

# WELCOME TO PICKETWIRE

By Tim Wintermute

## CHAPTER 1

### TOM

Tom Tiddings settled onto his regular stool at Sue's Pretty Good Café. It was at the end of the counter and was closest to the booths next to the plate glass front window that looked out onto Picketwire, Colorado's main street. He placed a steno pad and pen on the counter, opened the Denver Post with a snap so that it crackled the way only a newspaper can and was already reading as Sue poured the first of several cups of coffee into the slightly chipped mug with his name stenciled on it. It was a big deal to have your name on a mug at the Pretty Good. It meant that you were now a regular: A regular being determined solely by Sue based on criteria that had never been deciphered by her customers although it was generally agreed that just showing up was not enough. One morning you were drinking out of a plain old mug and the next there was a brand new white mug with your name in red block letters. However, you only got the first one free so if you wanted a replacement you had to pay a buck fifty. Sue said it was a way to make sure regulars took their status seriously and treated the mugs bestowed on them with the dignity they deserved although most regulars were like Jeff and just kept drinking no matter how many nicks and chips pitted its once glossy surface. Sue put up with that but if a crack appeared that threatened to leak the contents or give the drinker a bloody lip then they'd find themselves back in anonymity, drinking from a plain old mug until they paid for the replacement.

He had to look to find the news story on the hit and run involving the billionaire Wylie Boone in Aspen. Even though it was now on the third page of the Post it was still the first thing most of the regulars in the Pretty Good were talking about. According to the story, the police were still looking for a dark blue Minivan that ran into Boone's red Porsche that had stalled at an intersection. Boone was inside the car on his cellphone when it was hit but, miraculously, escaped with only scrapes and bruises although his cellphone was ejected from the car and run over by the fleeing minivan. It reminded Tom of last year when the flatbed truck Reuben Fuentes was driving stalled on a railroad crossing near La Junta and was hit by a freight train as he was trying to push it off the tracks. It was carrying a load of fresh picked melons and when the train hit the truck they rolled off in an avalanche and buried poor Reuben. Reuben never knew what hit him, most people said. But Tom, being a newspaper man, had seen the sad irony: That Reuben after years of working as a hired hand had saved enough to buy a farm and pick his own melons and then he'd been crushed to death by them. When he wrote that in the front page story he wasn't sure how people would take it but Reuben's widow -they had no children -

told him after the funeral that Reuben had indeed been buried under what he loved most. Not long after that the widow, who was paid a small fortune by the railroad, sold the farm and moved to Denver.

While the story about Reuben Fuentes made the front page of the Picketwire Press one about a hit and run of some billionaire in Aspen would usually get an inch on the second page, if that. They didn't have the resources to cover those kinds of stories and, besides, people didn't read the Picketwire Press to find out about what happened somewhere else. Boone, however, was the great grandson of one of Picketwire's founding fathers and grew up there and owned the family ranch, the Double B (some people said that the two b's stood for "Bottom line Boones") outside of town. Although it had been years since anyone had seen him around Tom knew he had to cover the story.

"So, what's the column going to be on this week?" Reverend Dave Sanderson asked as he stopped by with a thermos jug that Sue had filled with piping hot coffee.

"Rev, I never give advance notice on my columns. Not because I want people to buy the paper and read it there first, which I do, but because I don't know for sure what I'm going to write until just before the deadline."

"Sounds like me on a Saturday working on my Sunday Sermon."

"At least you can ask for some divine intervention. You know, a little Holy Ghost writing on your sermon. I remember as a kid going to a revival where they were singing about God calling on his heavenly telephone. I guess now they're singing What A Facebook Friend I Have In Jesus."

Dave laughed then bent closer so he could whisper in Jeff's ear. "I have a back up plan."

"A back up for God?"

"No, of course not," he chuckled. "I have Jane Takamoto."

"Jane? Is she in town?"

"Not only in town but she's our new associate pastor and she's preaching this Sunday."

"How come I didn't know? I mean, this is news and I do run the newspaper."

"Now you know. Seriously, Jane didn't want any publicity until after she gave her first sermon so this isn't for publication until after Sunday."

"Jane Takamoto," Jeff rolled the name around a few times.

"Coming back here? I thought she was gone for good. I mean she went to Yale."

"And then to Princeton for her degree in divinity."

"Some of us always thought she was divine," Tom said and then, wondering how it sounded, added. "I mean a really nice person. So she's come back to Picketwire - from the Ivy League to the minor league. Usually someone wants to be called up to the major league not the other way around."

"Are you calling my Church a farm team?" Dave said, pretending to be insulted.

"Of course not, Rev., although you've got some farmers in your congregation including Jane's parents."

"Speaking of which, and this is definitely not for publication, it's not just a call from the Church that Jane is answering but it's also one from her folks. Her Mom and Dad aren't doing all that well and you know, she's not only their daughter she's their only child. She gave up a good job in New York City."

"I knew she got married. Her parents told us and we printed the announcement in our Getting Hitched section."

"He's coming with her, in case you were wondering. You still being single and all." Dave said, nudging Tom in the shoulder with his elbow.

"I'm looking forward to meeting him," Tom answered, feeling a twinge of guilt about not only lying to a member of the clergy but a friend. "Anyway, thanks for giving me an idea for my column."

"What's that?"

"You can come home again."

You can come home again ran through Tom's mind after Dave left. Unlike Jane, it was Tom's parents who left home. He'd just graduated from high school and came home to an empty house and a note after a night out celebrating his graduation from high school. He should have suspected something was up when his parents bought a twenty-eight foot recreational vehicle at the beginning of his senior year. The RV was gone and the note said that they had worked for almost forty years at publishing the Picketwire Press without a break so they were going to make up for it by taking off and seeing the world, at least the parts you can get to in an RV. The hadn't decided exactly what places they were going to except that they were heading to Alaska first. They finished their note by writing that now that he was a high school graduate he was old enough to take over the family business and they were appointing him the new publisher of the Picketwire Press.

It wasn't that Tom was an only child; he was just the only one still at home. He was ten years younger than his sister and twelve years younger than his brother. They'd both gone off to college and neither of them had any interest in returning to Picketwire or being in the newspaper business. Since the paper was held in a family trust established by his great grandparents, Tobias and Hilda Tiddings, who founded it, Tom knew he'd end up with it sooner or later. It turned out to be much sooner than later. He called his sister and brother with the news and learned that they'd both received a letter telling them the same thing. "You know they said that they wanted to retire while they were still young enough to enjoy it," Dick, his older brother, said.

"It's more like they escaped than retired. It's a hell of a succession plan – running off and leaving behind the business to the kid who hasn't had a chance to leave home."

"All you have to do is get married and have at least one kid. That's not so hard," Dick laughed. "But, seriously, this isn't really a bad succession plan since unlike me and Karen you've always loved working at the paper and you know everything about it."

"Working at the paper isn't the same thing as running it and being responsible."

"It is now. The trust requires the family to continue as owner and a member of the family to be the publisher of the paper and if the trust is violated...well, you know what happens then?"

Yes, Tom knew all too well. A blessing and a curse had been passed down from one generation of Tiddings to the other. So there he was, the fourth publisher of the Picketwire Press at the age of 18. Since going away to college was now out of the question Tom enrolled at Picketwire College. At least he knew what he was going to do when he graduated from college because it would be the same thing he was doing before he graduated. Fifteen years later that's exactly what he'd been doing. And then Jane Takamoto comes home. The very person that he wished had never left came back, only now she was a reverend, with degrees from Yale and Princeton and she was married. Jane had changed but he was the same old, Tom. If he weren't on the masthead of the Picketwire Press he'd never see his name in the paper. What if Jane didn't even remember him? Just thinking about it filled him with dread and made his hands tremble so much that he had to put his coffee mug down. All he needed to add insult to injury would be for Sue to consign him to a nameless mug. Maybe he should assign Gloria to the story so that he didn't have to interview Jane? After all, he had his column and there was the Wylie Boone story to cover and, well, hell's bells, Picketwire was a small town and they'd run into each other soon enough no matter what.

## **TONY**

Everyone was long gone but the curtain flapping in the window of the empty house was still waving goodbye. "Wonder what else they left behind?" Antonio "Tony" Medrano's voice filled the empty van before escaping through the open driver's side window. There was no point in keeping the words inside when there was so much silence outside to fill. He opened the van's door and stepped out into the settling dust blown up by his arrival. It was almost as dry as the baked ground beneath it and just as silent under the soles of his boots as he walked though the front yard or what had been the front yard although front and back and side or even the idea, the entire concept, of yard didn't mean a whole hell of a lot to a house out here. He took a photo of it with his smartphone.

The door was open - in fact, the door was gone and so was most of the roof. You could have knocked down the house a long time ago with a couple of pushes from a bulldozer but what would have been the point? It's not as if there was some other use for the land it was on and besides it was adobe so it was basically dry mud and unlike the houses now it was bio degradable and would end up as unadulterated dust. Tony didn't like those new houses that much and he hated subdivisions and

suburbs. They ate up all the good land and produced nothing of value as far as he could see. After the housing boom a few years ago a whole lot of those new houses had been built in new subdivisions that sprouted up on the prairie around Denver and Colorado Springs. They weren't little houses on the prairie, either, but big houses and a lot of them were big and empty houses because the mortgages on them were for more than they were worth. They called that being underwater but out here in the dry lands if you had enough water to cover a house it would make it worth a whole hell of a lot.

Looking around he couldn't help thinking that what was considered a piece of junk, worthless trivia, today could be an important archeological artifact years from now. Of course, he wasn't looking for artifacts but just scouting sites for the new "ruins on the range" tour he was developing. What he was looking for was a story about the people who had lived here. He could learn something about them from seeing what they took and what they didn't. Maybe they didn't have room for everything but more than likely they left behind what they wanted to forget and that could be a little or a lot and, sometimes it was everything. In that case it was like a tomb only the body was missing. Telling that story was a challenge. There wasn't much that these folks left behind although they probably didn't have much to take with them. An overturned table with one of its legs snapped off, a tin bucket with a hole in it and a lot of coyote scat. That's when he noticed the Bible barely visible under a coating of dust on the earth floor next to what was left of an overturned table. It had probably fallen when the table had been knocked over or just collapsed. Tony brushed off the dust with a toothbrush he carried with him and took a photo. Carefully he opened the front cover. It was the King James Version and there were some papers folded between the pages. He closed it then took out his bandanna and laid it flat beside the Bible. He tilted the Bible enough so that the papers slipped out onto the bandanna. Ordinarily he would leave everything where he found it but he wanted to read what was on the papers and, who knows, being as how it was inside a Bible maybe it was left there for him to find? After folding the bandanna loosely around the papers he left the empty house and walked back to the van

Tony sat in the front seat of his van and drank the last of the coffee in the thermos that he'd filled that morning at Sue's Pretty Good Café. He'd have to wait to read what was on the paper because it was fragile and might disintegrate if he didn't do it properly. After writing a description of what he'd seen in his notebook he cranked the ignition and pulled away. When he got to the main road, which meant it was gravel instead of dirt, he stopped to let a couple of black SUV's barrel past on their way to the Double B Ranch. Tony wondered if they had anything to do with Boone and that hit and run up in Aspen a few days ago. Although he couldn't see through their tinted windows he imagined they were probably surprised to see a purple van in the middle of nowhere.

Getting attention was, of course, one of the reasons for painting the van purple. The other was the name of his business, Purple Sage Tours. Although the business was new Tony liked to think that he was picking up where his great, great, great

grandfather Francisco Medrano had left off. After all, "Don" Francisco, as he was still reverently called, had served as a scout and guide before helping to found Picketwire and starting its first (and last) stage company. His son, Miguel, was responsible for bringing the railroad to Picketwire. After Tony's grandfather, Alejandro, sold the railroad to the Acheson, Topeka and Santa Fe the family settled into investing rather than running businesses. Tony's father, Roberto, had been surprised when he told him that after getting an MBA at the University of Colorado he wanted to start a business and not just any business but a business that took visitors and sightseers on tours of Picketwire and the surrounding area.

"What visitors? What sights?" His father asked, unable to hide both his disappointment at his son not joining him in Medrano Investments and what a bad investment he'd made in paying for business school.

"That's the point, Dad," Tony had replied. We won't get tourists unless we identify and preserve the sights and a way to show them. Tourism is a big business, you know? What we need to build is the infrastructure to support it."

"People come to Colorado because of the Rocky Mountains and while we have plenty of rocks around here we're not exactly in the mountains."

"If you believe that then why are you still here?"

"I didn't say Picketwire wasn't a great place to live."

"Just not to visit, is that it? Well, how will people come to live here if they don't visit? We need to invest to attract visitors or they won't come."

"Okay, okay, maybe getting people to visit here would be good," Roberto answered, grudgingly. "But why should the Medranos be the ones to pay for it?"

If "Don" Francisco had thought that way we'd be in the fields picking melons today instead of having this conversation, Tony wanted to say but instead he answered. "I'm not asking you to pay I'm asking for a small investment to get started." With that he handed over the business plan he'd written.

His father was impressed. "But why do you want to call this business Purple Sage Tours?"

"It's named after Riders of the Purple Sage by Zane Grey."

"I prefer Louis L' Amour's books but then I'm not a tourist; I just live here."

Tony's father had provided some start up capital and, two years later, in addition to the van he had a mini bus, one full time employee and several part time tour guides. Although things hadn't gone exactly according to the business plan, Tony was confident that Purple Sage Tours was heading in the right direction and not riding into the sunset. He pulled the purple van onto the road toward Picketwire where he would be picking up a group to take to prison.

## JANE

It would do. Oak bookcases covered most of the walls. Fortunately they were already full since the room had been used as the church library and the books she brought with her would fill only a shelf. She did most of her reading on her iPad and computer but real books, with names of biblical scholars and theologians stamped on their spines, was something reassuring; comforting in fact. Instead of an office desk there was a wood library table. Jane decided it to should stay. She didn't need drawers and a big office desk was just a barrier between her and those who came to see her. This way they would be sitting around the same table. And there was plenty of light from the large double window behind her opposite the door with the top third filtered through stain glass. True, with the bookcases there wasn't much space left to hang pictures on the walls but she could always turn her chair and look out the window. It would be a good place to read and write and think, which is probably why the minister's office was called "the pastor's study".

But what about Bruce? He needed a place to work as well. They didn't even have a real home yet and were staying with her folks. There was no space to work there unless your work was farming, in which case there were acres but it was all outside. She laughed. Bruce? Bruce Levinson, born and bred in New York City as a farmer? Still, was that any more surprising than their marriage? A Japanese American farm girl and a Jewish guy from Manhattan. Despite those differences they got married and had stayed married even when she went to seminary. But now she had uprooted them from their life in New York City to move to a small hometown in the middle of nowhere. Bruce joked that if she was called to be a minister than he must have been called to be a wandering Jew.

In some ways, Jane felt like a stranger in Picketwire as well. Bruce, in fact, had an advantage because nobody there knew him and he wasn't expected to know anyone. If he were alone people would introduce themselves to him but when they were together she was expected to introduce him to them, which was a problem since they all knew who she was but she often couldn't remember who they were. She had to remind herself that not forgetting someone's name wasn't one of the Ten Commandments. What gave her the most anxiety was how she would handle running into someone whose name and face she couldn't forget as much as she'd tried. She only hoped that Bruce wouldn't be with her.

She opened her laptop and turned it on. The screen stared at her. It wasn't blank but cluttered with icons but none of them said "sermon" and that's what she needed. It was already Tuesday so she only had five days until she had to deliver it and she hadn't even started. This would be her first since she had been installed. Her parents would be sitting in the front row as well as people she knew. Reverend Sanderson (she had to remember to call him Dave) would be sitting right next to her as she stood at the pulpit and, of course, Bruce would be there next to her parents. He claimed that he would be there to give his moral, if not spiritual, support, but to be honest his presence was what made her most nervous. In New York after seminary she'd taken a job with an international social justice organization and "gave talks" rather than preached sermons. He'd heard her " talks" but never one of the sermons

she would give when she was a guest preacher at a church. Even then, her sermons weren't much different than the talks. The fact was she wasn't very comfortable with the whole idea of preaching. She lifted her eyes from the blinking cursor on the computer' blank screen and looked at the bookshelves. Her eyes drifted over the spines. She was too far away to read the titles. Why not just pick one of the books from here and use it as the basis for her sermon? Now, that would be something completely different for her: Something that no one, not even Bruce, would imagine her doing.

The Church Secretary, Hazel Shanley, interrupted Jane's thoughts.

"Sorry to bother you Reverend Takamoto," Hazel said standing in the open doorway.

"No bother, Hazel and, please, you don't need to call me Reverend, Jane is fine. After all we've known each other for years." In fact, Hazel was the Church Secretary when Jane was baptized.

"I just want to say again, Jane, how proud we are of you and ever so happy that you've come back."

"So am I Hazel. Can I help you with anything?"

"I just thought I'd clear some of the books off the shelves so you would have room for your own books. If you could just tell me what ones you want to keep then I'll put a little sticker on them so we don't move them by mistake."

"As a matter of fact I was just going to take a closer look at them."

"Well, you'll find that all of the religious books - theology, Bibles and what not, are on these shelves," Hazel waved at the ones on the walls to the right and left "But these," she put her hand on the bookshelf facing Jane. "Now these books I think it's safe to say we can get rid of. God only knows how they ended up here in the first place. We might be able to sell some to Bunch of Books."

"What kind of books are they?"

Hazel pulled a volume out. "I don't think you'll be needing the Wizard of Oz, for example."

Jane rose from her chair and walked over to where Hazel was standing. She took the book from her and looked at its cover. Staring back at her was Dorothy holding her dog, Toto, with the Tin Woodsman, Cowardly Lion and Scarecrow standing behind her. "I don't remember ever reading the book. I saw the movie with Judy Garland, of course, and The Wiz on Broadway but I don't believe I ever read the book, itself."

"I imagine you must feel a bit like Dorothy - having gone off to New York City and now coming back here and all," Hazel laughed.

"Then, I should read it, Hazel. In fact, you can leave the other books here for now so that I can look through them as well."



## CHAPTER 2

### SISTER M's

She was pretty sure that no one knew. At least they never said so if they did. Not a peep. Little kids sometimes gave her one of those scrunched face looks as if they wanted to say something but couldn't. Maybe it was the costumes she wore? Usually it was the stripes of a convict although sometimes it was the solid gray of a guard and, when called on, the warden's three piece black suit with a gold watchband. She never wore the hangman's hood. A few goose bumps were okay but not screams of terror. None of the people she portrayed were supposed to be women although she was pretty certain that a few had worked there disguised as men just like they had taken on other supposedly male roles in the west. When her role was a guard rather than a convict she liked to think that she was re enacting a woman pretending to be a man.

Being thin, she had to pad herself before she played a warden or a guard but not when her role was a malnourished convict. Nor did she have to apply a mustache with muttonchops when she was a prisoner. It was ironic that she only wore a nun's habit on the rare occasions when she had to fill in for Sister Cecilia who led tours of the chapel. It was odd to experience what it felt like to look like a penguin. They didn't wear habits now but they lived in cells; the same cells where convict's, whose lives she re-enacted, had resided when it was the Purgatory State Penitentiary. Sister Mary Margaret, or Sister M's as she was known, put on the pillbox, striped cap and looked at herself in the mirror of her cell. A zebra stared back. She smiled, although it was hidden under the fake beard, which was just as well since an inmate wouldn't have much to smile about.

Sister M's walked to the Welcome Center at her usual fast gait then slowed to a shuffle that was more appropriate for the convict role she was enacting. The Welcome Center was next to the main gate and had been the visitor's room for the prison. If there had been a "welcome center" when the place was a prison it would have been considered cruel and unusual punishment. Looking through the gate she saw a large purple van parked in the visitors parking lot. "Purple Sage Tours" followed by the tagline "take a ride with us" was stenciled on its side.

Sister Rachel was behind the counter when she entered. Unlike, Sister M's, she was dressed in a simple blue blouse and black pants with a small silver crucifix hanging from her neck on a slender chain. "They arrived a few minutes ago and they're in the

museum waiting for you to start the tour," she said, nodding toward the door to the right. "You can count on Tony to be on time."

"He's sort of like a postman; neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their rounds."

"It's easier when it hardly rains or snows and the night sky is lit up by the stars."

"Unlike what you had to deal with in Cleveland when you were delivering the mail?"

"Yes," Sister Rachel answered with a beatific smile. "I don't miss the weather or the skies being cloudy all day and night," she said and then quickly added. "Although that certainly isn't why I joined the order, Sister M's."

"I think we both agree that we don't have any fair weather nuns," Sister M's answered with a hearty laugh.

Sister Rachel joined in and then stopped and said. "My, aren't we just carrying on; laughing like little children."

"Can you think of a better place to fill with innocent laughter than a former prison?" Sister M's answered.

"God knows it needs it."

"This may have been Purgatory Penitentiary but I'm pretty sure that the inmates thought it was hell." Everyone chuckled. The four adults because they knew that purgatory was also the place that Catholics believed the souls of people who didn't go directly to heaven were condemned to do penance and the three kids because she'd said hell. Sometimes people didn't laugh at all but Sister M's knew better than to try and explain. This wasn't a class in catechism but a tour of a former penitentiary. She did, however, explain that Purgatory, in this case, came from the location on the Purgatoire River, which was purgatory in French, and prisons were named penitentiaries because they were supposed to be where people who had broken the law were sentenced to do penance through reflection on their bad deeds and learning how to be good and upstanding citizens. The adults all looked at the kids who responded by squirming in their seats. She refrained from adding that they, in fact, became places where people were simply punished by being locked up and the "penitentiary" became the "pen" where society kept its human livestock.

"Do you still keep bad people here?" One freckle face, tow headed boy of about eight asked.

"Why, do you want to stay?" an older girl, no doubt his sister, asked. "Maybe they'd take you."

The adults laughed nervously and the little boy looked at his sneakers as if he was hoping they would carry him away. One of the women said. "Now, Laurie, don't tease your brother."

"I prefer to say that we believe that it's now a place where anyone can come to reflect and learn to live a better life. We don't call people who stay here inmates and we don't have locked doors and guards."

"You're not an inmate, then?" The girl asked.

"No, I'm a Sister."

"I wish you were my sister not her," The little boy blurted out pointing at Laurie.

"Jack, stop that," the father snapped. "She's a nun."

"What's a nun?" Jack asked.

"None of your business," Laurie said, with a giggle.

"N U N," the older girl who had been trying to ignore the other two, spelled out the letters. The two adults who smiled approvingly were obviously her proud parents. Then she asked. "But why aren't you wearing nun's clothes?"

"When we lead tours we dress up as either prison inmates or guards. It's called re enacting. When I'm not wearing this costume I just wear regular clothes. We don't wear habits in our order."

"You're just pretending, then?" The boy asked.

"She's just play acting," Laurie said. "But little boys like you should remember not to make things up or you'll be sent to a real penitentiary."

The boy looked at his sneakers again.

"Laurie," the mother snapped. "You shouldn't say things like that to your little brother."

"I was just joking."

"Telling your brother that he's going to prison isn't a joke."

"No, you're right," Laurie replied glaring at her little brother. "I wasn't joking."

## **HARRY**

Harry Bunch took his steaming cup of cappuccino, shifted the stacks of books on the table and set it down in the space he'd cleared. He loved cappuccinos and lattes and espressos. No offense to the coffee brewed by Sue's Pretty Good Cafe next door but there was just nothing like grinding your own beans and then making it with your own espresso machine. He'd bought it several months ago while he was on a trip to Italy. It wasn't one of those fancy, automated, push button ones but the real deal. By now he was pretty darn good at making it, if he did say so himself, and he did say so and said it to anyone else for that matter. Harry sipped the coffee. The beans, of course, were everything. These were from Kenya and he hadn't tried it before so it was an experiment. He'd already sniffed them before grinding them. He'd never been to Kenya, or Africa for that matter, but at least he now knew what it smelled like. That wasn't something you could get from books not that he hadn't read plenty of them.

He surveyed his domain. Bunch of Books wasn't just a really cool name for a bookstore - although it was pretty cool - it was also the oldest bookstore in Colorado. And to think that it all started when his great, great grandfather, asked the Bent Brothers if he could sell some books at their fort and trading post on the Santa Fe Trail. He had brought a trunk full of books with him from Philadelphia and by the

time he got to Bents Fort he'd read them all. His plan had been to sell the books and use the proceeds to outfit himself as a mountain man and live the life of Natty Bumppo of Last of the Mohicans rather than Nathaniel Bunch, Philadelphia bookworm. Although they took up a lot more space in the Conestoga than cash no one would be tempted to murder him in order to steal books and there was the added benefit of being able to read them before selling them. After tagging along with the Bent Brother's partner, Ceren St. Vrain, to a rendezvous of trappers in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Nathaniel or Nate as he now called himself, decided that he preferred reading about mountain men to being one. When he returned to Bent's Fort he discovered that the books had sold like hot cakes and that people were asking when he'd be selling more from his "bunch of books"?

Nate expanded Bunch of Books. He would buy used books from those who were passing through on the Santa Fe Trail and resell them to others. Before long he had gone from one shelf in the store to a shed that he rented from the Bent Brothers. It was then that Nate made a decision to move his enterprise to a new town that was being built on the Santa Fe Trail about fifty miles southwest of Bent's Fort. The founders of the town approached him and told him they were founding a new town called Picketwire and offered him a prime spot and financial backing for his enterprise. Instead of a shed in an adobe fort he'd be in a real building on a real street of a real town. "Any old town in the West can get boozers and carousers but we want the folks who can read and think," is the way one of them, C.W. Boone, put it. Harry was still amazed that Wylie Boone was C.W.'s descendant: Wylie, a man who bragged that the only things he read was spreadsheets.

Harry looked up and saw Tom Tiddings wave at him as he walked by. He waved back at Tom and then went to unlock the front door knowing, without looking at his watch that it must be a quarter to eight if Tom was on his way from the Pretty Good to the Picketwire Press offices next door. It took a moment for Tom to acknowledge his wave even though he was looking right at him. Must be something on his mind. Then, turning toward his office Tom bumped into Carlotta who was walking in the opposite direction toward the front door of the bookstore. Harry observed them as they exchanged words-no doubt profusely apologizing to each other. If saying you're sorry was a sport, Harry reckoned they would be neck and neck competitors.

After letting Carlotta in Harry gave her a nonfat, single shot, latte he just made.

"Maybe, instead of running into each other almost every morning you two should go out on an actual date," Harry said with equal portions of hope and humor.

"Sure," Carlotta, laughed, rolling her eyes. Then, changing from what was an uncomfortable subject, she asked. "Is the new display done?"

Harry walked over to a long wooden table that was piled with books. Some of the books were lying flat on their backs, others stood up on their spines and others were stacked on top of one another. Anyone who didn't know better would assume that the books had been dumped there waiting to be organized into a proper display. "Yep."

Carlotta went over and stood beside Harry. They both looked at the table for a couple of minutes then she picked up one of the books that was lying flat, moved it to another location and stood it up on its spine.

"You're right, Carlotta, I don't know how I missed that. I guess you've mastered the system."

Carlotta laughed. "One of the things I learned from you is that a person never masters book bunching."

When Carlotta mentioned book bunching she wasn't referring to the name of the business but to the system of displaying books that had been invented by Nate Bunch. Although he devised the system out of necessity when he had only a table on which to display the books he was selling Nate continued to use and refine the system even after he had bookshelves and a proper bookstore to put them in. While the books appeared to be set on the table haphazardly they were, in fact, displayed in a manner that stimulated the customer's curiosity while subtly facilitating the decision making process so that customers not only bought more books, they were happier with what they read. Nate said it wasn't an invention you could patent since "book bunching" was more art than science and just as it took years to create it required years to learn. Carlotta's discovery of his mistake reassured Harry that at least he'd been successful at teaching her the system even if he'd been a failure as her father.

## **SUE**

There are some people who are so cheerful, so flashing of a full set of pearlys, so bushy tailed and bright eyed- whatever the hell that means – that you can't stand them. Sue wasn't one of those people and that's why she put "Pretty Good" in the name of the Café when she opened it on Carson Street. Not great, not fantastic, not sublime or heavenly and not even "really good" just "pretty good". And that pretty much summed up Sue's philosophy at this point in her life. She wanted to free people of the feeling that they weren't "good enough": That it was a personal failure that they weren't ready to conquer the world at the beginning of every day. No, Sue's Pretty Good was a place where eggs and toast and a cup of coffee were the reward for getting out of bed and just showing up.

She hadn't always held those views. In fact, like many who take on a cause – and the Pretty Good Café was a cause-she had been a firm believer in the opposite. She never would have moved to Picketwire, much less opened a cafe, if she hadn't been jolted out of those beliefs. It wasn't that Sue was unhappy. In fact, if you asked most customers Sue's smile was the most popular dish at the Cafe. It wasn't on the menu but when she served it up it would beat everything that was, except the rhubarb pie, and it was free of charge and one hundred percent homemade.

Of course, none of her customers suspected that before Sue Cohen moved to Picketwire her smiles were as fake as the happiness that they were supposed to express. She'd left pretty much everything when she moved but, then, the point of moving was to escape all those things. Among the things was a seven-figure salary

along with a Malibu beach house, a red Maserati, a husband, a lover and a dog. The dog was the only thing she missed and within a month of moving she adopted a mixed breed stray that was wandering in the alley behind the house she was then renting. Sue named her Norma Lee.

Sue didn't smile when she announced, "I have to see Rich Best," as she donned her old Carhardt barn jacket. Every time Rich, the owner of Fred's Furniture and Farm Implements, asked to talk to her it was because he wanted to ask for a favor. She didn't know what it would be this time except that it would be something she didn't want to do.

"Glad you could make it, Sue." Rich yelled then pulled a lever and the chair he was reclining in catapulted him to his feet. "Just testing out a new innovation I came up with. I replaced the springs with ones that are stiffer and made a few other adjustments. I figure it would appeal to people who have trouble getting up out of their chairs. Seems to work pretty darn good, don't you think?"

"I'd say it works for someone your size but aren't you concerned that someone who weighs a lot less than you, like a child for instance, might end up on the ceiling instead of the floor?"

He looked at the recliner and scratched his head. "Hadn't thought about that. I guess I should have a minimum weight limit stamped on it before I sell any."

"You said you really needed to talk to me about some new project?"

"Indeed I do, Sue. I figured since you're the president of the Chamber of Commerce you'd want to hear it first."

"So what's the idea, Rich?"

"You ever hear of Ted X?"

"Sounds like a country and western rap singer."

Rich shook his head. "No, it's not a singer. Ted X is an event that showcases all kinds of innovative thinking and cool stuff where folks get to talk for ten minutes in front of an audience about their big idea."

"Now it sounds like a home shopping network for eggheads."

"Not at all, Sue. First of all it's on You Tube, not TV."

"We don't have You Tube at the Cafe, we have the boob tube and it only gets the Pueblo TV stations."

"That's because you don't have the Internet. You're not wired."

"We're wired enough on coffee."

"Still. I'm surprised Sue, being as how you're the President of the Picketwire Chamber of Commerce that you've never heard of TED X."

"Well, now that you make it seem like I'm letting down the entire Picketwire business community I'll just have to take a wild guess and say that TED X stands for technology entertainment and design expo."

"Why that's exactly what it stands for, Sue," Rich said, hardly able to hide his surprise.

"Just because you can't hook up to the Internet at the Café doesn't mean I'm totally disconnected from the outside world, Rich."

"Of course not. Anyway, I thought why shouldn't we have one right here in Picketwire?"

"TED X in Picketwire?"

"No, not TED X but FRED X."

"FRED X? You've named it after your store?"

"Of course not. That's just a coincidence; it stands for Farm and Ranch Entrepreneurship."

"What does the D stand for?"

"I'm still working on that. Do you have any suggestions?"

"No, but coincidentally Fred's Furniture and Farm Implements has a d in it and it doesn't stand for anything."

"Whatever it's called I still think it's a great idea."

"That gives you one great idea for FRED X, but where are you going to get the other ones?"

"I'm calling a meeting. I'm asking anyone who has a new business idea, invention or innovation to come. I need some judges, though, and I was hoping you might do me a favor...." Sue thought quickly and figured her best answer would be that she was honored to be asked to be a judge but as the head of the Chamber it wouldn't be right for her to choose which business idea was the best. "And persuade Jemma Lu to be a judge?"

"Jemma Lu?" Sue answered, a little surprised that along with the sense of relief she also felt some disappointment at not being asked. "Why don't you ask her yourself?"

"I did, but she said no."

"What was her reason?" Sue asked, although she wasn't surprised that Jemma Lu turned him down.

"No reason, just no. I asked her if she'd at least read the one page description I put together and think about it."

"And, what did she say?"

"She said that of course she'd have to think if she read it since a person can't do one without the other but she already had plenty of other things she was thinking about."

"Sounds like Jemma Lu."

"I thought that if you talked to her, especially as the head of the Chamber, she might agree to do it."

"The only thing I can promise is if I run into her and she brings it up then I'll tell her what I think," Sue answered, hoping Rich wouldn't ask her what she actually thought, which she'd managed to avoid so far.

"I knew I could count on you," He said as he sat down in the chair and pulled back on the lever. Instead of reclining the chair remained upright.

"Looks like you've got your second innovation, Rich – a recliner that doesn't recline."

## CHAPTER 3

### JEMMA LU

Jemma Lu descended the broad steps then walked down the brick paved path that cut through a manicured lawn of Kentucky Bluegrass until she reached the ornate, wrought iron gate of the Tuttle Mansion on Las Animas Street. She paused and looked back at the house that had been built by her grandfather, Samuel. He believed that the family's success with Picketware, the business that his father and mother Moses and Adouette Tuttle had started, warranted constructing the largest and most palatial house in Picketwire. Jemma Lu thought it was dead wrong for descendants of a runaway slave and his Cherokee wife to live in what looked like an antebellum mansion so she had moved out when she had inherited it along with the business. For the past thirty years she had lived in the same modest adobe homestead that Moses and Adoette had built. It was the oldest house in Picketwire and was on several acres where only original indigenous wild grass and plants were now allowed to grow. As Jemma Lu put it she'd moved out of the big house on the plantation and back to the little house on the prairie. She'd donated the Tuttle mansion to the Picketwire Preservation Society when she moved and when she died they would also get the homestead and grounds.

Jemma Lu had just attended a breakfast meeting of the Society's Board of Directors. She was not only a founding member but also a past Chair and her bequest of the Tuttle mansion and endowment made her by far the Historical Society's biggest patron. Not that she threw her weight around. For one thing she barely weighed a hundred pounds so she wouldn't have made much of an impact and, for another, she believed that nine heads of the Board of Directors, were better than one big head. That being said, when she did make a point of sharing her opinion people tended to listen very carefully. It wasn't just because of her philanthropy, or that she owned Picketware, one of the major businesses in town, and that Moses and Adoette Tuttle were two of the town's founders it was because when Jemma Lu expressed an opinion it was only after she'd given it considerable thought. She'd never been one to run off half-cocked, spout something off the top of her head or fail to do her planning.



Well, that wasn't quite correct because she did have a child that she most definitely hadn't planned on although she didn't know where he was or if he was even alive. So, technically, she might not be the last of the Tuttle line but she was the last one who would own Picketware because central to Jemma Lu's plan to keep the family business from ending was to end the family ownership. Her plan wasn't to sell it to someone else but to give it to the people who worked there in the form of an employee owned cooperative. Of course, none of the employees knew that yet but now that she was past sixty there was more than a little concern as to what would happen to the business and their jobs when she was gone. Many of the employees had worked for Picketware for decades and there were some who came from families that had worked there for two and even three generations. There was even one employee whose was a direct descendant of the very first employee hired by Moses and Adoette, was Jemma Lu's best friend and the only one who knew what she had planned and why she'd planned it. Everyone else would be surprised when she announced her plan and Jemma Lu loved surprising others as much as she hated to be surprised.

But now, she had to deal with not just one but two surprises. The first was that someone had tried to kill Wylie Boone and the second was that Wylie had decided to come back to Picketwire. She hadn't seen Wylie in thirty years and she wasn't sure she wanted to see him now. They had not parted on good terms, to say the least, after she had refused to marry him. They had grown up together and like Jemma Lu he was a descendent of one of Picketwire's founders and also, like her, he'd inherited the family business. What he had proposed came out more like a merger than a marriage. He'd even written a detailed business plan.

"You have to understand, Jemma Lu," Wylie had explained. "Picketware can't survive the way it is now. Its business model isn't viable and hasn't been for a long time. You know your Dad borrowed a lot of money to keep it afloat. Even worse for you, he personally guaranteed it so when, not if, it goes under you'll lose everything, including your home. When we get married, I can replace your personal family guarantee with one by Boone Enterprises. I've already checked with your creditors and they've agreed that if Picketware becomes a subsidiary of my business then they don't have any problem with it - in fact they offered to extend even more credit. Then Picketware will be streamlined and repositioned so that it can pay off its debts and, even better, it will start racking up profits. Within five years we can make a public offering of stock and walk away with millions."

"Walk away?"

"It's a figure of speech. We can structure the deal so that Boone Enterprises retains control after going public."

"This seems like more like a business proposition than a marriage proposal."

"Don't you see, Jemma Lu...honey, if we get married and we don't do this then, as your husband, I'd be personally liable for Picketware's debt as well. That wouldn't be fair, would it?"

"No, Wylie, it wouldn't be fair and we can't have a marriage that isn't fair to both of us - where one person has an advantage over the other. That seems to present us with an insoluble problem because just as it would be unfair to you not to give you control of Picketware if we married it would be just as unfair to me if you had control. So, it seems that there is no way we can get married."

"You're calling off the marriage because you're not willing to give up control over something that you'll lose anyway? Jemima Luyu Tuttle," Wylie said, drawing out her full name. "That's crazy."

Maybe it was crazy to refuse him, she thought after he left, but Luyu was Native American for Wild Dove, so just maybe she was just using her wings to escape something worse than crazy. Of course, she didn't know that she was pregnant. Although, even if she had, it wouldn't have been enough to change her mind. Besides, she wasn't sure it was Wylie's, which kept her from feeling guilty about not telling him. She'd managed to keep the whole thing quiet and left town on what she told everyone was a grand tour of Europe several months before giving birth. Instead of Europe she went to Philadelphia and checked into a very private home for unwed mothers. During those last three months of her pregnancy she did a lot of thinking and came up with her own plan for saving Picketware. She finished the plan just as she went into labor and likened it to giving birth to twins. Not only that, it was followed by a double adoption with a nice couple adopting her baby and the employees of Picketware adopting her plan. An added advantage for Jemma Lu in seeing it that way was that since the plan had been successful at Picketware the baby must have grown up to be successful as well. Not that she gave it much thought. In fact she had managed to not think about it for almost thirty years until she heard the news about Wylie.

All of this was on Jemma Lu's mind when she rounded the corner onto Carson Street and ran into Sue Cohen.

## **MAX**

When he walked onto the stage Max was planning to recite the "band of brothers" speech from Henry the Fifth as he had always done before the first rehearsal. Since he had been both an actor and the director in every production of the Bard Wired Players sometimes it had been more of a soliloquy to a one-man band than an address to a Company. However, this time he was only going to direct and there were almost a dozen people in the cast so he could deliver it the way Shakespeare intended. As Max looked at the front row where everyone was seated he was about to open his mouth when he was stopped by the new face. Not just new to the Bard

Wired Players and new to Picketwire but new to acting. Even her name was new, having told Max after she'd been given the part that she had decided on a stage name.

"I want to be called Zelda Zenn. Not Mary Ann Smithers. That's Zenn with two n's not one. I think a stage name and, especially one with a silent n, will give me a bit of mystery."

Since Mary Ann or Zelda was already a complete unknown Max was a bit mystified by her desire to be even more mysterious even though he could understand her wanting to have a name with more zip to it. He, himself, preferred to be called Max rather than Maximilian and, unfortunately, the silent "n" added to his own last name transformed it from the name of the famous Swedish film director, Ingmar Bergman, into the German word for "mountain man". Whatever her reason for wanting to be called Zelda Zenn, there was certainly no mystery as to why she was in the play since she was the only one who auditioned for the part. Fortunately, Zelda had talent in addition to her stage name. Still, she was only a seventeen year old high school student who had never acted in a play before so it was a risk but Max liked to think of himself as a risk taker. Besides, it couldn't hurt at the box office to have someone make her debut. Not that they should need any help since the play was the world premier of a new work by the "sagebrush Shakespeare", Harold "Howdy" Hanks. Max had already been working on getting a front-page story in the Picketwire Press and a live interview on WTKP Radio as part of the publicity.

Max opened his mouth as he looked out at the cast and crew who were seated in the first row, which happened to be the front pews of the Picketwire Community Church. They were using the Church for rehearsals although the play would be performed at the historic Tumbleweed Theatre. Fortunately, the rehearsal space was free courtesy of Reverend Sanderson, who was also one of the members of the cast. Sitting next to Dave was Zelda looking up at him and suddenly he couldn't remember a word of the speech and closed his mouth. Attempting to overcome Zelda's intense stare, he looked up at the large, oval, stain glass window that rose behind the balcony at the back of the sanctuary. A woman in a white robe with golden wings and surrounded by cherubs in a swirl of clouds looked down at him. He opened his mouth again and "O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention, a kingdom for a stage, princes to act and monarchs to behold the swelling scene," came out. After a short pause he lowered his eyes. "I thought that these lines were more appropriate," he explained as much to himself as the others. "Since we are not only beginning the fifth season but we are doing so with a brand new play by our very own muse, the sagebrush Shakespeare, Howdy Hanks..."

"Well, I'm sure as hell not an angel or a Greek goddess, Max, but I try to amuse people," a gravelly voice bellowed from the back of the sanctuary. The only thing Max could see were the soles of two boots propped on the back of the next to the last pew and the top of a Stetson hat.

"Howdy, I didn't see you back there."

"I've always been a back of the church sort of guy," Howdy answered. "Not that I've spent much time in church."

Dave Sanderson turned and looked back toward Howdy. "Think of this as a theatre, Howdy, rather than a Church."

"You mean it's been re-consecrated to the theatre gods?"

"It's always been a place for the theatre God."

"I guess that makes this a unitheatertarian church so I suppose I can come on up there without worrying about being damned by the trinity."

Howdy stood up, took off his hat revealing an unruly thatch of white hair over a sun creased face and walked up the aisle to the front of the sanctuary. Max asked Howdy on stage and say a few words about his new play. Instead of stepping up onto the stage Howdy sat down on its edge. His legs, clad in jeans that looked like they hadn't been washed in years, were long enough so that he could plant the heels of both of his scuffed cowboy boots into the carpet. Max, being wider than he was long, knew that even if he managed to lower himself and sit next to Howdy his short legs would be left dangling along with his dignity. Instead he walked over to the pulpit on the stage behind Howdy after judging that it was securely bolted to the floor, leaned against it with as much nonchalance as he could muster.

As Max introduced each member of the cast and crew Howdy squinted at them and nodded without saying a word. When Max got to Zelda he introduced her as Mary Ann Smithers and noted that this would be her debut performance. Zelda stood up and reminded Max that she preferred to go by her stage name, Zelda Zenn. Then, she turned to Howdy and said. "The only Howdy I've ever heard of was the puppet Howdy Doody and he also wore a cowboy outfit."

"I hope you don't think I'm also a dummy like him?" Howdy deadpanned.

"No, but a person who writes a play is sort of like a person who throws his voice."

"Howdy is not a ventriloquist," Max said firmly in an attempt to assert his directorial authority.

"Good, because I'm not a puppet."

**ARI**

Entering the Last Ditch Bar he felt a bit like the stranger in a western movie walking into a saloon. To Ari's relief no one looked up from their drinks as he made his way to the bar and sat down on one of the few empty stools. He rested his arms on the bar in an attempt to look casual, but couldn't help notice that he was the only person wearing a corduroy sport coat, or any sport coat for that matter. At least it didn't have suede patches on the elbows.

"What'll you have?" Shep, the bartender asked. "By the way, its happy hour."

"How much is the happy hour discount?"

"Nothing, everyone at the Last Ditch is just happy as hell that they made it here." Shep grinned, although his bushy, white beard mostly camouflaged it.

"In that case, I'll have whatever beer you recommend," Ari replied and then added. "As long as it doesn't come with a slice of fruit."

Shep shook his head and filled a pint from a tap labeled Bent's Best Bitter Ale. "Mister, this is the last place anyone would come if they wanted fruit with their beer."

"Sorry, I didn't know. I'm new in town."

"That figures, because everyone in these parts knows that we don't add any cute stuff to our drinks," Shep replied handing the pint to Ari. "What brings you here?"

"Philosophy."

"I didn't know Picketwire had any."

"I'm a new professor of philosophy at Picketwire College."

"In that case this beer is on the house because we sure need to elevate the level of bullshit in this place. Unfortunately, we can only card people for their age not their intelligence," Shep said, reaching out to shake Ari's hand. "Everyone calls me Shep, by the way. Not because I hang out with sheep but because my last name is Woolsey."

"Ari Nakos," Ari said as he shook Shep's hand.

"Arinakos sounds Greek?"

"It is Greek, but Ari is my first name and Nakos is my last. Ari is short for Aristotle."

"How could a person whose first name is Aristotle and last name is the Arapaho word for wisdom be anything but a philosopher?" Harry Bunch observed from his perch on the stool next to Ari. "Hope you don't mind me butting in?"

Shep introduced Harry, adding that Harry wasn't one of the bull shitters he was talking about. "Harry owns Bunch of Books so he's what they call well read. Although I didn't know that included reading Arapaho."

"Fortunately, the book I just read on the Arapaho was in English," Harry replied, then looking at Ari he explained. "We have a Native American section in the store and the Arapaho are one of the tribes that lived in this area. Anyway, that's how I found out that Nakos means wisdom. It stuck in my mind because it also means tumbleweed although the only thing I can see that they have in common is that a wise person and a tumbleweed are both sages." Harry laughed, shaking Ari's hand.

"As much as I like the idea of being called Professor Wisdom by my students at Picketwire College I feel like I blew in here like a tumbleweed."

"Just make sure you don't tumble into the ditch out front when you leave," Shep said.

"It happened to Thales so who knows?"

"Somebody named Thales fell in?" Shep asked.

"I think Ari was referring to Thales, the philosopher," Harry chuckled. "He lived way before they dug that irrigation ditch."

"The sixth century BC, to be exact," Ari said. "What I was alluding to was a story that Socrates and some other philosophers tell in which Thales went outside with an old woman to look at the stars and fell into a ditch. When he asked for help the old woman told him that she didn't see how he could expect to know all about the heavens if he couldn't even see where he was walking."

"Now that's what I call wisdom from the mouth of an old babe," Shep said.

"Didn't Thales believe that everything was made up of water?" Harry asked then added. "We've got a philosophy section at the store as well."

"He believed that the basic, irreducible, substance for everything is water."

