his face, and he twisted his lips into a wrenching smile.

“Bet you ain’t gonna say it again!” she said sweetly, and she leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

It was all Dean and Joe could do to keep from falling off of their stools with peals of laughter.

As Doc sat rubbing his arm and still looking in shock at Frances, she held her cup to her lips, and with bright eyes, she was staring unblinkingly at Doc and trying not to giggle.

Dean and Joe had both cleared their throats and settled down. Then Dean said, “Listen Doc, I’d bet that you are a flight instructor, right?”

Doc shook his head yes.

“Right. Well, think about things this way. In addition to hours of flight instruction before a student is allowed to solo, he begins studying for a lengthy written exam, right?”

Doc said, “Right.”

“And before a student pilot goes for a check ride to get his license, he has to pass that written and pass a practical, an oral exam, and then he has to pass a checkride with an pilot examiner, right?”

“Right! But...” and Doc pointed at the table of contents, “Meterology for Skydivers?”

“Does the weather have anything to do with skydiving?” asked Joe.

“Well...” said Doc.

“You bet your sweet ass, it does.”

Then Doc, still looking at the table of contents, said with a slight amount of incredulity in his voice, “Under “Traditions,” it says, “Dead Ant, Cardinal Puff and Lost Ripcords...” And he looked first at Joe, who was on the verge of laughing and then at Dean who was smiling, and he said, “*Really!?*”

“Gotta have some post jump fun, too, huh?” said Dean.

With that, Doc pushed against the bar with fully outstretched arms and leaning back with just the two rear legs of his stool still on the floor, he looked at Joe, then at Dean and, and after a long silence, he quickly sat forward, with the two front legs of the stool making a loud thump against the floor and he said, “Infuckingcredible.”

Dean looked at the front door and through it's small diamond shaped window, he could see that dusk was setting in.

“Getting dark. Where you guys staying tonight?” asked Dean.

“Under the wing, if it's all right with you guys.” said Doc. And he looked at Frances. Then she asked, “Can we heat our supper at your fire place?”

Joe said, “You don't need to do that. Some of the guys and their families will be rolling in in a few minutes and later, there will be plenty to eat, if you want to take pot luck with us.”

“Lovely.” said Doc. “Sure it’s not an imposition?”

“Certain it’s not.” said Joe. “Besides, I think you are going to want meet some of these guys. One of them even owns a Travel Aire. He oughta be landing pretty soon.”

And in the distance, Doc heard an airplane engine faintly.

Frances was looking at Doc and her excited look indicated that she’d heard it, too.

And before she could even ask the question, “What’s a Travel Aire?” Doc said, “It’s another really old airplane, too.”