"It's sure as hell is pretty basic around here. Why there's more fighting about water than just about anything else. Take the irrigation ditch in front. The water from that ditch comes from the Purgatoire River and it's the last ditch around here because all the water rights were bought up and nobody can divert a single drop from the Purgatoire without being sued for breaking the law. It's all under riparian law."

"In Colorado the riparian body of law is bigger than any actual body of water in the State," Harry said with a chuckle.

"Riparian? Rip off law is what it really is," a man hunched over a pint of beer on Ari's left said. The man wore a beat up barn coat and was in his late twenties with black hair that would have been down to his shoulders if it wasn't tied back in a ponytail. He gave them a sidelong look and continued. "They steal the water so that rich people can have those green lawns in front of their mc mansions up in Colorado Springs and Denver so there's none of it left for farming. If you want to be a farmer and grow food to feed people instead of mowing lawns for rich people, forget it." He drained the last of his beer. "And they're sure as hell coming after that ditch out there and unless they're stopped you'll be changing the name of this bar from the Last Ditch to the No Ditch."

"Look, son," Shep replied in a calm voice. "You're wrong, because there's no way the Picketwire Ditch Company is going to sell the water rights to the ditch."

"Who said anything about selling? I was talking about stealing." With that the man stood up and slapped a five-dollar bill on the bar. "And I'm not anyone's son," he said and walked out.

"Now, that's an angry young man," Harry said.

Shep held up the five dollars. "Not much of a tipper, either."

"I take it you've never seen him in here before?" Ari asked.

"Nope," Shep said. He wiped the bar with his towel then turned and looked at Ari. "Of course, I've never seen you before, either."

## CHAPTER 4

### BOONE IS BACK

"You're asking me how to get an interview with Wylie Boone?" Gloria Herrera repeated Tom's question as she sat at her desk in the newsroom. The newsroom was not really a separate room but a couple of desks in the one room office of the Picketwire Press. There was even an old Linotype machine in the corner that Tom referred to as a collector's item because all it did was collect dust. There was another room in the back with a loading dock where the printing press was. The new press was computerized and the shout to stop the presses had been replaced with the click on a computer screen: Digits instead of widgets.

Tom shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Not because of Gloria's response but because there was no way to get comfortable in the straight back, oak office chair. It was the same one that his Dad and grandfather had used. His father said it kept you on the ball - a hard ball. Better to have a numb butt than be a dumb ass was the way he'd put it. Besides, it went with the old roll top desk that Tom loved even though he had to keep it rolled up in order to allow for the keyboard and two computer screens that had replaced the old Underwood typewriter. "I'm trying to get input from the members of the team, Gloria."

"The team? There's only me and you."

"We've also got Maggie and Rodney," Tom pointed out.

"They're the business manager and advertising salesman, not journalists." Gloria never passed on an opportunity to remind him that she was not just a reporter but had a degree in Journalism from the University of New Mexico. Technically, it was a B.A. in Journalism and Mass Communication but as far as she was concerned the only person who could call themselves "mass communicators" and not sound like a pompous jackass was a priest and she had no interest in that profession even if it was open to her. No, journalist was what Gloria had wanted to be since she was a little girl and she'd discovered Lois Lane and the Daily Planet in one of her older brother's Superman comic books. It had taken her years to work her way through college but by the time she'd graduated at twenty-four she felt she had the strength to bend words like steel.

"We've got our part time reporters."

"Unpaid stringers, you mean? Maybe we should include everyone who writes a letter to the editor as well?"

"Okay, okay," Tom held up his hands in surrender. "It's a small team, Gloria," Tom said. "The point is that Boone is back in Picketwire and he's in the headlines because of the hit and run so it would be a coup for us to get an exclusive interview."

She fidgeted in the black, ergonomic chair that Tom had bought for her that she liked to think of as her signing bonus but that he had thought, mistakenly, might dampen her excessive energy. "Just call him?"

"Just call him? Like you can just pick up the phone and get a billionaire like Boone on the line?"

Gloria didn't answer as she quickly paged through the dog-eared Picketwire phone book on her desk. "The Double B Ranch is listed," she announced holding up the page with the phone number. Without waiting for Tom to respond, Gloria was on the phone. She told whoever answered that she was Gloria Herrera, a journalist with the Picketwire Press. She smiled at whatever the response was and then told the



person why she was calling. She wrote something down on a pad as she listened and then thanked the person and hung up. "We've got our interview. It's at the ranch tomorrow at 9 AM."

"You got an interview with Wylie Boone just like that?"

"Uh huh."

"How do you know the person you talked to has the authority to set up an interview with Boone?"

"Because it was Boone that I was talking to."

"The Wylie Boone, himself, answered the phone?"

"Uh huh. He told me he was surprised to hear the ring of a landline phone. He said it had been so long since he'd heard the ring of real telephone he just answered it without even thinking."

"Okay," Tom waved his hands in surrender. "But what do you mean we've got our interview?"

"Me and you. It's called teamwork."

"I went too Picketwire High with your Mom and Dad. They were a couple back then and that must have been forty years ago" Wylie said. Although Wylie was addressing Tom, he was looking at Gloria who was perched at the edge of a chair facing him with a small digital recorder in her right hand like a racehorse waiting for the starting gate to open. Wylie was seated in a leather covered chair like a cattle baron on his cowhide throne. The sequoia sized beams high overhead, mammoth stone fireplace and custom made southwestern furniture liberally draped with expensive, hand woven Indian blankets added to the royal rusticity of the room.

"They're still a couple," Tom answered, passing on the opportunity to ask Wylie about his three marriages, the last of which ended only a few months ago.

Turning his eyes from Gloria to Tom, Wylie said. "What are they up to since you took over the newspaper?"

"Traveling around in an RV."

"An RV? It's great to hear that after running a newspaper together for all those years they still want to run around together in an RV rather than retire to Florida or Arizona next to a golf course."

"They hate golf."

"Don't think much of it myself. It's not even a good walk since they make people ride around in a golf cart in order to speed things up."

"Don't you own some golf courses?"

"A few and hell yes, I make people use carts. The more people I can get on the greens the more green gets into my pocket," Wylie laughed. He seemed awfully relaxed for someone who'd just escaped being killed in a hit and run, Tom thought.

"Can we ask you about the hit and run?" Gloria asked, sounding every bit the professional journalist.

"Sure, go ahead."

"Are you worried that they haven't found the guy who almost killed you?"

"Or gal. It could have been a woman - maybe one of my ex wives," he said and then added, quickly with a grin. "That part about my exes was off the record, by the way. No, what really upsets me is that it totaled the car. You know it wasn't just any old Porsche, it was a 356 B Carrera GTL."

"But insurance should cover it," Tom said.

"Insurance? It was a classic – just like the Porsche that won at LeMans in 1960. Didn't have a scratch on it. You don't replace a beautiful machine like that."

"Weren't you afraid you'd get a dent or something by driving it around?" Gloria asked.

"Afraid? What's the point in having it if I can't drive it? It's not a piece of furniture." Wylie leaned back in the chair and stretched out his long legs. Tom noticed that his cowboy boots were handmade.

"And you're sure it was an accident?" Gloria pressed, reaching out with her tape recorder.

Wylie leaned toward Gloria. "The running into me probably was but the running away sure as hell wasn't. That's why they call it hit and run and the police are looking for the guy."

"Or gal," Gloria added. "But as someone who acquires companies, fires a lot of people and then sells them for a big profit you're probably not the most popular person."

"It's called restructuring but I admit that I've made a lot of enemies. But any that would want to kill me with a minivan? That's not exactly the weapon a hit man, or hit gal, would use." He laughed and shook his head. "Still, the whole thing brought me up short. I mean, the idea that it could all be over just like that got me thinking about what's really important and before you know it I was thinking about this place. I've got plenty of houses but this place..." He looked around the room. "This place is my real home and, as they say, there's no place like home, especially this old home on the range. So I decided that I'd been away too long."

"How long?" Tom asked.

Wylie looked up at the ceiling and then replied. "About thirty years."

"That sure is a long time. Although, I've never left at all. It's hard to get out of Picketwire."

Wylie nodded. "It was easy for me, though. Nothing to keep me here after my Dad passed away. My Mom had already moved to California after she divorced the old cuss. I wanted to try my hand at something besides the ranch and there weren't any business opportunities here in Picketwire."

"It turned out you were pretty handy at business since you've made a lot of money," Tom said.

"And enemies," Gloria added. "Those were your words, Mr. Boone."

"There doesn't seem to be a way to make one without the other so, yes, I've made plenty of both."

"If that's the case, I imagine you're looking forward to seeing your old friends here?" Tom asked, trying to inject some cheer into the conversation.

"Old enemies are more like it. I seemed to have been able to make enemies even before I made money. There were lots of people who didn't mind me leaving."

"Why, Howdy Hanks was gone and he just returned to town," Tom said. "And from what I've heard he made a few enemies when he was here as well."

"He's back?"

"He's back for the premier of his new play," Gloria said.

"Howdy wrote a new play?"

"He sure did and it's going to be performed at the Picketwire Playhouse by our own Bard Wired Players," Gloria said, in a voice more animated than her usual professional journalist register. "Everyone's talking about it. You know, they call him the Sagebrush Shakespeare."

"You seem quite enthusiastic, Miss Herrera?"

"Gloria also covers the arts for us," Tom explained as Gloria looked at her tape recorder, in order to hide her blushing.

"A premier you say?" Wylie repeated, drawing out the word premier. "The only premier of one of Howdy's plays that I ever attended was the one he put on at Picketwire High when we were both seniors. It pissed a lot of people off." He looked at Gloria and added with a slight smile. "Excuse my language, it sort of rubs off from the ranch."

"My folks told me about that play," Tom said. "They said it upset a lot of people. But the fact that everyone is looking forward to the performance of his new play just shows that people in Picketwire tend to forgive and forget."

"I haven't forgotten - I walked out halfway through it."

"I was just using it as an example of people here letting bygones be bygones," Tom said.

"Easy to say about people when they're gone but when they come back?" Wylie shrugged, looked around the room again then slapped his right knee and rose from the chair. "Enough of the strolling down bad memory lane, let me show you around the place."

Wylie took them on a tour of the ranch house. He explained that it had started with the one room that his great grandfather C.W. Boone had built and then expanded along with the acreage of the ranch and the family wealth. The tour was a voyage of rediscovery for Wylie with each room evoking memories and stories that he would recount. They moved slowly into the past as they went through the newer rooms into the older ones until they reached the original, one room ranch house. It was now completely enclosed by the later additions and, as Wylie explained, everything from the planks in the floor to rough, hewn beams in the ceiling to the sturdy, wood furniture was original. "Except these windows that once opened to the outside," he said standing in front of one of them. "Now they have paintings inside the frames that show what the ranch looked like back then."

"It's like a museum," Tom observed as he gently pushed a rocking chair with his hand to see if it really did rock. It did.

Wylie looked around. "It does look like everything's been pretty well preserved." He turned and winked at Gloria. "Except the bodies. All the Boones are buried in the family cemetery on the hill outside."

Gloria, ignoring the wink, reached into her purse that was slung over her left shoulder. "Can I take a photo of you in this room?" Gloria asked pulling out a camera.

"Gloria's also our staff photographer," Tom said.

"Sure," Wylie said as he assumed a pose with both hands on his hips. "As long as you don't make me look like a ghost who came back to haunt this place."

"We don't generally interview dead people," Tom replied as the flash on Gloria's camera lit up the room.

Wylie laughed. "They may have killed my Porsche but they didn't get me. No, Wylie Boone is very much alive."

## **OUR LADY OF LOST SOULS**

It is a truth universally acknowledged that tourists in possession of a credit card must be in want of souvenirs. Jane Austen's opening line in Pride and Prejudice came to mind as Sister M's led the tour group into the Good Stuff Gift Shop next to the convent's Welcome Center. She ended the tour by introducing them to Sister Louise with the observation that "Sister Louise has a gift for helping people discern what they need rather than just selling them what they think they want".

Sister M's left the gift shop and walked over to Tony Medrano who was leaning against the Purple Sage Tour van. "You know, Sister," he said as she approached. "I'm trying to picture you giving a group of illegal immigrants a tour."

"I won't be giving them the same tour I gave these folks or wearing this getup, that's for sure," she answered, tugging at the prisoner outfit she wore. Then she took off the striped prison cap, ran her fingers through her short hair, and asked. "Have you decided on whether you can help us?"

"Not yet, but soon," Tony replied with a nervous smile. "It just seems strange to take people to a prison so that they won't be arrested."

"It's not a prison anymore," Sister M's answered as she put the cap back on.

"You have to admit it still looks more like a prison than a convent."

She stared at the red brick walls and towers with her hands on her hips. Maybe she couldn't shake Jane Austen but with the turrets it actually looked sort of like a castle. Pemberly as a convent? Was that so far fetched? After all, *Pride and Prejudice* was as much about sisters as it was Mister Darcy: Maybe more.

"There's also the name you gave your convent; Our Lady of Lost Souls. That's what some people call prisoners. And, then the location here on the Purgatoire River. You know the original Spanish name is El Rio de las Animas Perdidas en Purgatorio, which means The River of Lost Souls in Purgatory."

"Souls in purgatory aren't lost. It's not like they're loose change that God has misplaced," Sister M's said. "Anyway, this isn't purgatory."

"I know, Sister," Tony held up both hands in surrender. "The lost souls in your convent's name means it's a place for folks who have lost their way in life and are searching for meaning and purpose. I did take your tour, you know."

"Then you should also remember I said that we welcome those who are outcast or given up for lost by society. However," Sister M's continued. "I agree that it's a convent that's camouflaged. Still, it's a convent, and that means it's a sanctuary not a prison or purgatory."

"And you want to provide sanctuary for people who are here illegally?"

Sister M's nodded. "Although, since they're undocumented we won't ask them to sign the guest register."

"Isn't undocumented and illegal immigrant the same thing under the law?" Tony shook his head and looked down at his black cowboy boots. There was still dust on them from the abandoned house he'd visited that morning.

"Not necessarily. The law's a funny thing."

"I'd say a lawyer calling the law a funny thing is funny."

Not just a lawyer but a lawyer who'd once been a prosecutor. She'd put people in jail and now she was keeping them out. "That was the nun speaking not the lawyer."

"Which one is breaking the law by hiding them – the nun or the lawyer?"

"We will be giving them sanctuary not hiding them," Sister M's corrected him. "I will also be their legal counsel and under the law everyone is innocent until proven guilty. That's the lawyer speaking. As a nun I also think it would be a sin not to offer sanctuary."

“So the good news for me is if I agree to transport these undocumented immigrants here to this convent-sanctuary then according to you, a nun, I won’t be committing a sin?”

Sister M’s nodded. “Yes, that’s what I believe.”

“And the bad news is that if I get caught I’ll be charged with committing a crime?”

“I believe that’s true, as well. However, I also believe that if the choice is between committing a sin by not helping and committing a crime by helping than one should always choose not to knowingly sin  
.”

“I shouldn’t have asked, because now I know,” he pulled on the brim of his Purple Sage Tours baseball cap and looked at Sister M’s in her black and white striped prisoner costume. It’s easy for you nuns to choose to do something that would put you in jail, he thought, since you’re already living in a cell. When Sister M’s had asked if he was interested in helping after he’d told her about his anger as a Mexican American at the way illegal immigrants were being treated he had hesitated. Going to jail wasn’t exactly part of his business plan. “If I get arrested will you be my lawyer as well?”

“Certainly,” Sister M’s said and then added. “It will be pro bono, of course.”

“I’ll let you know tomorrow,” Tony said. “Right now, I better round up my tour group. Next stop is looking at the dinosaur tracks and that’s always a hit with the kids. Next to the prison tour, that is.”

“I think it’s ironic that this was once part of Mexico,” Sister M’s said as they walked toward the door to the gift shop.

“Everything south of the Arkansas River was until the U.S. declared war on Mexico in 1846 and took it all.”

“Just think, if the U.S. hadn’t taken it from Mexico I could be the one who is arrested and deported.”

Tony came to a dead stop and pushed back the visor of his cap. “You know, the Medrano’s were living here back then, even before all that happened. One day my ancestors were living in Mexico and the next thing they knew they were in the United States. Instead of crossing the border the border crossed them. Was that illegal immigration?”

## CHAPTER 5

## **FRY BREAD AND TEA**

Sue was standing outside Fred's Furniture and Farm Appliances reflecting on the conversation she'd just had. FRED X was intriguing she had to admit even though it was being proposed by Rich Best. Unfortunately, he reminded her of people she knew in LA who were constantly pitching ideas for movies or television shows. They called them "high concepts" rather than ideas, probably because a lot of people were high when they thought them up. Maybe if she thought of FRED X as a "low concept" being "pitched" with a pitchfork she would be more open to the idea? Yes, she had to be open, she repeated to herself just as Jemma Lu rounded the corner onto Carson Street. Like all of the main streets of Picketwire, Carson was wide enough for a wagon with a full team of oxen to turn around since getting a team of oxen to back up is, well, oxymoronic. However, its sidewalks were narrow with the explanation being that people bumping into each other encouraged community and/or that you didn't need to give a person the same amount of right of way as a thousand pound ox. Fortunately, Sue still retained the pedestrian collision avoidance skill she'd acquired during her years of navigating city sidewalks and stepped out of the way as Jemma Lu continued on without breaking stride. Suddenly, Jemma Lu stopped, turned around and exclaimed. "Why Sue Cohen, I almost walked right by you." She surveyed the dozen feet between her and Sue and added. "In fact, I did walk right by you."

"You're just in a hurry to get someplace, that's all."

"Hurry?" Jemma Sue walked back to Sue and said. "But the place I was in a hurry to get to is your Cafe. I could really use a cup of tea and some of your homemade cowboy fry bread and prickly pear jam."

"No scones with your tea?"

"This is low tea, not high, and it would go down even better if you join me, Sue." She threaded her right arm through Sue's left and said in a voice that must be obeyed. "And it's on me so don't even think about a freebie."

"How can I refuse an offer like that?"

"Why, you can't, of course," Jemma Lu said as she started walking, pulling Sue by the arm.

Sue carried a tray with the tea and fry bread to the booth in the center of the front plate glass window where Jemma Lu had seated herself. Jemma Lu might as well have her name on the booth as well the mug, Sue thought, since she always made a beeline to it as soon as she came through the door. If someone she knew already occupied it, and she knew just about everyone, they'd just scoot over to make room for her. Since it was after breakfast and before lunch the booth was vacant and they pretty much had the Cafe to themselves.



"Now Sue," Jemma Lu said, cradling the mug of tea in her hand, "Was Rich Best trying to corral you into being a judge for this contest he's dreamed up?"

"He didn't ask me to be a judge but he did want me to ask you."

"He already did."

"And you said no."

"He thinks you can persuade me to change my mind?"

"Rich thinks you might do it as a favor to me or the Chamber, but of course I'm not going to ask you to help with his crazy idea."

"It is a crazy idea Sue but that's not why I refused to be a judge. If it wasn't for a crazy idea Picketware would have gone out of business. But all Rich has is a crazy idea. There needs to be a strategy on how to make it a success that isn't crazy and someone who isn't crazy to carry it out. Now," Jemma Lu paused and sipped her tea. "If you were in charge of running this contest it would be different."

"But it's not my idea and besides I've got my own crazy idea."

"You do?" Jemma Lu asked as she picked up a piece of fry bread and spread some prickly pear jam on it.

"This is just between you and me but I'm thinking of going into farming."

"You want to be a farmer?"

"If I want to serve the highest quality food then it's not enough to know how to cook it. I also need to know how to grow it."

"Now, Sue, you do know that there is a lot more to farming than growing things?"

"You mean that farming is a great way to turn money into manure? It's like saying that the only way to make money owning a restaurant is to cook the books," Sue said. "It's still just a crazy idea so I have to come up with a plan. I know the first thing, though, is that I have to find someone who really knows farming and is willing to help me learn."

"Well, you don't need to know much about farming to know that when it comes to farmers, like most people, being willing and being able don't necessarily go together," Jemma Lu said.

"Sounds like Rich Best; he's willing but not able."

Jemma Lu's eyes lit up. "Sue, if I can find a farmer who'd be willing and able to help you do you think you can find someone to help Rich with this contest of his?"

"It won't be easy to find someone who knows what they're doing and is also willing to work with Rich, but I'll try."

"Well, then it's settled. Let's drink on it," Jemma Lu announced, cocking her head and smiling broadly.

They clinked their mugs and sipped the tea. Jemma Lu pulled a small piece of fry bread from the slice on her plate. "I do hope you're finding some time to get out."

"You mean other than going out with you and having tea?"

"I mean something more like a date."

"Well, I have been seeing someone."

"Really?" Jemma Lu asked, although it sounded more like a confirmation than question.

"It's Max Bergmann."

"I must say, Sue, what a surprise."

Sue knew Jemma Lu wasn't really surprised and that she and Max were probably the only two people in Picketwire who were. "Of course, when I say seeing each other, what with the Cafe, the Chamber and this crazy idea and now that Max has started rehearsals for the new play with the Bard Wired Players it's barely seeing each other. I guess that means we aren't going steady although I don't know what going steady means anymore. I guess I'd have to ask a teenager."

"I did hear that the play is by Howdy Hanks? Do you know what it's about?"

"Max won't tell me a thing: Just that it's a new one and that Howdy wants it to be kept secret."

"Like your recipe for fry bread is a secret," Jemma Lu said.

"A script as secret recipe," Sue said with a bemused smile. "I'll have to share that with Max, although I have to see him first."

"Howdy kept his first play a secret as well but it turned out to be a recipe for disaster. Of course, that was the play he wrote in high school."

'You saw it?'

"I was in it. We went to Picketwire High at the same time. That was the end of my stage career but, as it turned out, the beginning of his."

"Max said he's called the sagebrush Shakespeare."

"That certainly wasn't one of the names he was called back then and he was called quite a few." Jemma Lu said as her gaze floated out the window and into the street as if she was looking for something. She seemed to smile to herself then turned to Sue. "Although the Howdy I knew didn't give a hoot. I don't know what he's like now. With all his success writing plays he might have a head as big as a ten gallon hat."

"You haven't seen him since high school?"

"We saw each other after we graduated but then he left town thirty years ago and I haven't seen him since."

"So, you must really be looking forward to seeing him again?"

"Of course," Jemma Lu replied with a faint smile and then quickly changed the subject. "I suppose we've dawdled quite enough. Although it's pretty darn difficult to stop eating this delicious fry bread and prickly pear jam of yours. In fact, I'll take the rest with me, if you don't mind?" Jemma Lu wrapped the leftover cowboy fry bread in a napkin and put it in the pocket of her barn coat then slapped a ten-dollar bill on the table and declared, "I'm paying and you keep the change."

## **DINOSAUR TRACKS**

"Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from the terror of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty." The words came suddenly to Jane as she looked at the dinosaur tracks on the banks of the Purgatoire River. The words were Isaiah's not Fred Flintstone's and they made her shiver even though she was standing in the hot afternoon sun of the Picketwire Canyonlands. She returned her attention to Elise Plumb, the Forest Service Ranger who was leading their tour. Elise was explaining that there were more than 1300 dinosaur footprints from the late Jurassic period in a hundred plus track ways. Forty percent of them were left by the four legged, plant eating Apatosaurus and the remainder by the vicious, two legged, flesh eating Allosaurus. "The Apatosaurus were up to 72 feet long and could weigh more than 24 tons. What were huge, plant eaters doing here? Well, as hard as it is to imagine looking at this arid landscape with just the shallow, muddy Purgatoire River running through it, but 150 million years ago this was the shoreline of a huge lake. There were lots of plants for the Apatosaurus and other vegetarian dinosaurs to eat. There was even a forest here. Although that's not the reason why the Canyonlands is administered by the Forest Service." She waited for the anticipated chuckling to

subside before continuing. "The Allosaurus was only a third of the size of an Apatosaurus but it had dozens of serrated teeth and it's estimated that it could run at up to 34 miles per hour so it could take down prey that was much larger than it was. It's not hard to imagine that they were here to dine on other dinosaurs."

"Wow, this is like Jurassic Park," said a freckled faced boy, who'd turned his Purple Sage Tour cap around so that the brim faced backward.

Jane and Bruce had run into Tony and his tour group at the trailhead and he'd invited them to ride along in one of the Purple Sage jeeps rather than hiking the three and half miles to the dinosaur tracks. The motorized tours were conducted by the Forest Service and only four-wheel drive, high clearance vehicles could be used. An added benefit was being able to have Elise as the tour guide. Jane had seen her around town a couple of times and wanted to meet her. Not just because they appeared to be about the same age but there was also something about her of her best friend growing up. In fact, the first time Jane saw her at the cash register talking to Sue in the Pretty Good Cafe Jane froze for a second thinking that it was Cindy Pedersen. But when Elise put on her smoky bear Ranger hat and gave Jane a polite nod as she passed her on her way out, she knew, with both relief and regret, that it wasn't.

"Jurassic Park is just a movie, Jack," explained the girl standing next to him, letting him know that she was not only taller and older but much, much wiser. "All the dinosaurs are dead. They made those footprints a jillion years ago."

"Maybe all the dinosaurs didn't die?"

"Maybe you're right and we could leave you here and when we came back all we'd find would be little boy bones,"

"Laurie, stop scaring your brother," the Mom said and then turned to Jane and Bruce and explained. "First she was going to put her little brother in prison and now she wants to feed him to the dinosaurs."

"Kids," Jane said, more as an expression of sympathy than an explanation

"At least they aren't bored," the Mom said. "Nothing is worse than when they are bored and they want to do something else." She looked around at the rugged landscape. "I mean, what else is there?"

"Are people ready to see some rock art?" Elise asked enthusiastically.

Laurie's hand shot up as she yelled. "I want to see the rock stars!"

"I hope you don't mind that these rock stars were artists who drew animals and other pictures on rock thousands of years ago."

"I can draw animals on rocks," Jack offered as Laurie withdrew her hand. "I've even got my own crayons in my backpack."

"I'm afraid we don't allow anyone to draw on the rocks," Elise said putting her right hand on Jack's shoulder. "However, if you have paper maybe you could draw something for us. We'd love to put them up in the Ranger Station."

"Will you put mine up too?" Laurie asked.

"Of course," Elise answered.

"But I don't have anything to draw with?"

"Laurie," her Dad said. "Ask Jack if he'll share some of his paper and crayons with you."

"Why don't you just tell him to?"

"Because it's his decision."

Laurie walked over to Jack and, looking down on him, demanded. "Give me some paper and crayons."

"Laurie," her Mom said, sternly. "There's a difference between asking and ordering someone."

"Please," Laurie said, forcing a smile.

"Okay, I can give you some paper, but I get to choose which crayons," Jack said to Laurie.

Laurie looked at her parents and, when they declined to intervene, she turned back to Jack and nodded in agreement to the terms.

Jane said to Bruce. "Now that was a learning experience."

"You mean that whenever you go out with your kids be sure and bring extra paper and crayons?"

Jane jabbed Bruce's left arm with her elbow. "No, silly. It was better this way because they had to share."

"Well, if it was a lesson in free market economics and supply and demand, Jack should have demanded that Laurie pay him."

"You mean they should be taught that it's a dog eat dog world? Is that what you really think?"

"No," Bruce replied. "I don't know that dogs really eat other dogs, but we just heard how dinosaurs eat other dinosaurs so maybe it's a dinosaur eats dinosaur world."

"Maybe if dinosaurs had learned to share they'd still be around."

"Dinosaurs are extinct because they didn't sit around the campfire singing kumbaya? Now, that sounds like what a preacher would say."

"What does that mean?" Jane asked not hiding her irritation.

"It was a joke, Honey," he said, with a weak laugh and slight shrug.

"Really?" She said staring at him and crossing her arms.

Bruce could hear the demand but he wasn't sure he could supply the answer so he was about to resort to his usual, lame, standby that he didn't mean it that way when Tony interrupted. "I hope you two are joining us on the rest of the tour?"

"Sure, we'd like to see the rock drawings," Bruce answered quickly, seizing the opportunity to avoid responding to Jane. Then he looked at Jane who was staring at him with her arms still crossed and added. "But Jane heard that there was a camp where Japanese Americans were imprisoned around here and we'd like to see if we can find the site. It's not on any maps and even when we Googled it there was nothing."

"I'm not surprised you didn't find anything," Elise, who was now standing beside Tony, replied. "In fact, you're among the very few people who have even heard that there was an internment camp here. Most people only know about Camp Amache, that's located near Lamar where more than 7,500 Japanese Americans were sent. They called them internment camps but that was just a euphemism for prison."

"I grew up in Picketwire and my grandparents talked about another camp that was located over here but they didn't say where it was other than it was somewhere in this area," Jane said, uncrossing her arms. "They died before I was old enough to ask them about it and where it had been located although they probably wouldn't have told me if I had asked. My parents said they never talked about it and made it clear that it was better not to ask any questions. They did say that none of our family was sent to any of the camps."

"The Japanese Americans who were sent to the camps were from the West Coast," Elise said. "The excuse was that they couldn't be trusted and might help the Japanese invade California."

"My family was already living here," Jane said. "My great grandparents came here from Japan."

"I know," Elise said. "Your great grandparents came here in 1905 and were the first Japanese American's in Picketwire."

"How did you know that?" Jane asked, unable to hide her astonishment.

"I try to know about the people who live here, not just the dinosaurs."

"Do you know where it was located?" Jane asked.

"Sure," Elise spread a map of the area on the hood of the jeep. "It's here," she said, pointing to a spot. Jane noticed that her fingernails were trim but definitely manicured. "It's not very far from the ruins of the Dolores Mission."

"Look," Tony said. "We're stopping at the Mission on the way back after we look at the rock art so we can drop you off and point you in the right direction."

"It should be an easy hike from there although you should know that it's on the Double B Ranch," Elise added. "I really wish we include it as part of our research and education program but every time we've approached the Double B they've said no without giving us any reason."

"Does that mean we'd be trespassing?" Jane asked.

"Technically, I suppose," Tony answered. "But there's no fence in that section and it's not posted, so you can claim ignorance."

"I don't have a problem claiming ignorance," Bruce said.

## **SHADOWS ON THE SUMMIT**

You would think that Picketwire College would be easy to find. After all, the College is on Mount Witt and how many mountains could there be in Picketwire? None, as it turns out, although Mount Witt is the highest point in town, surpassing its nearest rival the clock tower of the Wobbly Building by a couple of feet. So how did a hill get the name Mount Witt? The story most out of towners get when they ask (and who else would ask?) is one about how the first pioneers travelling through on the Santa Fe Trail's Purgatory Cutoff thought it must have been a mountain at one time but it had been whittled down by the wind. Spelling being more creative in those days it was given the name Witt rather than Whit. As further evidence for the claim they're told that Picketwire is on the northern edge of the Raton-Clayton Volcanic Field. Where there had once been more than a hundred towering volcanoes millions of years ago there was now just prairie. As plausible as the explanation is, the only thing about it that has been whittled is the truth because Mount Witt was, in fact,

named in honor of John Witt who donated the land for the College as well as a sizable endowment.

On the surface, naming the highest point in Picketwire after the founder of the College seems pretty straightforward in comparison to the whittled mountain story. However, while the false story made a mountain into a hill the true one made a hill into a mountain. This convoluted, creative process was the result of Witt's requirement that neither the College nor anything built or added by the College could be named after him. Despite this restriction the first Board of Trustees decided that they really ought to name something after such a great benefactor and that it should be something that visibly displayed the magnitude of his gift. Unable to come up with a way around Witt's requirement on their own they turned to the townspeople of Picketwire for ideas. In response a number of suggestions were submitted. While all did credit to the imagination of Picketwire's citizens only one seemed doable and not just entertaining. It proposed that the Town Council classify the hill where the College campus was to be located as a mountain and once that was done to name the mountain after Witt. The suggestion pointed out that a geologic formation that had existed for millions of years could not be considered something that was built or added by the College so naming it after Witt would not violate the terms of his bequest. Furthermore, although designating the geologic formation a mountain didn't add one inch to its altitude, it gave it the magnitude desired by the Trustees. It didn't hurt that the author of the suggestion wished to remain anonymous and forgo any recognition including the prize that the College Trustees had agreed to pay out of their own pockets.

Ari had decided to use the two versions on how Mount Witt got its name to start off his Introduction to Philosophy class. It seemed particularly appropriate since everyone in the class was in their first year at Picketwire College, including himself, so it was likely that most, if not all of them, didn't know the true explanation. He began by recounting the first version. Then, using a blackboard, he broke it down into a diagram: (1) Mount Witt had once been a mountain but had lost most of its mass as the result of millions of years of erosion by the wind, rain and other elements; (2) a definition of whittle is to remove mass by cutting it away or wearing it down; (3) whittling wood was common among the early pioneers and settlers who passed through the area; (4) these same pioneers and settlers often spelled things based on what they sounded like and whittle sounds like wittle; (5) Witt is an abbreviation of wittle; therefore, (6) the conclusion is that it was named Mount Witt because it reminded the early pioneers and settlers of a whittled down mountain. However, he then explained, when you apply the philosophic method, it is clear that, while each of the five statements is true, number six, the conclusion, is not because there is a hidden assumption that the early pioneers and settlers were the ones who named it Mount Witt. He then recounted the true story about how it was named after John Witt. "Think of it like climbing a mountain," he summarized. "Only in this case at the top is truth rather than a beautiful view. Philosophy is what helps you avoid false steps that send you tumbling down the slippery slope and, just as important, it helps you avoid false routes that get you lost instead of to the summit."



As soon as he finished and asked for questions one of the students waved his hand from the second row and asked, "Professor Naxos, since we're here at Picketwire College on Mount Witt doesn't it stand to reason that we've already succeeded in climbing to the top of a mountain? And if that's true why are we required to take courses in philosophy?"

Hoisted by my own pedagogy, Ari thought as he walked back to his office after the class. In the distance the Sangre de Cristo range of the Rocky Mountains rose like jagged, silver teeth in the clear blue, western sky. Sangre de Cristo was Spanish for blood of Christ and the mountain that was most visible was called Spanish Peaks because of its twin summits. Sid Tenken, the Chair of the Philosophy Department, had pointed them out to Ari on his first visit to the College. He said the Ute Indians called them Wa-ha-toy-a, which means breasts of the earth. "I had one student in a class who used them as an example in his paper on Plato's theory of forms." Sid shook his head and said with a grin. "When I was that kid's age I had breasts on my mind as well but they sure as hell weren't platonic."

Ari smiled to himself as he looked at the mountains. If the breasts of the earth in the blood of Christ were projected as shadows on the wall of the cave in the allegory Plato used to illustrate his theory of forms then Surrealism would provide a more enlightening explanation than Platonism. Maybe that kind of enquiry was what Witt had in mind since one of the conditions of his gift was the requirement that all students had to take at least one course in both philosophy and art each year. When he had asked Sid what he thought the reason was for this requirement he simply responded. "It's a mystery like everything else about the guy. For instance, no one knows how he made his fortune, why he decided to give it all away to found a college in Picketwire or why he didn't want any recognition. In fact, he wanted it to be an anonymous gift but that was impossible because of his requirement that the campus be here and everyone knew that he owned the land. Just add the requirement for philosophy and art to the list of things we don't know about our mysterious benefactor. What we do know is that he wanted it that way. Since I teach philosophy I can't say that ours is not to reason why so, instead, this being the west, I'll say that we shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth and just be thankful to have classes in philosophy full of students rather than empty desks. And the pay isn't bad, either."

No, the pay wasn't bad, Ari had to admit. Ari also had to admit that he was lucky to even have a job teaching philosophy. After five years getting his PhD, a one year post doc at Harvard, a two year fellowship, a paper accepted by a prestigious academic journal, a presentation on the paper at a major philosophical conference, he had met Sid and now he was here on the sunlit summit of Mount Witt. No, the pay wasn't what really mattered, Ari thought, what mattered most was he'd not only scaled a mountain he'd climbed out of the cave.

Ari's reverie was interrupted by classical music. It was from a piano and carried by the soft breeze across the College Commons, a round, grass covered plot that everyone called the "corral". Instead of the music school it was coming from a one story building next door. With several cottonwoods in front and beige adobe walls, it was almost invisible and Ari hadn't noticed it before. He walked over to take a closer look and stepping onto the wooden veranda that ran the width of the building he could clearly hear music from inside. On the adobe wall next to the door was a varnished, wooden plank with the name Homestead Hall carved on it in rustic letters. The door was slightly ajar, which had allowed the music to escape. Ari looked through the crack. Although he could see only a sliver of the inside he could make out a person's hands gliding across the piano's keys. Despite feeling a bit like a voyeur, Ari couldn't stop listening through the crack. The music suddenly stopped and the hands retreated. Instead of backing away, Ari hesitated, hoping that the hands would reappear and the music would resume. Instead the door opened.

## CHAPTER 6

### AS SHE LIKES IT

It was a broad proscenium with an orchestra pit beyond the footlights followed by rows of plush, red upholstered seats. And above the main floor there was a balcony with more seats although less legroom. As far as Max was concerned The Tumbleweed Theater was as good a venue as anything on the "great white way" except that it was a couple of thousand miles off Broadway. Although the house lights were on, Max had arranged with Fred Binsdale to go to the lighting booth and turn them down and switch on a spotlight at his signal.

"It sure is different up here," Zelda said in a whisper.

She must be in awe, Max thought, which is exactly what he expected from someone who had never been on a stage before. Although each new member of the Bard Wired Players got a personal orientation from Max he had particularly been looking forward to this one since Zelda had never acted. Usually a new member had been in a school play or musical or some amateur theater group. They had no idea how bad they were and Max had to patiently listen as they recounted how they had honed their theatrical skills performing in *My Fair Lady* in a high school auditorium or *Our Town* at a Moose Lodge. That's why it was a relief that Zelda, who had never performed before, was a clean slate rather than blackboard that needed erasing.

"It should," Max answered. "You're up here instead of out there."

"I've only been in this place once and that was to see a stupid movie. Where's the screen?"

"Above you?" Max pointed up. "It's lowered when there are films but otherwise it's stored up there. This was a theatre for the performing arts long before movies were shown. They had performances of operas, concerts, musicals, some vaudeville and, of course, melodramas."

"Mellow dramas? You mean everyone was stoned?"

Max gave a mildly condescending smile and explained. "No, melodramas not mellow... dramas. A melodrama is a play in which everything is exaggerated and there's plenty of slapstick. They were very popular a hundred years ago. Usually some dastardly villain with a name like Snidely Whiplash would kidnap a young girl with a name like Nell, and when she rejected his amorous advances he'd tie her to the railroad tracks. Then the good guy, who's a real super straight Dudley Doright type, would rescue her."

"Why?"

"Because if she wasn't rescued a train would run over her."

"I mean, why did she need to be rescued by some super straight jerk with a name like Dudley?"

"Because then Nell would fall in madly in love with Dudley and live happily ever after."

Sounds like something a guy would make up, especially the kinky, bondage stuff."

"Times were different then, Zelda."

"But not the male fantasies."

Changing the subject, Max pointed up. "The scenery is also hung up there so that it can be lowered and raised during a play. It's called the fly tower because the scenery flies up and down and the stagehands who pull it with ropes are called flymen." He pointed in front of the fly tower. "In front of that is the curtain and then going all the way around is the proscenium," Max continued pointing as his arm swung in a three hundred and sixty degree arc. As he did so right on cue Fred, hidden in the lighting booth at the back of the second balcony, dimmed the house lights and Max was suddenly lit up by a spotlight. "The proscenium is the frame within which the play is performed." Max walked boldly to the front of the stage with the spotlight following him and stopped and put his right hand palm up as if it was pressing against clear glass. And this is the fourth wall."

"I don't see any wall," Zelda said.

"Of course not, Zelda," Max replied, disappointed that she didn't seem to notice the dramatic change in lighting. "It's an invisible wall that stands between the actors on stage and the audience on the other side."

"So it's invisible because it doesn't really exist?"

"Oh," Max shook his head and gave her his best, bemused smile. He wanted to reach out and put his right hand gently on her left shoulder. That would have been a nice, dramatic touch. But Zelda being a teenage girl might get the wrong impression as to his intentions so he just waved toward the empty theatre and launched into the soliloquy that he gave to new members of the Company. "It exists, even though it's invisible. The people out there, on the other side, the audience can look through it but what they see and hear exists only behind this wall. And what we do on this stage, on this side of the wall," He pointed to the floor of the stage. "Is to create such a vivid world that while it exists they don't." He pointed, forcefully toward the seats now shrouded in darkness. "They will be so absorbed that they are unaware of anything else, including themselves. This world that we create on the stage becomes their world although they can only watch."

"Like all the world is a stage, right?"

"I bet you didn't know that you just quoted Shakespeare."

"You mean As You Like It, Act Two, Scene Seven?" Zelda replied as she walked quickly over to where he was standing. He was forced to move aside and she took his place in the spotlight. Then thrusting her right hand out, fist first, she pushed past the edge of the stage into the darkness.

"For someone who's never acted before you sure know your Shakespeare," Max said, unable to hide his surprise at her response as well as her actions.

"I just haven't acted on a stage," Zelda answered then, without waiting for a reply from Max, she asked. "Are you going to show me the rest of this place or should I just stay here in the spotlight?"

Max was actually relieved at her request to be shown the rest of the theater. He could escape the improvisation and return to his orientation script. As he gave Zelda the grand tour of the rest of the beautifully restored, historic Tumbleweed from the dressing rooms backstage to the lighting booth in the balcony his confidence and command returned. He talked and she listened in silence. After they finished the tour in the ornate lobby, standing on the plush burgundy carpet, he asked if she had any questions.

"Only one - why is this play supposed to be a big secret?"

"Howdy just wants to keep people in suspense," he replied calmly although her question was both unexpected and, he had to admit, unsettling.

"Why?"

"He didn't say. He just made it a condition. Anyway, audiences like to be surprised."

"But I don't see why the actors need to be surprised. Why don't we get to see the last act now instead of waiting? You've seen it, right?"

"Of course." After all, if you couldn't tell a convincing lie then how the hell could you call yourself a good actor? The truth was, he was embarrassed that Howdy hadn't shared the entire play with him. He could have demanded it but Howdy had made it clear that he wasn't going to share it until they were ready to rehearse it. He told Max he should just think of it as just in time production. After all, he'd joked, what's the point in having it until you need it? What could Max do but trust him since he could hardly afford to cancel the production and lose his chance to show everyone that this wasn't some podunk playhouse.

"So why can't we see it as well?"

"Howdy doesn't want the cast to see it until they've rehearsed the previous acts. Until you're ready."

"What if I hate it. I don't want to be in a play I hate."

"Listen, Zelda, trust me, you'll be happy with the ending."

"Not if it's a sappy ending."

"Of course not." Max replied, doing everything he could to hide his exasperation. "Howdy doesn't write sappy stuff. In any case, as soon as we finish rehearsing the first two acts we'll rehearse the final act so you don't have long to wait. You know, Shakespeare, himself, would still be working on a play even as the actors at the Globe were rehearsing it. Apparently they would often get their lines just before they were ready to be spoken."

"You're saying that the reason Howdy is called the Sagebrush Shakespeare is because he doesn't finish his plays before rehearsals start?"

"No, I'm not saying that. The play is finished. It's just that, well," Max paused at a loss for words. He felt he'd been ambushed. "Let's just say that ours is not to reason why," he said firmly.

"That's not Shakespeare."

"No I'm paraphrasing a line from Tennyson's poem Charge of the Light Brigade. You've never heard of it?"

"Just because I like Shakespeare doesn't mean I like everything that's written by old dead men."

"Tennyson is very famous as is his poem."

"Okay, so what happened to this charging light brigade?"

"Most of them were killed in the charge."

"Not exactly a happy ending."

"No, but..." Max stuttered as he searched for a comeback line.

"That's good because I hate happy endings," Zelda declared.

## **HARRY MEETS HOWDY...AGAIN**

Harry settled onto a stool at the end of the bar. The MJ Bar was a long, narrow room with a bar that stretched almost its entire length so even though it was daylight at the front it was twilight where Harry sat. MJ's was the oldest bar in Picketwire and was the first tenant in the Wobbly Building. In fact, the first beers were being served before the last brick had been laid in 1916. Because MJ are the initials for Mother Jones some people call it "mothers". These are people who not only know what MJ refers to but know what Mother Jones stood for and why the massive brick building with an imposing clock tower that is as straight as a plumb line was named the Wobbly because that was the nickname for the International Workers of the World. Harry and Howdy knew about MJ, Mother Jones and the Wobbly but that wasn't why they were meeting at "mothers". Howdy had suggested it because it was where they had last seen each other thirty years ago.

There was no way Harry could mistake Howdy when he appeared. His broad shoulders, narrow hips and a Stetson hat were a silhouette against the sunlight from the doorway. Without hesitation he followed the long bar into the darkness to where Harry was waiting. There was a slight hitch to his step as if the heel of his left cowboy boot was lower than the right although Harry knew that wasn't why. When he got there Harry stood up and they just looked at each other for a minute then shook hands.

"Hell, Harry, you haven't changed a bit," Howdy said, slapping Harry on the back as he sat on the stool next to him.

"Just less hair and more belly and, then, there's the glasses."

"But you've always worn glasses."

"Only now they're bifocals," Harry chuckled.

"You got me beat, Harry. I just have cheap ones that I buy at the drugstore, a half dozen at a time because I keep losing them. Got one right here in my pocket." He patted a bulge in the breast pocket of his jean jacket. "Can't read anything without them."

"There's nothing to read in here. They still don't have a menu but, then, they still don't serve any food except pretzels and potato chips and if you don't already know what you're going to drink before you come in then you've come to the wrong place."

"Speaking of which what do you want? I'm buying."

"That's mighty generous of you."

"I get a discount since I'm staying here."

"In the Wobbly?"

"Yep."

"You're a member of the Ludlow Lodge?"

Howdy nodded. "And membership has its privileges although being allowed to use the Lodge is the only one as far as I know."

"How did you get to be a member of the Lodge? It's not like you can just apply, you have to be invited. The whole process is a big secret."

"There's an exception for direct relatives of founding members and it turns out my grandfather was a founding member. I guess you could say I was grandfathered in. Since I didn't become a member through the regular process I don't get a voice in who is invited so I can't enlighten you on the process. Even if I could I couldn't because, as you pointed out, it's a big secret."

"I never knew your grandfather was part of the Ludlow strike."

"He survived the massacre. Picketwire was one of the few places that offered them sanctuary from Rockefeller's goons and the Colorado National Guard that was called out to break the strike. Sort of ironic since the Purgatory Penitentiary was right outside town and more than a few strikers who were caught ended up there. Anyway, he met my grandma who grew up in Picketwire and decided to settle here."

He died young just a year after he married my grandmother. She was pregnant with my dad when he died. My grandmother remarried so he wasn't mentioned much: Sort of a rumor more than anything. My dad didn't even know anything about him and considered his stepfather his real father. He only found out about his real dad's involvement in Ludlow after he was invited to join the Lodge. It seems that my granddad was an organizer for a labor organization called the Knights of Equity. I've done some research and found out they took the name as a combination of the Knights of Labor, one of the country's earliest labor unions and the American Society of Equity, a group that organized workers in rural parts of the country. Both of those groups are long gone but the Knights of Equity's is still around. At least in Picketwire since the Ludlow Lodge turned out to not only be their first chapter, it's also their only one. Fortunately, membership is for life so when I showed up after three decades they welcomed me like I had come back from the dead."

"In a way you have come back from the dead. It's like the Odyssey, Odysseus leaves his home in Ithaca to go off to Troy and after ten years of war and another ten years he returns home but by then everyone thinks he's dead and they don't recognize him so he's a stranger."

Howdy shook his head. "I'm no Odysseus even though I've encountered more than a few sirens. You know, Leo Tolstoy wrote that there were only two stories. In the first a man goes on a long journey and in the second a stranger comes to town. I guess me and Odysseus have that in common." After sipping the beer he'd ordered he added. "But my stories are hardly Homeric epics."

"Speaking of which, can you tell me what this play of yours is about exactly? Max Bergmann won't tell anyone. He says it's a secret"

Howdy nodded. "It is a secret but I can tell you that it's about history."

"You mean something that happened a long time ago?"

"I guess so since you and I are old farts."

"You don't mean that I'm a character in it?"

"You are a character but don't worry you're not in my play," Howdy chuckled. "No, it's based on some things that happened here when you and I were younger – before I left town. In fact, I think you can help me with something."

"How can I help?"

"With how it ends."

"But you already know that since you've written the thing."



"Not the ending."

"You're not finished?" Harry asked in astonishment. "Isn't it supposed to open the end of the month at the Tumbleweed?"

"Yep, and rehearsals just started today. I guess you could say it's my version of just in time production."

"You use that method to write your plays?"

"No, just when I don't know what the ending is."

"Why didn't you wait until you did know before setting an opening date?"

"Because then I would never know. Agreeing to the play forced my hand, so to speak. It made me come back and without being here I'll never know how to end it. So I had to do it this way."

"Sounds crazy to me."

"Probably because it is."

"And you think I can help somehow?"

"I sure as hell hope so." Howdy replied and then picked up his bottle of beer by its long neck and drained it.

## **SLEEPLESS IN PICKETWIRE**

Money never sleeps and neither did Wylie Boone. For years he boasted about his ability to get along on only a few hours of sleep as a strategic advantage that gave him an edge. The point being that he had the ability to exert mind over matter in pursuit of money. But the truth was that it wasn't his desire to make money that kept him awake, it was his fear of the nightmares that came when he slept. The nightmares had started when he was in high school and avoiding them had played no small part in his accumulation of wealth. Instead of counting sheep to get to sleep he counted dollars and pounds and euros and pesos to stay awake. Not that he would have counted sheep since Boone grew up on a cattle ranch where even one sheep was too many. It was two in the morning and his mind was getting uncharacteristically fuzzy. The numbers from different stock, bond and currency markets throughout the world that were displayed on the three monitors in front of him were starting to dance. Was it sleep deprivation or was the cause post-traumatic stress syndrome from the crash or was he worried that the driver of the van who hit him was still at large or was it being back in Picketwire? He swiveled in his black Herman Miller Aeron chair, got up and walked out of the bedroom of the ranch house that he'd converted into an office. What he needed was some fresh air

and not the kind that comes from a stroll but through the open window of a 57 Chevy going full throttle.

It was his first car. A classic even in 1973 and after the candy apple red paint job, the four shining mags on the wheels, the overhaul of the V8 engine and the installation of a four speed stick shift on the floor with a black number eight cue ball as the knob, it was perfect for picking up girls and impressing the other guys. He had bought it with his own money and paid for the upgrades out of his own pocket. Boone thought of it as his first investment and the only one that he hadn't sold. He'd told the reporters how upset he was that his 1960 Porsche Carrera had been totaled in the hit and run but the truth was that the only car he really cared about was the 57 Chevy. For years it had been kept safely in its own garage at the ranch. Kept in tune and checked out regularly by a mechanic so that it would be ready when Boone decided to come back and take it for a spin. Now he was back and he was ready.

Boone told the bodyguard (whose name he couldn't remember) on duty that he would be taking the car out for spin.

"Are you sure, Mr. Boone?" The guard asked as he walked with him to the garage.

"Of course, I'm sure."

"But wouldn't it be better if I drove you in the Suburban? Its armor plated."

"That sort of ruins the whole idea. No, I want to drive myself and not in some two ton tank. I'll stay on the ranch so you don't have to worry and I'll be back in less than an hour."

After helping him take the protective cover off the car, the bodyguard opened the garage door. Wylie sat in the driver's seat. He didn't buckle the seatbelt, which wasn't original and had been added because it was required by law. His left foot pushed in the clutch, which was called a suicide clutch because you barely had to lift your foot for it to engage, then shifted the stick through all four gears before settling back in first and taking off. He quickly realized that he wouldn't be able to get beyond second gear without stirring up the gravel on the ranch road and pitting the candy apple finish so when he got to the front gate he ordered the guard to open it. A few minutes later he pulled onto the hardtop of the county road. He stopped and listened to the throb of the V8, inhaling the mix of leaded gasoline and sagebrush. There was a half moon so he could see the road beyond the arc of his headlights as it ran straight across the flat, silver prairie. He knew that there wasn't a bend in it for at least five miles until it turned toward town just past the cut off to the old penitentiary. He pumped the gas pedal a couple of times then pushed it down to the floor as he released the clutch and with a squeal the Chevy shot forward. When he reached a hundred he shifted into neutral, turned off the engine and the headlights. Silently he coasted, surrounded by the silver, moonlit prairie and a rush of memories. When he finally rolled to a stop he pounded the wheel several times,

leaned out of the window and yelled like a coyote. He turned the key, shifted into first and switched on the lights. Suddenly there was a bright light flashing above him. Looking up at the rearview mirror he was surprised to see a pair of headlights on high beam. They had come out of nowhere and were closing fast.

## CHAPTER 7

### NIGHT PRAYERS

Sister M's sat in her room. There were only two places to sit, either the one chair or the single bed. When it had been a prison cell there had also been a toilet one could sit on but that had been removed along with the bars. There was no need for a lock on either the inside or the outside of the cell since no one was going to break in and if someone wanted to break out they were more than free to escape. Anyone who wanted to lock themselves in their cell shouldn't be a nun. She was wearing a pair of Levis and a black tee shirt with the words "Nun is our business" stenciled in white, block letters. Hanging from a leather strap around her neck was a small crucifix made from piñon pine. Sister Darlene, who was a sculptor when she wasn't baking bread, carved them from wood that she found on her walks. They were the same ones that were sold in the gift shop. Sold was a misnomer since they were placed in a basket with the words "freely given" on a card next to it. There was also an unlabeled ceramic jar that Sister "Bernie" Bernadine made on her potter's wheel. The jar was empty when the shop opened but was always seemed to be filled with coins and bills by closing time.

This was the time after supper and before Compline. During dinner one of the Sisters read from a book while everyone else ate. It wasn't the Bible and, in truth, it wasn't always a good book. The reading time was limited to thirty minutes so that there was time for talking or just eating. Sister M's was scheduled as the next reader and she hadn't decided what to read. She wished that Sister Sylvia had picked something longer than Conrad's Heart of Darkness to read. It was certainly a story that generated discussion but it was only a novella and she'd be finished in a week. Sister M's would have to get to the library quickly and check out a book she'd already read that she could read to people as they ate. It had to whet their appetite for discussion while not upsetting their stomachs. She'd given all of her books that she'd accumulated from her previous life to the library including her law books so the book she'd pick would more than likely be one that once belonged to her. The only book she kept was the Bible that had been given her.

It had been her first case as an Assistant DA that she had handled on her own: A rapist who had brutally beaten his victim. He refused to confess or accept a plea bargain so it went to trial and she'd gotten the conviction and sent him to prison for thirty years. Seven years later she was in court facing him again. Only this time it was for his exoneration. DNA evidence had proven that another man had been the

rapist and now the one she had gotten convicted was being set free. The People had no objection and within minutes the courtroom was clearing out. The man she had gotten convicted, who she had believed at the time was a vicious serial rapist who deserved no mercy was standing by himself. She walked over to him and said that the People were sorry.

"The People are sorry?"

"The People is who we...I, represent."

"I'm people, a person, and you didn't represent me."

"That's not how the system works."

"That's how the system doesn't work, you mean?"

She remembers wanting to walk away but something kept her there, looking up at him. "I guess not in this case."

"It wasn't a case to me, it was seven years, 2,555 days, 61,320 hours, in a cell in a maximum security penitentiary."

"Look, I know there's nothing I can say to give you back the time you lost but I do want you to know that the People apologize and..." And what? And what?

"No," he put up his right index finger. "I don't accept the apology."

"I understand."

"No, you don't understand, because what I don't accept is the People's apology because I don't see any people. I just see you." His brown eyes locked onto her blue eyes, seeing right through her: No, not through her but into her. A smile rippled across his lips and he said. "But I do forgive you."

"You do?" She exhaled the words. It was more than a sigh of relief. Much more.

"Yes."

"Thank you," she heard herself say as he turned and walked away.

Just before he reached the door to the courtroom, where a group of people stood, probably his family and friends who'd waited for him for seven years, who'd believed that he was innocent, he stopped and walked back to her. When he got to her he reached into the pocket of the cheap, ill-fitting suit coat that the People had given him to wear in court and pulled out something. "Don't thank me, thank this," he said, handed it to her and walked out of the courtroom. The Bible he gave her was

a cheap, pocket version with its black cover so worn that scotch tape had been applied liberally to keep it from disintegrating. Inside, every page from Genesis to the Book of Revelations had passages that he had underlined and every day she read one.

She read Exodus 3:11, "Who am I that I should go to Pharoah and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" After nine years of reading the underlined passages Sister M's knew most of them by heart, including this one. Still, she always read the words. In the next passage Moses asks God who God is and God turns Moses' words around and replies, "I am who I am". If she were still a prosecutor an answer like that would have drawn an objection from her that no judge would overrule and God would have been held in contempt and if it was an immigration hearing swiftly deported. Although God wouldn't be one of the undocumented immigrants they would be providing sanctuary to and that she might have to defend if they were caught by Immigration and Custom Enforcement there would more than likely be at least one Jesus.

After closing the Bible and placing it on the single, wooden shelf fixed to the wall opposite the bed, Sister M's put on a faded blue hoodie sweatshirt. Whenever she had the time she liked to take a walk before Compline. Since she ran for an hour every morning she really didn't need the physical exercise and this was more for thinking. There was a full moon so she was planning to walk outside the walls. As she passed through the open gate she couldn't help thinking about how free the prisoners who'd served their time must have felt when they left through the gate and how free she had felt the when she entered through the gate. Suddenly she was bathed in light. It wasn't the full moon but headlights and they were moving toward her at a high rate of speed. Whoever was driving was ignoring the speed limit they'd posted and she wondered if it was some teenagers on a joyride. She stepped to the side of the road and waved her arms. The car continued past her, then braked and came to a stop in front of the gate. She ran over to the idling car expecting to see some pimply-faced teenager. Instead, there was a man in his sixties with both hands gripping the wheel, looking intently in the rearview mirror. "Looks like I lost them," the man said.

"Who?"

"The people who were chasing me."

"Who are they?"

"Hell if I know. I was just out for a ride and they came up behind me - fast, like they wanted to run me off the road. They must have something under their hood because I couldn't shake them. I knew the road dead ended here so I didn't know what I was going to do if they were still on my tail." He laughed. "Maybe they decided they didn't want to go to prison. What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I live here," Sister M's replied, pulling the hood of the sweatshirt off her head.

"You live here? In the old Purgatory Penitentiary?"

"It's not a prison anymore."

"I know they shut it down when I was still a kid. Are you some sort of caretaker?"

"I'm a nun."

"A nun? Why would a nun live in an old prison?"

"I don't live here by myself," she answered. "This is a religious community now."

"You're kidding me." He opened the car door and stepped out. He looked at the prison walls that even the moonlight couldn't soften and then looked at her. He was taller than Sister M's and a lot heavier and she could tell that he was used to throwing his weight around. "You're telling me this is now a convent?"

"It's also a retreat and educational center and we give tours of the old penitentiary."

"Well. I'll be dam..." he stopped and added. "Sorry Sister. It's just a surprise." He looked at the sign next to the open gate that was lit up by his headlights. "It says Our Lady of Lost Souls Convent, Sisters of St. Leonard. Who is St. Leonard?"

"He's the patron saint of prisoners."

"Now it all makes sense," he said.

"It does?"

"I mean, that you live in a prison."

"But it's not a prison anymore."

He held up both of his hands in mock surrender. "Sorry, I meant former prison. Anyway, I'm happy to have the Sisters of St. Leonard as a neighbor."

"You own the Double B ranch?"

He nodded his head. "Heck of a way to drop in and introduce myself, I guess. I haven't been around for awhile so I'd didn't know that this place had been converted into a convent."

"We've been here for almost ten years."

"It's been a long while." He reached out with his right hand. "Anyway, I'm Wylie Boone and welcome to the neighborhood."

"Sister Mary Margaret," she answered shaking his hand. He had a firm handshake like he was used to making people wince and seemed surprised when she didn't. "Do you have any idea why someone would want to chase you?"

He shook his head as they unclasped their hands. "Like I said, I don't have any idea who they were."

"That doesn't mean you don't know why they were."

"My but you are direct, Sister Mary Margaret. It almost feels like I'm being cross examined," he laughed. "Anyway, why covers a lot of territory. Lots of reasons why someone might want to chase me. Maybe they wanted to see if they could beat a fifty seven Chevy."

"You should probably call the Sheriff and report it."

"No, no need for that. Whoever it was is gone. No harm done. It was even kind of fun. I wonder if I can borrow a phone so I can call the ranch, though, and tell them where I am and that I'm on my way back. I left my cellphone at home. Didn't think I'd need it."

She knew he was lying but he wasn't there to confess and she wasn't there to get a conviction. "It wouldn't do you any good here, anyway," she said, then looked over at the prison walls and added. "Even though we have lots of bars on our cells."

"I can let you use the land line in our Welcome Center."

He followed her through the gate to the Welcome Center where she turned on the lights and showed him the phone on the counter. "You don't mind if I leave you here by yourself?"

"Should I lock up when I leave?"

"We don't have locks here," she answered. "Just shut the door when you leave. Now, I have to go, or I'll be late for Compline."

"Compline?"

"Night prayers. You're welcome to join us."

"Me? I think I'll pass. I mean, I haven't gone to church for years. I'm not even a Catholic."

"We don't have any admission requirements. Everyone is welcome."

"I'll take a rain check."

"It hasn't rained in a month, but when it does you know where to find us." She pulled the sweatshirt hood over her head and started to walk out the door and then stopped and turned around. "I hope you don't mind, Mr. Boone, but I will include you in our prayers tonight."

"Are you asking for my permission?"

"No. I just wanted you to know."

## **HAPPY TRAILS TO YOU**

It was named Happy Trails after the song by Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, the singing cowboy and cowgirl. No one figured that old man Ricketts would ever sell. After all, he was over eighty and most people figured he'd bite the dust before he hit the trail. As far as anyone could tell he hadn't changed either the place or himself in the half century that he'd owned the trailer park. It wasn't until he drove out of town, towing the Airstream that had been his home that people realized he'd actually sold the place. Not just that, he'd sold it to people that no one knew. Of course, no one could think of anyone they knew who would buy the place.

Desmond Goswami stood outside the Happy Trails office trailer waiting for Sue Cohen to stop by and welcome him as a new member of the Picketwire Chamber of Commerce. He had joined not just for business but because, to tell the truth, he was lonely. He was also unhappy. Instead of working for a start up in Silicon Valley he had agreed to help his parents out by managing their newest acquisition. He was the youngest brother and his two older brothers and one of his sisters were already managing motels the family owned in the Denver area. He got the call while he sat in a coffee shop in Cupertino with his laptop and a latte. His father told him that they had just bought their first trailer park in a place called Picketwire and he wanted Desmond to come back to Colorado to lead the management team.

"But you do motels, Bapa."

"Everyone from Gujarat does motels, Desmond, but none of them do trailer parks."

"Did you ever think that there might be a good reason why they aren't. Stick with what you already know, Bapa."

"If your mother and I stuck with what we already knew we'd be rice farmers in India and you'd be one too. Instead, we came here and learned about motels and now that we know motels we are ready to move on to trailer parks. You say you want to be an entrepreneur and now I offer you a chance to do a start up."



"It's not a start up because it's already a business."

"Maybe, but a business going nowhere so this is an opportunity to start it up in the right direction."

"That's called a turn around not a start up."

"It's a re-start up, Desmond, so what?"

"But what's innovative about running a trailer park?"

"That is the point, my son. It needs innovation and that is exactly why you are needed to lead the management team to re-start the trailer park in a new, innovative direction."

"Okay, okay," Desmond sighed, closing his laptop. "But only for six months."

"Six months?" His Father answered. There was disappointment in his voice. Desmond was sure that his father would not agree and he'd be off the hook. He picked up his latte. Then his father's voice came back on, first weak and then strong. "Yes. Six months. I have already booked you a plane ticket for tomorrow morning."

"But..."

"There is no time to waste, Desmond. The man who sold it to us is leaving in two days. That was a condition of the sale. So our new management team must be in place by then."

"Why can't one of them handle things for a few days?"

"Who?"

"One of the other members of the new management team."

"But you are the management team, my son."

"This is the first time I've been here," Sue said as she shook Desmond's hand after parking her car. "I only recall meeting the former owner once. I never saw him at the cafe and he wasn't a member of the Chamber. In fact, I don't know that he was a member of anything. I always wondered why someone who was a loner would want to be in the hospitality business."

"Sometimes people do things they don't want to do because they have no choice,"

"I understand that but for over fifty years? Anyway, no one forced him to sell it but a lot of us are glad he did. I have to say, though, a lot of people, including me, were surprised that anyone would buy the place."

Desmond looked around. Including me, as well, he wanted to say. "We were looking for a turn around opportunity and I was asked to take this on because I am an expert in start ups and this is like a start up. It requires a re start in a new direction. Most people when they look at these trailers just see boxes on wheels but one needs to see the bigger picture."

"You mean outside the box?"

"Exactly. We will be an innovative and disruptive, yet constructive, first mover. Of course, everything we do here will be replicable and scalable so we can quickly expand the number of Happy Trails. Our goal is to be the Amazon of trailer parks." Desmond realized that what he was saying sounded like a Silicon Valley pitch and stopped.

"I see," Sue replied as if everything he said made sense, although all she saw were dozens of dilapidated trailers, resting on flat tires and hitched to cinder blocks. "I'm really happy that you not only bought Happy Trails but joined the Chamber. What are some of the things that you hope to get from your membership?"

"As an entrepreneur I believe strongly in the power of networking so I hope the Chamber will help in that regard. I also hope our membership will improve the image of Happy Trails. We wish to be seen as a thriving business that Picketwire can be proud of rather than... you know?"

A dump, Sue wanted to say, instead she just nodded and said. "You know, a good way to do both would be to work on one of the projects we sponsor. You would meet people and it would generate some very positive publicity for Happy Trails."

"Yes, I like that idea. But it should be something where I can make a real contribution so that people see that Happy Trails is turning around and becoming an asset to the community."

"As a matter of fact the Chamber has just agreed to sponsor something new and I think it's just the sort of project that could use someone with your expertise in start ups and innovation."

## **DEAD RECKONING**

"I hope we're not lost."

"This is the trail that Tony and Elise said leads to the camp." Jane stopped and turned to Bruce who was several paces behind her. "Do you want to switch places?"

"No, honey. Without cell service and GPS I'm just a wandering Jew. Who knows where we'd end up if I was leading the way?"

"I have to admit that ever since we climbed out of the canyon everything looks pretty much the same," Jane replied, her hands on her hips.

"So how do we know that we're still going the right direction?"

"Dead reckoning."

"I don't like the sound of dead in that. Can't we look at the map that Elise gave us?"

Jane pulled out the map she had tucked into her back pocket and opened it. "I'm pretty sure we're here." She pointed to a spot on a line that Elise had drawn in blue ink and then moved her finger along it until she stopped at a blue circle. "And this is where Elise said the camp is."

"You're sure?"

"Don't you know how to read a map?"

"I'm a New Yorker so I only know how to read a subway map. You on, the other had, are a cowgirl so..."

"I grew up on a farm not a ranch so I'm not a cowgirl," Jane said, cutting him off.

"A farm has cows doesn't it?"

"Yes, but they don't call girls on farms cowgirls."

"What do they call them, farm girls?"

"Just girls."

"Really? And I thought I married a cowgirl."

"Cowgirls only marry cowboys. It's one of the unwritten laws of the West. You should have done your research before you proposed, Mister," she laughed. "Of course, if you feel cheated you can leave right now. Only," she waved the map. "I keep this and, this girl knows how to read a map."

"Leave you? I'll have you know I've always had a hankering for farm girls."

"Hankering?" Jane hooted.

"It was an inner hankering but I believe it's becoming an outer hankering,"

"Well, you'll just have to keep your hankering inside until we get back home."

"Right, the farm; that's where you keep the hay you farm girls like to roll in. The kinky stuff."

"Kinky? It's more like itchy," she answered, trying to keep from cracking up.

"If you've got the hay then it must be the cowgirls who like to roll out here in the cactus. It would be like making love to a porcupine."

"You've heard of cowpokes, haven't you?" Jane replied with as straight a face as she could muster. "And speaking of pokey, we need to get going. It shouldn't be far but I want to have time to look around before we have to hike back to the trailhead."

As they walked, Jane called out the names of various plants and flowers: Buffalo Grass, Cheatgrass, Bigelow Sage, Cane Cactus, Snakeweed, Prairie Clover, Red Paintbrush."

"I'm amazed that you know all their names. I mean, I've walked through Central Park hundreds of times and I'd be hard pressed to name any of the plants that grow there."

"They aren't the proper names, just what people call them around here. If you go somewhere else they often have different name for them. The only names that everyone accepts are the scientific ones they've been given and those are in Latin."

"Didn't you study Latin in Seminary?"

"Greek and Hebrew. Remember, you tried some of the Hebrew you'd learned for your Bar Mitzvah on me and I told you I didn't understand a word because I only knew Ancient Hebrew?"

"And I told you that was okay because I didn't remember what any of the words meant. In any case, Honey, I prefer what you call the plants we're looking at to the names in an old language that I don't understand."

"Speaking of old languages, I'm glad we had a chance to see the rock art. I think Elise did a great job of explaining how the pictographs are really a language, didn't you?"

"I thought it was interesting that people who know Native American sign language can read them."

"But that's only a theory," Jane said. "As you recall, Elise said that while sign language and pictographs may look similar there's no way to prove that the pictures mean the same thing because there's no Rosetta Stone like there was for Hieroglyphics."

"Who know, maybe there is but it just hasn't been discovered. There are a lot of stones out here and it could be under one of them." Bruce stopped, picked up a small rock and turned it over. "Not this one," he said and tossed it into a clump of what he now knew was Buffalo Grass.

"I'm afraid you'll have to leave the rest of the stones unturned because the camp is just ahead." Jane answered, pointing at a wooden watchtower fifty yards in front of them. The watchtower was lying on its side, tangled in the barbed wire of the fence it had fallen on.

"It's a good thing you really can read a map," Bruce said and started walking toward the breach in the fence that had been created by the watchtower's collapse.

Yes, Jane thought, as they walked toward the breach in the fence that had been created by the watchtower's collapse. But from now on it's all dead reckoning

## CHAPTER 8

### ON THE CASE

Despite the bullet in his brain Foster St. Vrain was feeling pretty damn good. There was a long neck bottle of beer in his right hand and his butt was in a Lazy Boy and a Rockies baseball game was on TV. Of course, his television didn't work anymore. He'd shot it and all he could see between the toes of the cowboy boots on the elevated footrest was a bullet hole in the middle of its screen. So he was listening to the game on the radio. Well, hell, he liked to listen anyway. The way they called the game on radio was a lot more interesting than what you saw on the television. When he turned the sound off the TV and listened to the play by play on radio it was like there were two different games: The boring as hell one he was watching on TV and the thriller he was listening to on the radio. He finally decided that he preferred the version that played out in his mind as he listened than what he saw and that's when he got his pistol and put the television out of its misery or maybe it was his misery - in any case, he felt better afterwards. Hell of a thing for a cop to do but he wasn't a cop anymore.

As he swigged his beer and listened to the game he looked out through the screen door of his bungalow. Jemma Lu Tuttle was standing on his front porch. Of course, according to an expert witness his powers of identification were impaired by the

bullet in his head so maybe it was Bertha Lopez delivering the mail or just his imagination. He turned off the radio.

"Foster."

Once he heard the voice he knew it was Jemma Lu. "Sorry, I couldn't hear you over the radio," he replied as he pulled the handle on the recliner, got up and opened the door. "Come on in."

She accepted his offer to sit in the only other chair but declined the beer or a glass of tap water, which was the only alternative.

"So, Jemma Lu Tuttle," Foster asked after he settled back into the Lazy Boy. "What brings you to this part of town?"

"What's wrong with this part of town?"

"Other than me, nothing."

"Now, what does that mean?"

"It means that if I knew I'd have me as a neighbor I'd have never moved here."

After Jemma Lu stopped laughing she said. "You're too hard on yourself, Foster."

"You sound like the sister I never had."

"The big sister," she replied. Not that she had to remind him she was fifteen years older since that point had been made a long time ago.

"Since we haven't seen each other in while there's been no one to put me in my place so I've had to do it myself. I hope you didn't come here to put me in some other place because I'm sort of attached to this one."

"This place?" Jemma Lu looked around the small living room of the one story bungalow

"I believe this is the first time you've been here."

"Yes it is. Of course, I don't recall ever being invited to visit," she said then, without waiting for him to think of an answer that might sound halfway convincing, she let him off the hook by changing the subject. "What happened to your TV?" She asked, nodding toward the television.

"Shot it."

"Why on earth did you do that?"

"Got tired of its company." He took a sip of beer.

"Then I'll be sure and not out stay my welcome."

"Don't you worry, Jemma Lu, I only shoot television sets now a days. Besides, I get the feeling you didn't come here just to keep me company."

Jemma Lu smiled. "I always enjoyed the times we spent together, Foster."

"All the times?" He asked, arching his right eyebrow.

"Okay, not all of the times," she replied.

They stared at each other in silence for a minute until he toasted her with his beer.  
"Easiest confession I ever got."

"Now that you've gotten it I want to ask you something. Are you still doing private investigations?"

"It keeps me busy. Not that I've been real busy."

"So you're free to take on a case?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Who asks me."

"I'm asking."

"Then the answer is yes, I'll take the case."

"Before you know what it's about?"

"That's not as important as who it's for, but now that I've agreed, what is it about?"

"It's about Wylie Boone."

"Wylie Boone?" Foster nearly spit out the beer he'd just sipped.

"Yes, you heard me right, Wylie Boone. I want to find out if someone is trying to kill him."

"I heard about the hit and run up in Aspen."

"What if it wasn't just a hit and run?"

"You think someone deliberately tried to kill him?"

"I don't know for sure and that's what I'd like you to find out."

"Based on the Wylie I knew he sure had a gift for making enemies. That and making money. But why do you care? Wylie has been gone for years and from what I remember you were glad to see him leave."

"We had our differences, but..."

"But?"

Jemma Lu wished she'd taken Foster up on the beer. "But, he's back."

"To Picketwire?"

"The ranch."

"If someone is trying to kill him while he's at the ranch than that's the Sheriff's responsibility."

"Jesse Riggleman? You've got to be kidding?"

"I'm just saying it's his jurisdiction."

"He's also the person who shot you."

"Attempted and, as you recall, they concluded it was a mistake while assisting an officer."

"Riggleman is the one who called for your assistance and when you responded he tried to kill you."

"He claimed that he thought I was one of the bad guys and not a police officer."

"You know he did it intentionally, Foster."

"They said my memory was impaired by the bullet in my head. Also, there was no motive for Riggleman to shoot a Picketwire Cop. That was more than enough for Vince Lowery, County Prosecutor, to declare it an accident."



"Of course he did, the Lowery was probably in on the whole thing. Anyway, a lot of us here in Picketwire believe what you saw is what really happened."

"There were enough folks outside Picketwire who believed his story to elect him County Sheriff."

"His whole campaign was based on portraying Picketwire as the center of evil and that if he was Sheriff he'd stop it from spreading to the rest of the County."

"I believe he compared it to foot and mouth disease and that Picketwire was like infected cattle that had to be separated from the herd."

"And shot. I mean he didn't come out and say it, but everyone knows that's what you do to cattle with hoof and mouth disease."

"So his motive is that he put a bullet in my head because I couldn't keep my foot out of my mouth," Foster said as he spun the empty beer bottle by its neck on the broad arm of the Lazy Boy.

"It's not something to joke about, Foster," Jemma Lu said wanting to grab the damn beer bottle out of his hand.

Foster let go of the beer bottle and raised both of his hands, palms out. "You're right, Jemma Lu, it's not something to joke about."

"And I'm not joking when I say that I don't want you to share any information you uncover during your investigation with Rigglesman or any of his gang that they call the Sheriff's Department. If you don't agree then don't take the case."

"Jemma Lu," Foster said without smiling. "If you said anything different I wouldn't take the case."

"But, you agreed to take the case before I said it," she teased.

"And you just told me I didn't have to take it if I didn't agree with you."

"My, this sounds like one of those stupid arguments brothers and sisters get into," Jemma Lu said with a laugh and got up from the chair. As they walked out onto the porch together she said. "Don't I need to sign an agreement?"

"Nope."

"Then just send me a bill for whatever it costs."

"No point in sending you a bill when I'm not charging you anything."

"Now Foster, you know I can more than afford whatever it is you charge for your time."

"Jemma Lu, I owe you a lot more than whatever this is going to cost for what you did for me."

"You owe me nothing, Foster."

"Then consider us even."

## **PERFECT FORM**

Unlike the ancient Greek sculptor who chipped away at a block of marble until he found Venus de Milo, Ari had produced only a trail of rubble in his pursuit of the perfect feminine form. The form of the woman on the other side of the open doorway was hidden inside the baggy Carhartt jeans and loose red checked flannel shirt. However, her face was longer than it was wide, her skin was olive rather than alabaster and her auburn hair was tied in a careless bun. She was also wearing silver wire rim glasses. Despite all that Ari had the strange feeling that his pursuit of the perfect form might have come to a sudden and unexpected end. "I'm sorry if I interrupted you," Ari said, trying not to let his own face show what he was thinking, much less feeling.

"You didn't interrupt me," the woman answered as if his presence wasn't totally unexpected. "I was finished and just leaving when I noticed that someone was at the door waiting to come in."

"I wasn't waiting to come in, I was just walking by and heard the piano music and couldn't help listening. You play beautifully, by the way. Chopin?"

"It was Mahler and I didn't do it justice. It's a Steinway grand and they keep it tuned and I'm almost ashamed that it is wasted on me. Still, I can't resist stopping and playing whenever I have the time, which isn't often."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to block the doorway," Ari said, moving aside.

"That's the second time you've said you're sorry." Her smile made it clear that it was an observation, not an accusation.

"Then I won't apologize by saying I'm sorry that I've said I'm sorry twice. I'm Ari, by the way," Ari said offering his hand.

"I'm Gretl," she replied. As they shook hands he noted that she had a strong grip. Probably from playing the piano or, considering the outfit she had on, from splitting logs.

"Like the fairy tale Hansel and Gretel but without the second e and without Hansel."

"Did you know Gretl means pearl in Greek?"

"Does it? A pearl of wisdom or a pearl that is a jewel?"

"Maybe both. I don't think they're mutually exclusive."

"A wise jewel. Another reason to prefer being called Gretl rather than Margaret."

"Like I prefer Ari to Aristotle."

"I would think that a Professor of Philosophy would be happy to have the name of a wise man like Aristotle."

"I'm not a full professor so I guess I'm more of a wise guy. But how did you know that I taught philosophy?"

"There was a story on the College website about the new faculty along with their bios and photos. Unlike the photos of most faculty you actually resemble yours."

"I had it taken after I just shaved off my beard otherwise you probably wouldn't have recognized me. In fact, I didn't recognize myself when I looked at the photo." He'd grown his beard in college but had decided that if he wanted to start over again in a new place with a new job he should have a new face so he shaved off the old one. He was still getting used to the person staring back at him in the mirror. "What about you?"

"I never had a beard. Although, it would probably go with the clothes I am wearing at the moment."

"I mean your photo in the Directory?"

"There is no photo. I'm not on the faculty or the staff."

"I guess I just assumed that you were because you were here playing the piano."

"I'm loosely affiliated, which means they let me use the piano although, now that I think about it, anyone can come in and play the piano since the door is unlocked."

"How are you affiliated?" Ari asked, realizing that he was now walking with her although he had no idea where she was going except that it was in the opposite direction from where he had been headed. She had some powerful legs hidden inside those jeans and he had to up his gait to stay abreast.

"Have you heard of PI?"

"Apple pie or pi the irrational number."

"No, PI, the Picketwire Institute?"

"I can't say that I have."

"You've heard of the Aspen Institute and the Santa Fe Institute?"

"Of course. They're famous."

"Well, the Picketwire Institute isn't. No one's heard of it so you don't need to say you're sorry for not knowing about PI."

"That's good, because it would be my third apology and I wouldn't want to strike out."

"Strike out?"

"You know, three strikes and you're out, like in baseball?"

Gretl stopped and looked at him straight in the eye. He was six feet and she was almost as tall as him. It was a new experience.

"Are we playing baseball?" She asked, her eyes narrowing behind the lenses of her glasses.

"No..."

"That's good," she said, sounding relieved. "Because I think it's a boring game."

Ari decided against telling her he was a Red Sox fan. "Is the Picketwire Institute, or PI, a think tank like Aspen and Santa Fe?"

"I don't know about you, but if I was inside a tank the only thing I would think about is how to escape. How can someone think outside the box if they're in a tank?"

"The same way they think inside a cave."

"You mean, like cavemen?" She laughed.

"I was thinking more like Plato's allegory of the cave."

"If you mean where the cavemen believe that the shadows on the wall are reality, I'd certainly agree that some think tanks resemble man caves," she said, then turned and resumed walking.

After scrambling to catch up with her Ari asked. "If the Picketwire Institute isn't a think tank, or a man cave, can you tell me something about what PI is or do I need to do a search on the Internet?"

"When I think of the Internet I think of those huge nets that trawlers tow behind them scooping up everything - fish and crabs and whatever innocent creature is swimming in its wake. It reminds me of the summer I worked on the slime line in a processing plant in Alaska. The trawlers would bring everything they caught in their nets to the processor where it would be dumped on the slime line, which is like a conveyor belt. Then we'd pick through it for anything that could be packaged or canned for sale. I can't help thinking that Google, Facebook and the others are like processors only they employ algorithms rather than people and the slime gets packaged as well."

"You mean that we're being slimed by Google and Facebook?" He laughed.

"Exactly, although, its no laughing matter," she replied then reached out and touched his right arm with her left hand. "Sorry, now it's my turn to apologize because I didn't mean that you're joke wasn't funny."

"Don't worry, it wasn't a strike," he replied as her hand slid off his forearm and they resumed walking. He noticed that they were in a part of the campus that he hadn't seen before.

"To get back to your question," she said. "You won't find much about us on the Internet. We don't even have a website or an online presence."

By "us" Ari figured she included herself as well as PI. "So how does someone like me get to know about you, about the Picketwire Institute?"

Gretl shrugged. "They can follow me like you are."

"We've been talking while we were walking so I don't think you could say I was following you."

"But you have no idea where I'm going and yet you are still right beside me, so it seems to me that you have been following me."

"Okay, but its not like I'm stalking you."

"If you were stalking me we wouldn't be talking. I would have told you to get lost."

"It wouldn't be hard to for me to get lost since I hardly know my way around the campus, particularly this part," Ari answered. "But, since we both agree that I'm not stalking you but following your lead, can you tell me where we are going?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm going there." She nodded toward a three story yellow brick building with a dome on top.

"This must be the College observatory?"

"It was originally. They built an observatory in the mountains near Cuchara twenty years ago that replaced this one. It has a bigger telescope and it's closer to the stars up there than down here."

"What is it now?"

"If you want to find out you can follow me inside," she said and then started walking toward the entrance without waiting a reply.

Ari looked at Gretl for a moment and then jogged to catch up. "I guess I've come this far so why not?" He said as he caught up with her just as she was opening the door. Who knows, he thought, maybe I'll have a chance to see a heavenly body after all.

## **RAILROADED**

"All aboard the Picketwire Limited," the short, stocky man wearing a turn of the century train conductor's uniform announced to the twelve passengers seated in the vintage Pullman railroad car that Tony Medrano had reserved for his new *Rails, Trails and Tales* tour. Then, with a lurch that sent the man stumbling forward the train pulled out of the La Junta train station at 10:10 AM. Regaining his footing, the man continued. "I'm Clem the Conductor and this little lady here is Clementine." Clem nodded to the young woman standing next to him. She was dressed in a black skirt that brushed the ankles of her high-topped black shoes and a white, long sleeve blouse with puffed shoulders and ruffles down the front and a starched collar. "And she's a Harvey Girl. In case you don't know, Harvey Girls worked at the Harvey Houses where passengers on the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad could have a meal when the train stopped at a depot. Mind you, not just any girl could be a Harvey Girl. They were very selective. You had to be single, between the ages of 18 and 30, and of good moral character. Most importantly, though, a Harvey Girl had to sign an agreement not to marry for at least a year."

"I was a Harvey Girl," the Clementine said, curtsying as she smiled at the passengers. "But I'm not a Harvey Girl anymore."

"You mean you're married?" Clem asked in mock disbelief.

"Of course not. Not that I don't have plenty of proposals. I was working in a Harvey House but I wanted to ride the rails not just watch the trains go by. Now I work on this wonderful train and also in the famous Picketwire House Hotel, which is just

across the street from the historic Picketwire Train Station. That's our next stop isn't it, Conductor Clem?"

"It certainly is my darling Clementine. This being the Limited there's no stops between here and there."

"Then I better start serving these nice passengers some fresh squeezed lemonade because we'll be there in a jiffy." She picked up a silver tray with glasses of lemonade that had been resting on the counter next to her.

Clem turned to Tony, who had been standing behind him. "And now a few words from another conductor, your tour conductor Tony Medrano."

"Thanks Conductor Clem," Tony said, flashing the biggest smile he could muster. "We will arrive in Picketwire at 11:45. After a brief tour of the Picketwire Train Station, which is over a hundred years old, we will walk across the street to the equally historic Picketwire House Hotel where we will have lunch."

"It's not a Harvey House," Clementine said, batting false eyelashes the size of window awnings. "So proposals are welcome."

"But no tips since they're already included in the tour package," Clem added.

Feeling like a straight man, Tony continued. "Then after lunch we'll board our luxury Purple Sage Tour bus and visit the historic, former Purgatory State Penitentiary."

"However, the current occupants are not incarcerated desperados since it's now Our Lady of Lost Souls Convent," Conductor Clem chuckled.

"I used to visit one of my beaus there," Clementine said. "Before it was a Convent, of course."

Tony waited for the laughter to stop then said. "Several of you will be leaving the main tour at that point. Not to be incarcerated, as Conductor Clem put it, but for a stay at the Convent's Retreat Center." As he spoke Tony glanced at the two men and a woman who were sitting in the same row near the back. For them this was a ride on another kind of railroad – one that was underground. They were the first group of "so-called" illegal immigrants that Tony had agreed to transport to the Our Lady of Lost Souls Convent disguised as members of his tour group. "After touring the historic Purgatory Pen we will return to the Picketwire House Hotel for cocktails, followed by dinner at the Home on the Range Restaurant. Tomorrow we will tour parts of the Santa Fe Trail's Purgatory Cut Off that goes through Picketwire before concluding our Rails, Trails and Tales Tour by boarding the train for our return trip to LA Junta. Now sit back and enjoy the scenery."

“And more lemonade,” Clementine added.

I never thought I’d say things that corny,” Zelda said as she lit a cigarette.

“It’s supposed to be corny,” Max pointed out. “And you shouldn’t be smoking, Mary Ann, I mean Zelda.”

“We’re outside, aren’t we?” Zelda waved the cigarette. They were standing on the observation deck that stuck out from the back of the Pullman car.

“But women usually didn’t smoke in public then.”

“Harvey Girls didn’t but Clementine would be smoking up a storm. That’s probably why she was kicked out and had to work this gig.”

“She doesn’t say she was kicked out. It’s not in the script.”

“A character has to have a back story, don’t they? That’s Clementine’s back story.”

Max was saved from having to think of an answer when the door opened and Tony came out on the deck. “I think it’s going pretty well,” Tony said. He’d wanted something different for the new tour and had asked Max if he would play the part of a conductor who could spin some tales while they were on the train. Max had proposed the Clementine character, telling Tony that he had just the person to play the role. Tony had been a little nervous after meeting Zelda but he had to admit she was a pretty good in the part.

“You think its going well now, just wait until I tell the tale about the great train robbery of 1905,’ Max said.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Tony answered. “We’ve got few minutes before we reach the spot.”

Max looked at the pocket watch that dangled from his vest on a gold chain. “Five minutes.”

“That gives me time to finish my cigarette and touch up my lipstick,” Zelda said. “I mean, I have to be ready to say my lines, right?”

“Remember, when you hear me say that we’re moving through a particularly scenic and pastoral area, you scream then open this door here and come in from the observation deck...”



"And shout there are train robbers coming after us, Clem, we need to escape!" Zelda replied with more than a little sarcasm. "How could I ever forget a line like that?"

"It may not be what you would say but it's Clementine who is saying it," Max replied. "And it will get everyone's attention so I can tell the story of the great train robbery." Max checked his watch again. "Okay, I'm going in now."

"I'll be there in a second," Tony said to Max as he closed the door.

"If you ask me, I don't get it," Zelda said, her hand cupping the elbow of her right arm as she gestured with the cigarette in her right hand.

"Your lines?"

"No, the three people in there who want to spend the night in prison."

"They're going there for a spiritual retreat and, besides, it's a convent now not a prison"

"Same thing."

"I don't think the Sisters would agree with you on that."

"I don't think they'd agree with me on anything."

"You should meet them, you might be surprised."

"Nothing surprises me," Zelda said, turning her head cocking it slightly to keep the smoke from her cigarette out of her eyes. "You may not believe it but I've seen a lot; done a lot, too."

"Including pretending to smoke?"

"What?"

"You're blowing smoke but you're not inhaling."

Zelda looked at the cigarette as if it had betrayed her and then, as her face blushed the same shade as her rouged cheeks, she pleaded. "Please don't tell Max that I'm not really smoking."

"Sure," Tony said opening the door. "Just don't throw the cigarette overboard, we don't want to start a grass fire."

Tony closed the door and sat down in a vacant seat at the rear of the car. He looked up at Max, who was standing several feet in front of the door, announced. "Ladies

and gentlemen if I can have your attention please. We are passing through a particularly scenic and pastoral area..."

An earth-shattering scream from the observation deck cut Max off. The door suddenly swung open and Zelda, her face contorted in terror, shouted, "They're coming after us, Clem." Slamming the door behind her Zelda sprinted past Max and up the aisle toward the front of the car, frantically waving her hands and yelling, "We need to get the hell out of here!" As Max stood speechless with his mouth open, the three "illegal immigrants" looked at each other, then jumped up and took off after Zelda.

## CHAPTER 9

### COVERING THE BASES

A picture might be worth a thousand words but Tom couldn't find anything in Gloria's photos of Friday's high school football game between the Picketwire Prairie Dogs and the Bitter Creek Bisons that matched the account in Jim Harman's sports story. It was as if they had attended two different games. Hal's had young men in helmets battling each other on the gridiron while Gloria's had young women with pom poms performing acrobatics on the sidelines. When he'd pointed the discrepancy out to Gloria, she reminded him that she'd never claimed to be a sports photographer as well as a journalist. That being said, she couldn't help pointing out that Picketwire's cheerleaders had clearly outperformed those from Bitter Creek, which was more than could be said for the football team who had been trounced by the Bisons. As he sat in the rear booth at the Sue's Pretty Good Cafe he looked at the layout for the sports page. He could almost hear the kicking and screaming as he tried to drag one of Gloria's photos and drop it into a box next to Jim's story. It was the exact opposite of her photo of Wylie Boone that slid perfectly into place next to the front-page interview they'd run in yesterday's paper.

"Why if it isn't Tom Tiddings."

Tom looked up at the man standing next to the booth holding a mug of hot coffee.

"Why if it isn't Foster St.Vrain," Tom replied.

"I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"You're not interrupting anything," Tom said closing his laptop.

"Seems like rush hour at the Pretty Good."

Tom looked around. "You're right. It was almost empty when I got here." He looked at his watch. "But that was a couple of hours ago and its getting close to lunch time." Tom gestured to the vacant bench facing him. "I feel sort of guilty occupying a booth by myself. Care to join me?"

Foster took a seat facing Tom, set his mug on the table and rested both elbows on either side of it.

"You don't have a mug with your name on it?" Tom asked.

Foster laughed and tapped the mug. "I put so many chips in it that Sue finally confiscated it. Apparently, it would be bad for business if I cut my lip and bled to death. Now I get a new one each time. I sort of like it this way, to tell you the truth. It's like being under cover."

"Speaking of undercover, how is the private detective business?"

"I guess you could say it's more of a hobby than a business since I don't seem to make any money at it. Fortunately, I've got my pension. One of the benefits of being shot on the job was getting my pension early." He sipped his coffee, put down the cup and continued. "Of course, I hadn't planned on retiring early. Maybe that's why I fiddle around with private investigating. Makes me feel like I'm not some pensioner grazing the south forty. By the way, that was quite a story you ran on Wylie Boone yesterday."

"Thanks. Some wire services and Internet news feeds have even picked it up. That doesn't happen often."

"Wylie Boone is pretty famous."

"Some people prefer infamous."

"Picketwire's favorite son...of a bitch."

"Is that what you think?"

"I don't think that Wylie just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when he was run over."

"Wylie claims it was an accident."

Foster smiled in response.

"You think he's lying?"

"Wylie tell a lie? And to the press? That would hardly be, what's the word they use now? Transparent, that's it."

"Okay," Tom threw his hands up. "Maybe he was lying to us. Maybe he does think someone tried to kill him but for some reason he wants to hide it. That's what Gloria thinks."

"Gloria Herrera, the reporter that shared the byline with you?"

"Yes, she and I did the interview and wrote the story together," Tom said. "No, wait, since we're talking about transparency, if it wasn't for Gloria we wouldn't have gotten the interview and she also took the photo."

"Seems like this Gloria Herrera is a real go getter."

"I just hope I can keep her from getting up and going somewhere else. She really wants to do investigative journalism."

"So?"

"So? If I want to keep her I've got to come up with some opportunities other than covering the high school football game."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Well, in any case this Boone story should provide a great opportunity."

"But we've got to move fast and it's really only her and me and it's not like I know anything about how to do investigative journalism."

"It's just detective work."

"Easy for an ex-cop and a private eye to say," Tom replied. "I'm just afraid that we'll screw it up and not only hurt the paper's reputation but Gloria's career."

"Sounds like you could use some help," Foster said.

"Say, you wouldn't consider helping us out, would you?"

"Me?"

"Who better to help us with our investigative reporting than a private investigator. It's pretty much impossible for us to cover all the bases on story like this. Us, being mainly Gloria since I'm giving her the lead on this."

Foster sat back and drummed the fingers of his right hand on the Formica table top. Finally, he stopped, leaned forward, and answered. "I'll help, but I have three conditions."

"What are they?"

"First, that you don't pay me anything. I'm interested in who tried to kill Boone and was going to do some nosing around anyway."

"You don't want to be paid anything. That's an easy one to agree to. What's your second condition?"

"You have to agree to keep my name out of the paper."

"You don't want us to acknowledge your contribution?"

"Bad for business."

"Agreed - now what's your last condition?"

"That Gloria agrees."

"I don't see why she would object to having some help from a professional investigator so that shouldn't be a problem."

"She needs to agree not you, Tom."

"Right. Well, she's in the office so if you have time why don't we go over and ask her?"

"I think it would be better if I met with her by myself."

"You think that she'd be afraid to speak her own mind if I was there?"

"You are her boss, aren't you?"

"Boss? I think of us more as a team."

"But you sign her paycheck."

"Right, I see your point, but I have to tell you Gloria isn't afraid to speak her mind."

"Then she won't have any trouble speaking it to me. It's not negotiable, Tom. I need to know that she doesn't have a problem with me being involved. Being on the team, as you put it."

“Okay, but let me go to the office first and tell her our idea.”

“Your idea, Tom.”

“My idea. Then I’ll call you on your cell in about ten minutes. What’s your number, by the way?”

After Foster told him his number, Tom said. “I’ll invite you over and introduce you and explain my idea about your helping us out. Then I’ll find an excuse to leave. I’ll say that I’m going to get us some lunch, which,” he looked at his watch. “Will be the truth.”

“Let me get this straight, you were once Picketwire’s Chief of Police?” Gloria asked Foster after Tom had introduced them then left to pick up the lunch for all of them from the Pretty Good.

“I was.”

“And you think you can help us with our investigative reporting on Wylie Boone’s hit and run?”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether you want me to since Tom tells me that you’re the Picketwire Press’ investigative reporter.”

“He did?”

“Did I misunderstand him?”

“No, of course not. Just like he said, I’m the paper’s investigative reporter.”

“Well, I’m a private investigator. Got into it after I retired from the Police Department.”

“I didn’t even know there were any private investigators in Picketwire.”

“Guess I’ve done a good job of keeping it private,” Foster said, cracking a faint smile. “Seriously, it’s hard to work undercover if people know that you’re a PI.”

"I guess that's the bright side of no one knowing that I'm Picketwire Press' investigative reporter."

"There you go." Foster wanted to give her a light tap on the shoulder but decided to pull his punch in midair and converted his fist into an okay sign.

"Tom said you don't want your role to be made public."

"Correct."

"I guess I'll just refer to you as an anonymous source. Anonymous resource might be more accurate."

"I take that to mean you don't object to my being involved?"

Gloria shrugged. "I'm willing to give it a try. It's not like the Picketwire Press has a lot of resources to draw on when it comes to investigative journalism or any journalism for that matter."

"Alright, Ms. Herrera..."

"You can call me Gloria. I think we can be on a first name basis since we're going to be working together."

"Okay Gloria. It might be good if you can fill me in on what you've done so far."

She picked up a notebook from her desk, looked at it, and answered. "Well, there's the interview with Boone that we did on Tuesday and published Thursday, which was yesterday."

"Read it."

"Then I guess you know pretty much everything I do. I really didn't have any time since I had to work on the weekly police report that we publish on Friday."

"Read it as well."

She leaned toward him and said. "Can you believe it's one of the most popular things we publish in the paper?"

"I can believe it. If you don't find your name in it then you must be an honest person. Like reading the obituaries to see if you're still alive."

"Obituaries are popular as well. Fortunately, Virginia Robertson writes them. She says she enjoys it." Gloria gave a mock shiver. "But to get back to the weekly police

report you might not believe how much work goes into it. People just think we print what the different police departments in the County send us but...well let's just say there's more than a little editing that's required. The Picketwire Police Department gets their spelling and grammar correct, most of the time, and I can understand the other towns, because they only have one or two policemen, but what I can't understand is why the County Sheriff's Departments are so poorly written. It's a challenge to rewrite them so that they're intelligible for our readers. If we printed them the way they send them to us people would have serious doubts that they are professional law enforcement officers."

"Maybe they should."

Gloria looked at Foster to see if he was pulling her leg but his face was stonier than Washington's on Mount Rushmore. "Then I had some other stories I had to write and edit some others from our stringers - that's what we call people who write for us who aren't considered staff, which really means everyone but me and Tom. Then to top it off I had to take photos of the high school football game because the photographer we usually use was grounded."

"Grounded?"

"He's a Junior at Picketwire High and his parents grounded him for the weekend because of, get this, he was texting while driving...their tractor. So, I had to spend Friday evening doing about my least favorite thing, watching a football game."

"I prefer baseball myself."

"Me too!" Gloria exclaimed almost jumping out of her ergonomic office chair. "I was the short stop on my high school softball team. I was pretty good at double plays."

"I bet you were," Foster nodded.

"What positions did you play?"

"As I recall," Foster replied. "I was a catcher and also played third base and I spent some time playing center field. I even did a little pitching. Not all at the same time, of course. My illustrious career started with Picketwire's Pee Wee League when I was seven and ended while I was playing in the Over the Hill League."

"You don't play anymore?"

"Tragically, my illustrious career was cut short by an injury." He shifted in his seat. The straight back, hard oak chair made him appreciate his recliner even more. "Now that you've brought me up to speed what do you see as the next steps?"



"I was thinking that my next step would be to call the Aspen Police and the Colorado State Police."

"Patrol."

"What?"

"They call themselves the Colorado State Patrol not the State Police like in New Mexico. It was originally called the Colorado State Highway Courtesy Patrol. I can understand why they dropped highways from their name but not courtesy. It seems to me that if people were more courteous they be less inclined to engage in criminal behavior."

Figuring it might be impolite to laugh if Foster was indeed serious, which was impossible for her to tell, Gloria looked at the notebook in her lap. "What about the Colorado Bureau of Investigation? Did I get that name right?"

"That's right. Courtesy was never part of the CBI name."

She underlined the name with her pen. "Should I call them?"

"Sure. They'd likely be involved in something as big as this. I'll get you the name of someone I know who will talk to you."

"Great. Then I was thinking I should interview Sheriff Riggleman since Boone's ranch is in his jurisdiction."

Foster nodded in agreement.

Gloria made a check mark with her pen. "This will be my first interview with the Sheriff so I'm open to any suggestions you might have."

"I wouldn't tell him what you think about his police reports. He's a bit touchy."

"Was he the Sheriff when you were Police Chief?"

"No, he was still a Deputy Sheriff."

"So, you knew Riggleman even before he was Sheriff?"

"You could say we go back aways."

"In that case maybe he would be more open if I mention your name."

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Foster said.

"Why not?"

"You know that injury I was telling you about?"

"The one that ended your career as a ball player," Gloria replied.

"You left out illustrious."

"Sorry," Gloria laughed. "Illustrious career. What did Riggleman have to do with your injury?"

"He caused it."

Gloria's smile vanished. "You mean he was playing against you?"

"That's one way to put it - he shot me."

"Shot you!" Gloria gasped, dropping the pen in her hand. "With a bullet?"

"It wasn't with a baseball."

## **INTO THIN AIR**

Harry's hip hurt. It had been hurting for the last twenty minutes or so but he chose to ignore it and even now he just shifted his butt, blaming it on the seat that he'd worn down to nothing after years of driving. Maybe he should get a cushion. It would be cheaper than a new hip. But it was easy to turn his attention away from his body aches to the scenery. He had been going up for some time. Mountain driving was different than prairie driving. On a prairie when you went up you knew you'd be going back down pretty damn soon but in a mountain you keep going up. Then there was the constant turning that you had to do in the mountains. You couldn't just let two fingers rest on the steering wheel making minute, unconscious adjustments, you had to have both hands on the wheel and be vigilant. That made it almost torture because you had to keep your eye on the road when you were driving through such distracting scenery where a breathtaking view was around every bend. It wasn't made any easier by not knowing exactly where he was going. He'd taken Highway 12 from La Veta, winding his way up into the mountains until he reached Cuchara, a small town nestled like a spoon in the mountains behind the twin Spanish Peaks. At the gas station he'd been able to get directions to where she lived. A GPS was worthless without an address and, besides, there was no cell service and all Howdy had told him was that there was a Pam

Martindale living outside Cuchara and he was pretty sure it was her.

Pam Martindale, the prettiest girl in their high school. Not that they actually had a vote. Not that they actually needed to. Pam the cheerleader, Homecoming Queen,

Class Secretary, an editor of the yearbook, etc., etc., as well as the lead in the senior class play written by none other than Howdy Hanks. Pam, the girl that every guy wanted to ask out if they only had the guts. Harry shook his head. He'd been one of those guys. It wasn't just a lack of courage, though, it was just being realistic. A chunky guy with thick glasses, whose only team sport was debate didn't stand a chance. Not that he and Pam weren't acquainted. They'd gone to the same grade school and he remembered walking her home more than once. Then puberty hit and she was transformed into a swan while he turned into a waddling duck. Even in Picketwire one couldn't escape the teenage caste system and by the time they were in high school they moved in different circles, Pam's being as close to the center of the social solar system as you could get while Harry was orbiting somewhere in the vicinity of Pluto. It was true that she would smile and say hello when they passed in the hallways but Harry saw that as at best a nod to the memory of a long lost childhood. He would smile back but for all his ability in debate he could hardly put two words together in response.

Just thinking about it made Harry uncomfortable. Would he revert to the tongue-tied teenager or, even worse, be a blabbing moron? Of course, it had been more than forty years. They probably wouldn't even recognize each other. Well, she would probably recognize him because he was still chunky and wore thick glasses. But what would she look like now? He'd been tempted to search for his old Picketwire High senior yearbook and look at her picture. Pictures, would be more accurate, because as he recalled, there were plenty. The yearbook would have been a hell of a lot thinner without her. Harry decided not to look for it. Why make a big deal after all this time?

He headed south, climbing to almost 10,000 feet before crossing over Cuchara Pass and a few miles later turned left off Highway 12 and onto an unpaved county road. The road skirted the southern slopes of the Spanish Peaks. Pine and spruce trees covered the sides of the mountain up to their gray caps of granite. Thirty or so years ago he had climbed the western peak with some friends. As he'd finally neared the top where his two, more fit companions were waiting his foot had slipped on the scree sending him in a skid so that for a terrifying moment, he believed he'd be plummeting off the edge of the mountain into thin air. Now, as he looked at it through the window in the sunlight against a cloudless, blue sky he thought there could be a lot worse ways to go. After a half hour he reached an open gate. There was no sign, but the man at the gas station had told him that she was at the end of the county road. He could see a house in the distance so he continued through the gate onto a single track drive bordered by fireweed that looped through a meadow speckled with lupine. The house was partly obscured by a stand of Aspen and facing east so he could only see the back of it. At this altitude it had quite a view with the Spanish Peaks to the north and to the east a vista of the high plains. When he got closer he could see that it was a log house with a long covered porch. Off to the side was a large metal pole barn. A pick up truck was parked in front so someone was home and when he got within fifty yards he noticed a person sitting on the steps. He parked next to the pick up and a slender woman in blue jeans and a red checked

shirt but no hat stood up. He got out of his car. His hip still hurt a bit but at least he wasn't dizzy from the altitude and could walk a straight line toward her.

"I was wondering who would be driving up the road and going through the possibilities as I watched, including that whoever was in the car was lost, which seemed to be the best possibility. It never entered my mind that it would be you, Harry." There was some gray in her hair and some lines on her face, but Pam's eyes were as blue as ever.

Harry told her that Howdy Hanks had asked him to see her. "Howdy thinks you have some information that will help him finish his new play. He didn't think you would want to talk to him but, for some reason, you might be willing to tell me."

Pam listened patiently to Harry as he stumbled through the explanation for his visit. Then, she asked Harry if he cared for a glass of fresh spring water. After they he was settled into adirondack chairs on her porch with a glass of water she said. "I always hoped we might meet up again, Harry."

"Really?"

"You're surprised?"

Yes," he sure as hell was. "I mean, we knew each other when we were kids but by the time we got to high school we had sort of drifted away."

"Sort of drifted," Pam repeated the words. "I was definitely adrift back then, no sort of about it." What was she getting at Harry wondered but before he could think of how to ask her or, even if he should, Pam said, "Come, I want to show you something."

Harry followed her to the pole barn. She slid the barn door back with a strength that surprised him. Inside, there was an even bigger surprise: A half dozen or so large metal, abstract sculptures as well as a number of smaller ones. On one side of the barn there was a long workbench with tools hung above it. A welder's mask rested on the near end. Next to it was a welding torch connected to an acetylene tank that stood on the concrete floor.

"Who's the sculptor?" He asked, thinking that it must be a husband or lover.

Instead of answering she walked over to the workbench and put the welder's mask on.

"You? I mean I never thought..."

She pulled off the mask and said. "You aren't the only one, including me."

"So this is what you've been up to all this time?"

"No. It took awhile but this is what I love doing."

"I'm no expert but I'd say you're pretty darn good," Harry said. "I mean, you give a new meaning to heavy metal. Do you sell any?"

"Enough to support myself," she turned around and looked out the barn entrance toward the house. "And this place as well as a loft in Denver where I live when the snow gets too deep up here."

"But I Googled your name before I came out here and nothing came up."

"That's because I go by another name as a sculptor."

"Like a stage name or a pen name?"

"Yes, but since I'm not acting or writing I guess you'd call it an alias."

"But you don't want people to know who you really are?"

"Not who I really am but who I was. I have an artists bio using my alias and it's a true one as far as it goes."

"So what is this alias of yours?"

"You promise not to tell anyone?" Pam asked, then added. "No, you don't have to promise, Harry. I trust you. I really do trust you." She put the mask on the table and leaned against it. "Don't laugh, but Its Dale Martin. I could have come up with a name that would be harder to decipher but I figured no one's going to believe that the Pam Martindale they once knew would be a metal sculptor."

"Judging from my reaction I'd say you're right."

They walked back to the porch. Pam brought out a bottle of pinot noir and two glasses. After pouring both of them a glass she asked Harry. "What does Howdy want to know?"

"The real reason you left Picketwire. Why you just vanished into thin air right after graduation."

"Howdy wants me to answer that so he can finish this play of his?"

Harry nodded his head.

"Why do you think I left?"

Harry twiddled with the stem of the wine glass. "Well, you know..."

"Because I was pregnant?"

"That's what some people thought."

"Some people?"

"A lot of people."

"Including you?" She asked, then reached over and touched his right hand. "Don't answer that, Harry. It's not fair to ask you. I don't blame anyone for thinking that it was because I was pregnant. It would make a lot of sense. I suppose they also thought it was Wylie who was the father?"

"You two were going steady."

"Going steady," she laughed and took a sip of wine. "There was nothing steady about it. Anyway, I guess Howdy doesn't believe that's the reason or the only reason or he wouldn't have sent you to ask me. Why does he want to know? Does this play have something to do with me?"

"Howdy showed it to me and there is a girl, a senior in high school, who plays the lead in a play but it's not about the play but what the play triggers."

"Sounds like what happened forty years ago because Howdy sure pulled the trigger back then."

"You know, a lot of people never understood why you agreed to play the lead. I mean, that character..."

"Belle," she said. "Belle Bent."

"Right. It was a shock to a lot of people to see you up there saying those words, acting that way. You were so convincing it was hard for many of them to believe you were just acting. Anyway, some people wondered why you'd ever agreed to do it."

"Yes, why did I agree?" She repeated the question with just a trace of a smile on her lips. "When Howdy asked me he said he'd written the part just for me. That I was the only person who could play it. When I read it I told him that for the life of me I couldn't understand why he said that he'd written it for me." She leaned toward Harry and said. "You know what he told me?"

Harry shook his head.

“He said if I did it up on stage I’d understand.”

“And?”

“He was right. I realized that up until then I had been looking at myself through a telescope, like the one over there.” She nodded toward the large telescope on a stand at the far end of the porch. “I could see this person who was supposed to be me but she was so far away, so distant. I remember back then looking at photos of myself and thinking that was all I was: Someone posing. You know, what’s funny is that I was one of the editors of the yearbook.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Right, and a yearbook’s mainly pictures of people.”

“Except me. There isn’t one photo of me in the yearbook. Just my name listed as not pictured.”

“I remember. I remember thinking that you had to have done it on purpose,” Pam said, then looked at him. “Why didn’t you want your photo in the yearbook?”

“I guess I just didn’t want to be remembered that way.” Harry answered then quickly changing the subject he pointed at the telescope. “You’ve got some view from up here in the mountains. You must be able to see all the way to Kansas with that telescope.”

“Take a look.”

He got up and walked over to the telescope. Pam followed him. The telescope was pointed slightly down, toward the distant plains. He looked through the eyepiece. “Why, hell, Pam, that’s Picketwire you’ve got it aimed at.”

“This is as close as I get to it,” she said, pushing the barrel of the telescope toward the sky. “When it gets dark we can look at the stars.”

“Really, you want me to stay and look at the stars with you?”

She pinched his arm. “Actually, Harry, I want you to stay but not to just look at the stars.” She let her hand slide down his arm. “And if you stay the night I’ll answer Howdy’s question.”

“To hell with Howdy,” Harry answered with a grin almost as wide as his face.

## CHAPTER 10

## GHOST CAMP

"I didn't expect it to be like this," Bruce said after they sat down on the front steps of a partially collapsed building in the center of the abandoned internment camp. They hadn't spoken more than a half dozen words since they passed through the break in the fence.

"What did you expect?" Jane asked. She could have directed the question at herself as much as Bruce.

"I thought we'd just find some crumbling foundations, piles of bricks and boards here and there but I certainly didn't think that there would be anything still standing. It's like a ghost town."

"It was an internment camp, not a town."

"So, it's a ghost camp."

"Funny you say that because I can't shake this feeling that we're not alone." Jane looked around. There were at least half a dozen buildings standing between swaths of sage brush and rubble. They were weather beaten and windowless and their tin roofs were rusted and battered by years of wind, snow and hail. "Not that I'm scared," she said looking at him. "And I don't believe in ghosts."

"What about the Holy Ghost?"

"I mean ghost as in a dead person who's come back to scare people," she replied, jabbing him in the side with her left elbow.

"Gee and I was hoping to practice my ghost busting," Bruce replied, standing up and tucking the thumbs of under the belt of his jeans. "Guess I'll have to try bronco busting instead. Of course, first I'll have to learn how to ride a horse."

Jane got up and stood beside him. "I can ask my Dad to teach you. He taught me and my brothers when we were kids."

"I can go by Bruce the Kid."

"I think Bruce the kidder would be more appropriate," Jane said then did a three hundred and sixty degree turn and added. "You know I really do get this feeling that we're not alone."

"Maybe we should leave. It could be a security guard, and we are trespassers."



"If it's a security guard they aren't doing a very good job by not showing themselves. After all, it's not like we look as if we'd put up a fight if they showed themselves and told us to leave."

"Maybe it's a ghost guard."

Instead of laughing, Jane gave Bruce her *that's enough so cut it out* look that she'd deployed on more than one occasion during their marriage.

"Sorry," he said, quickly. "I don't mean to be disrespectful."

"It wasn't disrespect it was just a bad pun."

They lapsed into silence again. Jane remembered the words from Psalm 137 that recounted the Jew's exile and captivity in Babylon *By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion*. But, then, instead of meditating on a story from the Bible her mind shifted unexpectedly to the Wizard of Oz. She pictured Dorothy, only she looked like Jane not Judy Garland and Oz wasn't emerald green but prairie brown and it wasn't Kansas that Dorothy wanted to return to it was California and the Wicked Witch and the Wizard were....

"What are you thinking?" Bruce asked, bringing her runaway thoughts to a sudden halt.

"Just feeling sad but also curious," she answered, deciding that it was a whole lot easier to tell Bruce what she was feeling than what she had been thinking.

"Sadness I get, but why curious? I would be angry. That's what I felt when I saw Dachau - sad but angry."

"When did you go to Dachau?"

"Before I met you. I was in Munich on business and it's near there. I had been in Munich several days working on a deal with colleagues in our German office and had an afternoon before I flew back to New York the next morning. Dachau is right outside Munich so I decided to see it. I went there because I was curious about what a Nazi concentration camp, a death camp, was like. My family didn't talk about the holocaust except to say that we were lucky since none of our relatives were killed. At least none that they knew about. So, even though I'm Jewish, I didn't have a personal connection and it was all abstract to me. As soon as I entered the camp it wasn't abstract anymore and I wasn't curious, I was angry. When I left Dachau, I changed my flight back to New York from the next morning to that night. I wanted to get out of Germany as fast as possible. Of course, I got over the anger and I went back. I mean back to Germany, not Dachau. A long way of saying that I understand that you're feeling sad but what are you curious about?"

“Curious as to why they were sent to this camp. Why was it such a secret even now, after all these years? You know, even my parents don’t know what happened here? I’ve visited the place where Camp Amache was and there’s a memorial there but we never knew about this place. If people did know about it they never talked about it”

“But your grandparents did. You said they mentioned that there was another camp.”

“That’s true, but I was too young to ask them if they knew anything else and, like I told you, when I was older and asked my parents they said that my grandparents wouldn’t talk about it other than say that they were lucky they hadn’t been put in camps. My Mom and Dad said that my grandparents and other Japanese Americans around here were probably afraid that if they started asking questions their patriotism would have been questioned and they’d have ended up in a camp themselves. In any case, if they did discover more about this camp they kept it to themselves. Then, after the war ended and the camps were closed I think people just wanted to forget and put it behind them.”

“I wonder what people around here would have done if they’d rounded up their Japanese American neighbors like your grandparents, and thrown them in the camps.”

“I imagine people were relieved that they didn’t have to answer that question.”

“Did you see that?” Bruce exclaimed.

“What?”

“That cloud of dust over there,” he pointed toward the west. “It looks like somebody is driving away and fast.”

Jane stood beside Bruce and looked, cupping her right hand to her forehead since even her sunglasses couldn’t block out the full glare of the sun in the cloudless sky. “You’re right. I can’t tell if it’s a car or truck.”

“I guess you were right, we weren’t alone.”

“Where do you think they were?”

“They must have been in that last building close to the fence,” Bruce replied. “And their vehicle was hidden behind it. They were able to drive out through that opening with the watch tower beside it. It’s probably the entrance to the camp.”

“Why would they take off like that?”

“They’re probably trespassing just like us.”

"If that's the case, why would they run away from other trespassers?"

Bruce shrugged. "Maybe they didn't want to stick around to see if we would forgive their trespassing if they forgave ours."

Jane poked Bruce with her elbow again. "No, seriously, I wonder why they were in that building."

"There's one way to find out."

"You mean go over and look inside?"

"You said you were curious, didn't you? You know there can't be ghosts inside because you don't believe in them."

Unlike the other buildings that were still standing the door to this one was not only attached it was closed. Bruce twisted the rusted knob and gave it a shove. It swung open and he walked inside. "Now this is strange, truly strange," Bruce said.

"What do you mean?" Jane asked, still standing outside.

He poked at several cans on the floor. "These look like cans of spray paint." He held one up. "This is red spray paint."

"You think they're artists?"

"Artists who use spray paint? If they were they must have taken whatever they were painting with them because there's nothing in here."

"But why would they use this building to paint in?"

"Beats me," Bruce said with a shrug. "Although I knew an artist in New York who used a fire escape as her studio. Of course, she didn't have much choice since she was sharing a one bedroom apartment on the Lower Eastside with three other people. And, in case you're wondering, I wasn't one of them and I never spent the night there including on the fire escape. We were just friends..."

"If you keep on I will start wondering."

"Got it."

"Maybe they weren't artists but vandals who were going to spray graffiti all over."

"That would explain why they ran away, but we didn't see spray paint on the outside of any of the buildings while we were walking through the camp."

"This can feels like it's empty to me," Bruce said. "Somebody was spraying something with it. They could have left something behind outside." He handed her the can and walked out the door.

Jane held the can. It felt empty like Bruce said. She picked up the other two can on the floor. They were both red. She decided to put the cans in her small backpack rather than leave them there for future use in case the vandals came back.

"I know what they were spray painting," Bruce shouted from outside.

"What?" Jane yelled back and then hurried out the door. Bruce was standing looking at the building from the other side.

"They spray painted graffiti all over this wall. We couldn't see it because it faces the entrance to the camp."

"Doesn't it look like the pictographs we saw earlier?" Bruce asked after Jane joined him in looking at what had been painted boldly in red across the wall.

"Those aren't pictographs," she replied without hesitation.

"What is it, then?"

"It's Japanese."

"You're sure?"

"I think I would know what Japanese writing look like."

"So what does it say?"

Jane shook her head as she studied the red markings. They were more like angry slash marks than the delicate calligraphy she was used to seeing. "I don't know. I can speak some Japanese, but I never learned how to read it."

Bruce looked at her in astonishment. "You're telling me that you can read Greek and Hebrew but not Japanese, which is your ancestral tongue?"

"Says the Jew who can't read Hebrew."

"Good thing we both know English," Bruce said. "Hey, what about your parents? We can take pictures of it and show them."

"They can't read Japanese either, other than a few characters. The only person I know in our family who can read Japanese is my Dad's older brother, Uncle Joji. You've never met him."

"Does he live around here?"

"He lives in my grandparent's old house. When my grandfather died my grandmother moved in with us and their farm was divided between my Dad, Uncle Joji and my two aunts. Since my Dad already had a farm and a house, and my aunts live out of state, the land Uncle Joji inherited included my grandparent's house. My Dad bought his sister's land and added it to his own, but Uncle Joji still owns his land even though from what I've heard he's not much of a farmer."

"Why haven't I met this Uncle Joji?"

"I hardly know him, to tell you the truth. He went to Japan and lived there for a number of years. That's where he learned to speak and write Japanese. I only saw him as a kid when he came back to visit. He stayed with my grandparents when he was visiting here and didn't come back for good until my grandfather died and left him the house on the condition that my grandmother could continue living there. She decided to move in with us instead. My Mom became the oldest daughter by default when my aunts moved away. Fortunately, my grandmother and Mom really got along. Uncle Joji had the house to himself and he's lived there ever since. The last time I saw him was at my grandmother's funeral and that was almost ten years ago."

"Since you don't really know your uncle, maybe your Dad could ask him what this means."

Jane shook her head. "My Dad, along with my aunts, had some sort of falling out with Uncle Joji after my grandfather died and since my grandmother's death they've pretty much kept their distance so it wouldn't be a good idea to ask my Dad."

"Since no one is going to ask your Uncle Joji we'll have to see if there's someone else who can translate it," Bruce said. "There might be someone at Picketwire College."

"That won't be necessary because I'm going to ask him," Jane said with a firmness that surprised Bruce. "I said it wasn't a good idea to ask my Dad, not that I shouldn't ask Uncle Joji."

"I thought you said you didn't really know him."

"Now's my chance."

**HERE WE ARE**

“You’ve heard about tiny houses, Bapa?” Desmond asked when his father called for a status report on repositioning Happy Trails. Fortunately, Desmond had just watched a television show about tiny houses that very morning while channel surfing through the seemingly endless number of reality TV programs on people buying, fixing up and selling houses in hopes of coming up with ideas to turn around Happy Trails.

“Of course, son.” His father’s voice boomed from the cellphone that Desmond had placed on his desk. He was much more concerned about going deaf from holding it to his ear every time he spoke with his father than the impact on his brain from any electromagnetic waves it was emitting. “They are very small homes. If we lived in the village where our family comes from in Gujarat we would be forced to live in a very tiny house. Just think of all of us in just one room. Fortunately, in America we live in a big house where everyone even has their own bedroom.”

“Not those kind of tiny houses,” Desmond replied. He knew those houses from the time his parents took the family on a trip to India when he was a teenager and they visited their ancestral village. “These are custom built and many of them are on wheels. They’re very popular. People consider them innovative. One of the ideas I’m thinking of is re-inventing Happy Trails as a place for tiny houses.”

“How’s that any different than the trailer park it already is?”

“A tiny house is no more like a house trailer than a Tesla is an Oldsmobile. They’re both cars, have four wheels and move but while Tesla’s are innovative, high tech and cool and sell like hot cakes they stopped making Oldsmobiles because no one would buy them.”

“Not me. I would still buy one. I loved our Oldsmobile 98.”

“I hated it. It was like riding in a huge Lazy Boy recliner on wheels.”

“What’s wrong with being big and comfortable?”

“I don’t want to argue with you, Bapa,” Desmond sighed. “You told me you wanted me to come up with innovative ideas to turn Happy Trails around and this is one of them. I probably shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

“No, my son, I’m glad you feel that you can run ideas by me.”

Just like running into a brick wall, Desmond wanted to say but he just rolled his eyes. For once, he was glad that his Dad refused to use Skype and couldn’t see the expression on his face. “Anyway, I have been asked by the President of the Chamber of Commerce to help them with an important project they are sponsoring. It’s to showcase local entrepreneurship and innovation.”

“Really?” His father seemed genuinely interested. “What is this important project.”

“I don’t know the details but Sue Cohen, the President, said it was sort of like TED X.”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“TED X isn’t a person. It stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design Expo. They have these events where people give talks about innovative ideas. They’re called TED Talks.

“That’s what we do in our Rotary Club. We have someone come in at every meeting and give a talk. If they have a Rotary in Picketwire you should join. I can sponsor you.”

Desmond wanted to say that it wasn’t the same thing but, then, his father would have reminded him that he’d never been to a Rotary so how did he know? “I’ll see if they have one, Bapa. Look, I have a lunch meeting with the President of the Chamber of Commerce about the special project, so I need to go now.”

After hanging up, Desmond stuffed his cellphone into the front pocket of his khakis and got into his nondescript rental car, whose make and model he’d be hard pressed to remember if he was ever asked. As he pulled out of Happy Trails he tried to imagine what it would look like with rows of tiny houses but what he imagined wasn’t all that different than the tiny house trailers that were already there. That made him wonder how the people who lived in tiny houses would be different than the people who lived in the tiny trailers? He had to admit that he didn’t know much of anything about Happy Trails except what he could see in its financial records. Other than who paid rent on time, he had no idea as to who lived in Happy Trails or why. If he was going to engage in an innovative turn around that would change Happy Trails into something else it would help to know what it was now.

When Desmond entered the Pretty Good he spotted Sue right away. She was sitting in the center booth in the front next to the big plate glass windows. This was the first time he would have lunch inside the Pretty Good. He’d had breakfast there but every time he had gone there for lunch it was always full with a line waiting for a table or a seat at the counter.

Sue waved at him and he walked through the crowded diner feeling like an honored guest who had been invited to sit at the head table. This was an opportunity. Desmond knew that being seen eating with the President of the Chamber of Commerce was bound to open doors for a newcomer like himself. He also hoped that as a successful local businessperson she would provide some useful advice, such as some unobtrusive ways to find out more about the current residents of Happy Trails. As soon as he sat down opposite her she handed him a menu.

“Should we wait for Mister Best?” Desmond asked as he took the menu.

“No, Rich will be late as usual,” Sue replied matter of factly. “So, we can go ahead an order. It’s on me, by the way.”

“It is very kind of you to invite me to lunch, Ms. Cohen...”

“Please, just call me Sue,” she answered, flashing him a smile that was meant to put him at ease.

“Sue,” he repeated. “And you must call me Desmond.”

“I already did.”

“That’s right.” His embarrassment was quickly followed by the happiness at being on a first name basis with the President of the Chamber of Commerce as well as the owner of such an obviously successful business.

“By the way, in case you haven’t noticed, pretty much everyone goes by their first name around here.”

“What if you forget their first name?”

“In that case you probably wouldn’t remember their last name either so some variation on howdy is considered acceptable. Chances are they’ll be relieved, because if you don’t remember their first name they’ve probably forgotten yours as well.”

“That is very helpful advice for a newcomer like me,” Desmond said, hoping that those he had previously addressed by their last names were not offended.

“The advice comes with your membership in the Chamber. The free lunch, however, is on me for agreeing to help us with our special project.”

“I am honored that you think I might be helpful,” Desmond said. “When you invited me to this lunch meeting you said the project was like TED X? I am a big fan of TED X and TED Talks.”

“Sort of like,” Sue answered then pushing the menu closer to Desmond, added. “Rich will fill you in when he gets here so, like I said, you might want to order since you may not get a chance once he’s here.”

“I am really looking forward to lunch,” Desmond said picking up the menu. “Tell me...Sue, I have tried to have lunch here before and it is always full. Is there a way to make a reservation?”



"We don't have reservations but you can become a member of our lunch club."

"Lunch club?"

"Yeah, if you join you get priority seating."

"And in return you are able to gather information on your customers, which can be very valuable? He made a mental note. Perhaps he would be able to get valuable information on the those who currently rented spaces at Happy Trails by offering some sort of membership coupled with inexpensive perks.

"Actually, we don't ask for any information other than their name. Their last name as well, to avoid any confusion. If you can believe it, there are actually two Jerry Jeffs and Wanda Maes who are members, although you would be the first Desmond if you want to join."

"I would be happy to sign up," Desmond answered.

"Done."

"But I didn't sign anything."

"You don't need to. I know your name."

"If I might ask, Sue, since you do not use the membership as a way to collect information on your customers, what methods do you use?"

"We talk with them."

"You talk to them? You mean you ask them questions like in a survey?"

"With them not to them. Not a survey. Everyone who works here engages in real conversations rather than *I'm Sue and I'll be your server.*"

I see," Desmond nodded. "That is a secret to your success."

"It isn't a secret, Desmond."

"Got it," Desmond replied, hiding his disappointment that Sue wasn't sharing a business secret.

"Now that you've gotten me to divulge one of my non-secrets is there something on the menu that catches your eye?"

"I have heard you have very good chili. Which one would you recommend? One that is hot and spicy."

"If you like really hot and spicy than try the Purgatory Chili," Sue answered. "It may be hot as hell but when you're finished you 'll feel like you're in heaven."

"Sounds good. You know," he added. "I don't understand this belief that purgatory is an actual place that exists between heaven and hell."

"If you had lived in LA like me you might."

"You lived in Los Angeles?"

"For almost twenty years. That's where I got into the restaurant business. I went from waitress, to cook, to chef, to co-owner, to sole owner, to owner of several more, all of them successful by the way... and then I left and came here."

"You moved here from LA?"

"I'm pretty sure this is where here is."

"Of course," he replied, hoping that his dark complexion would hide any blush. "I just meant that it seems like a big move."

"At the time it just seemed like a good move." Sue looked out the plate glass window at the sleepy street, and added. "Still does."

There must be something about Picketwire that he had missed so far, Desmond thought. How else to explain why a successful business woman like Sue Cohen would move here from LA to open her next restaurant. Not wanting to expose his ignorance by asking her directly he tried an oblique approach. "After LA you must have found it easy to open your next restaurant here."

"No, Desmond," Sue shook her head and looked at him with dead seriousness. "It was the hardest thing I've ever done beginning with the fact that the last thing I wanted to do when I left LA was to own or even work in another restaurant."

"Yet here we are in your own cafe," Desmond observed.

"Yes, here we are," Sue answered. "And, speaking of being here, Rich has just arrived."

## CHAPTER 11

### SISTER M'S TAKES A SHOT

Instead of fingering a bead Sister M's shot baskets while saying the Rosary. After each Hail Mary she launched the ball toward the basket, working her way clockwise in an arc from the right corner to the left as if she was following a hardwood Stations of the Cross. Basketball, unlike prayer, came easily to Sister M's. She had been playing the game since she was in grade school and had been a starting guard her senior year at Saint Joan of Arc Catholic High School. However, after college, where she played in an intramural league, she hadn't stepped onto a court until she'd arrived at Our Lady of Lost Souls and discovered that it had an indoor gym that had been part of the prison. The gym had been added in the nineteen thirties as an alternative to the prison yard where walking in circles and fighting had been the only form of exercise. The theory was that good, clean sports like basketball and volleyball would help in the convict's rehabilitation by instilling in them the hygienic values of fair play and teamwork. The reality had been gladiatorial combat between teams composed of rival prison gangs. Still, it was better to have an elbow in the ribs than a shiv in the belly.

Now the space was used primarily for activities like yoga, tai chi and, even, square dancing. The latter was called by Sister Rosalie with Sister Wendy on the fiddle. Although there was the occasional game of volleyball, Sister M's was the only one who used it to shoot baskets or, as she jokingly called it, engaging in "nun on nones". Sister M's needed this bit of round ball meditation. Soon Tony would be delivering several undocumented immigrants and she would have to be on her toes. She released a Hail Mary from her lips and took a shot from the top of the key. Watching it swoosh through the net she heard her name being called.

"They're here," Sister Cecilia, yelled from the open doorway. She was dressed in the century old nun's habit that she wore when she led tours.

"Who?"

"You know, our guests."

"They're early," Sister M's answered as she picked up the basketball and tucked it under her left arm. "The Purple Sage tour group isn't supposed to arrive for several more hours.

"It's not the whole tour group that is here, just those who are staying with us. You know, that we're giving sanctuary to."

"What did Tony do with the rest?" The plan was for this to be seen as a regular stop on the Purple Sage tour so it wouldn't raise any suspicions.

"I guess they're still with Tony. Our guests came in the back of a pickup truck not in the Purple Sage tour bus. A young lady brought them. Sister Rachel has taken them to the guest rooms that we have set aside for them. We thought it was best that they

get out of sight in case they were being followed.” Nothing was more out of sight than the area they had designated the Sanctuary Wing since it had once been the maximum-security cellblock.

“Is the young lady who brought them still at the Welcome Center?”

“No, I’m right here and I’m not a young lady! That’s Clementine, the character I was playing,” Zelda blurted as she rushed past Sister Cecilia and stepped out onto the court. “That’s why I’m wearing this costume.”

“I’m Sister Mary Margaret,” Sister M’s replied, calmly as she looked at the young woman dressed in a dress right out of the Victorian era and wearing high topped, buttoned shoes that were scuffed and coated with dust.

“My name is Zelda Zenn. Actually that’s my stage name. My real name is Mary Ann Smithers, but I prefer Zelda.” Without pausing for Sister M’s to reply, Zelda dived right into recounting her story. “I was on the back of the train car waiting to make my entrance as Clementine who’s a character in the skit I was performing in for the Purple Rose tour. She’s the female lead...”

Sister M’s held up her right hand to and Zelda, to her surprise, stopped. After thanking Sister Cecilia who was been standing just inside the door looking like a penguin stranded on an iceberg Sister M’s turned to Zelda and said. “If you could just tell me what happened when you were on the back of the train?”

Without missing a beat Zelda picked up where she left off. “As I was saying, in the skit I was supposed to run into the car screaming that there were train robbers chasing us and Clem, that’s the name of the character who’s the conductor, was supposed to pick up a rifle and run back onto the rear platform and then there would be the sound of gunfire and horses whinnying and then Clem would come back in and say that he’d driven them off. That’s when I was supposed to throw my arms around him and call him a hero. Of course there wasn’t supposed to be anyone actually chasing us and the gun wasn’t real and the sound of shooting and horses was just a recording. But, instead, a whole of gang of guys on horses appeared out of nowhere and were chasing us yelling for us to stop. Stop the train they meant. I took off running right through the car and then the next car and then the train stopped and I jumped off and ran for the bushes by the tracks. That’s when I realized that three people on the Purple Sage Tour were right behind me. We hid behind the bushes as a couple of the guys on horses trotted by going toward the train engine. I could see that they were wearing badges and had patches on the arm of their shirt that said Sheriff’s Posse. That’s when I turned to the three people who followed me and told them that we didn’t need to hide because it was the Sheriff not train robbers. But then Gary...”

“Guillermo,” Sister M’s interjected. “Guillermo is one of the three guests we were expecting.”

"He just told me his name was Gary. I like Guillermo better, actually. Anyway, he told me that they couldn't because they were the people the Sheriff was after and if they were caught they'd be thrown in jail and deported. Then the girl, Alice..."

"Allesandra," Sister M's said. "That's her real name."

"She definitely said her name was Alice."

"They've all taken on false identities. Sort of like you took the name Zelda."

"Zelda Zenn is not fake, it's a stage name. There's a difference."

"Sorry," Sister M's said, although she wasn't sure what the difference was.

"Anyway, like I was saying, Alice or whatever he name is, asked me to wait at least a few minutes to give them time to get a head start. You know, so that they could try and get away. She wasn't just asking, she was begging and with tears, real tears, Sister. It was no act."

"Then the other guy, he called himself Art, although from what you just told me that's not his real name."

"It's Andres," Sister M's said."

"Whatever," Zelda shrugged, the puffed up shoulders of her dress rising as if she were lifting barbells. "Art-Andres said that they could tie me up and gag me so I wouldn't be arrested for helping them. Well, I told him they didn't need to do that because I was going with them."

"And why did you decide to help them, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I don't know exactly. Everything happened so fast. Maybe I always thought of myself as an outlaw and this was my chance to be one." Zelda said, deciding to leave out that Guillermo was also a hunk.

Sister M's nodded and asked. "And they agreed?"

"Agreed, of course they did. Who wouldn't? Guillermo did say that if they got caught they'd tell the Sheriff that they had kidnapped me so I wouldn't be arrested as an accomplice. I thought that was really sweet of him. Then, I asked them where they were going and he said they needed to get here since it was a safe place. That's when I understood that they were the three members of the tour that Tony Medrano told me about who were going to stay here at the prison I mean convent but that that they weren't going to be on any spiritual retreat but hiding out..."

Sister M's interrupted. "We're providing a sanctuary. It's a safe place to stay."

"Isn't that the same thing as a hideout?"

"No exactly," Sister M's answered although she would have been hard pressed to explain the difference.

"I think hiding out in a prison is sort of a neat plot twist."

"We're a convent now."

"Even neater."

Sister M's thought it better to drop the subject and said. "Please, continue with your story."

"So we snuck off though the brush." Zelda bent over to illustrate. "We didn't have to go far before we came across a dirt road. The others sort of looked at me like I was supposed to know which way to go from there. Of course, I didn't have a clue, where the road went. Believe you me, Sister, things were looking desperate," Zelda looked at Sister M's to make sure that she was impressed with how serious, not to mention melodramatic, the situation was.

After Sister M's nodded Zelda continued. "But just then, out of the blue, a pickup truck came barreling down the road and stopped right in front of us. It turned out that the kid driving the pickup recognized me even in this get up. He also goes to Picketwire High. Anyway, Donny, that's his real name by the way, agreed to drive us here."

"Did you tell Donny what happened?"

"I just told him that we were on the train as part of the Purple Sage Tour and I was giving a performance, which was why I was in this outfit, and that the train broke down and the three people with me were on the tour and needed to get here so I volunteered to take them."

"And he believed you?" Sister M's asked.

"I am an actress," Zelda declared. "Besides, I told him that if he drove us here I'd go out with him."

"Really?" Sister M's said more out of marvel than as a question.

"Yes really," Zelda answered. "I don't expect that you'd know much about this kind of stuff, Sister, so you'll just have to take my word for it when I tell you it's a really

big deal for a guy to get a chance to go out with me. Donny looked like he'd died and gone to heaven. Sorry, I guess I shouldn't be using the word heaven that way."

"You don't have to apologize. I'm just sorry that you were put in a position where you felt you had to lie to Donny."

"It wasn't lying, it was acting. I was just playing a part. Besides, I'm pretty sure that Donny wants to go out with Zelda Zenn not Mary Ann Smithers."

"Well, Mary Ann, I mean Zelda, I just want to tell you how much we appreciate what you've done. You put yourself at risk to help people you didn't know."

"Do I have to hide out here as well?"

"We provide sanctuary not a hideout but no, you don't."

"But what if the Sheriff finds out I helped them escape?"

"Sheriff Rigglesman didn't find any illegal immigrants on board the train and the obvious reason as to why you and three members of the tour left is that you thought he and his gang were train robbers since he didn't identify himself as the Sheriff. There's no way he can prove that the others who left were illegal immigrants or that you helped them. This was just a publicity stunt by him. Rigglesman formed this posse of his claiming that it will protect the County from what he calls an alien invasion. What he did by stopping the train is what's alien. It was not only outside the law he's supposed to be enforcing but it put people like yourself in danger."

"You're saying that he's going to just drop the whole thing? Forget that it ever happened?"

"Let's just say that his publicity stunt turned out to put a big dent in his silver star. That doesn't mean he isn't going to give up this crazy crusade of his and he'll probably try to find the three people that you brought here."

"What if the Sheriff asks me if I know where they are?"

"Then you tell him you won't talk to him without your lawyer present."

"I don't have a lawyer."

"I'll represent you."

"Sorry, Sister, but I would need a lawyer not a nun."

Sister M's laughed. "I'm also a lawyer."

"That's good," Zelda sighed in relief. "Because as much as I consider myself an outlaw I'm in a new play by the Bard Wired Players and being in jail would really mess up my big break."

"You mean the play by Howdy Hanks?" Sister M's replied.

"You know about it?"

Sister M's nodded. "We already bought tickets even though we don't know what it's about."

"Well," Zelda hitched up her skirt, which had started to droop. "I'm not only in the play I'm the female lead. You know the director, Max Bergmann, is the one who got me the job playing Clementine. He plays Clem the train conductor. I need to let him know I'm okay."

"I'm sure Max will be relieved," Sister M's said.

"Relieved that he didn't lose his star," Zelda said as she looked around. As if she suddenly realized where she was she said. "Why this is a gym. I didn't know convent's had them. Not that I know anything about convents."

"It was here when we took over the prison. Nun's need to exercise just like everyone else."

"I thought your body was supposed to be a temple not a gym. At least that's what they said in Sunday School."

Sister M's couldn't help laughing. "That's from the New Testament, First Corinthians," deciding to leave out that St. Paul was referring to sexual immorality.

"I used to play basketball," Zelda said, pointing at the ball Sister M's had tucked under her left arm. "That was before we moved to Picketwire a year ago. I decided to give it up for a life in the theater. Haven't been in a gym since."

"Until now."

"Yeah, and it's in a convent of all places. It's sort of weird."

"Here, take a shot." Sister M's said passing the ball to Zelda. It was a slow, bounce pass to make it easier to catch. Zelda ran toward it, grabbed it and took off dribbling toward the basket, her long skirt trailing behind and her shoes clattering on the floor. Without stopping she launched a layup that bounced off the backboard through the net.



## **DOMES ON THE RANGE**

On the first day of Philosophy 101 Professor Hill had warned Ari to avoid chasing rabbits. Since then Ari had tried to follow that advice not only in philosophy but in life. Yet now he was pursuing Gretl (he didn't even know her last name) like Alice chasing the Mad Hatter. Only, instead of down a hole he followed her through a door in a yellow brick building. By the time the revolving door spit him out in a small lobby she was already disappearing up a staircase next to the elevator. He clambered after her up the stairs but when he reached the third floor landing she was nowhere in sight. The hallway was deserted and all the doors were shut except one and that was slightly ajar. Opening it he saw another staircase. Although the stairway was narrow and dark there was a brilliant light at the top. He stood there, feeling his heart still pounding from the rapid ascent up the staircase. Looking at the building from the outside he had counted only three floors and yet here was another staircase.

"Are you coming up?" Gretl's voice echoed down the stairwell.

"Right behind you," Ari yelled back and slowly climbed the stairs. The light grew more intense and when he reached the top he found himself in a large, circular room with a high domed ceiling. Light was streaming through an opening in the dome. In the center of the room there was a cluster of office furniture including a desk, several office chairs, a filing cabinet with four drawers, and a bookcase. The metal furniture was from the paleo-ergonomic office era, in gunmetal gray with black vinyl cushioning on the chairs. Ari half expected to see a typewriter instead of a computer. In fact, he saw neither.

"So this is where the telescope was?" Ari said, resting his right hand on the back of one of the chairs, feeling the cool steel as he caught his breath.

"I use it for my office now," Gretl answered. She stood beside the desk without showing any signs of being winded.

"Quite a climb to get up here."

"I like taking the stairs instead of the elevator."

"You like taking a stairway to the heavens," Ari said looking up at patch of clear, blue sky visible through the opening in the dome.

"Yes, but unlike the lady in the Led Zeppelin song I don't believe all that glitters is gold," Gretl answered then tapped the desk. "The telescope was mounted here in the center of the dome and could be rotated three hundred and sixty degrees. The dome also rotates and, of course, the viewing slot up there opens and closes. I like to keep it open as much as possible." Gretl walked over to the chair behind the desk and sat down. The chair had just enough recline to allow her to look up directly at the opening.

"I bet you get a good view of the sky from up here even without a telescope."

"As a matter of fact it's very easy to spend hours looking at the sky."

"Are the books for cloudy days?" Ari said, walking over to the bookcase. "Although, isn't it supposed to be not cloudy all day here?"

"This isn't Home on the Range. "

"More like dome on the range with a stairway to heaven," Ari replied, pulling one of the books off the top shelf. On the cover was a cartoonish illustration of a dog about the size of a Shetland Pony standing over the sprawled body of a glamorous woman in a cocktail dress. He read the title out loud. "*Sally's in the Alley* by Norbert Davis?"

"It's a detective novel," Gretl replied, getting up out of her chair and joining Ari by the bookcase. "Norbert Davis wrote crime stories in the 1940's."

"I see that you have four books by him."

"Those are all the books that he wrote. The one with the title *The Complete Cases of Max Latin* is a collection of stories that were published in magazines. The other three are novels that feature a fat detective named Doan and a dog named Carstairs. That's Carstairs on the cover looking down at Sally."

"And you've actually read all of them?" Ari asked, unable to hide his surprise

"Why else would they be in my bookcase? Certainly not to impress people like you."

"You'd be surprised at what impresses me," Ari replied. "How did you get into collecting these detective novels?"

"They once belonged to a distant relation. I guess you could call them a family heirloom. Somehow I ended up with them."

"Somehow?"

"I read all of them the first time when I was twelve and asked if I could have them. At least, I think I asked. Anyway, I've had them ever since. I still re read them. That's why they're in the bookcase."

Ari furrowed his eyebrows as if something Gretl had said had prompted some deep thought when he was really trying to think of what to say next. "So this large dog named Carstairs..." Ari pointed at the picture of the dog on the cover.

"He's a Great Dane. They're large dogs."

"Right, this Great Dane..."

"Although I will grant you, Carstairs is large, even for a Great Dane."

"Okay, this large Great Dane is Doan, the detective's, best friend, is that it?"

"Actually, Carstairs isn't very friendly to anyone, including Doan. Doan isn't very nice himself. Really, none of the characters are very likable."

"But the book must be likable since you've read all of them more than once?"

"I didn't read them because they were likable." Before Ari could ask Gretl why she read them, in that case, she said, "Did you know, that Ludwig Wittgenstein said that more wisdom is contained in the best crime fiction than in philosophy?"

"No, I didn't know. But since he's considered to be one of the great philosophers I should probably take it seriously. Maybe I could develop a course on private eye philosophers. You know Socrates as Sleuth, Descartes as detective, Camus as gumshoe. Unfortunately, unlike Wittgenstein, I don't know much about crime fiction."

"Then you should read the book. Norbert Davis was one of his favorite crime writers. Although, I don't think having a dog one of the main characters had anything to do with it."

"I believe Wittgenstein said that a dog cannot lie. Neither can he be sincere. Does that match the description of Carstairs?"

Gretl laughed. "You'll have to decide for yourself...or not."

"I guess I could look at dogs as well. Diogenes was a bit of a dog. He supposedly begged for scraps and one could even call his heckling of Socrates barking."

"Wasn't Diogenes the philosopher who carried around a lamp searching for an honest man?"

"Of course, he didn't find any. He was the founder of the Cynicism school of philosophy after all. I can see myself submitting a paper to the Journal of the American Philosophical Association on Diogenes as a hard-boiled philosopher."

"Then you should definitely read some of Norbert Davis' books as part of your research. You won't find them in the College Library."

"You'll let me borrow your first editions?"

"Picketwire College does a pretty thorough background check before they hire someone so I think I can trust you."

"Okay," Ari replied placing *Sally's In The Alley* carefully into the tan, canvas messenger bag that was slung over his left shoulder. "So what else goes on here other than looking at the sky and reading detective stories? I mean, you haven't given me a clue, to use detective lingo, as to what you and the Picketwire Institute do."

"You mean it's not evident to you that what PI does is observe and..." Gretl responded, the lenses of her glasses magnifying a twinkle in her eye.

"Detect!" Ari interrupted, slapping his forehead with the palm of his right hand. "Of course, the observatory, the detective books. It's all we've been talking about since we got here. And I was wondering if our small talk was going anywhere."

"Speaking of going somewhere," Gretl said. "I have to go on a field trip with one of my new colleagues in a few minutes. We're meeting in the lobby."

"Sorry I made you come all the way up here."

"You didn't. I was coming up here anyway to get my camera and bag." Gretl opened the top drawer of the filing cabinet and pulled out a camera. It was a small silver and black Leica.

"That looks like it's been around a few years."

"More than a few decades. Another heirloom. I like the way it looks and feels. Here," she said handing it to Ari.

"They certainly don't make them like this anymore," Ari said. It was as if he was holding a Formula One race car in his hands and that turning the focus ring on the lens as he panned the camera was like shifting gears while taking a curve at the Monaco Grand Prix. He handed it back to Gretl and said. "I see that it's pre-digital. Must be difficult to get the film developed."

"We have a darkroom. I actually enjoy the process. There are only thirty-six shots on a roll of film and unlike a digital camera there's no memory chip or replay screen so I really have to look before I shoot. It forces me to pay attention instead of mindlessly pressing a button. I take dozens of pictures with my eyes for every one that I take with this camera. That's my way of taking a selfie." She opened the bottom drawer of the desk and removed a small, green canvas knapsack. After putting the camera in the knapsack she slid its straps over her shoulders and adjusted them. Without saying a word Gretl started for the door. Ari followed her to the stairway entrance where she stopped and flipped a switch. Unseen machinery groaned and the dome began to close. As they watched the bright, blue

sky disappear and the dome fill with darkness, she said. "Can't forget to turn off the lights before we leave."

## CHAPTER 12

### BIG IDEAS

"Rent a Rancher." Clint Crowley drawled after he settled into the chair opposite Rich and Desmond in the FRED showroom. Desmond couldn't help noticing Clint's limp as he'd walked over to the table that they were sitting at. It reminded him of Chester in the old reruns of the TV series Gunsmoke that he'd watched as a kid.

"How is renting a ranch a big, new idea?" Rich asked.

"It ain't, but renting a rancher is." Clint said, knitting his bushy gray eyebrows together into one long wooly strand. "You see, there's lots of folks who don't really want a ranch, they want to be a rancher. Not all the time, though, because, well, it's damn hard work. So, this way they can be a rancher for a weekend or a week or longer, even."

"How's that different than a dude ranch?"

"Dude ranches are for dudes. I mean if you want other people to believe that you really are a rancher you need to have someone who not only knows what the hell they're doing but can make others believe you do too."

"But isn't that fake?" Desmond asked.

"Not any faker than most of the stuff on the inner net-"

"You mean Internet."

"That too," Clint nodded, then continued. "Like those photos folks take of themselves-"

"Selfies."

"More like wanna be's." Clint tilted his chair so that it was balanced on its back two legs.

"Say, Clint, you want to try out one of our recliners?" Rich asked. "They're on sale. I can pull one over-no trouble."

“Nah,” Clint answered, coming back down with a thump on all four legs. “I got a rocker that suits me fine.”

“Bet it doesn’t have a vibrator.”

“If I want to vibrate all I have to do is get in the saddle.” Clint leaned forward and put his elbows on the table. “But that’s no never mind. Let’s get back to my big idea.”

“Rich turned to Desmond and asked. “What do you think?”

“Well, it’s different...”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Rich snapped. “It’s got some innovation in it.”

“How much?”

“How much innovation?”

“No, how much money can I get? I don’t need a lot, I figure \$5,000 is enough.”

“Look, Clint, FRED X doesn’t give people money. What it does is give entrepreneurs like you the chance to pitch their ideas to investors.”

“Pitch?”

“Pitch means you give a talk describing your idea. It’s called a FRED Talk.”

“I’m not much of a talker.”

“They’re short.”

“You don’t need to use PowerPoint,” Desmond added.

“What’s that?”

“Never mind,” Rich said. “You can write on a flip chart if you want.”

“My spelling ain’t so good.”

“Just talk naturally.”

“I don’t know,” Clint took off his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his right sleeve. “I don’t want to stand up there and make a horse’s ass of myself.”

“Don’t worry,” Rich said. “We have experts like Desmond who will help you.”

"How much?" Clint asked.

"As much help as you need," Rich answered then turned to Desmond. "Right, Desmond."

"No, how much do I have to pay you?"

"You don't pay us anything. All you do is give your FRED Talk? We ask the people who come to listen to make a contribution to help cover expenses."

"You got to be pulling my leg. Why would someone pay to come hear me talk?"

"Why?" Rich answered. "Because they're interested in big, new ideas. A lot of them will be venture capitalists looking to invest in start-ups and you, you're.... you're a start-up."

Clint's eyebrows unknit, and he pushed back the brim of his Stetson, exposing his sun creased forehead. "Start-up? I ain't started nothing yet, that's what I want the money for."

"That means you need seed money to develop your idea into a start-up," Desmond said, trying not to sound like a know it all.

"Seed money? Rancher's don't plant things. Don't you know the difference between a rancher and a farmer?" Clint spat out the word farmer like it was a wad of phlegm.

"I didn't mean money for seeds. Seed money is what we call the first investment."

"Why don't you just call it the first money?"

"Okay, Clint, it's the first money," Rich said.

Clint's face relaxed. "It'll not only be the first it'll be last money because, like I said, all I need is five thousand bucks."

"Most startups require additional infusions," Desmond said.

"I don't need a transfusion. I need money not blood."

"Infusion of capital is what I meant. That's when venture capitalists invest more money in a start up."

"Okay, but why would I need more money after I get my five grand?"

"Well, for one thing, you'll have marketing costs," Desmond said. "It takes money to create a brand."

Clint smiled broadly. "I already got a brand. It's the Lazy C. You can see it on all my cattle."

Instead of explaining what he meant by brand, Desmond fought the urge to throw up his hands and looked at Rich instead. Rich said calmly. "Now that reminds me of another great brand - Lazy Boy. You know, Clint, we're their exclusive dealer in Picketwire so if you change your mind about wanting a recliner."

"If I get the five thousand dollars I'll be able to get my idea going so that I can make some money. Then I might buy one of your Lazy Boys so I can vibrate while watching television."

"Sure, Clint," Rich answered. "But like I said, FRED X doesn't invest, it gives entrepreneurs like you an opportunity to give a FRED Talk that will present your big idea to potential investors who can give you the money."

"And you got people, experts like Desmond here, who'll help me with this talk?"

"That's right, isn't it Desmond?" Both Rich and Clint stared at Desmond until he nodded his head.

Clint slapped the table with his right hand. "Well, then, I guess I'll give her a go. It can't be worse than bull riding at the Picketwire Rodeo when I was nineteen. Broke my right leg in three places when a damn bull stomped on me," Clint said as he slowly pushed himself up from the chair. "That's how I got this gimpy leg."

"One down," Rich announced after Clint limped out of the showroom. "We just need nine more to present. I figure ten FRED Talks should be enough."

If they're like Clint's that will be more than enough, Desmond thought, then said. "I don't pretend to know anything about farming, Rich, but..."

"You mean ranching. Clint's a rancher, remember. Big difference."

"Right. I also don't know anything about ranching, but what I wanted to say is that I do know something about investors in start-ups and it's hard to see how Clint could make a pitch that would interest them."

"I agree that he's a bit rough around the edges but ranchers like Clint don't like to be fenced in."

"Okay, but he needs to corral his idea if he wants to sell it."



“That’s exactly right, Desmond.”

“It is?”

“Yeah, corral is the kind of lingo a guy like Clint will understand. We just get him to look at his presentation as rounding up his idea and then filling it out like he fattens his cattle at a feed lot before he sells them.”

“I think fattening them organically rather than taking them to a feed lot would be better.”

“You mean raising them free range? We can give him the option. Anyway, maybe he can do some fancy rope tricks while he talks. He’s really good with the lariat.”

Hopefully, he won’t hang himself Desmond wanted to say. Instead he asked Rich who was next on the schedule?

“Schedule? I just let people know that we’d be here this afternoon and they should just drop by and share their idea. We don’t want to be too formal or it’ll scare people away. That’s why I decided the showroom would be a great place for this since people can view it sort of like window shopping. Looks like another one just walked in. See how she’s looking around like she’s just stopped by to check out the furniture.”

Desmond looked toward the front of the showroom. A woman stood just inside the entrance, wrapped in a gauzy aura from the bright sunlight streaming in through the plate glass windows behind her.

“We’re over here,” Rich shouted as he stood up.

She threaded her way through the furniture, shedding her aura until she fully materialized in front of them as tall and trim with short, blond hair and large blue eyes.

Rich held out his right hand. “I’m Rich Best and this is Desmond...”

“Goswami, Desmond Goswami,” Desmond said, shaking her hand.

“Margaret Knutson,” the woman answered.

“Knutson?” Rich asked. “Any relation to Arvid Knutson?”

“He was my uncle.”

“Sorry,” Rich said, then added, hastily. “Not sorry that he was your uncle, I mean.” Rich turned to Desmond and explained. “Arvid Knutson passed away last year.”

"Nine months ago," Margaret said.

"We all thought that he didn't have any family."

"Just a sister, my Mom, but they weren't close. In fact, she didn't find out about his death until several months afterwards."

"Ah, so your Mom gets the farm. A lot of people have been wondering what will happen to it."

"Actually, he gave me the farm although I have no idea why."

"So, you're not here for FRED X?" Desmond said, unable to completely hide his disappointment.

"FRED X? Is that some sort of sale you have going on?"

"FRED X stands for Farm and Ranch Entrepreneurship Expo," Rich said.

"What does the D stand for?"

Rich ignored the question and replied. "It's an opportunity for our amazingly talented but unrecognized rural entrepreneurs to showcase their innovations."

"Then D stands for display?"

"Exactly," Rich responded without missing a beat. "We're going to put them on display."

"Is that why you're having it in a showroom?"

"Oh, it won't be here, it'll be at the Tumbleweed Theater. We're just using this as a place to meet with entrepreneurs who want to present their big ideas at FRED X."

"I'm afraid I don't have any big ideas to share. My only idea, in fact, is to make my uncle's house habitable."

"So, you want to redo the place?"

"From what I can tell my uncle never got around to doing it in the first place. Not only is there not one stick of furniture that is completely intact, including the bed, there's not even indoor plumbing."

"Does this mean you're thinking of staying for a while?" Desmond asked.

"I'm not thinking about it, I'm sure that I'm staying for a while."

"If you need a place to stay while you're fixing the place up Desmond owns Happy Trails RV and Trailer Park," Rich said, patting Desmond on the back.

"I don't have an RV or a trailer."

"We have ones that you can rent," Desmond said. "They're furnished just a like a motel."

"You buy your furniture from us, right Desmond?" Without waiting for Desmond, who had yet to replace any of the original furniture, to respond, he continued. "So, you know it's high quality. One of the reasons Happy Trails is Picketwire's premier lodging establishment."

"How many lodging establishments are there?" Margaret asked.

Rich looked at Desmond who answered. "Three... not counting the campground."

"I certainly don't need a campground since I'm already camping out in my uncle's farm house. That's why I came here. I was hoping that in addition to furniture you might know some home remodeling contractors."

"Do I know them, we are them," Rich said. "Not only does FREDs sell furniture we're a one stop shop for all your home needs, including remodeling. Our motto is if you can't get it at FRED's then you don't really need it."

"That's really your motto?" Margaret said, raising her eyebrows.

"One of them," Rich said. "Let me get my home remodeling information packet from the office and we can go over all your needs."

As Rich walked toward the back where the office was, Margaret asked Desmond. "How long have you owned Happy Trails?"

He looked into her deep blue eyes, which was easy since she was as tall as him. They were like pools of water that he could drown in if he wasn't careful. "Actually, it's owned by my family. My parents own a number of motels and bought it six months ago then asked me to help them with it. I haven't worked in the family business since I got my MBA. For the past five years I've worked in San Francisco for a venture capital firm and have a lot of experience with high tech start-ups. I'm only planning to stay long enough to turn it around."

"I thought you worked with start-ups?"

"A lot of start-ups need turning around at some point or, at least, a change of direction."

"I guess we're both involved with turn arounds, then, since that's what my uncle's, I mean my farm, needs."

"And you have experience with turn arounds?"

"No, I'm more of a full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes type, although I don't think there's any danger of torpedoes around here. Fortunately, I have some experience with farming. I grew up on our family farm in Minnesota. I haven't worked on a farm since I graduated from college, except when I visit my folks. As soon as I get unpacked they give me a pitchfork." She sighed as she gazed out over the acre of furniture that surrounded them, her hands on her hips. Then she turned and looked at Desmond. He got the feeling she was sizing him up. At least he wasn't shorter than her. "Does your place have a bed and indoor plumbing?"

"My place?"

"The trailers that you rent?"

"Oh, yes, you mean Happy Trails. Of course. We have very comfortable beds. I sleep on one, myself. And we have clean bathrooms with water - hot and cold. Also, there is a kitchenette and a coffee maker with free coffee and tea."

"Sounds like everything I don't have at my place. I may have grown up on a farm but that doesn't mean I'm a happy camper."

## **THE SECOND COMING**

Every year on the first Saturday in the first week of June Picketwire celebrates its founding with a big parade. People who don't know any better ask why they have a celebration and parade just a week after Memorial Day. Well, seeing as how Picketwire established their day before May 30th was designated as Memorial Day in 1868 they weren't about to change it. Instead, they celebrated Memorial Day on Picketwire Day. It seemed only fitting since Picketwire Day was about remembering.

Jemma Lu's earliest memory of the parade was watching it go by as she sat on milk boxes in the shade of the Tumbleweed Theater's marquee. She was four years old then and decided that the parade didn't have a beginning or end but kept on going clear around the world before showing up back in Picketwire a year later. When Milli, her best friend, pointed out that this couldn't be true because the world was flat, Jemma Lu responded in the authoritative voice that she had acquired almost as soon as she started talking that while Milli's world might be flat the real world was round and that she could prove it by showing her the globe in their house. Over the

years as Jemma Lu's world grew the parade route shrank. What she had once been sure had circumnavigated the earth was reduced to a dozen blocks. Likewise, as she got older what had seemed like an endless parade of horses, riders, wagons, floats and marching bands was condensed into not much more than an hour.

She'd read that some Astro physicists theorized that there were multiple universes where an alternate version of this universe exists. If that was true, then maybe the parade she remembered continued to exist in an alternate universe where it marched around an alternate world. But that would mean there was more than one Picketwire and more than one version of herself. If there was, what were her alternative Jemma Lu's up to? What happened to the Jemma Lu who married Wylie? What happened to the Jemma Lu who ran off with Howdy? What happened to the Jemma Lu who kept her son? What happened to the Jemma Lu who....

"Jemma Lu!"

"Yes." Jemma Lu looked at Milli who was standing next to her.

"Where on earth did you go this time?"

"Go?"

"I know when you're day dreaming."

"I wasn't day dreaming, I was just remembering when I saw my first Picketwire Day parade at this very spot."

"You remember the first one you saw?"

"Why, Milli you were right here with me. We were both four years old. You don't remember?"

"That was almost 60 years ago, Jemma Lu."

"57 years, Milli."

"Only 57? Why I feel younger already. But, really, how can you expect me to remember one from the other? I mean you've seen one Picketwire Day parade and you've seen them all as far as I'm concerned."

Jemma Lu couldn't forget because that was when she found out who her great grandparents were. After the parade her mother asked her which float she liked best and she answered without hesitation that it was the one with the Indian princess.

“Why, she’s your great grandmother,” Jemma Lu remembered her mother answering with a smile that was even bigger than usual.

“Then I’m an Indian princess too,” Jemma Lu asserted as she twirled around in delight at her unexpected coronation.

“And the man next to her, the black man dressed in buckskin with the long rifle,” Her mother added. “He’s your great grandfather.”

Jemma Lu remembered that she stopped twirling at hearing this unexpected news. That was when her mother told her the story about the black mountain man who fell in love with an Indian maiden and that she was their great granddaughter.

At the time Jemma Lu didn’t fully comprehend what her mother was saying. The only black man she had met was Mr. Fraser, who bore a striking resemblance to the man on the float. She didn’t know any Indian princesses either although that didn’t stop her from believing in her royal lineage. A few years later she cried when she discovered that her great grandmother hadn’t been a princess after all and that her great grandfather had been a slave before he escaped. “Just think, Milli, we’ve been friends all these years. Through thick and thin.”

“I’m thick and you’re thin,” Milli laughed, patting her stomach.

“Let’s celebrate with a milkshake. My treat.” Jemma Lu hooked her right arm around Milli’s left and tugged her toward the door of Tanneyhill’s Drug Store.

“We should sit at the counter,” Jemma Lu said, steering Milli toward the row of stools in front of the soda fountain. When Jemma Lu was a little girl she thought that the drugs sold at Tanneyhill’s were dispensed from the soda fountain through the large faucets behind the Formica counter.

“I’m not sure I can still get up on one of these stools, Jemma Lu,” Milli said. “Can we sit at our old booth, instead?”

They made a beeline for the middle booth and sat on its familiar red vinyl benches. The white top had been dulled by the years but the sunlight that played against it through the open blinds still managed to uncover the gold and silver flecks imbedded in the Formica. How many times had they and their friends sat at this very booth? Jemma Lu wondered if the wads of gum they stuck to the bottom were still there in some fossilized form. The teenage boy behind the counter who had watched them come in walked over, pad and pencil in his hand. The badge on his white apron said his name was Mike and Jemma Lu recognized him as a Tanneyhill. It was still a family business and even though Mike’s father, Trent, now ran the place his grandfather, Lyle, who was in his late seventies, still came in several times a week to work in the pharmacy in the rear. She tried to fill her prescriptions with

Lyle as much as possible since she knew after forty some years he could keep it private. That was no small feat in a small town.

"Can I help you," Mike asked.

"We aren't wearing a name badge like you, Mike, but I'm..."

Mike interrupted "Everyone knows who you are, Miss Tuttle."

In that case maybe you could tell me Jemma Lu wanted to say, because she had her doubts. But she didn't want to embarrass a teenage boy. She'd done enough of that when she was a teenage girl. "Just call me Jemma Lu, and this is Milli."

"Sure thing, and I'm Mike."

"We know."

"You do?"

"It's on the name tag pinned to your apron."

"Oh." Mike looked down at it. "Right."

"And we know you're a Tanneyhill because you look just like your Dad when he was your age," Milli added.

"Do you want to be a pharmacist like your father and grandfather?" Jemma Lu asked.

"I sort of like working at the fountain, but it's not exactly a career. I've thought about working for you – I mean Picketware. Everyone says it's a great place to work." Mike said with a sheepish grin.

"Picketware will be around if you still want to work for us when you've finished school."

"I'm going to graduate from Picketwire High next year."

"Aren't you going to college?"

"Sure, I guess so," Mike said without much enthusiasm. "Can I take your orders..." He paused and then added, tentatively. "Jemma Lu and Milli."

Happy that Mike had agreed to pursue higher education, smiled and asked for a milkshake. Milli decided on a vanilla root beer float but with diet root beer as if that would cancel out the calories in the ice cream.

"We sure knew some soda jerks in our day, didn't we Jemma Lu?" Milli sighed after Mike retreated behind the counter.

"We also knew plenty of just plain jerks."

"I think I dated most of them," Milli giggled.

"At least you married someone who wasn't."

"Yes, I can't complain. Ricky's been a great husband and father."

"Four kids and six grandchildren."

"Going to be seven. I just found out that Martha's expecting another one."

"How wonderful, Milli. Another reason to celebrate!" Jemma Lu said.

"Do you ever wonder if your son has kids?" Milli was the only person who knew that Jemma Lu had a child.

"I just hope he didn't turn out to be a jerk." Jemma Lu replied. No, she hadn't thought that she might be grandmother. She tried not to think about being a mother. It wasn't as if she'd done any mothering. She had settled on thinking of herself as being a surrogate mother for some lucky couple.

"Have you seen Wylie since he came back?" Milli asked "I was just wondering. It has been awhile, hasn't it?"

"Thirty years."

"That long?"

"Not long enough," Jemma Lu, snapped.

"Jemma Lu, someone tried to kill him. At least that's what the news is saying. I mean you and he..."

"He might not even be the father."

"What?"

"We were going together and, yes, the odds are he is but there's still room for doubt."



"You mean after all these years you're telling me that there was someone else?" Milli asked.

"Briefly."

"How brief?"

"Once."

"Someone I know?"

"This is Picketwire, Milli, where everyone knows everybody."

"Are you going to make me start throwing names at you?" Milli asked, pointing her spoon at Jemma Lu.

"You sound like a wife who just found out her husband cheated and wants to know who it was with."

"Sorry, Jemma Lu. It's just that we're best friends so..."

"Let's just change the subject."

"Okay, what about Howdy?"

"What about him?"

"You don't have to be so sharp with me," Milli said. "I changed the subject like you asked. I just asked if you've run into Howdy Hanks since he came back to put on this new play of his?"

"Sorry, Milli. No, we haven't run into each other."

"Why Jemma Lu Tuttle and Milli Martinez. I see you two girls are sitting in your regular booth." Jemma Lu and Milli looked up at the sound of a drawl that despite sounding as if it had spent a lifetime wandering in the wilderness, could only belong to Howdy Hanks. Despite the creases around his eyes and mouth and wild strands of gray hair escaping from his Stetson, Jemma Lu was surprised that he'd weathered remarkably well.

"We're not girls anymore, Howdy," Jemma Lu answered, glad that her dark complexion was perfect for hiding a blush. "And it's Milli Pacheco now."

Howdy looked at Milli, who had moved over to let him sit down opposite Jemma Lu. "That's right, I heard you married Ricky Pacheco."

"You've actually heard something about us since you left Picketwire?" Jemma Lu said.

"Read it in the Picketwire Press, actually. I subscribe."

"We sure read a lot about you, Howdy," Milli said, sounding more like a teenager than a grandmother. "You're famous."

"I thought no one was famous in their hometown," Howdy said.

"You're probably thinking of the Bible verse where Jesus said no prophet is accepted in their hometown," Milli offered.

"Good thing I'm a playwright and not a prophet."

"As I recall, before you left Picketwire you thought they were the same thing," Jemma Lu said.

"As I recall I was a bit full of myself back then."

"A bit?"

"At least I didn't think I was Jesus, Jemma Lu."

"That means we don't have to see your return to Picketwire as the second coming."

"Hi," Mike interrupted, handing Jemma Lu and Milli their orders.

Milli leaned toward Howdy and said. "This is Mike, he's a Tanneyhill."

Howdy looked up. "Howdy Mike."

"Howdy," Mike replied.

"Howdy is his name," Milli giggled. "Howdy Hanks."

"Are you the Howdy Hanks?" Mike asked.

"You can call me Howdy."

"Okay," Mike said, his pencil poised over the pad. "Can I get something for you, Howdy?"

"I don't think I can get what I want, Mike, but a Coke sure would taste good."

"What do you want, Howdy?" Jemma Lu asked as Mike returned to the counter. "I mean, why did you come back after all these years?"

"Jemma Lu," Milli said. "You know perfectly well that Howdy's back for the world premiere of his new play."

"I heard that you were still working on it," Jemma Lu said, as she churned her Vanilla Shake with a straw.

"I'm still working on the ending."

"You always did have trouble with endings...as I recall."

"Here's your Coke, Howdy," Mike announced placing a glass on the table. "Say, Howdy," he asked, "Is that your motorcycle parked outside?"

"Since you don't have a place to hitch a horse anymore I had to ride my bike instead."

"Sorry."

"He's just joking again, Mike." Milli said before closing her lips around a spoonful of ice cream.

"Right." Mike looked through the plate glass window at the motorcycle. "Can I ask you what kind of bike it is? I know it's not a Harley."

"It's an Indian. They stopped making them in 1953. I don't count the ones that snowmobile maker, Polaris, started putting out a few years ago. Stamping a name on something doesn't make it the real thing. It's like buying the brand without the beef. Of course, if it was a Harley it would be without the hog, which is another reason why nobody from cattle country should be riding one of them. Why don't you go out and have a closer look. Just don't kick the tires."

"I'll just go and have a quick look," Mike said, turning and walking out the door.

"And I need to go to the ladies room," Milli said.

After getting up and letting Milli out, Howdy sat back down and, ignoring the straw, took a drink of his Coke.

"Isn't that the same bike you rode out of town on?" Jemma Lu asked.

"The very one. The same one that you always refused to ride on."

"That's not true, Howdy. I rode with you in the Picketwire Day Parade."

"I was in the back of the parade along with the jalopies, bikes, trikes, skateboards and what not and you came up and said that you wanted a ride. Surprised the hell out of me that you finally wanted one," Howdy answered, then took another drink.

"And you gave me one."

"I did, Jemma Lu, I sure did."

Jemma Lu hoped he wouldn't bring up the time that he picked her up after she broke up with Wylie. She said quickly. "And then a few weeks later you just rode out of town on that very same motorcycle. And now you're back after all these years, and on the very same bike,"

Howdy stared at the glass he held in his right hand. It was already half empty. He looked up at Jemma Lu and said. "How about another ride?"

## CHAPTER 13

### FLY FISHING FOR JESUS

As he cast the fly Dave Sanderson imagined he was knee deep in the shallows of the lake near his cabin in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains instead of standing on the blue carpet between the pulpit and the lectern. He waved the rod back and forth creating elegant loops with the line before flinging it out over the empty Sanctuary. Before the fly could land on one of the pews he whipped it back.

"Catch anything?" Jane asked from the back of the Sanctuary.

Dave looked up, surprised to see Jane emerging from the shadows under the balcony. "Just practicing," He answered without taking his eye from the fly.

"Uh huh."

"Practicing for next Sunday's Sermon."

"I've heard some people consider fly fishing a religion but..."

"It's on Matthew 4:19."

"Fishers of men."

"I haven't preached this Sermon for several years so I need to practice. Not the preaching but the casting. I'm going fishing on Saturday for the first time this year so

I'll be able to practice then but I figured it would be good to rehearse it once in the Sanctuary as well." Dave began reeling the line in as Jane walked to the front.

"Have you ever hooked someone?"

"The first time I did it I caught a parishioner's hat. She always wore a hat to Church that you couldn't miss and I didn't. That was at my first Church back in Pennsylvania."

"What did you do with it?"

"Ran down and unhooked it. It's called catch and release. Mrs. Matthews, that was her name, was a pretty good sport about it. She said she appreciated that I was demonstrating how Jesus fished for women as well as men. After that I've made sure there's no hook but just a weighted fly." He held up the end of the line to show Jane. "So what brings you in on a Monday? You should be relaxing after preaching yesterday."

"I stopped by to pick up a book from my office and noticed that the doors to the Sanctuary were open. But as long as we're both here..."

"When we should be on our day off?"

"It will take some getting used to having Mondays as my day off now that as a pastor I'm working on Sunday."

"Good thing that Sunday is the first day of the week rather than the seventh or we'd be breaking the Fourth Commandment every time we preached."

"You said you were going fishing on Saturday so how is that remembering the Sabbath day, to keep it holy?"

Dave smiled as he shook his head. "Jane, for me fly fishing is a spiritual exercise. Every time I cast I say a little prayer."

"I have to admit that I haven't thought of incorporating fly fishing into a sermon."

"Well, I hadn't thought of the Wizard of Oz as part of one until I heard your sermon yesterday."

"How do you think it went over?"

"The way you opened by reading the first line from the book..."

"That Dorothy lived in the midst of the great Kansas prairies."

“Yes, right there you got everyone’s attention since we all know that Picketwire is where those great prairies end. You not only got their attention you held it. Why I even notice that Jim Arbogast stayed awake.”

The only person she’d really noticed during the sermon, aside from Bruce and her parents sitting in the front row, was Tom Tiddings. She knew they would see each other and had imagined some scenarios. None of them had her preaching her first sermon with Tom sitting in the back pew. He must have slipped out the side door during the recessional. Was it to avoid telling her that he didn’t like her sermon or was it just to avoid her?

“What are you going to do on the rest of your day off?” Dave asked.

“Bruce and I are going for a drive in the country to see someone.”

“Don’t tell me that you’re off to see the Wizard.”

“No,” Jane laughed. “We’re off to see my Uncle Joji at his farm and the road to it isn’t paved with yellow bricks.”

“Uncle Joji?”

“You know him as George. Joji is how George is translated in Japanese.”

“I didn’t know that. Your grandmother and parents always referred to him as George.”

“My grandparents named him George but when he came back from living in Japan he told everyone in the family that he wanted to be called Joji from then on. Most people wouldn’t know that because he’s a bit of a recluse.”

“Now that you mention it, the only time I remember meeting him was at your grandmother’s funeral. I’ll never forget that he came up to me after the service and gave me a really deep bow. Since he didn’t say anything I assume that meant the funeral service met with his approval.”

“You’re right, he wouldn’t have done that otherwise since bowing is a sign of respect. What did you do in response?”

“I bowed back. It wasn’t quite as graceful as his. Probably the only opportunity I’ll ever have to take a bow for leading a Church service, much less a funeral.” As they talked Dave had untied the fly that was at the end of his line and started attaching another one.

“Why are you changing flies?”

“The one I’m taking off is a trout fly called a Parachute Adams and it’s pretty effective since it has a resemblance to a number of different insects that are on the surface of the water. Its drawback is that as a dry fly it’s for fish that come to the surface to feed. For those that don’t you need one that works underwater where it’s darker and colder that looks like nymphs and leeches and other underwater creatures . That’s what a wet fly like this Woolly Bugger,” He pointed to a fly tucked into the band of the broad brimmed, cotton hat he wore. “Is good at. I did some casting with that one before I switched to the Parachute Adams. There are different flies for different fish and conditions. So, you have to decide first what kind of fish in general like a trout or a salmon or a bass you want to catch and then, this is where it get’s even trickier, what particular ones are you after. Is it some young, small one who’s impulsive and will go for just about anything flashy that you toss at them or one who’s grown old and big by being wily and cunning? And then there are the conditions. Are you fishing in calm waters or fast moving, shallow places, deep places, rocky places, marshes and so on. There are different flies for different conditions.”

“Which one works best inside a Church?” Jane asked, trying to sound serious.

Dave reached into one of the pockets of the fishing vest he wore and pulled out a fly. “I just made my own. This will be the first time I’ve used it.”

“What’s it called?”

“The Jesus Fly, of course,” he said with a wink as he deftly tied some brown feathers arranged in a cruciform to the end of the line. “As you can see there’s just a weighted tail rather than a hook. Now, let’s see if I can get it all the way to the deep water of the back pew.” He began flicking the rod back and forth, each time sending the line with the fly at the end farther out over the empty pews. “Almost there,” he said as the fly flitted upward toward the vaulted ceiling. Then, as Dave’s arm shot forward in one last cast, it and the rod came to a sudden stop. Instead of whizzing over them the fly had disappeared behind them. They both turned around and looked over their shoulders. Their eyes followed the line across the carpet, onto the communion table and up to the six foot high wooden cross attached to the back wall, where it was snared on the left arm with the fly dangling from its end.

## **BOOK STOP**

Despite Tom’s staring at the computer screen for an hour it was still blank. Where there should be the first draft of a news story about the Reverend Jane Takemoto’s return to Picketwire as the new Associate Pastor of Picketwire Community Church and her first sermon, there was nothing. Tom had the announcement from the Church and he had even gone there Sunday to listen to her sermon. He had fully intended to speak with her briefly and maybe, even, get something he could quote. All he had to do was to join the line of people who would file out through the front door of the Church after the service where he would shake Jane’s hand and ask her if

she had any comments for The Picketwire Press? Since there would be people lined up behind him waiting their turn and everything would be public anything private and personal would be easily avoided. That was the plan. It was a good plan until he saw her and heard her voice and listened to her. He'd never heard her preach before. He'd never imagined that she would be a minister. When it came to Jane a lot of things he'd imagined had turned out to be wrong. It was obvious to him as he listened to her that she was where she wanted to be and doing what she wanted to do.

The anger he'd felt when she had ended their relationship so suddenly after she went away to school had subsided a long time ago. At least the "Dear Tom" letter she had written had been in long hand rather than an email and, being Jane, after recounting some of their best times together she had then listed just a few of the things that she said made him such a wonderful person, enumerated some of his talents that she knew would take him far in life and then, having written the dreaded words that he would always have a special place in her heart, she told him that she was setting him free so that he could find someone truly worthy of his love. Something like that, anyway. He didn't remember the exact words because he'd torn the letter up. Now, he wished he'd saved it because he realized when he saw her again, up there, behind the pulpit, what had really upset him was that she had left Picketwire while he hadn't.

Tom couldn't publish any of that in the paper so the computer screen remained a yawning chasm between what he felt like writing and what he had to write. It reminded him of the time when he was a boy and they had been visiting the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. He had been hiking along the rim by himself and stopped to look down. Less than a foot separated him from falling through the air for a thousand feet. He had quickly backed away, not because he was afraid of accidentally slipping but because he was afraid that if he stood there for one more second some dark force inside him would take over and compel him to step off the edge. Tom pulled his hands from the keyboard, stood up, walked out of the office and ducked into Bunch of Books next door.

Inside the bookstore he gave Carlotta only a quick nod hello before he disappeared into the maze of bookshelves. As he wandered the aisles he pulled down books that caught his eye. Sometimes it was the title, sometimes the width and height of the spine projecting from the shelf but mostly it was a random act. Finally, he felt calmer and he emerged from the stacks with the last book he'd grabbed at random in his right hand.

Carlotta read aloud the title of the book Tom had placed on the counter. "*Renaissance Florence*. What a beautiful place. I mean Florence, Italy not Florence, Colorado. The only thing to see in Florence, Colorado is the SuperMax Federal prison and it's just a big concrete bunker. Dad says it's so secure that its inmates will be the only survivors if there's a nuclear war."



Although Tom wasn't even aware of the book's title until Carlotta read it, he responded as if his selection was intentional. "I've always wanted to visit Florence, Italy."

"You should. Florence, Italy has such beautiful art and architecture. Michelangelo's David, the Uffizi Gallery, the Cathedral with the dome that Brunelleschi designed. It's one of the places I'd like to visit again."

"I didn't know you'd been to Italy."

"There are lots of things you don't know about me."

"How would I? You left town with your Mom when we were just kids and you just moved back to Picketwire."

"Just moved back? I've been back for six months."

"Six months? I must have lost track of time. Anyway, when did you go to Italy?"

"I spent a year traveling around the world after college..."

"You went to Oberlin, didn't you? That's out east."

"Oberlin is in Ohio."

"That's out East from here."

"Then you could say everything is either out east or out west or up north or down south from here and you'd just be lost."

Maybe I am lost, he thought. "I should travel more. You've been around the world and I've hardly gotten out of Colorado."

"Why don't you then? You could go to, well, Florence, Italy." Carlotta said and waved the front of the book in his face.

"I've got a newspaper to put out in case you forgot. Vacation stops are for delivering newspapers not for publishing them. It's not like I have a choice. In fact, I never had a choice about whether I wanted to run the paper."

"I guess you did have to take over the paper rather suddenly when your parents..."

"Took off." Tom snapped his fingers. "Like that. At age eighteen. Just graduated from high school. I'd been accepted at Northwestern in Chicago..."

"Evanston, but that's right outside of Chicago. I guess you could call it a suburb."

"I just call it another place I've never been. Sort of ironic that what kept me from majoring in Journalism at Northwestern was having to run a newspaper."

"I'm sorry, Tom."

"Why are you sorry, you weren't responsible for any of it."

"I mean sorry in a more, you know, cosmic way."

"That fate gave me its fickle finger?"

"More like that you're a victim of bad karma."

"Yeah, I guess I got yinged instead of yanged." Tom laughed, which surprised him. "Anyway, I've stopped feeling sorry for myself. It doesn't change anything. It is what it is."

"Whatever will be will be."

"Que sera sera." Tom quipped, surprising himself because he wasn't much of a quipper.

"Couldn't you ask Gloria to take over while you go on a vacation? I've gotten to know her a bit and she told me she really loves working for the Picketwire Press."

"Gloria? It's a big jump from reporter to be the editor in chief."

"You managed it and you were just out of high school."

"I didn't have a choice, remember."

"Then she can say no. It's not like you'd just take off like your parents."

Tom had to admit that there was something to the suggestion. "I guess I could ask her, but I don't think she'd be interested. She might just agree because she's afraid to say no."

"Gloria afraid to say no, you must be kidding?"

"Okay, she isn't exactly a yes person, but what she really wants to be is an investigative reporter not an editor and she's working on a big story."

Now it was Carlotta's time to laugh. "What on earth does an investigative reporter report on in Picketwire?"

"That someone tried to kill Wylie Boone," Tom answered in dead seriousness. "And whoever tried is still on the loose and might try again. It seems that he's come back here to stay at his ranch because he feels safer. Gloria got us an exclusive interview with him the other day at his ranch. It'll be in tomorrow's paper and I'm pretty sure that it's going to be picked up by other papers and media outlets. And this is just the first. We are planning on a whole series. In fact, I just hired Foster St.Vrain the former Picketwire Police Chief to help Gloria."

"Foster is helping you?"

"You know him?"

"He and my Dad are friends and he comes in pretty regularly to buy books."

"Really, what books does Foster buy?"

"Why Tom, you know I can't tell you that."

"You're telling me that a bookstore is like Las Vegas? What happens here stays here?"

"How would you feel if I told people what you do when you're here."

"Right, I get it," Tom answered, knowing that she wasn't just referring to the books he bought. "Anyway, to get back to the point I was trying to make this is a big opportunity for Gloria to make a name for herself as an investigative reporter because Wylie Boone is so well known nationally and, even, internationally. He's almost like a celebrity and people are interested not only in his business but his personal life."

"And death? As you said, someone wants to kill him."

"Hopefully, our series doesn't end with Wylie Boone's obituary. I am sure that what we publish on Wylie will be picked up by other newspapers and media outlets. Not just in Colorado but even nationally."

"Even out east?"

"Yeah, even out east, out west, all points of the compass." This time they were laughing together.

## **A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE**

Why worry, Max told himself. This wasn't the first time he'd been questioned by the police. True, the other time was in the television series *Mean Streets of Manhattan*. He played the part of Sal Malpensa, a Mafia hit man, and was interrogated by

Detective Liam O'Bannon, played by Troy Stone, the tall, broad shouldered chiseled face star of the show. No matter what O'Bannon threw at him Sal parried it without breaking a sweat. Finally, when O'Bannon offered Sal witness protection, Sal responded with a sardonic smile. "I'm the only protection I need," and walked out of the precinct station as cocky as ever. Sal was immediately cut down in a hail of hot lead and fell into the gutter where he sprawled in a pool of blood. Unfortunately for Max that was not only the end of his character but also the end of the steady paycheck he'd been getting. He'd had enough of waiting on tables and bartending while waiting for his big acting break so he drove off into the sunset on the other side of the Hudson River heading West not to Hollywood but to Picketwire and his new job at the Bard Wired Players.

"So, where are they?" Sheriff Rigglesman demanded after he'd climbed aboard the Pullman car and found Max inside, next to the door to the rear observation platform.

"They?" Max answered.

"The illegal immigrants you're transporting on this train."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't?" Rigglesman sneered. "Then hand over the passenger list."

"Why would I have a passenger list?"

"You're the conductor and the conductor takes the tickets for all the passengers, right?"

"Right, except for the fact that I'm not the conductor."

"Then why are you dressed like one?"

"I'm acting as a conductor."

"I don't care if you're just an acting conductor, you're still responsible for knowing who the passengers are on this train just like a permanent conductor."

"No, I'm an actor playing the part of a conductor."

"You expect me to believe that you're pretending to be the conductor?"

"I'm not pretending, I'm playing a role in a melodrama. Actually, it's more like a mini melodrama."

"So, you're play acting, is that it?"

"I'm a professional actor in a play."

"By yourself?"

"No, there's another actor, Zelda Zenn. I guess you could call her the leading lady. She plays a Harvey Girl"

"Who's Harvey?"

"Harvey is the name of a chain of restaurants that used to be at train stations a long time ago. Like I said, she's just playing a part, she's not a real Harvey Girl just like I'm not a real conductor."

"Where's this Zenn woman now?"

"She took off when you and your gang..."

"It's not a gang it's a posse."

"What's the difference?"

"A gang is, well, hell, anyway we didn't attack the train."

"What do you call it then?"

"Detaining it because of suspicious activity."

"What suspicious activity?"

"That this train is being used to smuggle illegal immigrants into Purgatory County."

"And you know that for a fact?"

"If we knew it for a fact it wouldn't be suspicious. When we catch the illegals and those helping them then it will be a fact."

"In any case, Zelda thought you were a gang that was attacking the train, so she took off."

"In other words, she fled the scene of a crime."

"She thought you were the ones committing a crime by robbing the train and she was just escaping."

"Okay," Riggles jotted something into the small spiral notebook he held in his left hand. "She made her getaway now where do you think she went?"

"How should I know. Maybe she jumped on one of your horses and rode off."

"You know they used to hang people for stealing a horse."

"I was just kidding."

"Kidding an officer of the law could be seen as obstruction of justice."

"Oh, jeez..."

"Now you're swearing."

"I'm not swearing."

"Using the Lord's name in vain is the same thing."

"Is that against the law, too?"

"It's one of the Ten Commandments in case you didn't know."

"Of course, I know what the Ten Commandments are, I'm Jewish and the Jews had them before anyone else."

"That also means you've had more time to break them."

"You know, Sheriff, I think what we've got here is a failure to communicate."

"So now you're playing Paul Newman in Cool Hand Luke?"

"Actually, the line was delivered by the character Strother Martin was playing to Paul Newman who was playing Luke."

"Oh yeah, I remember, now. You know, my favorite scene is when Paul Newman ate all those hard-boiled eggs that made his stomach swell up like he was nine months pregnant. I'm more a John Wayne fan but that was some pretty good acting."

"I liked Wayne in The Searchers. He did his best work when John Ford was directing him. You can't have good acting without a good director. Of course, I might be a bit biased since I'm a director."

"You're a director as well as a conductor."

"I told you I'm not the conductor. I'm doing this as a favor to Tony Medrano. My full-time job is Artistic Director for the Tumbleweed Theater and I direct most of the

plays put on by the Bard Wired Players. In fact, I'm directing the new play by Howdy Hanks."

"I heard Howdy was back in town. So, you're directing this play of his, huh?"

"New play of his: It's the world premiere."

"Word is it's about stuff that happened here in Picketwire years ago before he left, is that right?"

"It draws on his experiences growing up in Picketwire."

"Does he mention me?"

"I can't tell you anything more than what I just did. Howdy wants the details of the play to remain secret until it's presented."

"If there's stuff in there about me I have a right to know what it is."

"Then I guess you'll have to see the play."

"What do you mean I have to wait to see the damn play?" Riggleman snarled.

Fortunately Max was saved from answering by the train whistle.

Riggleman jerked his head. "Why did the train whistle blow?"

"It's signaling that the train is about to start moving," Tony Medrano answered from behind them.

Riggleman turned around to face Tony. "I didn't give my permission for the train to start, Medrano."

"I did. We're already behind schedule."

Max turned to Tony and explained. "Please tell the Sheriff that I'm not the conductor and I don't know who left other than Zelda."

"Like he said, Sheriff, he's not the conductor. Max is an actor pretending to be the conductor and he doesn't know any of the people who left with Zelda, just like he said."

"And how do you know he doesn't know?"

"Because everyone in this car is a member of my Purple Sage tour and none of them are from this area so Max would never have met them before."

“Since it’s your tour, Medrano, you tell me who’s missing.”

“Sheriff, the horses are missing!” A Sheriff’s Deputy shouted from the open door to the platform.

“Horses! What the hell are you talking about?”

“All the horses are gone.”

Riggleman quickly ran out onto the back platform with Tony and Max following him. Stopping at the railing he exclaimed, “What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know Sheriff. The train whistle spooked them, and they got loose and took off.”

“Well, go find them and bring them back.”

“They could be miles away by now.”

“Then call Dispatch and tell them to send out a couple of patrol cars to come and pick us up.”

“We can’t; there’s no cell service here,” the Deputy answered.

“Well, damn to high hell!” he cursed then turned back to Max and Tony. “We’ll just have to take this train into Picketwire.”

“No problem Sheriff,” Max answered, repressing the urge to flash Sal’s sardonic smile. “Just show me your tickets.”

## CHAPTER 14

### BORDER WATCH

Some old rancher once told Foster that ranching was ninety percent perspiration and ten percent trying to wipe it off. Square jawed and broad-shouldered Clint Crowley sure looked the part of a trail boss itching to lead a cattle drive, but the truth was that ever since he busted his right leg when he was thrown from a horse and then stomped on by a steer, Clint’s desire to head em up and move em out just went away. Clint’s output of perspiration declined along with his inspiration as did the reputation of his family’s ranch, the Lazy C. But even if the Lazy C was no longer one of the best ranches around it was next Wylie Boone’s Double B, which was hemmed in by the Comanche National Grasslands on every other side. One might



say that the Lazy C occupied a position of geo-strategic importance as a check on any expansion of the Double B. In fact, Purgatory County's last range war had been between the Double B and the Lazy C in 1912. It ended in a show down in which the Crowley family somehow managed to fight the Boone's and their gang of hired guns to a standoff. And that's where it still stood more than century later. So, while Gloria was off interviewing Sheriff Riggleman, Foster was at the Lazy C getting an exclusive of his own.

The entrance to the Lazy C was almost directly across from the massive gate of the Double B. At the end of its short drive was their sprawling ranch house. It no longer burst at the seams with sons and daughters, all of whom could ride, shoot, brand and pretty much do whatever needed to be done including taking on the Boone's, as it did a hundred years before. Instead, it was mostly empty, occupied only by Clint and his wife Rhonda as well as two dogs and several cats. Merle, the second oldest of their three sons lived alone in a mobile home parked near the corrals. He did most of the perspiring on the ranch along with a hired hand named Diego who, ironically, had only one arm. He'd lost it in Iraq. Merle had been in the Army as well and done two tours in Afghanistan. He'd managed to come back with all his limbs still attached although based on the few interactions Foster had with him he was still working on getting his mind back together.

"Decided to re-invent yourself," Clint said after Foster told him that he was there as a reporter for the Picketwire Press. They were seated in Clint's office just off the entry hall of the house. Foster was seated in a well-worn easy chair with horsehair sprouting through the cracks in the leather upholstery while Clint sat in an old wooden office chair with wheels on its four legs. The only other furniture was a large oak desk with a desk top computer and a bookcase that was filled with what appeared to be ledgers.

"Seemed easier than being re born. Dying was hard enough."

"You mean when you got shot in the head and almost died."

"I did die according to the docs but apparently they didn't want me up there or down there. Woke up with a hell of a headache."

"So now you're undead, like some kind of zombie."

"That's what I was beginning to feel like sitting there in my Lazy Boy watching the damn television."

"And you're a reporter now," Cliff said, nodding his head slowly then pursing his lips like it was a lot to contemplate.

"I don't do the writing just the research, which is why I'm here."

Clint perked up. "The paper wants to do a story on rent a rancher? Rich Best says it's a big idea."

"I bet it is but that's not the story I'm researching. I'll let Tom know since he covers big ideas for the paper."

"Actually, it might be better to wait since Rich wants me to present it at this Fred X shindig he's putting on for people who want to invest in big ideas. He'd probably be mad as hell if it got out before then."

"No problem," Foster said and took the pen from his breast pocket and wrote in the small pad he was carrying that he shouldn't tell Tom that Clint Crowley had a big idea.

"So, what is the story that you think I can help with?"

"It's about Wylie Boone. This attempt to kill him has made the headlines all over and now that he's come back to the ranch the Picketwire Press wants to do a series on him."

"It's no secret that the Crowley's and the Boone's don't exactly like each other, but I didn't try to kill him."

"No one's saying that, Clint."

"Yeah, well Rigglesman has already been out here and asked me where I was the day Boone got run down. I told him it was none of his damned business but if I had it sure wouldn't have been with a minivan."

"Knowing Rigglesman, I don't think he'll drop it. Especially after what you told him."

"I sure as hell hope you're right and he brings me in for questioning and asks me where I was, so I can tell him right there in front of his deputies." Clint stopped and held his right hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh.

"What's so funny?"

Clint wheeled his office chair closer to Foster, leaned forward and answered. "You see I was on jury duty at the Purgatory County Courthouse, which as you know, is right next to the Sheriff's Department. In fact, one of Rigglesman's deputies testified in the case. He was the star witness for the prosecution, which didn't help them one bit since he was as big an idiot as his boss. You should have seen Vince Lowery trying to get his star witness to make sense. It was like trying to turn on a light bulb when there's no electricity. Hell, after hearing his testimony we didn't even have to deliberate to find the defendant not guilty. The only thing we did in the jury room

was shake our heads and laugh. Yeah, I sure hope Riggleman calls me in and asks me where I was."

"I wish I could be there to see his face if you do get the chance."

"Say maybe you could be there as a reporter."

"I don't think Riggleman's going to let a reporter witness his interrogation, especially me. Besides I'm not a reporter, I'm just doing research. But Gloria could cover it if you get called in. She could interview you and Riggleman afterwards. At least try to interview him because I don't think he'd be in any mood to meet the press."

"I can see the headline - Sheriff takes the fifth."

After Clint finally stopped laughing Foster said. "I didn't actually come here because I thought you were under suspicion, Clint. I wanted to ask you if you've noticed anything suspicious since Wylie came back to his ranch. You know, any comings and goings that are out of the ordinary."

"You think I spy on him?"

"I'm not saying you spy on him I just figure that given the past history between the Boone's and the Crowley you keep a sharp eye out for anything unusual."

"Sharp eye, more like an eagle eye. If I could afford it, I'd have a satellite up there with its camera focused on the Double B twenty-four seven."

"So, have you noticed anything?"

"Well, let's have a look." Clint wheeled backwards and then spun his chair, so it faced the desk. He pulled a thick ledger toward him and opened it.

"You keep a log?"

"Sure. Not just me. My father and granddaddy as well." He waved at the bookshelf filled with what Foster had thought were ledgers. "Now, let's see here. The only thing unusual happened the other night. My son Merle monitors our remote cameras and if he sees anything unusual he writes me a note and then I put it down in the logbook."

"You have remote cameras?"

"You bet. Got them set up at strategic locations along the border with the Boone's. The border is what we call the property line. I guess you would say it's part of our early warning system. Lets us know if there's been any incursions from the other

side. Merle's in charge of all that. Once in awhile he and Diego even do some recon work across the border. That's off the record of course."

"Of course. I won't even write it down."

"Anyway, the video monitors are in Merle's trailer, which he calls the CCC, Crowley Command Center. He even got us a drone with a camera for aerial surveillance. Anyway, he says, well, hell, you can read it yourself." He handed Foster the open book.

Foster read the entry that said that at 8:35 PM a 57 Chevy came out of the Double B front gate and turned south without coming to a full stop. Five seconds later a Jeep Wrangler appeared from the north at a high rate of speed and continued south. This was followed by another entry that said that at 9:03 PM a Chevy Suburban left the Double B headed south. Finally, there was a third entry that said at 9:31 the 57 Chevy followed by the Suburban returned to the Double B.

"Did Merle get any license plate numbers?" Foster asked handing Clint the ledger.

"If it's not in there than he didn't get them, either because he couldn't make it out from what he saw on the monitor or he didn't think it was important."

"So, it might be on the tape?"

Clint shook his head. "Nope. They get recorded over after twenty-four hours unless Merle decides to save something he looked at. If he had, he would have written that on the notes he gives me, so I can write it in the log. He's been talking about storing them in a cloud, whatever the hell that means."

"Who do you think was in the Chevy and the Suburban?"

"Well, the Suburban is easy. That's the vehicle that Boone's security detail uses. I figure the person in the 57 Chevy was Wylie. He used to have a red 57 Chevy when he was younger. It was a real beaut, I have to say, and it was fast. He must still have it and kept it at the Ranch. I can't imagine Wylie letting anyone else drive it, so it must have been him."

"You have any idea who might have been driving the Jeep Wrangler?"

"Nope, and Merle would have mentioned it if he did. There's a lot of Jeep Wranglers around. Hell, Foster, you're even driving one." Clint pointed out the window at Foster's dented, dirt encrusted, black Jeep.

"Almost a hundred thousand on it. Thirty-five were there when I bought it."

Clint whistled. "And those are Jeep miles."

“Yeah, and I can feel every one of them. I’m sort of hoping it will jar loose the inoperable bullet in my head and pop it out through my ass.”

“Good luck, I guess,” Clint said. “To get back to the Jeep, all I can say about the driver was that he was in a big hurry to get somewhere.”

“Or catch up with someone.”

### **FOR EXAMPLE**

They took the elevator down. It was very slow. After the doors closed they had a few more minutes together. Ari asked Gretl if she could tell him anything more about PI other than it was involved in detecting although what he really wanted to ask was when he could see her again

“They are unusual.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“Okay, for example we worked on a case recently that involved missing cats.”

“Missing cats? What’s so unusual about that. They go missing all the time. I’m always seeing flyers people who lost their cat put up.”

“Yes, but these cats were virtual. They were part of a free software app called Cyber Cat that was developed by a group of students at Picketwire College. They created it as a community service project for people who wanted to have a pet cat but were not allowed to have a real one for some reason like being allergic or they weren’t allowed to have pets. Their virtual cat starts out as a little kitty but then it grows into an adult cat. One day when people activated the app using their computer or smartphone, instead of their little kitty appearing there was a statement from a group calling itself the Cyber Cat Liberation Army saying that their kitty had been liberated.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. I would never kid about missing kitties. People are very attached to their cats, real or virtual.”

“Okay, so what did you do?”

“We discovered who the members of the CCLA were and persuaded them to return the missing cats and not to engage in similar activities in the future.”

“They agreed just like that?”

“After we informed them we would tell their parents if they didn’t. They were all twelve year old’s. However, they had written a manifesto that we thought made some good points, so we also recommended to the Picketwire students who developed the app that it be changed to require the users to agree not to abuse their virtual cats or they would be taken away from them.”

“What constitutes abuse of a virtual cat or any other virtual animal for that matter? It’s not like there is a society for the prevention of cruelty to virtual animals.”

“Now that is a question a philosopher, someone who studies ethics, someone such as yourself, should look into, don’t you think?”

“Okay,” Ari held up both of his hands in surrender. The elevator doors opened, and they were in the lobby. It was empty.

“Where’s your colleague?”

“Actually, we are going to meet outside. He’s going to pick me up instead.”

Ari followed her through the front doors. Time was running out to ask her out or ask her anything.”

“Here he is, right on time,” Gretl said as a black, two door Jeep pulled up and stopped.

“Wait,” Ari said.

Gretl paused as she after she opened the passenger door and turned to him.

Ari continued. “This case of the missing cats is the best example you can come up with of what PI does?”

“I didn’t say it was the best. It’s just an example of the kind of unusual cases we take on.”

I would say it’s more than just unusual it’s...”

“Silly?”

“Well...”

“I take it you’ve never had a cat?”

“No, I’ve only had dogs. One dog, in fact. I’m not against cats, though.”

“Including virtual ones?”

"Both real and virtual," Ari said. "Look can we meet again? Maybe you could give me another example."

"Why wait? If you want another example of what PI does than get in and you can see for yourself," Gretl said. Without waiting for an answer, she tilted the back of the front passenger seat forward and added "You can sit in the front seat. It's got more room." She climbed into the back and then stuck her head out at Ari. "Well, do you want another example or not? If you do get in."

"Sure," Ari answered then slipped the messenger bag off his shoulder.

After Ari settled into the front seat Gretl's head appeared over his left shoulder. "Be sure and buckle up tight. There aren't any roads where we're going so it will get bumpy but Will here is very good at off road driving."

"Driving on roads is when I get into trouble," the driver replied. Will's voice was familiar. Ari turned and looked at him. It was the stranger who'd sat down beside him at the bar in the Last Ditch the day before.

## **JUST A LITTLE BIT**

While Sue was still in LA she had traded her Porsche Carrera for a Prius. In a place where driving a Porsche Carrera is a way of telling people you've arrived even if you haven't she bought the Prius as was a way of telling herself she was leaving, and she did. However, now that she was in Picketwire, she was finding that the earth friendly Prius was so close to the ground that it scraped off the top soil of dirt roads like the one she was on. She would just have to get something with a higher clearance. She also needed a vehicle that had a lot more cargo space than her Prius. Although a pick-up truck would be the practical solution she knew that she didn't want one of those gas guzzling behemoths with tires bigger than Ferris Wheels and cabs the size of minivans. Fortunately, Ted Wheeler, owner of Wheeler Dealer Truck and Tractors, was a regular at The Pretty Good and could steer her in the right direction.

Sue raised the windows to keep out the dust. She hated to shut out the smell of the outdoors, but it was either that or vacuuming the inside. To her right was a creek with cottonwoods growing along its bank and to the left fields that stretched toward the distant Sangre de Cristos where puffy clouds rose like hot air balloons tethered to the peaks. If a pastoral landscape was all that was needed for farming she could stop looking. After a few more minutes of ground crunching driving she saw the farmhouse nestled in a grove of trees. About fifty yards from the house was a large red barn and some pens for livestock. Behind the barn a windmill on top of a wooden tower slowly rotated in the slight breeze. She parked next to a Ford pick-up that looked tan until she got closer and could see that it's white paint was coated with dust.

As Sue walked across the broad planks of the front porch the screen door opened and a man walked out. He was wearing Carhartt bib overalls and a white tee shirt. He was short and had broad shoulders and his head was shaven. He looked more like a Buddhist monk than a farmer. Sue wouldn't have guessed he was in his seventies if Jemma Lu hadn't told her. Instead of offering his hand he bowed his head. She gave a return bow. It wasn't very elegant but at least she didn't curtsy. "I'm Sue Cohen, Jemma Lu's friend."

"I've been expecting you. Would you like to come in or perhaps you would prefer sitting out here?" Joji answered, gesturing at the porch swing as well as two straight backed wood arm chairs with wicker seats. There was a low table in between them.

"Out here is fine, Mister Takemoto. It's a beautiful view."

"Please call me Joji."

"And everyone just calls me Sue. In fact, if you said Miss Cohen I probably wouldn't know who you were talking about," Sue said as she sat in one of the chairs.

"Not everyone calls me Joji," he answered. "Would you like some tea?"  
"I wouldn't want to put you out."

"It's no trouble. I just made a fresh pot." He walked slowly back into the house and returned a minute later with a tray, a pot of tea and two tea cups. Joji removed the quilted tea cozy, revealing a powder blue ceramic tea pot.

"Is the tea set from Japan?" Sue asked.

"It is in a traditional Japanese style," Joji answered as he poured the tea. "But I made the pot and cups myself. I'm not very good, but they don't leak, at least not yet."

Sue took a sip. "This is Ryokucha, which is one of my favorites."

"If you know that it is Ryokucha you must like tea."

"I picked up a taste for good tea while I was living in Los Angeles. I went to the tea houses to try different ones and then served the one's I liked at the restaurants I operated."

"Yes, Jemma Lu told me you were in the restaurant business there before you moved to Picketwire and opened a restaurant."

"Have you eaten there?"



He shook his head. "I stopped eating in restaurants many years ago. However, according to Jemma Lu it is very good."

"Pretty good," Sue said.

"I am sure that she said it was very good."

"No, what I mean is that the name of my restaurant is the Pretty Good Cafe."

"Why that name?"

"Calling it pretty good means I'm not claiming to be the best. I think they call it managing expectations." Especially her own, she thought. Sue had spent years trying to have the best restaurant. It became an obsession that crowded out everything else in her life, but no matter what she achieved it fell short of being what she thought was the best. It was actually a good thing she burned out, otherwise she would have exploded.

"Jemma Lu said that you are now interested in farming?"

"Yes, organic farming in particular," Sue answered, relieved at the change in subject. "I asked Jemma Lu if she knew of any organic farmers in the area since she seems to know everyone. She mentioned you and said she'd try to arrange a meeting and, well, here we are."

"Yes, we are here, but where do you want to go from here?"

"Have you heard of farm to table restaurants?"

"I don't go to restaurants very often."

"Well, a farm to table restaurant is one that serves food that comes directly from local farms like yours that they have a close relationship with instead of using wholesalers and other middlemen. Unfortunately, if its reasonably fresh that's good enough for a lot of restaurants, particularly the fast food ones."

"I prefer my food slow. I don't believe you should rush either the growing or the eating."

"I agree. That's why I don't rush my customers even when there are people waiting for a table," Sue replied. "To get back to your question as to where I want to go, I'd like to have local farms that use organic techniques to supply my tables at the Pretty Good Cafe."

"And you think that my farm, might be one?"

Sue nodded. "Right. I understand from Jemma Lu that you learned organic farming while you were living in Japan?"

"Yes, I had the good fortune to meet Masanobu Fukuoka..."

"Fukuoka! I read his book One-Straw Revolution. He's one of the people who inspired the whole organic farming movement. I read that he saw farming as more than producing food but a spiritual and aesthetic approach to life."

"He said that cultivation and perfection of human beings was the ultimate goal."

"And you got to meet him in person," Sue said, shaking her head in amazement.

"Not only meet him I had the privilege of studying under him and learning his natural farming method. He was particularly interested in the re-vegetation of arid and desert areas. Perhaps you know of the book he wrote on it called Sowing Seeds in the Desert?"

"No, I didn't know about it. I'd like to read it."

"I would lend you my copy, but you would have to learn Japanese first. In any case, because this is an arid area I wanted to learn his method and see if I could apply it here."

"This natural farming method that you learned from Fukuoka, that is what you use on your farm?"

"Not strictly speaking. I modified it over the years based on my experience. You may know that Fukuoka's natural farming method is sometimes called do nothing farming. I suppose one could say that my method is to do just a little bit. Many of the other farmers around here think it is a little bit crazy." He stopped and sipped some tea and then looked at Sue and said. "What I know is if I followed any other way I really would be crazy."

"I can relate to that," Sue said looking straight back into Joji's eyes. "I know I would go nuts if I ran the Pretty Good the way I did the restaurants I owned in LA."

"Los Angeles is where you learned the restaurant business?"

"It turned out I learned the wrong way. What made it worse was that I was successful, so I thought it was the right way. In fact, I thought it was the only way."

"I learned how to farm growing up here. My father was one of the most successful farmers in the area, so my younger brother and I learned his method and he was very methodical. He believed in the do everything way of farming. I had to unlearn his way in order to learn the natural way."

“At least I won’t have to unlearn how to farm since I never learned it to begin with. I mean, if you are willing to teach me.”

“You really wish to learn how to do just a little bit?” Joji said with a laugh and then poured them both more tea.

“There’s nothing I’d rather do,” Sue answered, raising her cup in a toast.

## CHAPTER 15

### FIRST EDITIONS

Even if all it was ever going to be was the one night with Pam that was sure more than Harry had hoped for if, in fact, he’d hoped for anything, which he hadn’t. But, when he said goodbye on the front porch the next morning after breakfast Pam’s reply was. “I hope it’s not.”

“You hope it’s not what?”

“Goodbye.”

“You mean?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

Pam walked up to him until they were almost touching and looked up, straight into his eyes. “Do I need to paint a picture for you?”

“No,” Harry fumbled.

“Good, because I’m a sculptor not a painter.”

“It’s just that I’m still finding it hard to believe that...you know...”

“I’m not asking you to believe anything, Harry, I’m telling you that I want to see you again.”

As Harry stood there speechless with a dopey grin on his face Pam pulled an envelope from the back pocket of her jeans and handed it to him. “Here’s the answer to Howdy’s question. I was afraid that I might wake you up when I got out of bed to write it, but you were sleeping like a log.”

Harry hoped he hadn't been snoring like a saw. He looked at the envelope in his hand. "I'd forgotten all about it."

"Wasn't this the reason why you came to see me?"

"It was," he said. "But not anymore."

"Does that mean you don't want it?"

"Howdy's the one who wants it, not me, I'm just the delivery man."

Pam laughed. "Well, you've got some delivery, Harry."

Hours later after he'd driven down the mountain and had almost, but not quite, returned to earth, Harry sat at the desk in what he considered his private office. Not in the bookstore or his home that he now shared with Carlotta but in an old, adobe ranch house several miles from Picketwire. It had also been a stagecoach stop for Francisco Medrano's Picketwire Stagecoach Line. Although Harry had bought it as a storage library for his private collection of books because its adobe walls helped maintain the inside temperature at the optimum level for preservation, it had since become a place where he could retreat and reflect. There was even a cot where he could take a nap surrounded by books.

Harry stared at the envelope with Howdy's name on it. Pam hadn't sealed it. Did she forget, or did she want him to read it or did she trust him not to? This wouldn't have been the first time Harry had stared at an unsealed envelope addressed to someone else, but they had all been ones found between the pages of used books that he'd acquired. Some letters were to people he'd never heard of in places he'd never been, but others were addressed to people in Picketwire. When he found one that belonged to someone he recognized he would return it if they were still alive but the ones to people who were no longer living he kept. He did this after deciding that if the person had wanted members of their family to read the letter they wouldn't have hidden it in a book. Of course, Harry could have destroyed the letters but since they'd been hidden instead of destroyed he felt that he had a fiduciary responsibility to preserve them. There were now hundreds of them stored in banker's boxes in a section of the library and Harry felt like the caretaker of a cemetery for dead letters. There was a rapping on the front door. Harry picked up the envelope, pulled back the open flap and sealed it with his lips, then walked to the door.

"I see you found the place," Harry said to Howdy.

"Thanks to your directions." Howdy replied stepping through the open doorway. "If I'd followed Google Maps I would have ended up in the middle of nowhere,"

"And where do you think this is?"

"Beyond nowhere,"

"I wanted a hideaway."

"I'd say it's a hideout," Howdy said as he stood with his hands on his hips looking at the shelves of books. "Is this where you stash all the overdue library books that you checked out and never returned?"

Harry laughed. "Actually, these all come from private owners."

"You don't have enough used books in your bookstore?"

"This is my private collection and I prefer to call them pre read not used. Many of them are rare books and a lot of them belonged to people from around here, including some from Picketwire's founders."

"Including the Boone's?"

"Indirectly."

"Indirectly?"

"I didn't buy them from the Boone's but they all have the Double B brand stamped inside on the back of the cover."

"Ain't that a hoot," Howdy said, slapping his right thigh. "The Boone's even branded their books,"

"Maybe they were afraid of book rustlers."

"You didn't rustle them, did you?"

Harry laughed. "The only thing about them that's been rustled are their pages. They were part of a larger collection of books that I acquired and inside one of them was a note from Wylie Boone's father that makes it clear that he was giving them to the person I bought them from."

"Can you tell me their titles? I'm curious what a Boone would read."

"Sure. The note was in a copy of The Wind In The Willows and the other books are Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Peter Pan, The Jungle Book, Peter Rabbit and The Wizard of Oz. All of them are first editions."

"I guess even the Boones were children once."

"Except for Wylie. I think he skipped childhood and went directly to adolescence."

"Where he's been ever since. His development wasn't just arrested it was incarcerated," Howdy said, taking a book from one of the shelves. He looked at the cover then opened it. "How did you ever get your hands on a first edition of James Joyce's Ulysses?"

"From Miss Bennet."

"You mean our first grade teacher?"

"I see you remember her name."

"How could I forget. In fact, I still remember how she invited all of us in the class to her house for some of her homemade cookies. She lived right across Fremont Street from the grade school."

"Coronado Elementary. They tore it down three years ago after they built the new one over on Mesa View. Miss Bennet still lived in the same house and passed away just a few months after that. She was ninety two."

"Hard to believe that our first grade teacher was reading Joyce's Ulysses while baking cookies."

"Not only that, it was a banned book when she bought it."

"How do you know?"

"She told me."

"And she gave it to you?"

"I bought it from her estate. She invited me to her house a year before she died. She was over ninety and still lived in the same place."

"Did she serve you her homemade cookies?"

"As a matter of fact, she did and they were as good as I remembered. She also served martinis and they were the best ones I've ever had. Not that I'm a martini sort of guy. Anyway, Rosalind..."

"Wait, who's Rosalind?"

"That was Miss Bennet's first name."

"I never thought of her as having a first name," Howdy said. "And if I had, I certainly wouldn't have guessed it would be Rosalind."

Harry shrugged. "After a couple of martinis she told me I could call her by her first name. Her parents named her after Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. She said she'd always called me Harry so now that I was a grown up she'd reciprocate."

"Reciprocate?"

"That's the word she used. she must have figured that I was old enough to understand a four syllable word. Anyway, she, Rosalind, asked me if I would buy all of her books when she died. Actually, it wasn't so much a request as a command. She told me that her will called for everything she had to be sold and the proceeds to be divided equally between the Picketwire Public Library and the Picketwire League of Independent Women."

"Miss Bennet was a member of the PLIW?"

"Not just a member, she was a founding member. To tell you the truth, Howdy, that didn't surprise me. What surprised me was the amount she wanted for her book collection. Until she showed me what was in it. In addition to that first edition of *Ulysses* you're holding it included first editions of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the edition that DH Lawrence had privately printed in Italy in 1928, and *Women in Love*, both of which were banned at one time. In fact, there were quite a few books in her collection that were banned when she acquired them. She told me that a big reason why she was such a supporter of the Picketwire Public Library was because they never banned a book."

Howdy shook his head and smiled. "And I always thought Miss Bennet was just a spinster school marm who made cookies."

"I don't have any homemade cookies but I can offer you a beer." Harry said, walking over to an ancient refrigerator and taking out two long neck bottles of beer. He popped the caps and handed one to Howdy then pointed the neck of his bottle at an old easy chair and told him to have a seat.

After carefully returning *Ulysses* to its spot on the bookshelf, Howdy approached the chair. Bending down he pulled at some of the stuffing that was sprouting from the cracks in the leather. "It appears that this chair of yours has a bad case of mange."

"I'd have a vet check it out but I don't think upholstery is covered in veterinary science," Harry said as he sat down in the old metal office chair by his desk. "Maybe I should just shoot it and put it out of its misery."

"Well, don't do it while I'm in it," Howdy said.

I'll have to get some special furniture firearm to do the job properly, anyway."

Howdy sat down in the chair and took a sip of beer then asked. "How did it go with Pam?"

"Fine."

"Just fine?"

"Mighty fine, actually. She even said she wanted to see me again."

"And you feel the same way?"

"You bet, and if you saw her again, yourself, you'd know how stupid a question that was."

"She didn't want to see me, remember? You should be thanking me for asking you to be my messenger."

"And the message was delivered," Harry said. After taking a sip of beer, he put the bottle on the desk, took the sealed envelope and tossed it like a frisbee into Howdy's lap. "And that's her answer."

Howdy picked it up. "Did she tell you what she wrote?"

Harry shook his head. "You're the one who asked her."

Howdy opened the envelope, pulled a single sheet out and slowly read. His eyebrows flared a couple of times before he carefully folded it and put it back in the envelope. Then he took a long swig of beer as he tapped the envelope on one of the mangy arms of the chair.

"Answer your question?"

"It answers the question I asked."

"Then you have the ending for your play."

Howdy shook his head. "More like it thickens the plot."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"As long as it doesn't become quicksand."

**EVER EVER LAND**



Desmond hadn't been on a date for a long time and he wasn't sure if this even qualified. He'd suggested meeting Margaret again for a drink when they had met earlier that day in FRED's and she had agreed. It was only a drink he kept telling himself as he sat looking out the window of the Last Ditch. He had arrived early so that he would be sure to get a table. That had raised the eyebrows of Shep Woolsey since Desmond usually sat at the bar where all the other lonely men hung out.

"I'm meeting a woman for a drink," Desmond explained before Shep could ask. Then, realizing that it sounded like a boast, he added. "She's new in town and I offered to help orient her to Picketwire."

"And you picked the Last Ditch for your orientation session. That'll be a change from the usual disorientation session that most of our patrons engage in."

"She was the one who suggested it as a matter of fact. I was surprised that she knew about the Last Ditch."

"You'd be surprised at how many newcomers we get here. We're sort of a welcome wagon for people who aren't on the wagon."

"Here she is now," Desmond said. Margaret stood just inside the door. Desmond rose from his chair and waved his hand and she walked over to the table with, to his relief, a smile on her face.

Desmond introduced Margaret to Shep who immediately asked. "Are you related to Arvid Knutson?"

"His niece."

"Arvid used to come in here."

"I gathered that from the Last Ditch trivia coupons I found."

"He was a regular at our Tuesday night trivia contest. Winners get coupons that give them a fifty percent discount on drinks."

"He had quite a stack."

"Arvid took his Trivia seriously. He won a lot but didn't drink much so I'm sure he had quite a stash."

"I noticed that his name is written on the coupons. Does that mean he was the only person who could use them?"

"Sorry, they're not transferable," Shep said holding his hands out palms up.

“On the bright side, I won’t have to pay any inheritance tax on them.”

“Look, in memory of Arvid, your drink is on the house. Same for you, Desmond.”

Margaret

didn’t order a glass of wine or something with an umbrella or an olive in it, but a long neck bottle of Sodbuster IPA. Desmond decided to skip his usual gin and tonic and order the same thing. After Shep dropped off the beers, Desmond asked. “How long are you planning on staying in Picketwire?”

“Uncle Arvid put a condition in his will that I had to live here for one year before I could sell the farm.”

“Why did he do that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I have to stay a year to find out,” Margaret said with shrug of her shoulders. “I quit my job so I really don’t have anything that prevents me from leaving Minnesota and coming here for a year.”

“You quit your job to come here?”

“Not exactly. I was working at a high tech start-up with a bunch of boys in tee shirts and hoodies and I was starting to feel like Wendy in Never Never Land and my co-workers were the Lost Boys with Peter Pan as the founder and CEO.”

“Reminds me of a lot of the start-ups I worked with in Silicon Valley.”

“Except the one I worked for was in Golden Valley, which is a Minneapolis suburb. There were only five people working there when I started and I was the only female. I took the job because I wanted to work in a start-up. After I graduated from college in St. Paul I needed to pay off my student loans so I went to work for large corporation for five years. As soon as I made my last loan payment I started looking for a different job. A friend told me about this new start-up that was developing a new Internet based product and I contacted them. Next thing I knew I was meeting with the CEO, who also founded the business and was offered a job. At first it was a really cool place to work at a start-up but after a while it began to feel like it wasn’t just a start-up but a place that never wanted to grow up. Its offices were even in a building that had once been an elementary school. Peter, which was the actual first name of the founder/CEO if you can believe it, thought that if you were creating the next big thing you could ignore all the little things. He was able to convince investors that with just a little more time and money the big idea would take off, like they were Tinker Bell who could sprinkle the pixie dust that would make it fly.”

“Sounds like you got out of there just in time.”

“Actually, they announced they were going public last month and I would have made several million dollars from the initial public offering if I’d stayed.”

“Too bad you didn’t know.”

“I did know.”

“You did?”

Margaret nodded. “But, in order to cash in my stock options I would have had to agree to stay on at the company for another year and I had just found out that Uncle Arvid left me the farm but, as I said, there was one condition.”

“That you had to come here to live for a year.”

“Peter and all the Lost Boys thought I was crazy to leave and walk away from all that money. After all, if I agreed to stay on for another year in Never Never Land and I wanted a farm I could buy any one I wanted...except for one.”

“Your Uncle Arvid’s.”

Margaret sighed. “So here I am.”

“No regrets?”

“Not yet but, then, I only just arrived. Maybe I’ll stay here forever.” Margaret drained the rest of her beer, placed the empty bottle on table and said. “Gee, what if Picketwire is ever ever land.”

“Can I buy you another beer?” Desmond asked.

“You didn’t buy the first one, it was on Uncle Arvid, remember?” Margaret smiled.

Your teeth are as white as your eyes are blue, Desmond wanted to say, but said. “Okay, but the next round is on me.”

Margaret leaned toward him across the table. “You know what I’d really like instead of another beer?”

Desmond felt like his heart was doing cartwheels against his rib cage. “What?”

“Take a hot bath and wash my hair,” Margaret said, tugging at her blond hair.

“Huh?”

"You did say that your trailers have bathrooms and hot water when we met at FRED's, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course they do, with bathtubs and, it goes without saying that they are very clean. We also provide soap and shampoo. Premium brands made of all natural products."

"I have my own shampoo."

"You carry it in your purse?"

"No," she laughed. "It's in my suitcase in the car. When I heard about your trailer motel or whatever you call it..."

"Happy Trails RV and Trailer Park."

"Happy Trails, right. Anyway, I went back to the farm and got my suitcase so I'm ready to check in."

## **TWO RIDERS**

"Two riders were approaching and the wind began to howl," Sister M's listened to the last verse of Bob Dylan's All Along The Watchtower trail off into silence. She loved the song, and for many years she listened to the Jimi Hendrix version with his soaring guitar riffs. However, that version had been replaced by the one Sister Rosalie and Sister Wendy performed under the name The Lost Souls Sisters. Sister Rosalie's voice transformed the lyrics into a soulful prayer and Sister Wendy's fiddle solo at the end was a veritable transubstantiation. Sister M's turned off the ancient Sony Walkman, removed the earbuds and placed them in the backpack that served as the briefcase. This was followed by the legal pad that she'd been scribbling on. Then she turned off the computer that she'd been using for the last several hours, engaged in one of her least favorite activities - legal research. At least with free online sites like Google Scholar she didn't have to wade through volumes of law books. She looked around at the room she was in. It had once been the prison library. When they took over the prison it was filled with books and the largest section was devoted to the law. In fact, when she had examined the books it was apparent that they had been some of the most popular volumes in the library. She couldn't help wondering how many jailhouse lawyers had sat where she was scouring the dusty pages of legal statutes, criminal code and case law for something that would get them out.

"Tony Medrano is here to see you," Sister Sylvia announced. She looked at Sister M's from her seat at the Librarian's desk, cradling the receiver of the old black rotary phone that served as an intercom.

"Tell him I'm on my way," Sister M's answered, getting up from the library table.

After conveying the message and hanging up, sister Sylvia asked. "Have you chosen the book you are going to read?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"You don't have much time."

I would if you hadn't picked a novella to read, Sister M's was tempted to respond. "I suppose you wouldn't consider stretching out Heart of Darkness a bit, would you? I mean, it's such a great work that it's a shame not to allow every word to sink in."

"Well, I suppose I could go a bit slower to allow everyone to fully reflect on what Conrad has written."

"Yes, it is a work that cries out for meditation."

"Thank you, Sister M's. I chose it because I thought we might benefit from something a bit deeper."

"I agree. Although I think that Sister Rachel did a very good job with her reading of Bridget Jones' Diary."

"It was entertaining, I'll grant you that," Sister Sylvia replied then turned her attention back to the papers on her desk, a bemused smile on her face.

When Sister M's entered the Welcome Center she found Tony Medrano standing next to a map on one of the walls. "Good afternoon, Sister I was just looking at this old map of the area that you have on display. I guess I hadn't really noticed it before."

"That's because I just put it up this morning," Sister Louise chirped from behind the counter. "Sister Beatrice spent some time studying the original. As you know, she's an archeologist and supervises all the restoration and preservation work here. Anyway, Sister Beatrice was very excited about the discovery. She said it was in excellent shape considering its age so not much preservation work was required. Of course, this is a copy that we made. The original is safely stored in the archives."

"Where did you find it?"

"If you can believe it, we discovered hidden under the floor of one of the cells. It's undergoing restoration work and when Sister Beatrice and Sister Melody, who is also a carpenter, pulled up the old plank floors, they found it. Fortunately, it had been wrapped in cowhide and with the dry air it somehow survived."

"How do you think it got there?"

"Considering who occupied the cells, we think it's highly likely that it was some inmates ill gotten gain, although who they stole it from and why they thought it was so valuable they would risk smuggling it into prison with them is anyone's guess," Sister Louise said, walking over to where Tony and Sister M's were standing. "Whoever stole it smuggled it in with them and hid it in the mattress. Something must have prevented them from smuggling it out after they served their time."

"Do you mind if I take a photo of it?"

"Go ahead, but you can buy your own copy." Sister Louise pointed to the price sticker for \$4.99 affixed to the frame. "That price is without the frame, of course."

Tony took out his wallet and handed Sister Louise a five dollar bill. "Keep the change," he said.

Sister Louise reached under the counter and took out a copy of the map, rolled it up and then inserted it into cardboard tube that she handed to Tony.

"Thanks. This could be helpful with some research I'm doing." Tony said then turned to Sister M's. "Sorry that I kept you waiting but this could be really helpful in some research I'm doing."

"As a matter of fact I need an excuse to get away from the research I'm doing."

"In that case, I think this will be a pretty good excuse: Sheriff Riggleman brought Donny Buford in for questioning,"

"Who's Donny Buford?"

"He's the kid who picked up Zelda and our visitors in his pick-up after they escaped from the train."

"Oh, that Donny. Zelda didn't tell me his last name. Did he tell the Sheriff that he dropped them off here? I mean, I wouldn't want him to lie."

"He refused to answer the Sheriff's questions."

"How do you know?"

"Zelda told me. She said that Donny called her when the Sheriff pulled up in front of his house. She told him not to say anything without his lawyer present."

"Who's his lawyer?"

“Zelda told him that you were her lawyer so she didn’t think you’d mind being his as well.”

“Where’s Donny now?”

“At the Sheriff’s Department. That’s where they took him for questioning. When he told them he wouldn’t talk without his lawyer present they told him he could make one call. The problem is, Zelda didn’t give him your name so he doesn’t know that you are his lawyer. So Donny called Zelda and told her he needed his lawyer so she called me and asked me if I could pick you up and take you to the Sheriff’s Department and, well...”

“Here you are.”

“Right. We can both ride in my pick-up.”

“Well, I suppose we should get going so I can meet my client.”

## CHAPTER 16

### TOM TAKES THE STAGE

Hot off the press and right into a burning ring of fire. Just a couple of hours after the Picketwire Press published their exclusive interview with Wylie Boone it was picked up by the wire services and shortly after that Tom got his first call from another newspaper. In a few hours he had fielded calls from media outlets from all over: Not just all over the State of Colorado and not just all over the country but from all over the world. And not just print, but television, radio and Internet news sites. Not to mention the bloggers and tweeters and who knows whatters.

“I’ll get back to you,” Tom said and hung up the phone on his desk.

“Who was that?” Gloria asked. She had just come back to the office and was standing by his desk. Other than her and Tom, no one else was in the office.

“He said he was a news curator,” Tom answered looking up at Gloria. “I thought curators just worked in museums but he told me that a news curator takes news stories from news outlets and puts them into a thematic collection that can be published online. He wanted to collect our stories on Wylie Boone for a news feed, which is called, get this.” Tom looked down at his handwritten notes. “Boone Buzz.”

“I’ve heard of Boone Buzz. I came across it when I did an Internet search on Boone as part my background research. ”

"Did it have any good stuff?"

"Let's say it had stuff and leave it that." She shook her head. "Amazing the stuff that is posted online that no newspaper in its right mind would publish."

"You mean all the news that's unfit to print?"

Gloria grimaced. "Like having to eat a jumbo box of stale popcorn in order to find a kernel of truth."

"Speaking of which, were you able to get anything truthful from Rigglesman?"

Gloria shook her head slowly. "That name sure suits him because he sure knows how to wriggle out of giving a straight answer to a question." She opened her notebook. "When I asked him if he was worried that the person who tried to kill Boone might try it again his answer was, quote, if they tangle with me, I'll have their hide. What does that mean?"

"It's a line from John Wayne in the movie Horse Soldiers." Foster St. Vrain said. He'd entered the office while Gloria and Tom were talking.

Gloria rolled her eyes. "Thanks, Foster, I'll put in my story that Sheriff Rigglesman's response is actually a quote from John Wayne."

"Is there anything from the interview that is news?" Tom asked.

"Nothing concerning Boone. What he really wanted to talk about was undocumented immigrants from Mexico that he calls illegals are invading the county. He also said that these illegals include lots of violent criminals."

"Did he offer any evidence to back up his claim?" Tom asked. "Not that a lack of evidence ever stopped him from arresting people."

"He said he and his Posse..."

"You mean the gang that can't ride straight?" Foster drawled. He had settled into a chair and put his crossed legs up on the desk in front of him, his boots resting on the blotter, and clasped his hands behind the back of his neck.

"Whatever," Gloria answered and then continued. "He said they had just intercepted a bunch of illegals who were entering the County on the Picketwire Railroad. They were, according to him, disguised as members of one of Tony Medrano's tours. He also said that Max Bergman was there and that he was also disguised as the conductor." Gloria looked up from her notes and added. "He refused to elaborate on what he meant by that."



Tom leaned back and laughed. "Max was working for Tony. He was playing the part of Clem the conductor on this new tour of Tony's called Rails, Trails and Tales."

"How do you know that?" Gloria asked.

"He sent me a press release announcing a new tour called Trails and Tales and I included it in the Round Up section of the paper a few weeks ago."

"I guess I missed it. Sorry. I really do try to read every single word that's in each edition of the paper."

"Then you read more of than I do," Tom replied. "Anyway, getting back to your interview, did the Sheriff tell you how many of these illegals, as he calls them, he arrested on the train were actually violent criminals?"

"No, because he didn't arrest anybody. He says they got away before he could apprehend them."

"You mean he actually admitted that these desperados managed to escape him and his posse?" Foster asked.

"Riggleman said they jumped off the train before he could board it and escaped. He claims that they had accomplices who helped them get away, otherwise he would have caught them."

"Did he offer anything to back up this claim that there were accomplices?" Tom asked.

"He said, he had no further comments on the accomplices at that this time. He did say that their horses were spooked and ran off so they were unable to pursue the illegals."

Foster unclasped his hands. "Did he actually see these, to use his words, illegals that he claims are violent criminals?"

"No but he's sure he'll, quote, have them rounded up and behind bars in no time so they won't be able to prey on the good, law abiding, citizens of Purgatory County, end of quote. I guess I should check to see if that's also from a John Wayne movie. I'm going to ask Tony for his version of what happened."

"You mean, the true version," Foster said pulled his legs from the desk and let his boots hit the floor with a thump.

When Tom called Tony the person who answered the phone at Purple Sage Tours said he was out of the office and they didn't know when he would return. Although

the next person to call would be Max Bergmann, Tom hesitated for a moment. Even though he'd attended most of the plays performed by the Bard Wire Theater Company he wasn't exactly a fan. Despite his best efforts he always dozed off during the performances although he was pretty sure no one noticed since he managed to keep his head upright and not snore. He also made a point of attending on opening night so he could sit next to Eleanor Perceval, the Picketwire Press's theater critic. Eleanor, who was also a Professor of Fine Arts at Picketwire College would not only nudge him awake as the final curtain came down but fill him in on what he missed so that he could reply intelligently when people asked him what he thought. She joked that this not only saved Tom from embarrassment but also from having to read her review, which, in fact, it did.

Instead of Max, his answering machine picked up. There was a lengthy message from Max in a dramatic voice informing the caller that Mr. Bergmann was unavailable because he was at the rehearsal for the new play by the world renowned playwright, Howdy Hanks, that he was directing. Tom hung up as the message continued with details on the date of the world premiere and how to go about purchasing tickets. Tom knew that rehearsals were being held in the sanctuary of the Picketwire Community Church. When he got there the door to the sanctuary was closed with a note taped on it stating that there was no admittance during rehearsals. Hoping there might be a break when he would be able to talk to Max, Tom sat down on a bench in the narthex. As he waited he noticed the stack of Church newsletters and picked one up. On the front was a story on Jane, which made him feel guilty that he had avoided her. Then he started worrying that she might walk in on him sitting there and he'd have to talk to her. He put the newsletter back in the stack, looked at his watch and decided to leave. As he got up the door to the sanctuary suddenly opened and Max appeared.

"What are you doing here, Tom?" Max demanded, "The rehearsal is closed to the press."

"Don't worry, I didn't go inside. I've been waiting out here."

"What for?"

"To talk to you."

Max relaxed his face. "Ah, you want a story. Sorry to disappoint the press but as much as I want to, I can't tell you anything about the play because Howdy wants to keep it a secret until it opens."

"It's not about the play."

"It's not?"

"I mean the play is really big news, don't get me wrong but what I want to talk to you about is what happened when you were performing on the train yesterday as part of Tony Medrano's tour. Gloria Herrera, one of our reporters interviewed the Sheriff about something else and he claimed that he had stopped the train searching for illegal immigrants and that you were playing the part of a conductor."

"Clem the conductor. I also wrote the script and directed. It was in the old melodrama style that was popular in the nineteenth century, especially in the old west. I had to do quite a bit of research to make sure it was authentic."

"Right, well he told Gloria that there were illegal immigrants on the train but that they had escaped. The Sheriff refused to go into any detail but since you were there, I thought you might be able to tell me what took place."

Max opened his mouth and then closed it, bit his lip and furrowed his brows and then answered. "As much as I would like to be quoted in the paper - not for me personally, of course, but for the positive publicity it gives to the Bard Wired Players- in this case I really don't want my name in the paper. I've been told that the Sheriff can be vindictive."

"I'm afraid you're right." Tom nodded. "But, look, I don't need to name you; you can be an anonymous source."

Max smiled. "You mean, like deep throat in All The President's Men?"

"Sort of like that."

"And you're playing Woodward."

"I'm not exactly Robert Redford," Tom stammered.

"Neither was Woodward. That's what's we call theatrical license. Of course, being a journalist you want just the facts."

"Whatever you can recollect will be great."

"Then, what I recollect is that Sheriff Riggleman and his posse stopped the train just when we were reaching the dramatic climax of our performance. The actor who was playing the part of Clementine..."

"A man was playing a woman's part?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"You said actor not actress."

Max sighed. "We don't call women actresses in the theater anymore. Everyone who acts, whether they are male, female or whatever combination they choose, is an actor."

"Isn't that confusing?"

"No. more confusing than women journalists being called reporters rather than reportresses."

"Right. Sorry I interrupted."

"As I was saying, the actor playing Clementine came running from the back of the observation car, which is the last car in the train and has one of those platforms at the rear..."

"I know, I wrote a story about riding on it for its inaugural run after it had been restored. Sorry for interrupting again."

"Yes, well, to continue," Max said. "She, the actor I mentioned, was yelling that there was a gang on horseback chasing us. Of course, she couldn't have known that it was the Sheriff and his posse and not train robbers. She ran past me to the front of the car. Several other passengers leapt from their seats and followed her. She did give quite a convincing performance."

"But she wasn't performing if she thought the Sheriff and his posse really were bank robbers."

"That doesn't mean she wasn't acting. All the world's a stage so why not a train."

"Isn't all the world's a stage from Shakespeare?"

"As You Like It, Act Two, Scene Seven. You no doubt remember those words from the production that we staged last year."

"Of course," Tom said. "It was very moving."

"It's a comedy – you're supposed to laugh."

"I was moved to laughter is what I meant," Tom replied. "But getting back to what happened on the train, what did your actor and the three passengers do next?"

"It seems that they all jumped off the train."

"They jumped off a moving train?"

"No, the train had come to a stop. Someone had pulled the emergency cord and since it wasn't going very fast to begin with it stopped pretty quickly."

"Then what happened?"

"Sheriff Riggleman came aboard and walked down the aisle. Actually, he strutted like he wanted to everyone to think he was John Wayne. He stopped when he got to me and demanded to know where the illegals were. It seems that he actually thought I was a real conductor instead of an actor. If he wasn't such a dunce, I would be flattered that my performance was so convincing that he didn't realize I was an actor. Like your reporter told you, he had some crazy idea they were illegal immigrants. He seemed to think the Picketwire Railroad was the underground railroad."

"He didn't find the passengers who jumped off the train from what I understand."

"That's right, he and his posse couldn't find them near the train and they weren't able to continue their search because their horses had escaped as well. Apparently, the train whistle scared them off. Since there was no cell service where we were, he wasn't able to contact anyone to pick up him and his posse so they had to ride back to Picketwire with us. I don't know what happened to the passengers who ran off."

"What about the actor who played Clementine?"

"What about her?"

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know. She got here just in time for the start of rehearsal. All she said was that some guy she knows from high school was driving by and gave her a ride."

"Can I talk to her?"

"You can try but she said that she didn't want to discuss it with anyone. But you'll have to wait until after rehearsal is over, which won't be for another couple of hours. I just called for a short break because one of our actors hasn't shown up. I came out to see if he was sneaking a smoke or a drink."

"I didn't think smoking and drinking were allowed in a Church."

"That wouldn't stop this guy. He's turned out to be completely unreliable." Max looked at his watch. "That's it, I've had it with him. I'll just have to cast someone else for the part. The show must go on." He stepped back and sized Tom up. "Have you ever acted?"

"Me? Act? In a play?" Tom stammered.

"Nothing to it. This isn't a lead or anything. You just have to deliver a few lines. You just have to look the part and you're about the right age for the character, who is a senior in high school."

"But I graduated from Picketwire High more than ten years ago."

"That's closer than thirty years, which is how long it's been for Larry, the guy I just fired. You can only do so much with make-up. Also, he couldn't remember his lines even when he did show up. You, on the other hand..."

"No way." Tom interrupted, holding up both of his hands in protest.

"Look, you said you wanted to talk to Zelda, right?"

"Who's Zelda?"

"Zelda Zenn is the actor's stage name."

"Yeah. But..."

"Well, this is your chance. We're about to rehearse a scene with her and the character you play. You can read your lines from the script."

"But that's acting not interviewing."

"Don't you see, you'll gain her trust and she'll agree to tell you everything. I think she has some very valuable information that will help you. It'll be a scoop. Come on, just try it out. No commitment although I'm a pretty damn good judge of talent and I think you've really got something, Tom."

"I do?"

"You may not believe this, but when we were doing our interview just now it felt like we were doing a scene together. It was like you really were Robert Redford playing Woodward." He poked Tom in the chest with his right index finger. "There's an actor inside you just waiting to get on stage."

Before Tom could reply, Max grabbed him by the arm and opened the door. To Tom's amazement he didn't resist and followed Max inside the sanctuary as if he was being called by some higher power.

## **A DITCH TO NOWHERE**

Ari was beginning to feel gear stick envy as he watched Will deftly shift the Jeep's gears. He couldn't help feeling like a wimp for his inability to master the manual

transmission. His attempt to learn on his own had ended in humiliation. He'd rented a car in Athens with a stick shift while on one of his trips back to Greece but was unable to even back out of the parking space. How hard could it be to learn how to push and pull a stick while depressing a pedal? It doesn't take a PhD. Unfortunately, that also meant for Ari that all of the years of education that went into getting his PhD in Philosophy wouldn't be of any use: Shifting through gears wasn't the same as engaging in a dialectical argument. He'd just have to go to some driving school so he could learn. Someplace far away because he didn't want anyone in Picketwire to know that he didn't know. Maybe one of those places that teach you how to drive like a Grand Prix driver who smoothly shifts through hairpin turns as they race through the streets of Monaco.

Not that Ari could put that skill to use on the particular road they were on. In fact it wasn't even a road. They had turned off the paved road and then the gravel one and were now bouncing and shimmying across the prairie, on a rutted track that, according to Gretl, had been carved by conestogas a hundred years ago. After an hour in the Jeep the only thing that Ari knew about Will was his last name, Raines, an appropriate name since the other thing Ari learned was that Will was a hydrogeologist who specialized in water distribution and conservation. All of this came from Gretl as she introduced them after Ari had settled into the front seat of the Jeep. The only words Will said were nice to meet you and buckle up. Ari assumed from Will's response that he didn't remember they had met at the Last Ditch or, if he did, he didn't want to talk about it.

"It looks like the middle of nowhere," Ari observed.

"Logically, if we're in the middle we have to be somewhere because nowhere would have no boundaries that we could be equidistant from," Gretl replied from the back seat.

"Doesn't that go against the cowboy philosophy of don't fence me in?"

"Don't Fence Me In is a song."

"There's no reason why philosophy can't be sung ...on horseback...while strumming a guitar."

"Is that how you give your lectures?"

"No although I'm new to these parts so who knows. Of course, I would have to learn how to ride a horse, play the guitar and carry a tune."

"If you do you might want to think twice about including Don't Fence Me In since it was written by Cole Porter and he certainly wasn't a cowboy. His idea of the wide open spaces was Central Park. I'll leave it to you as to whether he would be considered a philosopher."

Ari was trying to think of a comeback when the Jeep stopped. As Will cut the motor and opened his door Gretl announced from the back seat. "This is as far as we go," Gretl announced, nudging the back of Ari's seat. "We're here."

"Here?" Ari answered, opening the door and getting out. Will was already out and walking quickly as if he knew where he was going.

"I mean it's not far from here," Gretl replied, climbing out of the back seat and standing beside Ari.

"Good, because I didn't bring my hiking boots. In fact, I don't have any hiking boots."

"Just follow the path."

"What path?"

"Okay, just follow me."

Ari kept eyes on the ground in front of him as he walked behind her on his thin soled, cordovan, penny loafers through the brush, loose stones and cactus. "How far is it?"

"Will's already there."

Ari stopped and looked up. Will had vanished. "Close? He's disappeared."

Gretl pointed down. Ari walked over and stopped where she was standing, which turned out to be the edge of a ditch. Will was inside the ditch, stooped over and poking around the bottom with his right hand. Although there was no water in the ditch, he raised his hand and opened it so that they could see the mud he'd scooped up. Gretl took a picture of him with her Leica.

"There was water in here last night and you can see by the water line that is still visible that it was a couple of feet deep." Will pointed at the side of the ditch and then poked it with his right index finger and ground the dirt between his thumb and index finger. "Damp." Gretl took another photo with her Leica. Will scrambled up out of the ditch and wiped his hands off on his jeans.

"Isn't that what an irrigation ditch is for?" Ari asked. "I mean this is an irrigation ditch, isn't it?"

"It was an irrigation ditch," Gretl answered, "But it hasn't been used for a couple of years..."

"Three years," Will interjected. "That's when the owners sold their water rights."



"Maybe it's from rain." Ari offered.

Gretl shook her head. "It hasn't rained for days."

"Ten days," Will added. "And it was less than a quarter inch."

"It rains so rarely here, especially this time of year, it's hard to not notice when it does," Gretl said.

"Where did the water come from, then?" Ari asked.

"The River. That's why the Purgatoire's level is lower than normal," Gretl said.

"And that's why we got involved," Will added.

"But how did it get into this ditch?"

"Somebody opened the old headgate where this is connected to the river. It was supposed to be sealed shut when the ditch was vacated," Will said.

"Obviously someone has been opening it to divert water into this ditch," Gretl said.

"Why?"

"Well, they could be doing it to irrigate their crops because they can't afford to buy water or they could be doing it to sell it to someone who can afford to buy it," Gretl answered.

"In either case they would be running it through here to ditches that are connected to this one. The problem is there are no ditches that are connected to this one," Will said.

"But the water has to have gone somewhere," Ari insisted.

"Unless it's a ditch to nowhere," Gretl replied.

Will looked at both of them and said. "Ready?"

"For what?" Ari asked.

"To see where the water went," Will replied.

"You didn't think we came out here just to look at an empty ditch, did you?" Gretl added.

"It can't be very far from here," Will said. "So it shouldn't be too much of a hike it but you can follow me in the Jeep if you want."

Ari looked at his penny loafers. They were scuffed and covered with dust. "I don't know if I can get very far in these shoes."

"We'll both follow you in the Jeep," Gretl replied. Will, who was already walking away, acknowledged her by raising his right arm. She turned to Ari and asked. "Do you want to drive?"

## CHAPTER 17

### ONE CONDITION

Jemma Lu didn't take up Howdy's offer for a ride on his motorcycle. It wasn't that she was afraid of motorcycles. No, asking her to take a ride on his bike was how it all started the first time. After all these years Howdy ought to have come up with a new line. Not that she would have fallen for it if he had. He might be the Sagebrush Shakespeare but she wasn't interested in more drama. Besides, she had a lunch meeting of the FRED X selection committee that Rich Best had persuaded her to serve on. Since, she'd also agreed to chair the meeting on condition it would be held at her office, she couldn't very well miss it.

"Did you say yes?" Rich had repeated after she finally relented and agreed.

"Yes."

"That's a yes to yes?"

"Really, Rich, can't you take yes for an answer?"

"I just wanted to make sure."

"You're lucky because if you had asked me again I would have said no."

If only Rich had asked again, Jemma Lu thought as she watched him and Desmond Goswami, the other members of the selection committee, enter the front door of the Picketware Building, a three story brick structure occupying an entire block in downtown Picketwire. Her desk was in the mezzanine overlooking the main show room. She watched them as they walked toward the rear where the stairs and elevator were. Jemma Lu wondered if they would take the stairs or the elevator. She always took the stairs even when she had been on crutches from knee surgery a couple of years before. Unfortunately, she couldn't see the elevator doors or the stairs from her perch so she could only guess, which one they took. After waiting several minutes for them to appear she knew they had opted for the elevator.

Taking the stairs was faster, even on crutches. When they arrived at Jemma Lu's works space she waved them toward chairs on the other side of the desk.

"I sure get a kick out of taking that elevator of yours, Jemma Lu," Rich said. "What an antique. And Stan, that's the old gentleman who was operating it," Rich explained to Desmond. "He's such a card. You know, I ride the elevator every time I come here just so I can hear his jokes. Desmond says this is the first time he's ridden in it."

"This is the first time I've been above the main floor," Desmond said. "I'm curious as to why you haven't replaced the elevator with one that has automatic controls."

"We could replace the elevator but we couldn't replace Stanley."

"I see," Desmond answered. Jemma Lu knew that he didn't, really. Not yet, anyway. But there was no rush. A whooshing sound made her turn to a vacuum tube that ran up through the floor of the mezzanine next to her desk. It had been used for sending and receiving messages and documents at Picketware before the advent of computers. Still, not everything can be reduced to digits and attached to an email so they kept the tubes. Jemma Lu heard a whoosh and a glass container popped out. Inside was a bag with Sue's Pretty Good to Take Home printed on it. She placed the bag on the table, put the container back in the tube and closed the hatch and it immediately disappeared with another whoosh.

"Here's your Better Than Most Burger, Rich. Well done as you requested," she said passing it to Rich, who sat across from her. "And this is your bowl of Some Like it Hotter Chili," she said to Desmond. After handing them all plates, napkins, forks, knives and spoons that she took from the top drawer of the mammoth oak desk they were all seated around, she took out half a Rocky Ford cantaloupe that would be her lunch.

"Thanks for lunch," Rich said before biting into his burger.

"Yes," Desmond added, looking around as he dipped his spoon into the bowl of chili. "I see you have adopted the open office plan."

"Adopted?" Jemma Lu said. "We've never had individual offices. There wasn't even an office desk for the first fifteen years and that was more than a hundred years ago. Then my great grandparents had this made. The date and initials of the man who made it for them is carved right here." She ran the fingers of her right hand across the carved initials on the top of the desk. "It was big enough for both of them to use at the same time. In fact, anyone who needed a desk used it."

"It's called hot desking," Desmond said. "That's when different people use the same desk on a rotating basis. It's quite an innovation."

"I don't know that anyone thought of it as an innovation even a hundred years ago. Not that we're against innovation as long as it meets a real need."

"Necessity is the mother of invention," Rich offered.

"And desire is the father of a lot of orphans," Jemma Lu replied. "Picketware isn't in the business of producing orphans so we don't sell something to people just because they want it. They may not get what they want but what they do get they need."

"Desmond, you said a rotating desk is a hot innovation?" I wish I'd thought of that one." Rich said.

"I think what Desmond meant is that a hot desk is when different people use the same desk on a rotating basis not that the desk rotates," Jemma Lu said.

"Then the next innovation in office furniture after the hot desk could be a desk that rotates. It would be like a lazy susan only I'd call it a lazy fred. You know I think it could be part of FRED X."

"If you want to submit it for consideration you have to abstain from voting," Jemma Lu said.

"Why?"

"Because it would be a conflict of interest for you to vote on your own submission. In fact, you should leave the room so that you don't know who voted for or against it."

Rich looked around. "What room?"

"Well, you can wait downstairs or you can ride the elevator up and down listening to Stanley's jokes."

"Stan's my man," Rich said. "But if I leave then what happens if one of you votes for my idea and one against? There needs to be three people voting so there won't be any ties."

"Good point, Rich," Jemma Lu said with a smile "And since you can't vote because of the conflict of interest there's no other alternative than not to allow any member of the selection committee to submit an idea for consideration."

"I agree," Desmond said, then added sympathetically. "That doesn't mean it isn't a good idea, Rich."

Rich sighed and sat back in his chair. Jemma Lu tapped a stack of paper on the desk in front of her and asked him and Desmond. "You met with everyone who submitted an application?"

Rich perked up and answered. "We sure did."

"So together with what was submitted in these application forms we should have all the information necessary to decide who should present at FRED X." After Rich and Desmond nodded, Jemma Lu continued. "Then let's discuss them in the order that they were submitted. She picked up the top sheet from the stack. The first person submission is Clint Crowley."

Rich looked at Desmond and then said to Jemma Lu. "We already sort of promised him that he would be included in FRED X."

"Sort of promised?"

"After Clint pitched us his idea for Rent a Rancher it seemed like a no brainer. We did tell him he needed a little help with his presentation."

"Knowing Clint he'll need more than a little."

"Desmond agreed to coach him, right, Desmond?"

Desmond nodded.

"Did you sort of promise anyone else that you met?"

"Let's see," Rich looked at the list then pointed at a name. "We didn't promise Brady Barnes. I have to say, I like this Hoofer idea of his where they hitch horses to special hitching posts and people can unhitch them by inserting their credit card and then ride them to where they want to go and then just hitch them to another post so someone else can use them. Desmond, though, has some doubts about it."

"I question whether there is really any market demand for it," Desmond said.

"If there's a demand for shared bikes and even electric scooters then why not for horses?" Rich answered.

"Aside from Desmond's point, which I think is quite a good one," Jemma Lu said. "It seems to me that this business Brady proposes could be really dangerous. Riding a horse isn't the same as riding a bike."

"Brady covered that. Everyone who rides has to sign a waiver that says they won't sue if they get hurt. A rider to ride, as he called it."

"What if the horse is hurt?" Jemma Lu asked. "Nobody shoots a bike when it has a flat tire. I can't vote for something that doesn't have proper safeguards to protect

the horses. I don't see anything in his proposal about it. Did Brady tell you what they were when you met with him?"

"Well," Rich squirmed. "He didn't tell us."

"We didn't ask," Desmond said. "We should have."

"That's okay. You saved Brady the embarrassment of having to admit that he hadn't even thought about it."

"I can see now that Brady's idea isn't ready for FRED X," Rich said. "I'll let him know that it needs more work." He looked at Jemma Lu who was staring at him with one eyebrow arched and added. "A lot more."

"You might want to tell him that successful entrepreneurs learn from their failures," Desmond added.

"You can tell him that, but the Brady Barnes I know is a very slow learner," Jemma Lu said, then with a forced smile said. "Anyway, that's settled. Is there anyone else on the list of applicants who you sort of promised?"

"Brady's the only one."

"Then I guess there's nothing else for the selection committee to do."

"There is one more that we could consider who isn't on the list."

"I thought every idea that was submitted before the deadline was on this list?"

"So did I," Desmond added.

"Technically, the idea was submitted before the deadline," Rich said. "But there was a condition that we would have to agree to. That's why it's not on the list."

"What's the condition?" Jemma Lu asked.

"That he presents the idea only to you and that you decide whether it should be included in FRED X."

"That means you and Desmond won't be able to hear it or vote on it."

"I guess that's only fair since you didn't get to vote on all the others except Brady's. There's another reason for doing it this way, though. He said that if we agreed to this he would cover all of our expenses plus another twenty five thousand dollar in prize money for the best ideas."

"I didn't know FRED X is going to give out prize money," Jemma Lu said.

"That's because we don't have any money but if we did, we could, and we could if we agree to his condition."

"Two could's don't necessarily add up to should," Jemma Lu said, shaking her head. "This offer sounds like a bribe, to me."

"It's not a bribe because Wylie said he would give the money whether or not we, in this case you, accepted his idea. All he wants is a chance to submit it to you in person."

"I still don't like it. There has to be more to it than that one condition."

"Is that a no vote?" Rich asked.

"I think I should abstain. I'll go with whatever you two decide."

"In that case I vote yes," Rich said. "What about you Desmond? Are you willing to let Jemma Lu hear this fellow present his idea and decide whether it should be included in FRED X?"

"I think I'll abstain as well," Desmond said, dipping his spoon into the bowl of chili.

"That's one yes and no no's, the motion carries," Rich said slapping the table. Then taking a paper napkin he wiped off the greasy imprint that his bison burger stained hand had made.

Jemma Lu sat back in her chair and sighed. "Okay, but I just hope this fellow really has the resources to keep up his end of the bargain."

"You don't need to worry about that, Jemma Lu," Rich said, breaking out in a broad smile. "Because the fellow we're talking about is Wylie Boone."

## **A BETTER BATAMOCHI**

Bruce looked at Jane out of the corner of his eye as he steered their blue Camry. He had discovered that driving could be relaxing rather than nerve wracking when you didn't have to dodge and weave through New York City traffic with one foot on the gas and one on the brake. You could actually use cruise control out here because you were actually cruising. It also gave him a chance to think about something other than avoiding a fender bender. "This is exciting," he said.

Jane turned and looked at him with surprise. "You're excited about meeting my Uncle?"

"What I mean is it's exciting to be involved in trying to solve a mystery, maybe even a crime, and your Uncle could provide us with some important clues."

"We're not detectives, Bruce."

"Speak for yourself, honey. Being a detective might be my real calling."

Jane laughed. "Your calling?"

"Don't laugh. If you were called to be a minister why can't I be called to be a detective? We could be a team. I catch the sinners and you save them."

"We are already a team," Jane answered. "It's called being married."

Bruce stared at the road ahead and muttered. "Do I need to do something other than you know?"

"What?"

"Fulfill my husbandly duties?"

"You mean you're doing it out of a sense of duty."

"No, I mean...". Bruce glanced at her and saw the teasing smile on her face. "Okay, so we can scratch off detective as my next career."

"Look, Honey," Jane said. "I want you to do what makes you happy, fulfills you."

"Before I met you I didn't even think about it."

"So you were happy until you met me, is that what you're saying?"

"Happy? No, what I mean is that I didn't know what happiness was until I met you so I didn't think about it." He slid his right hand off the steering wheel and onto her left leg. "Did I ever thank you for saving a wretch like me?"

"I didn't save you I married you," Jane said, giving Bruce a gentle punch on his right arm.

"You being a minister, I thought it was the same thing. A twofer. Although, if I was a Rabbi it would be like hitting the trifecta."

"Silly. Besides, as you know, I didn't decide to become a minister until after we got married."

"In other words, being married to me drove you to God."



"Drove me to God!" Jane finally exploded in laughter. There, she thought, you won again. If bantering was an Olympic event, Bruce would have a string of gold medals dangling from his neck.

"Did I say God? I meant to your Uncle Joji's." Bruce hunched over the steering wheel and peered out through the windshield as if they were driving in the dead of night rather than the middle of a sunny afternoon. It was an unsuccessful attempt to conceal the victory grin on his lips. "How much farther do we have to go?" He asked.

"We should be close."

"Does anything look familiar?"

"Not particularly. I remember visiting when my grandparents lived here before my grandfather died. I saw Uncle Joji a few times when he visited my grandparents. I was just a kid. After my Grandfather died and Grandma moved in with us my Dad would drive her here to see Uncle Joji but I was never invited to go along. The only time I saw him after he moved back from Japan and into the house was at my grandmother's funeral."

"You said there was some sort of falling out between your Uncle and the rest of the family. You don't know what it was about?"

"My parents never wanted to discuss it."

"I guess it was a good thing you called first to see if he would agree to see you."

"I didn't think we should just show up at his doorstep."

"And you said that he didn't seem to object to us wanting to visit him."

"No, and when I asked him if he could translate something from Japanese into English he said of course. It was like he was expecting that his niece, who he hasn't seen in at least a decade, would want to come by for a visit."

"With her husband. He does know that I'm coming as well, doesn't he?"

"Yes. He asked if I was coming by myself and I told him you would be with me."

"What was his response?"

"He said good."

"Do you think he meant it was good that it wasn't his brother, your father, or it was good that it was me, your husband?"

"I'm sure he meant it was good that you were coming with me because he wanted to meet you not that he wanted to avoid meeting my Dad. Does it matter?"

"Only if he meant that he was glad that he wouldn't have to meet your Dad than he wouldn't be disappointed when he met me. You know, that I wasn't the guy he hoped his niece would marry."

"Why on earth would he think that?"

"He might not be happy when he asks what I do and I tell him I don't have a job. Probably afraid that I'm just a moocher."

"Moocher? Like you married me so you could get your hands on my measly minister's salary? You get more interest from your savings account than I'll ever make."

"Our savings account, not mine. I turned you down when you offered to sign a pre-nup, remember? And it's not in a savings account, anyway. It's invested. Wisely, I might add. But, no one knows about that except you and me."

"And I wish I didn't know."

"Because you feel guilty about it. You had nothing to do with it. I made it all before I met you." He paused. They weren't bantering now. "Think of it as an inheritance from a past life. It's like a nest egg."

"If that's what it's like then it was a really big bird that laid the egg,"

"How do you know? I thought you didn't look at the statements."

"I don't look at them. You told me how much you were worth when we were having coffee at Starbucks."

"When I took you out on our first date."

"I didn't know it was a date and I insisted on paying for my coffee, which was actually a Chai tea. The point is that you tried to impress me by telling me how much you were worth."

"Right, I did. I could tell right away that I'd made a big mistake."

"I was going to get up and walk out but you wouldn't shut up and I didn't have a chance to tell you I was going to leave. I had to sit there and listen to you. Fortunately, you said you wanted to change the direction of your life and do something completely different that had nothing to do with making money."

“And that’s why you agreed to go out with me.”

“Actually, I thought there was a pretty good chance that you were just feeding me a line.”

“You never told me that before. And all this time I thought you believed me.”

“I did believe you.” But it was a leap of faith, Jane thought.

“And here we are.”

“Yes, here we are.” Jane answered, smiling at Bruce. “Together.”

“I meant we’re here. We just passed the entrance to your Uncle Joji’s farm,” Bruce said, putting his foot on the brake.

“How do you know?”

“It looked like his address was on the mailbox back there.” Bruce backed the car up and stopped next to the mailbox. Next to the stenciled address were some Japanese characters that had been applied with a black brush. “What does it say?”

“It says Takemoto. I did learn that much Japanese.”

“I guess this must be the place, then.” Bruce turned the wheel and they drove over a cattle guard and onto the gravel drive. “Is that the farmhouse in those trees?”

“Yes,” Jane said. “Although when I was a kid it seemed a lot farther from the main road than it is now.”

“Everything is farther away when you’re a kid.”

They drove slowly on the road. Jane looked at the creek and the cottonwoods and then the red barn and the windmill. Not only were things farther, but everything was wider, deeper, larger and taller when she remembered when she was a kid. She looked at the corral near the barn and suddenly remembered riding a horse named Fiddlesticks when she was seven or eight. It was Uncle Joji who must have been visiting from Japan, who had boosted her onto the saddle then got on behind her. He let her hold the reins as they had trotted around the corral. That was the first time she had been on a horse. They had a couple of horses on their farm but her parents said she was too young to ride. She asked Uncle Joji not to tell them. That it was their secret. She never mentioned it to her father and when he taught her how to ride several years later she acted as if she had never been on a horse before.

As they pulled up in front of the house Uncle Joji got up from a chair on the front porch. He walked down the front steps as Jane and Bruce got out of the car. He looked exactly as she remembered him from the funeral only he was smiling now and wearing faded bib overalls and a white tee shirt. Jane, hesitated, not sure if she should offer to shake his hand or give him a hug and, if she gave him a hug should she include a peck on the cheek. It reminded her of having to decide what to do when passing the peace sign at Church. You tried to take your cue from the other person but what if they were waiting for you. It was like playing the game rock-paper-scissors. More than once she'd put out her hand at the same time the other person embraced her in a hug. Uncle Joji cut off her thoughts by bowing. With relief Jane returned his bow and then introduced Bruce. When Bruce started to bow, Joji reached out with his right arm. It seemed to Jane that the smile on his face morphed momentarily into a mischievous grin as they shook hands.

"Have you come for another secret riding lesson, Niece?" Joji asked.

"I know it was wrong of me to have asked you to lie to my Dad," Jane answered.

"But I didn't lie. I knew when you asked me to keep it a secret that he would never ask me."

"Can I ask you why you knew?"

"You can ask me but it is your father, my brother, who has the answer. Now, why don't both of you come inside. It has been a long time since you have been in the house where your Father grew up."

Uncle Joji gave them a tour of the house. It was smaller than what Jane remembered. Are walls also farther away when you're a kid? Upstairs, Uncle Joji opened a door and announced that the room was where her father and he had slept. Inside, there was a bunk bed, a dresser and a desk and chair under the one window.

"I remember the bunk beds," Jane said. "I always wanted to sleep in it, but when I stayed over I slept in one of the beds in Aunt Kate and Aunt Winnie's old room."

"Your Dad had the lower bunk and I had the upper. I was older and so I got to choose first and I took the high ground. When he had grown tall enough for his legs to reach the bottom of my bunk he would kick me at night. He claimed he did it because I snored and he wanted me to turn over but I never heard myself snore so maybe he was just dreaming." He closed the door and opened the door next to it that had been her Aunt's room. Instead of a bunk bed there were two single beds separated by large dresser.

"I remember that when I stayed over Aunt Kate and Winnie's dolls were still here and I loved playing with them. The dolls are gone, but everything else looks the same," Jane said.

"There was no need to change anything except in your grandparent's room, which is where I now sleep." He pushed open a door that was half ajar revealing a room twice as large as the other two. The sun streamed in through several windows. It was empty except for a tatami mat on the hardwood floor. "As you can see, I removed all of the furniture. I sleep on a futon that I roll up and put in the closet during the day."

"No more upper bunk," Bruce joked.

"Yes, I have come down in the world," Uncle Joji answered, looking at the floor and shaking his head slowly. Then, he looked up and said. "Now, we should go downstairs to the kitchen and I can serve you tea."

After Jane and Bruce sat down at the large wooden kitchen table, Uncle Joji began boiling the water. He turned and asked them. "Would you like some Batamochi that I made?"

"Oh, yes, please, Uncle!" Jane answered clapping her hands like a little girl.

"Botamochi?" Bruce asked.

"It's a rice cake, a sweet pastry," Jane said, lowering her hands. "My grandmother made them. I wish I'd asked her to show me how she did it but..."

"Would you like me to give you a secret lesson?" Uncle Joji asked with a grin as the kettle began to whistle.

"Yes, that way if I ruin them no one will know," Jane laughed. "Especially, this guy." She smiled and nudged Bruce with her left elbow.

"What I want to know is what's with these secret riding lessons?" Bruce asked.

"Uncle Joji is just teasing me about something that happened when I was a little girl. Sorry, Mr. detective, but it's no big mystery. I'll tell you about it later." Looking at Uncle Joji she asked. "So Grandma taught you how to cook them?"

"No," Uncle Joji said as he poured the hot water from the kettle into a teapot. "I learned when I was in Japan. When I came back and I moved in here I made them for her as a surprise the first time she came over to visit. She said that they were different than hers but she like them just the same. I could tell she said that just to make me feel good so I asked her if she would show me her way. We made them together right here in this kitchen and I have made them her way ever since."

“Because Grandma’s way was better.”

“Of course,” Uncle Joji answered with a faint smile. Then he placed a bamboo tray with the teapot and round teacups on the table along with, a plate of Batamochi that had been warming in the oven. He sat down and poured the tea into the cups and passed them to Jane and Bruce. As he began to pass the plate of Batamochi he said. “You said that you wanted me to translate some Japanese words that you found on the side of a building in the ruins of the old Internment Camp?”

“Yes,” Jane answered. “We almost forgot. Bruce, can you show Uncle Joji the words?”

“We took a photo of the words on my iPhone.” Bruce said, putting down the Batamochi that Uncle Joji had just passed him and reaching for his iPhone from the breast pocket of his shirt.

“Please, eat your Batamochi,” Uncle Joji said. “You don’t need to show me the photo. I know what they are.”

## CHAPTER 18

### BEANS AND BOOKS

Harry stood next to the rear stairway to the second floor back room greeting the members of Beans and Books as they arrived for their monthly meeting. Bunch of Books was not only the oldest bookstore in Picketwire it was also the host for Beans and Books, its oldest book club. Despite its name Beans and Books had stopped serving beans for its lunchtime meetings when it became all too clear that it was one thing to eat beans while sitting around a campfire swapping tall tales it was quite another when sitting in a confined space and discussing works of literature. While beans had been replaced with less distracting edibles the name was not changed, although the members began calling it B & B. Since most of the members bought their books from Bunch of Books, Harry like the Bunch’s before him, was not an official member since he had to avoid any appearance of influencing what books were selected. As a non-member he didn’t have a voice in choosing the books. In fact, he didn’t have any voice since only members could participate in the book discussion. However, Harry was allowed to sit and observe. An experience that was often enlightening and always entertaining.

At one time the door was hidden by a bookcase that swiveled out on a hinge to reveal the secret stairs. That was when there were books that were still banned and anyone caught reading them risked arrest. Bunch of Books had to smuggle them in like illegal liquor during prohibition and Harry’s parents and grandparents told stories of unpacking boxes of books and slipping off the paper book covers with

titles by authors such as Zane Grey, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Horacio Alger in order to reveal the “banned” ones by D.H. Lawrence, Collette and Karl Marx. The secret room at the top of the hidden stairway was referred to as the “readeasy” where you could purchase and read bootleg books instead of booze although it wasn’t entirely unknown to consume one while doing the other. Because B&B members read most of the “banned” books that were available in the “readeasy” it made sense to hold their meetings there as well. In case they were ever “raided” by the Sheriff of Purgatory County, who was hell bent on burning as many banned books as possible, the members had been given the paper book covers that had been removed so that they could be quickly slipped over the banned volume being discussed. As it turned out the Sheriff’s Department never found out about the “readeasy” at Bunch’s and, instead, spent its time searching the shelves of public libraries and schools. When the County stopped banning books, despite the Sheriff’s vociferous objection, the hinged bookcase was removed. Even though there was no longer the fear of having their meetings raided, their books being confiscated, and their bodies thrown in the hoosegow, Beans and Books continued to meet in the once secret room at noon on the third Saturday of every month.

Harry wished he had been around then, but the last banned book in Purgatory County was J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, which was published in 1961. When the Sheriff raided the Picketwire Public Library and confiscated their copies and hauled the Librarian off to the County Jail the City of Picketwire challenged the constitutionality of the ban. Judge Martinez not only ruled in the City’s favor and overturned the banning he also wrote a favorable book review that was published in the Picketwire Press. Harry thought about that as he stood at his position by the door before the meeting not only to greet the B & B members but to close the door after the last member arrived. In fact, Harry had installed an elevator five years ago to serve the entire four stories of the book store so that members could enter the room through a doorway that had been placed in the wall separating the room from the rest of the second floor. However, most members still preferred taking the stairs. Even Miss Bennet had used the stairs up until her death and Lucy Hopkins, who was now the oldest member, still preferred them, although she was more than happy to take Harry’s arm as she climbed the stairs. As if on cue, Lucy approached, cane in one hand and a book in the other. Harry couldn’t help asking her if she ever thought of using the elevator.

“I did think about it after Rosalind died. There was no way I was going to take the elevator as long as she took the stairs and she never stopped taking them. But I decided against it. After all if I took the elevator I wouldn’t be able to take your arm, Harry.”

“You knew Rosalind a long time.”

“She was the person who invited me to join Beans and Books. We were both young teachers just out of college.”

"You taught school?"

"Third grade. Unlike, Rosalind, I quit when I got married."

"Just think, if you hadn't quit, I would have had you as my teacher."

"You were lucky," Lucy laughed. "I didn't really like teaching. I begged my parents to let me go to college and they only agreed because I said I wanted to be a teacher. Teaching was one of the few acceptable professions for young women back then. When I graduated my parents expected me to get a job teaching like I promised them. I couldn't tell them I didn't want to teach so that's how I ended up teaching third grade here in Picketwire. At that point, getting married seemed the only acceptable way to get out of teaching. Not that I didn't love Mel, you understand. Now, Rosalind, she loved teaching and if she had gotten married, she would have had to quit if she got pregnant. There was no dependable birth control back then nor was there maternity leave and women were expected to stay home and take care of their children. Of course, there were women who worked after having children but it would have raised a lot of eyebrows even in Picketwire, progressive as it is, if a woman continued teaching when she had small children. Besides, it's not as if there was daycare and Rosalind and I didn't have any family living here who could help out so we couldn't continue teaching if we had children. Those were the days when you couldn't have it all. At least for women. In any case, Rosalind chose teaching other people's children over having her own."

"Over love and marriage."

"Over marriage. Not necessarily over a love life. Although Rosalind was very private and didn't talk about her love life that doesn't mean she didn't have one." Lucy laughed. "I suppose that comes as quite a surprise to you, Harry, that your first grade teacher might have had a love life."

Harry smile and nodded. "It would have been before I bought her books..."

"I imagine you must have been surprised by some of the ones she read."

"You mean the banned ones? I figured she probably would have read many of them because she was a member of B&B."

"Then you may be surprised that she read them before B&B selected them as books to read."

"She didn't get them through us?"

"She bought them on the trips she took during summer vacation. She would go traipsing off to places like New York City and England and, even, France. You know she spoke French fluently."



“Miss Bennet, I mean Rosalind?”

“She also knew Italian and German and, of course, the Queens English.” Lucy smiled, broadly and shook her head. “By the way she made a point of correcting people if they said it was the King’s English. She pointed out that the current monarch was Queen Elizabeth.”

“One thing that really surprised me about the books was that some of them were gifts from Wylie’s father Charles Boone. They were rare, first editions that had the Double B Brand on them. There was even a note to her from Charles that I found tucked into one of the books. I wouldn’t have thought they would have even known each other much less...”

“It doesn’t surprise me,” Lucy interrupted Harry before he could finish. “Although I didn’t know until you told me just now that he had given Rosalind the books it makes sense.”

“Why?”

“Charles was also a member of B & B.”

“A Boone was a member of Beans and Books?”

“Yes, and it was Rosalind who brought him to his first meeting. This wasn’t long after we both joined. You should have seen the stir that made because everyone knew that the Boone’s pretty much owned the Sheriff’s Department and the Sheriff would arrest people he caught with a banned book. But, as some people pointed out - although not in front of Charles, if he was a member of B & B the Sheriff wasn’t about to raid our meetings or your family’s bookstore for that matter.”

“Is that why she brought him.”

“I can see Rosalind asking him for that reason but I can’t see Charles agreeing because of that. No, he was interested in more than a relationship with good books. Still, it was a surprise that he wanted such a relationship with Rosalind. Not that she wasn’t attractive but Charles was the number one eligible bachelor around. Not just because he was a Boone and handsome but he was also one of the only bachelors who hadn’t joined or been drafted into the Army. You see this was 1943 during the Second World War. “

“Why was Charles still around?”

“He got a deferment because the Double B was such a big operation and supplier of beef to the Army they were designated as a business that was vital to the war effort. Charles dad, CW Junior, said that he couldn’t run the operation without Charles.”

"You said Charles was a member. Does that mean he attended the meetings regularly and read the books?"

"Yes, he bought the books and read them, but I don't recall him saying much at the meetings. He just sat there next to Rosalind and listened. Sort of like what you do, Harry. Then after almost a year attending each monthly meeting he suddenly stopped coming."

"Why do you think he stopped?"

"Now what do you think, Harry?"

"Because he and Rosalind broke up?"

"That's what I think as well, although Rosalind never mentioned it to me. Not that she would have. After all, she hadn't mentioned that she was seeing him to begin with. Not long after that Charles left town and went off to California. The story was he was sent there by his Father to help with the logistics of transporting the Double B's beef by ship to our troops fighting the Japanese. When he came back at the end of the War he was married to Phyllis, that's Wylie's mother, who he met out there."

"Do you think Rosalind saw Charles after he came back?"

"It's a small town and Charles' son, Wylie, would have been one of her first grade students so I imagine they couldn't avoid each other."

"But she never said anything to you about it?"

"No. Whatever happened between them she kept to herself. Although, I guess she didn't keep it to herself, entirely, because she left that note from Charles you mentioned in one of the books. She must have known you would find it."

"You don't think she just forgot to destroy it?"

"Rosalind, forget something like that? Her mind was as sharp as a straight razor up until she passed."

"Would you like to read it?"

"Goodness no, Harry. If she wanted me to read it, she would have left it for me not you." Lucy then looked through the doorway and said. "You know, I think the folks upstairs are probably wondering if I dropped dead." She held out her left arm. "So with your assistance I'll rise up the stairs and appear as if from the grave."

**NOT ANY OLD MAP**

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"You can just let me off here," Sister M's told Tony as they pulled up in front of the Purgatory County Sheriff's Department. The red brick building, which also housed the jail, was attached like a carbuncle to the rear of the Purgatory County Courthouse.

"You have my cell number so just give me a call when you're finished and I'll swing by and pick you up."

"I don't think this will take long. Maybe an hour."

"You think Rigglesman is going to back off and see reason?"

"I don't know about reason but I think he will back off when he sees me," Sister M's replied with a wink and then got out of the pick-up.

With time to kill, Tony decided to drive over to the Picketwire Canyonlands Headquarters and see if Elise Plumb was in. They were going out on their third date on Friday. For Tony, the third date was a decision point as to whether to continue dating or to just be "friends". Since he and Elise had just been friends for a year before they'd decided to go out on a real "date" he was feeling that there was even more riding on this third date. He thought that dropping in on her at work might take some of the pressure off.

When he walked in Elise was standing with a couple of tourists in front of a large wall map. Tony looked over the rack of brochures as he listened to her give a brief history of Picketwire Canyonlands and some of the easier hiking trails. After they left, laden with maps and information pamphlets, Elise turned to Tony and said. "This isn't Friday is it?"

"What?"

"You know date night - our third date night? Did you forget?"

"No, it's not Friday and no I didn't forget. I just dropped Sister M's off at the County Jail and I thought I'd stop by and see if you were in while I'm waiting to drive her back to the Convent."

"What's she doing at the Jail?"

"She's there to get somebody released."

"Some dangerous desperado, I imagine," Elise laughed.

"Not unless you consider Donny Buford a desperado."

“Desperate, maybe, but what teenager isn’t. So why was he busted?”

“I guess you could say he was arrested for being in the right place at the right time.”

“I didn’t know that was against the law.”

“It’s not, but when did the law stop Riggleman.”

“But Sister M’s can.”

“You don’t think she can?”

Elise laughed. “It wasn’t a question, I was stating a fact.”

“Anyway, that’s why I was in the neighborhood and stopped by so I’m glad you’re in.”

“I’d rather be out...there, as you know,” she waved at the map on the wall.

“However, Jeanine called in sick and Bob is at an in-service training in Denver and, then, Ron decided to go on vacation. He went to New York City, of all places. Said he wanted a change of scenery and Dennis, well you know...” She rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, I know,” Tony answered. “Dennis the Menace.”

“What that in your hand?” Elise pointed at the rolled up map in Tony’s left hand.

“An old map of the area.”

“You want to trade it in for a new one because we’ve got plenty of them.”

“No, because this isn’t just any old map, either. At least a copy of one, anyway.” He peeled off the rubber band that bound it and spread it out on the glass counter.

Elise bent over and looked at it. “It does look old and there’s the Rio de Purgatoire.”

“It’s in Spanish, because it was drawn when this was still part of Mexico.”

“Where did you find it?”

“In a gift shop.”

She stood up and looked at him as if he was pulling her leg. He said. “No really. I saw it on the wall of the Our Lady of Purgatory Gift Shop just an hour ago. Of course, that was a copy, as well. They were also selling copies and that’s what this is. Only, they gave it to me for free.”

"Where's the original?" Elise asked.

"The Sisters have it. They discovered it while they were renovating one of the prison cells. Sister Beatrice says that it's authentic. You know, she's an archeologist."

"Of course I know Sister Beatrice. She's on our archeological advisory board and she helps out with our Digging for Dinosaurs program every summer. If she says it's authentic then it's quite a find. Is it something you're going to use in your tours?"

"Maybe, but this is more personal. It shows the land granted by Mexico to my family."

"You mean this line here." Elise said as she pointed with her right index finger. "Is the boundary line for the Medrano Land Grant?"

"Right," Tony said and pointed at the right corner of the map. "I know it's hard to tell on this copy but when I looked at the larger copy on the wall this right here was an official seal next to the signature of Manuel Armijo, who was the Governor of New Mexico when it was still part of Mexico. It's dated April 7, 1840. Next to it you can see that it says in Spanish that this map shows the land that is granted to Francisco Medrano and his family in perpetuity."

Elise shook her head. "Unfortunately, the in perpetuity ended when the U.S. won the Mexican-American War in 1848."

"Yeah," Tony nodded. "Even though in the Treaty of Guadalupe the U.S. agreed to honor the existing Mexican land grants the U.S. wasn't really all that committed to honoring the treaty. When the legality of the land grants were challenged my great, great grandfather, Don Francisco couldn't produce an official map showing the boundaries of the land grant."

"The story I heard was that he lost it."

"Actually, he said it had been stolen. He couldn't prove it and there were people who said that there was never a map and he was lying about it being stolen and it was a land grab. Of course, without the map Don Francisco couldn't substantiate the claim but he also couldn't defend the Medrano family honor. I think that was probably worse than losing the land."

"I thought your family ended up with some of the land and that part of it was donated to form Picketwire."

"Don Francisco did get the government to recognize the land that our family had settled and was ranching but that was only a quarter of what was in the land grant and some of Picketwire is on that land. Don Francisco donated it. Even though it's too late to do anything about the claim, at least this map shows that it was legitimate

and that my great, great grandfather wasn't a liar." Tony's cellphone jiggled in his breast pocket and he took it out. "It's a text from Sister M's saying she's finished," he said. He texted okay and put it back in his pocket.

"You know, what I don't get is how did it end up in a prison?" Elise said as Tony rolled up the map. "I mean, if it was a map of the prison I could understand someone smuggling it in but why this?"

"That's what I hope to find out," Tony answered securing the map with the rubber band.

## **FARM TO TABLE**

Sue looked around her kitchen, which was pretty much the entire house. When she'd bought the nineteen sixties era one story ranch house on the west side of town, she knew that her range wouldn't fit into the kitchen so she took out the wall between it and the dining room. Not stopping there she removed the walls to the two bedrooms. Now, the only walls still standing were around the bathroom. Her bed was tucked into an alcove. Max joked that he couldn't help feeling jealous that when he spent the night, he had to share her with a Vulcan range. "I mean, how can I compete with two ovens and six burners? Talk about the strong, silent type, it's eight hundred pounds of stainless steel."

Although she had laughed when he said that she had to admit that the longest relationship she'd ever been in was with her cooking stove. It had never let her down and she didn't have to worry about it walking out on her. Not that she shared that thought with Max.

"What if my bed was on a stage?" He asked.

"I'd make sure the curtain was down if I was sleeping over."

There wasn't going to be any sleeping over tonight, on or off stage. Max would be meeting with Howdy Hanks after their evening rehearsal and probably wouldn't be done until after midnight. Instead, Sue was going to meet Max for an early dinner before rehearsals started at seven. Not at the Pretty Good, since it would be about as private as eating on stage in front of a full house. No, this would be a table for two at El Mejor. She had even made a reservation several days in advance. Not that she was worried they wouldn't get a table but because the owner and chef, Hector Torres, would have been offended that she had assumed he wouldn't be fully booked. When Sue called and made the reservation, she told Annetta, the woman who answered the phone, that she hoped there was still a table free. Annetta responded that, yes, she was very lucky because they did have one table for two that was still available. Sue remembered telling Hector that the reason she decided to call her cafe the "Pretty Good" was because his restaurant was already "the best".

Although she meant it as a joke, he replied that he called it El Mejor because he opened it after being fired as the chef of another Mexican restaurant in town that was called El Supremo. Hector said the owner had fired him out of jealousy because customers were saying they came there only because of his cooking. Hector added that El Supremo closed less than a year later while he had been open fifteen years.

Sue parked her Prius on Carson Street and walked half a block to El Mejor. It was easy to walk right past the entrance, which was a double wooden door set into an adobe wall. Originally, there had been a storefront but Hector had replaced the large plate glass with the wall. He had torn off part of the roof and created a sala abierta, an open interior courtyard. The floors were waxed terra cotta tiles with exposed wooden beams overhead. On the interior side of the adobe were ornate, hand carved wooden frames with color photographs of the Mexican food that were served at El Mejor. Hector called them “retablos restaurante”. Instead of the framed folk art paintings of saints that were in Mexican homes and Churches these retablos were devoted to food. Annetta seated Sue at a table for two under a retablo for “saint chile relleno”. Sue ordered a margarita and picked up the menu. As she held it up in front of her she glanced over the top to see Annetta walk over to the kitchen door and open it. As Hector’s face appeared over Annetta’s right shoulder, Sue looked down at the Menu. Hector would want to see her studying the menu closely. She would even tell the waiter how difficult it was to decide what to order because all of the dishes were so tempting. Max, on the other hand, would ignore the menu and order the carne asada with a side order of yellow rice and black beans.

When Max arrived, Sue was already sipping her margarita. He gave her a quick kiss, sat down, picked up the bottle of Bohemia beer that she’d ordered for him and poured it into a glass. El Mejor wasn’t the sort of place where you drank your beer out of the bottle. After taking a drink, he set the glass down, looked at Sue and said. “Boy, I needed that.”

“Long day?”

“And it’s not over. I’ve still got rehearsal. I guess that makes it a long day’s journey into night.”

“Eugene O’ Neil’s plays are so long they put me to sleep.”

“Hey, as long as I don’t,” Max replied, smiling as he flashed his eyebrows up and down. It was as much Groucho Marx impersonation as it was flirtation. Sue didn’t know whether to laugh or give his hand an affectionate squeeze. She opted for both. She was still getting used to being in another relationship much less being in one with a guy like Max.

In LA Sue had known plenty of actors. It was hard to avoid them especially in the restaurant business where most of the waiters were waiting for their big break. Going on a date could be like an audition in which the worst thing that could happen

was to win the part. Sue found that out with her ex-husband. They had met while they were both working, naturally, in a restaurant where she was a chef and he was a waiter. After going together for several months they moved in together and married a couple of months after that. While she supported him, he devoted himself full time to his acting. His career began to take off and within a year he got a lead part in a new television series. After wrapping up the first season he told her that he found playing the part of a husband in a domestic drama too limiting and he needed a change. It was a career move and nothing personal. It turned out to be more of a career move for Sue than him. Shortly after their divorce his show was canceled while she used the divorce settlement to finance her first restaurant. She made sure that her relationships after that were limited engagements.

“The good news is Howdy says he knows how the play is going to end. He still has to write the final scenes, but he promises to have it done in a couple of days so we can rehearse it.”

“That must be a relief.”

“Only two weeks before the premier, I’ll say it is. Although, there’s still a lot to do at least the show will go on. What about you? How did your meeting with the farmer in the deli go?”

“It’s the farmer in the dell not deli.”

“What’s a dell?”

“I think it’s like a small valley.”

“I bet your farmer Joji would prefer being in a deli. Why don’t you open one? In fact, you could call it the farmer in the deli and you can serve stuff you grow on your farm.”

“That’s not an entirely crazy idea, Max.”

“I can be only half crazed if I want to be.”

“I only want you to be completely crazy about me.” Before Max could reply, Sue said. “Hold that thought or feeling or whatever. I have to say hello to someone who just walked in.” She waved at Desmond Goswami who had just entered the restaurant with a woman she didn’t recognize. Desmond responded by walking over with the woman.

After greeting Sue and Max, Desmond introduced Margaret Knutson.

“You must be Arvid Knutson’s niece who inherited his farm,” Sue said as she shook Margaret’s hand.



"That's me," Margaret answered. "I'm the one taking over the bachelor farmer's place."

"Are you planning on selling it?" Sue asked.

"No, at least not right away. I thought I might try being a bachelorette farmer."

"Sounds like one of those dating reality TV shows," Max quipped.

"Right, only the dates will include milking cows." She looked at Desmond and added. "Just kidding."

"Sue is getting into farming," Max said scratching his right thumb with his left index finger. "Her green thumb is itching."

"You want to be a farmer? What about your restaurant?" Desmond asked, then explained to Margaret. "Sue is the Sue of Sue's Pretty Good Café, which is the best restaurant in town."

"That's a mouthful of Sues, Desmond, but thanks for the compliment." Then thinking that Hector might be listening, she added. "However, I personally think this place is the best Mexican Restaurant."

"I should have said best non-Mexican restaurant."

"What about best Indian restaurant?" Margaret asked Desmond.

"There is only one Indian Restaurant in Picketwire and it's not very good."

Max cut them off by saying. "In answer to your original question, Desmond, about why Sue would want to farm, you've no doubt heard of farm to table restaurants. Well, Sue's already got the table. In fact she's got tables and booths. What she's lacking is a farm."

Sue gave Max a cease and desist look. "I know about buying food, preparing it and serving it but growing it is another matter. I may have the table part down but there's an awful lot I need to learn about farming."

"Me too," Margaret said. "And I've already got a farm."

## CHAPTER 19

### A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

"There was one funny thing that happened while I was at the Sheriff's Department," Gloria said to Foster after Tom left the office to interview Max about his run in with Rigglesman and his posse. "While I was waiting to see the Sheriff a woman lawyer walked in and said that she was there to see her client."

"What's so funny about a lawyer seeing their client?"

"Her name was Sister Mary Margaret."

"You mean Sister M's."

"A nun called Sister M's who's also a lawyer. Now that's hard to believe."

"I guess you witnessed a miracle, then. In any case Sister M's is a damn good lawyer as well as a darn good nun. She's one of the Sisters that took over the old Purgatory State Penitentiary. They call it Our Lady of Lost Souls. Name sure fits the place."

Gloria's eyes widened in surprise. "She's one of the Sisters of Saint Leonard?"

"You know about the Sisters?"

"They made the news when they bought that place."

"Bought might be a stretch since they paid next to nothing for it. It was more like a steal."

After groaning at his joke Gloria said. "It's pretty unusual for an order of nuns to take over an old prison."

"They're an unusual order. Not that I know much about religious orders or religion, for that matter. Who was she there to see?"

"Somebody named Donny Buford."

"Now that is what I would call really funny."

"Why?"

“Because Donny Buford isn’t the sort of person that Sister M’s would take on as a client.”

“Why?”

“She represents people who don’t have any money and Donny Buford’s family is pretty well off. His father is the President of Picketwire Bank and Trust and his mom is a doctor.”

“So why would Sister M’s agree to be Donny’s lawyer?”

“Must have something to do with why he was brought in. It has to be something that Sister M’s is interested in and that Donny doesn’t want his parents to know about.”

“Like what?”

“You do the police reports for the paper so why not call the Sheriff Department and find out?”

Gloria quickly turned to the phone on her desk and dialed the number for the Sheriff’s Department and spoke with the Deputy who handled the reports. “What do you mean you’re not allowed to disclose it?” She asked then twirled her right index finger in the air as she listened to the reply. “Isn’t that something for the FBI not the Sheriff?” She asked and after listening some more she said. “Can I speak with Sister Mary Margaret, his attorney? I saw her when I was there.” After listening some more while shaking her head and rolling her eyes she registered a protest and hung up. Turning to Foster, she said. “That was Deputy Doolittle...”

“You mean Deputy Do-Little,” Foster said, spelling it out. “One of Riggleman’s highly unqualified team.”

“Anyway,” Gloria continued. “He told me that he couldn’t release any information on the arrest because it was a matter of national security. When I asked why the FBI wasn’t involved he said that the Sheriff didn’t need any help from the Feds. Does that make any sense?”

“Only if you put non in front of it. My hunch is that Donny’s arrest is connected to Riggleman and his posse stopping the Picketwire Railroad looking for undocumented immigrants, or illegals as he calls them.”

“But he told me that he didn’t arrest anyone.”

“Didn’t Deputy Do-Little tell you this was a matter of national security?”

Gloria nodded.

"Well to Riggleman that means lying is his patriotic duty. Sort of confirms that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel."

"I guess that means Riggleman's also a refugee."

"He's definitely illegal. Anyway, the best way to find out what's going on is to talk to Sister M's. What did he tell you when you asked to speak with her?"

"He said she'd left a half hour ago and gone back to her nunnery. Of course he snickered when he said that."

"Then if I want to talk to her I should get myself to the nunnery as well," Foster said, then lowered his long legs from the top of the desk where he'd propped them and stood up.

"Wait, you're not going without me. I'm the investigative reporter, remember. You may think you're the Lone Ranger but I'm not you're sidekick what's his name."

"Tonto," Foster said looking down at Gloria as he put on his Stetson. "Let's go, partner."

As they walked toward the gate of the old Purgatory Penitentiary after parking his Jeep, Foster remembered when he was ten years old. He was mowing the lawn of their house in Picketwire when their next door neighbor, Mister Malloy, appeared on the front porch of his house, a big two story place with peeling paint and a sagging roof, and called him over. He couldn't remember ever speaking to Malloy who hardly ever came out of his house. Foster's parents had told him that Malloy's wife had walked out on him shortly after he'd retired and that they'd never had children. Nor did he seem to have any visitors. Foster hesitated when Malloy called but figured he didn't have to get that close to the guy so he let go of the handle for the push mower and walked over. Malloy had settled onto the top step of his front porch where he looked down at Foster, who would have declined to sit down even if he'd been asked, which he wasn't. Malloy held a can of beer in his right hand and took a drink, wiped his lips with the back of his left hand and then looked at Foster. "You ever been in a prison?"

"No sir," Foster replied in a serious voice even though it didn't make any sense to ask a ten year old if they'd been in prison.

"Well I have. Thirty years in the Purgatory Penitentiary. I'd still be there if they hadn't closed it down and everyone had to leave."

"You were in Purgatory?"

"Yeah, but I wasn't an inmate, I was an employee."

"Were you a guard?"

"I was called a corrections officer because I was employed by the Department of Corrections, but I should have been called a waste management officer because I guarded a garbage dump. That's what prisons are, they're just garbage dumps with walls. I was there to make sure the trash society threw away didn't escape into the environment. Now they've closed the place and sent all the garbage to other dumps. And this..." He waved his right hand with the can of beer at his house. "This is where I got dumped." He laughed again until he started coughing. When he stopped coughing he looked down at Foster, his eyes squinting, and said. "If prisons are garbage dumps you know what cops are, right?"

"Policemen?" Fostered asked.

"Nope," Malloy shook his head. "Cops are just garbage collectors with guns." He took a last sip from his can of beer, crumpled it in his hand and got up slowly. He stood unsteadily at the top of the steps. "I just figured you should know that you're living next to a dump so when the cops show up you'll know they're just here to haul away the trash." He turned and walked into the house letting the screen door slam behind him like a cell door.

"I wonder what the prisoners felt when they walked through these gates," Gloria said.

Foster stopped and looked up at the massive gate and said to Gloria. "I suppose it depended on whether they were walking in or walking out. You know, somebody I knew a long time ago called it a garbage dump."

"There's no way I could call someone who thought people in prisons are garbage a friend."

"I didn't call him a friend. He was a neighbor of ours when I was growing up in Picketwire. He'd been a guard here for thirty years until they closed it. He also called the police garbage collectors."

"How dehumanizing."

"That might have been his point. Not that I had a chance to ask him."

"Why not?"

"He killed himself the day after he told me. I guess he wanted to escape."

"Oh..."

“And I became a cop.”

When they entered the Welcome Center Sister M’s was talking to Sister Louise at the gift shop counter. “Why Foster St. Vrain. What a surprise,” she said. Noticing Gloria next to him, she added. “And...”

Gloria quickly stepped up and held out her hand. “I’m Gloria Herrera.”

“Gloria’s our ace reporter at the Picketwire Press. I’m working for them as an investigator. Right now I’m helping Gloria on a story.”

“I’m also the Picketwire Press’ investigative reporter,” Gloria jumped in as they shook hands.

“Is that why you were at the Sheriff’s Department when I was there a couple of hours ago?”

Gloria nodded her head. “I was there to interview Sheriff Rigglesman about the status of the search for the person who tried to kill Wylie Boone.”

“Your interview should be interesting reading to say the least. Did he tell you if they are close to catching the person?”

“Not really. He didn’t want to talk about it, in fact. What he really wanted to talk about were undocumented immigrants.”

“Whom he calls illegals,” Sister M’s added.

“Right. Anyway, he said that he and his posse had just stopped the Picketwire Railroad trying to apprehend some illegals. He claimed they were disguised as members of Tony Medrano’s Rails, Trails and Tales tour. He said the illegals got away and he was sure they had accomplices who helped them escape. That’s why we’re here. I heard you say that you were representing Donny Buford and when I called the Sheriff’s Department and asked if he had been arrested, they wouldn’t comment. They said it was a matter of national security. It sounds crazy but we thought that Donny Buford might have been arrested as one of the accomplices the Sheriff mentioned.”

“It does sound crazy, doesn’t it?” Sister M’s replied with a slight smile.

“Rigglesman’s no stranger to crazy,” Foster said. “But crazy or not why else would you be representing Donny Buford? Donny’s not exactly poor.”

Sister M’s gave Foster a hard look. “I don’t require my clients to take a vow of poverty just because I do. Anyway, other than I was there to represent him I can’t

tell you anything. Lawyer - client privilege still holds even if the client's not under-privileged."

"So you're giving us a no comment just like the Sheriff?" Gloria asked as she held a pen poised over a pad of paper she had quickly taken from her purse.

"At least I didn't insult your intelligence by saying it's a matter of national security."

"Can we quote you on that?" Foster said with a broad smile.

"But seriously, Sister Mary Margaret..." Gloria said.

"You can call me Sister M's."

"Okay, Sister M's, can't you even tell me if Donny Buford was arrested?"

"Yes, I can deny that because he wasn't arrested. He walked out of the Sheriff's Department about fifteen minutes after I arrived."

"But if you hadn't been there was a good chance he would have been booked, right?" Foster pressed.

"No comment," Sister M's replied.

"If you don't give us something more, I'll have no alternative but to contact Donny Buford," Gloria pleaded. "And tell him I'm writing a story that will appear on the front page of the Picketwire Press about how he was hauled in by the Sheriff in a matter concerning national security and that you, his lawyer, didn't deny it. I'll also have to contact his parents."

Foster added. "I have a hunch poor Donny's going to talk and he's going to say some things that you'd rather not have in the newspaper."

"Please don't contact him or his parents. He was just being a Good Samaritan."

Gloria wrote down what Sister M's said. "I'll be sure and include that quote in the story. It's a good quote. After all, as a Nun you should be an expert on who's a Good Samaritan."

"Can we go off the record?" Sister M's asked pointing at Gloria's notebook.

Gloria closed her notebook and put down her pen. "Okay, what can you tell us off the record?"

"It's not me that's going to tell you."

As Sister M's led Gloria and Foster through a long, windowless corridor she explained that, although it was a tunnel, it led into the prison, not out of it. "This was the main entry point for them. For many of them it was one way. If you were serving life the only way to escape was to dig a tunnel or wait to have someone dig your grave."

"Did anybody dig a tunnel and escape?" Gloria asked.

"According to prison records seven tunnels were dug but all of them were discovered by guards before they were completed. Most of them weren't very long although there was one that was more than a hundred feet in length. Unfortunately for the prisoners who dug it they were still several hundred feet short of the other side of the outer walls when they were discovered. Sister Beatrice, who's an archeologist, has discovered several additional ones and she suspects there are more."

The corridor ended with a pair of massive steel doors that, according to Sister M's hadn't been closed since they acquired the prison. "When I lead tours I joke that we threw away the key, but they're actually controlled by a huge lever in a guard room behind the window next to the door. Most of the doors are locked and unlocked by pulling levers rather than using keys. You could say that we're highly leveraged. Sorry for another tour group joke." Sister M's motioned for them to follow her through the doorway into the sunlight.

"I suppose you call this the light at the end of the tunnel," Foster said.

"No," Sister M's replied. "But I think I'll use that on my next tour if you don't mind."

They were now in a large courtyard. A wall of the former prison was on their right topped by guard towers and in front and to the left were the former cell blocks. They rose two stories higher than the wall, which meant that the upper cells had a view over the wall. "This was what they called the yard, which is where the convicts were allowed to congregate for a couple of hours a day. They had to keep moving so they just walked around in circles."

"Is that why those stones are arranged in a circle?" Gloria asked, pointing at paving stones that were laid out in a circular pattern in the middle of the courtyard.

"Oh, that," Sister M's laughed. "That's a labyrinth. You'll find them in the great cathedrals like Chartres in France. We use it for walking meditation. It's not lost on us that while we are free to walk in a labyrinth meditating, the people who were imprisoned here were condemned to walk in circles."

"Meditating on how to escape," Foster said.



"Irony, isn't it?" Sister M's said. "We're serving for life behind bars of irony."

They followed Sister M's through an open door and into a hallway. "This corridor leads to the cellblocks but we're not going that far." She stopped in front of another open door and motioned for them to enter.

They entered a long room with a high ceiling. Along the far wall were windows set high in the walls. Light streamed in from the courtyard. There was a black board on the wall opposite the windows that stretched almost the entire length of the room. "If you'll wait here I'll be back in a few minutes," Sister M's said.

"Where are you going?" Gloria asked.

"To get the people who can answer your questions," Sister M's said then stopped as she was about to walk out the door and added. "Off the record."

## **STAGE FRIGHT**

Tom recalled his first and only acting experience had taken place on this very stage when he was seven years old. He remembered that he was paralyzed with stage fright and totally mangled his one line. Instead of hark, what bright light fills the firmament he blurted out "Heck of a light up there." The audience had laughed, which would have been fine if it had been a comedy and not a Christmas nativity play. He told himself that this time was different. He wasn't seven years old and it wasn't Christmas and hadn't Max said that he reminded him of Robert Redford. Besides, he'd only agreed to recite the lines in the script that Max handed him.

"You're reading the part of Billy," Max said and then shooed him up on the stage. Tom stood there on the stage alone while Max walked over and stood behind the pulpit that had been moved off to the side. He reached under the pulpit and pulled out a cowbell, which he began to ring vigorously. The members of the cast and crew returned to the sanctuary from wherever they had gone on their break and took seats in the pews in front of the stage. Then a door next to the pulpit opened and a girl walked out. She was wearing baggy bib overalls over a tee shirt and her long blond hair had red and blue streaks in it. After storming up to within a few feet of Tom she stopped and stared at him. Her blue eyes were framed by turquoise eyeliner and her right cheek was sprinkled with glitter.

"You're on my mark," she announced.

"What?" Tom stammered.

"You're standing on my mark. See the tape on the floor."

Tom looked down and saw that he was standing on masking tape. There was a Z on it that looked like the mark of Zorro only in red. He quickly took several steps back. "Sorry."

She shrugged and stepped onto the tape. She looked back over her shoulder at Max and said. "Where's Larry?"

"Larry's no longer with the show," Max replied. "This is Tom Tiddings and he's agreed to play Billy."

"I've agreed to help out tonight," Tom said. "You must be Zelda Zenn."

"Must I?" Zelda retorted and then quickly changed into a friendlier voice. "What is it you want?"

Tom lowered his voice and whispered. "I have a few questions that I'd like to ask you about..."

Zelda cut him off. "*What is it you want* is my line. It's right there in the script that you're holding. Well, barely holding."

"Oh, right." Tom looked down at the script, which was vibrating in his shaking hands. "Uh..."

"There's no uh," Max said from behind the pulpit. "Just read what's in the script, Tom. You're Billy."

"Do you think Karla likes me?" Tom read.

"Wait," Max snapped.

"For what?" Tom answered.

"Say it with a little more feeling. Like you mean it."

"I don't even know who Karla is?"

"She's Jolene's best friend," Max said.

"Who's Jolene?"

"I'm Jolene," Zelda said pointing with a purple fingernail at the script in his hand. "It's right there."

Max walked over to Tom and put his right hand on Tom's left shoulder. "You see, Tom, Billy and Karla have been friends their whole lives. Now they're about to

graduate from high school and she's going to college in another state. Billy realizes that he wants to be more than friends but he's afraid she doesn't feel the same way so he's asking Jolene , who's Karla's best friend, for advice. You have to act like you're really nervous."

"Act? I am really nervous. I mean I can barely hold the script."

"Right, but that's stage fright nervous not lovesick nervous. You need to act like you're lovesick nervous. Look, just think of someone that you want to ask out but are afraid to while you're reading the line."

Tom nodded then read the line again.

"Of course, she does, Billy," Zelda answered, her voice filled with sympathy.

Tom read. "I know she likes me as friend but I want to be more than just friends."

"Why don't you just ask her yourself? She's standing right behind you." Zelda said. Tom turned and found he was staring directly at Carlotta.

"Carlotta!"

"She's not Carlotta, she's Karla," Zelda snapped.

"I didn't know you were acting in this play," Tom said to Carlotta.

"Stick to the script, Tom," Max said.

Tom looked at his script and then exclaimed. "Karla!"

Carlotta said. "I heard everything you just said. That you want us to be more than just friends."

"You did?"

"I did and I do..."

"You do?"

"Want to be more than just friends."

"Now that's what we call acting, Tom," Max interrupted. "You sounded just like a teenage boy the way you delivered those lines."

"I did?"

"Read your next line, Tom."

Tom looked at Carlotta. "Does that mean you'll go out with me...on a date?"

"Of course. Otherwise, we'll never be anything more than friends."

"But I still want us to be friends," Tom said.

"That's not in the script, Tom. Don't ad lib just stick to what Howdy wrote," Max said.

Tom nodded and read. "How about Friday?"

"Sure..."

"Hey, I've got an idea," Zelda said. "Why don't we double date?"

"Wow, that would be fun, Jolene," Carlotta answered then turned to Tom. "You don't mind that our first date is a double date with Jolene and Rick, do you Billy?"

"What?" Tom stammered, then looked at his script. "I mean, that's cool."

"It's not going to be with Rick," Zelda said.

"Not with Rick? Did you break up?" Carlotta asked.

"Sort of."

Tom looked down at his script and asked. "Who's going to be your date, then?"

"It'll be a surprise," Zelda answered.

"Great job," Max said as he walked over. Putting his right hand on Tom's left shoulder he said. "That wasn't bad for your first time."

"You mean that's all?"

"For this scene."

"There's more?"

"Not tonight." Max turned, held up his left wrist, tapped the face of his watch and announced to the cast and crew. "Rehearsal's over for tonight." Turning to Tom, he said. "Take the script with you so you can study your lines."

"But I just agreed to help you out tonight."

"Tom," Carlotta said. "You were great. I really felt there was chemistry between us."

"I wasn't that great in chemistry when I was at Picketwire High."

"Maybe you had the wrong lab partner," Zelda cracked.

"Come on, Tom, why not take a chance," Carlotta pleaded.

Tom raised his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay." Then looking at Zelda he said. "But only if Zelda promises to answer some questions."

"Howdy made us promise not to talk about the play before the premiere so you'll just have to be Billy to get the inside scoop. Of course, you won't be allowed to write about it until after we open."

"I don't want to ask you about this play but about something else you were in."

"Oh my God," Zelda said, clapping her right hand to her mouth then dropping it and pleading. "Please, don't tell anyone. You can't write a word about it. If this gets out it will ruin my acting career and that's my whole life. I'll just have to kill myself."

"Kill yourself!" Carlotta gasped. Zelda who buried her face in Carlotta's shoulder and began crying.

"It can't be that bad?" Tom asked.

Zelda pulled away from Carlotta and turned to him, her cheeks smeared with dripping mascara. "You didn't see it?"

"No, but Max told me about it."

"Max? Does he know too?"

"Of course, he was there."

"There? Wait, you mean this isn't about ...?"

"What?"

"Never mind," Zelda said and dabbed at her cheeks with a Kleenex that Carlotta had given her. "So what is this about?"

"Max told me that you were both in a play Max put on for one of Tony Medrano's tours on the Picketwire Railroad."

"Oh that. It wasn't a real play. Max calls it a melodrama. I call it stupid. I played this weird woman named Clementine..."

Tom cut her off. "What I wanted to ask you about is what happened when the Sheriff and his posse stopped the train. I heard you ran off with three undocumented immigrants that they were trying to arrest,"

"I didn't know he was the Sheriff. It was a gang with guns chasing us so I ran and these three members of Tony's tour just followed me."

"So you didn't know that they were undocumented?"

Zelda pursed her lips and looked around. "Look, if I answer you than I could be in big trouble."

"With the Sheriff?"

"I'm more afraid of my Mom finding out. She'll ground me if she finds out and then I won't be in the play. My big break will be a bust. I mean, I have a lawyer who said she can keep the Sheriff from arresting me but she won't be able to keep my Mom from putting me in solitary confinement." Zelda looked at the floor and shook her head.

"Anything you say will be off the record so neither the Sheriff nor your Mom will know." Tom paused and then added something he'd always wanted to say. "And as a journalist I never reveal my sources."

"Okay," Zelda said. "Then I'll give you an exclusive only you can't print any of it like you promised."

"Right. It's only for background. We should go someplace where no one will hear us," Tom said. Looking at Carlotta who was still standing next to Zelda, he added. "Including you Carlotta. Sorry."

"That's fine with me. Just get back to me about our date."

"What date?"

Carlotta put her hands on her hips and said. "Tom, you asked me out just a few minutes ago, remember?"

Tom started to scratch his head but stopped when his fingertips encountered cloth instead of hair. He realized that he was wearing a baseball cap. He also realized it was his gray one that had **READ A PAPER INSTEAD OF A HAT** stenciled on it in the same Franklin Gothic font used for the Picketwire Press headlines. Quickly lowering his arm he sputtered. "But that was Billy and you were Karla."

“Well, they’re both busy because they’re going on a double date with Jolene and...” she looked at Zelda. “And someone who isn’t Rick.”

“Okay, then, that’s great,” Tom answered, hoping that his grin didn’t look too stupid.

After Carlotta walked away, Zelda said to Tom. “So where should we go for this exclusive off the record interview?”

“I guess we could sit in one of the pews in the last row.”

“People can still see us.”

“Nobody notices people in the back of a church. That’s why so many people like to sit there.”

The lights flickered off and on several times followed by an announcement from Daryl Menke, the stage manager, that everyone had ten minutes to leave before the doors were locked for the night.

“I guess we need to find somewhere else,” Tom said. “Any suggestions?”

Zelda pursed her lips and squinted as if she was searching her mind. Then her head tilted left and right several times like she was weighing an idea. Finally she nodded her head indicating that she had reached a decision. “I know a place, but we’ll need a car,” she said.

“I can drive us. Where is it?”

“It’s a place I go when I want to be all by myself. I never go there with anyone else.”

“Then it should be a perfect place for an interview that never took place.”

## CHAPTER 20

### HIGH PLAINS

When Gretl had asked Ari if he wanted to drive he declined, admitting that he’d never learned how to drive a manual transmission. He told himself that since most cars had automatic transmissions and soon there would be autonomous vehicles without drivers much less a gear shift, mastering a manual transmission was about as useful a skill as penmanship and shifting gears would be something left to automotive re-enactors. Suddenly the Jeep came to a halt. Through the dust covered windshield he saw Will standing at a point where the ditch forked. The original ditch continued straight while the one that looked like it had been newly dug veered

to the left. Will began walking along the newly dug ditch with Gretl and Ari trailing behind in the Jeep. Will stopped where the ditch seemed to disappear into a small rise. Gretl halted the jeep and they both got out as Will walked to the top of the rise and looked around.

"It looks like it drains into that pipe," Gretl said, pointing at a pvc tube that stuck out of the end of the ditch near the bottom.

"Where does it go?" Ari asked, looking around at the empty, undulating prairie.

"Down," Will said from the top of the rise.

Gretl and Ari walked up the rise and joined Will. They were on the rim of a canyon that had been hidden by the rise.

"Marijuana," Gretl said, her hands on her hips. "Acres of it."

Ari could see the cannabis plants spread across the canyon floor like a rough green carpet on a brown floor. "Is this why they call it the high plains?"

Ignoring the joke, Will explained to Ari. "Box canyons like this form a natural micro climate that's great for growing cannabis. It has lots of sun, sheltered from the wind and the area is low in humidity so they don't need a climate controlled greenhouse. What they do need is water. Lots of water. A single plant requires six to ten gallons of water a day. That's twice the amount that most of the crops that are grown around here require and more than what humans need. They're using the ditch to deliver the water they need. It goes into that pipe connected to that storage tank down there." He pointed at a round, silver metal tank on the canyon floor. "You can see the pipe from the ditch coming out just below us and then going down the side of the cliff and into the tank."

Ari nodded and said. "The water is being diverted through the ditch for the marijuana farm."

"More like a marijuana ranch," Gretl said. "It's quite a spread."

"What they're growing is for commercial use," Will added.

"That's legal in Colorado, right?"

Gretl answered. "It's legal to grow marijuana for sale if you have a commercial license but nobody in Purgatory County has one. The Sheriff has vetoed every application. No pot in Purgatory is the way Rigglesman puts it." She looked at Will and added. "It's the only thing Will and Rigglesman agree on, right Will?"



Will kicked up some dust with the toe of his thick soled hiking boot and answered. "I'm not opposed to growing grass here but it's the kind of grass that animals eat not something people smoke. At this rate of use there won't be any water left for plants, animals or people."

"What about medicinal marijuana? Some people need it for health reasons."

Will stared at Ari with an intensity that was as far from the cool dude, stoner look as you could get. "There are already fifteen hundred commercial cannabis growers in Colorado and they grew more than five hundred tons last year. That comes to eleven pounds per registered medical marijuana user. I don't think there's a shortage."

Gretl knelt down and sifted the dry dirt through her fingers. "We'll have a lot bigger health problem if we run out of water."

"The solution seems simple enough," Ari said. "All we need to do is call the Sheriff and report that someone without a license is growing marijuana here. Given his opposition to pot he'll shut it down."

"We could and then Riggleman would do just what you said..."

"Exactly," Ari said, nodding his head.

"If this wasn't part of the Double B Ranch," Will added. "The ranch boundary starts back there where this new ditch is connected to the old one that connects to the Purgatoire."

"Why should that make a difference?"

"Because Wylie Boone is Riggleman's biggest backer," Gretl answered as she opened her hand and let the rest of the dirt fall on the ground, then stood up.

"Backer." Will spat out the word like a wad of chewing tobacco. "Riggleman is his hired gun...only with a badge. He does whatever Boone tells him. He's been bought and paid for, but there are other ways to stop this."

Before Ari could ask Will how, Gretl said "It's getting late." She already had the Leica that had been slung over her right shoulder in her hands. "I think we've seen enough here to confirm what you suspected, Will. Let me take some pictures while the light is still good and then we should head back to town."

As they drove into Picketwire, the sun was hanging just above the Spanish Peaks, hesitating before it plunged into the dark, jagged waves of the Sangre de Cristos. Gretl asked them if they wanted to stop at her place for a drink. Will said he'd drop

them off but that he had a prior engagement. They turned into Happy Trails and passed a number of old trailers, some Ari recognized as vintage Airstreams, before stopping in front of a little wooden cabin on wheels. It stuck out like a glass bottle in a row of aluminum beer cans. He knew the wood was cedar because it was the same as the small deck that was attached to the house that he rented. There were flower boxes under the windows on either side of the front door that were filled with plants.

After Ari and Gretl got out of the Jeep and Will drove away, Ari said to Gretl, "Now, this is what you call a tiny house."

"It's a shepherds hut. It has wheels so the shepherd can move with their flocks. Tiny is a matter of perspective. Shepherds used to live in it for months at a time. This one belonged to a Basque family who had a sheep ranch a few miles from here. There once were a lot of sheep ranches here and Basques are known for their skills as shepherds so Basques immigrated here to work on the sheep ranches. Some of them ended up owning ranches."

"How did you get it?"

She smiled. "I inherited it."

"You're a Basque?"

"A part of me is."

"A bit of Basque," Ari joked.

"Maybe two bits," she answered and then walked up three metal steps attached to the front and opened the green, wooden Dutch door. "Have a seat," she said after Ari joined her inside. As she unlatched the top of the Dutch door and swung it open she said, "That's how I turn on the air conditioning." She then patted a black stove. "This is my heat and that..." she pointed at a small cylinder on the wall above a small sink. "Is an on demand hot water heater."

"Where's the bathroom?"

"That thing in the corner that looks a little like a phone booth. In case you're wondering, I don't use a phone book for toilet paper. It's a composting toilet so it doesn't use any water. Instead, there's a bucket inside filled with sawdust and you put a cup full in the toilet when you're finished. It's cedar sawdust so it smells nice."

"I'm guessing that you don't take your showers with sawdust."

She laughed. "I take baths, but not in sawdust. The bath tub is, well, a wash tub. You're sitting on it, in fact."

Ari pulled up the edge of the cushion he was sitting on, exposing the shiny tin of the tub. "Very efficient use of space."

"And it doesn't hold that much water so there's no waste."

"I'm sure Will approves of both your tub and your toilet."

"He does. Not that he's tried it: Either of them. He's only been inside here once. He gave his seal of approval but I got the feeling that he prefers an even humbler abode."

"Humbler than this. Where does he live in a tent or something?"

"I don't know where he lives, actually, but I wouldn't be surprised if it's or something. As far as drinks are concerned I only have wine."

"I didn't think you'd be offering me a joint."

"No, I'm against smoking but I can offer you one of my homemade brownies that includes marijuana in the mix."

"Wait, I thought you were against marijuana?"

"I'm against the diversion of water for its large scale commercial cultivation, like we just saw, but not against growing it for personal use."

"So the marijuana in your brownie mix is homegrown?"

"You didn't notice what was growing in the window boxes on either side of the front door?"

"I'm sort of horticulturally challenged. I do know what grape vines look like, though. I think I'll have a glass of wine."

"That's fine with me."

"Red or white?"

"Red."

"That's good, because I don't have any white and I don't have any wine glasses either. But..." she took two ceramic cups from a pantry next to the sink. "I got these from Purgatory Potters. That's the name of the pottery at Our Lady of Lost Souls."

"That's the old penitentiary, isn't it?"

"Right. Sister Bernadine who made the cups said they use the same ones for their Holy Eucharist." She poured wine into both cups and handed one to Ari.

Ari took the cup she offered and peering into it, asked, "Does that mean that this wine has undergone transubstantiation?"

"No, but I believe it can lead to inebriation," Gretl answered as she sat down on a platform covered with a quilt. Ari assumed it must double as her bed.

Ari raised his cup and said. "Eucharist means being thankful in Greek so here's my eucharist to you. I'm Greek so I guess I'm not committing some mortal sin by using it in a toast."

"Todah," Gretl answered.

"What's that?"

"That's thank you in Hebrew. I'm also part Jewish. In Basque thank you is milesker."

He shook his head. "You're Jewish and Basque."

"A Jew from Austria and a Basque from Spain met in Colorado and the result was my great grandfather on my father's side."

"That only accounts for some of your parts."

Gretl laughed. "If you want a full accounting I would have to give you a sample of my DNA."

"DNA? I don't even know your last name."

"You don't like being on a first name basis?"

"It's just that you know mine and I don't know yours. Doesn't seem fair"

"Well then in the spirit of reciprocity," Gretl said and pulled the purse resting next to her onto her lap then rummaged through it and extracted a business card. She looked at it then took a pen and crossed something out and added something else. Finally, she held it out to Ari.

Ari reached over and took the card from her hand. Margaret had been crossed out and replaced with Gretl. "Gretl Johan," he read aloud then, looking up at her he said, "Johan is unusual for a last name."

"In Hebrew it means God is gracious. Of course, not being God I'm not required to be gracious."

"I don't know, your place looks pretty clean to me and that's supposed to be next to godliness."

"The god of good housekeeping isn't quite the same as Yahweh." She took a sip of wine and then asked. "What about your last name, Naxos?"

"It's the name of a Greek Island. Zeus was supposed to have lived there in a cave when he was growing up. He wasn't always an old man with a beard. Anyway, he lived in a cave before he took up residence on top of Mount Olympus."

"So he preferred a mountain top to a man cave?" Gretl said with a look of mock incredulity.

Ari looked at Gretl, who was glowing in the aura of sunlight from the window behind her. "It's hard to meet goddesses in a man cave. My grandfather, on the other hand moved from Naxos to America where he met my grandmother on another island...Coney Island. Her family had immigrated from Athens when she was a child. I grew up in Philadelphia but we visited them every summer."

"I imagine you spent a lot of time at the Coney Island amusement park."

"As much as possible. I still remember riding the Cyclone. Even though I must have ridden it a dozen times it always scared the hell out of me."

"We have cyclones here, but the kind you'd only want to ride out in a cellar." She looked around. "Since that's one thing my shepherd's hut lacks I go to the College when there's a tornado warning. The basement of the building where the Picketwire Institute is now was used for a bomb shelter during the Cold War. There are still sealed barrels of water and containers of dehydrated food stored there."

"The house I rent has a basement so you're more than welcome to come over. Although the only thing I have stored there is wine."

"In that case I'll bring cheese and crackers. They won't be dehydrated."

"That would be quite a date."

"A whirlwind romance," Gretl rolled her eyes and laughed, then got up and walked over to Ari. With her empty wine glass in her right hand she reached toward him with her left. He was left handed and was about to reach out and clasp it with his free, right hand when he realized she was reaching for his own empty wine glass. With a glass in both hands she looked down. "I'd offer you another but I need to get over to PRI and develop the photos I took."

Ari stood up. "Would you mind giving me a ride to my place?"

"No, I don't mind, but that was my Jeep that Will was driving. His car broke down so I lent him mine until it's fixed. I like walking and it's not very far to PRI. Nothing is very far away in Picketwire."

"I've noticed. It takes me less than ten minutes to walk to College from my place and that's uphill."

"We can walk together as far as your place."

He grinned.

"What are you grinning about?"

"I was just thinking that there ought to be an app for walking with someone," Ari said. "Instead of ride share it would be walk share. You just tap the screen of your smartphone and it hooks you up with someone else who's walking in the same direction."

"Or you could just tap a smart person," Gretl said as she tapped Ari on the right shoulder.

## **TEA FOR TWO**

This time she wasn't meeting Wylie on his home turf. The last time Jemma Lu saw Wylie it was at the Double B. They had been dating for six months and she was expecting a proposal. What she got sounded like a business proposition for a merger rather than a marriage. One that was all commitment on her side and all promises on his. The veil was lifted from her eyes but, fortunately, it was before she said I do. They argued and then she left, refusing Wylie's offer to drive her home. He had picked her up in the same candy apple red 57 Chevy he'd driven when they were in Picketwire High School. She realized that it was probably the only thing in his life that he would really cherish until death did they part. Why had she ever started dating him much less think that they might get married? She didn't want to spend another minute with him or his beloved Chevy. Jemma Lu knew when she called Howdy and asked him to pick her up that she wasn't burning the bridge between her and Wylie she was blowing it up. As she rode off on Howdy's motorcycle she could hear Wylie shouting at her but his words were lost in the roar of the engine and the rush of the wind.

Thirty years later Jemma Lu was prepared for Wylie. He wanted something from her and she was pretty certain it was more than wanting FRED X to include some idea of his. Through the window of the first floor parlor of the Tuttle Mansion she saw the candy apple red 57 Chevy pull up. Behind it was a black Suburban with dark

tinted windows. She'd told him that his bodyguards had to stay outside. Jemma Lu turned her back to the window. She didn't want him to see her through the window and, especially, didn't want him to see her looking at him. The front door opened and closed, there were muffled footsteps on the hall's carpet runner. Jemma didn't get up from the Louis XVI chair that faced a French mahogany couch. They were both antiques and upholstered in a soft pinkish-blue floral pattern. The chair she sat in was one of a pair but she had moved the other one out of the parlor for her meeting. Between the chair she sat in and the couch was an antique French coffee table made of painted Chinoiserie with an inlaid black lacquered top. Resting on the lacquer top was a silver tray with a porcelain china tea service and a plate of lemon tea cookies. The footsteps stopped. Jemma Lu looked up at the parlor entrance, whose pocket doors she had slid back and left open. Wylie stood in the doorway. He was wearing jeans, a blue blazer and an open collared white western shirt with pearl buttons. The brown cowboy boots he was wearing added a couple of extra inches to his already six foot plus height. He was still handsome and he knew it. Her heart didn't flutter.

"I see that you're back on your feet after that run in with a mini-van in Aspen."

"You know what they say - it's hard to keep a good man down."

"That may be true for good men but what about you?"

"Same old Jemma Lu."

"Old but not the same, Wylie."

Wylie started to laugh but cut it off when she didn't join in. He looked around, noticed that she was sitting in the only chair and walked over to the couch. She noticed that he had a slight limp as he walked and grasped the right arm of the couch when he sat down at one end. When he realized that Jemma Lu wasn't going to get up and join him he shifted toward the center. "You're as beautiful as I remember, Jemma Lu."

"That probably says more about your memory than my looks, Wylie."

"I haven't forgotten, Jemma Lu."

Jemma Lu decided not to follow up on his comment but bent forward and poured tea into both of the china cups. "It's Darjeeling. Help yourself. There's cream in the silver pitcher and sugar in the bowl," she said taking one of the saucers and cups and sitting back in her chair.

Wylie reached for the other cup with his right hand. Discovering that the handle was too small for his index finger he wrapped his hand around it and took a sip then quickly put it down, sloshing some of the red tea in the saucer.

"Is it too strong for you?"

"Too strong," Wylie snapped. "No, I'm just not that thirsty."

"Then how about one of the cookies?" Jemma Lu asked. "They're homemade lemon tea cookies."

"I'm not much for cookies."

"Really, it must have been someone else I was thinking of who liked cookies," Jemma Lu reached out and took a cookie, bit a piece off and after slowly chewing and swallowing, she asked Wylie. "So what is the idea?"

"You mean my big idea for FRED X or my idea of making it a condition that you had to meet me?"

"Both."

"Well, the first one is easy, but I can see already that the second one isn't going to be."

"Why, Wylie, I think I'm being ever so polite. This is my best tea set - it belonged to my grandmother, the cookies are from Dolly's Dough Bakery and you're sitting in what is considered to be the nicest parlor in all of Picketwire. So, please go ahead."

"Okay, Jemma Lu. My big idea is to make Purgatory County the cannabis capital of Colorado."

"Cannabis capital," Jemma Lu said, trying hard not to laugh. "The idea is big, but I guess that's befitting a Boone, and it has an alliterative ring, but, really, Wylie you sure you haven't been smoking it because that sounds like more of a pipe dream than a big idea."

"Before you laugh it off, Jemma Lu, I'm not finished so hear me out." Wylie had moved to the edge of the couch and was leaning toward her. "This isn't the stuff that's grown artificially in green houses but naturally, outdoors and it's more potent. Purgatory County will be known for its marijuana just like Rocky Ford is for its melons."

"There's a big difference between growing melons and marijuana, Wylie."

"The money you make from growing both is the same except you can make a hell of lot more of it growing marijuana."



“Wylie, what do you know about growing marijuana or anything except beef? The Boones have always been ranchers not farmers.”

“The ranch has been losing money ever since I left Picketwire. If it was one of my other businesses I would have sold it a long time ago but, well, it has sentimental value.”

Jemma Lu shook her head, picked up her cup of tea and took a sip, then asked. “Sentimental value?”

“Okay, it also has some value as a tax write off.”

“Tax write off. Now that’s the Wylie I remember.” She placed the tea cup and saucer firmly on the coffee table.

“Really?” Wylie blurted and then stopped, looked down at his clenched fists, took a breath, looked up at Jemma Lu and said. “But, to get back to my point, Jemma Lu…”

“Yes, your big idea. Please.”

“When marijuana was legalized in Colorado I started thinking that I might be able to turn the ranch into more than a tax write off. Something that would expand the Double B brand to include more than beef. I’ve been working on this for a while under the radar. I’ve invested millions. I hired a whole herd of experts and cross bred cannabis plants just like cattle to come up with the best breed.”

“And that’s your big idea?”

“No, Jemma Lu, there’s more. The second part is distribution – how to sell it. That’s where Picketware comes in.”

“Picketware?”

Wylie nodded. “Picketware is nationally known, even internationally, for selling only the highest quality, locally made products and that’s exactly what this is.”

“Not just made or grown locally but by locally owned producers.”

“The Boones are one of the founders of Picketwire. The Double B is the biggest ranch in Purgatory County. You can’t get more local than that.”

“For the past thirty years you’ve been an absentee owner, Wylie. From what I’ve heard you have a lot of homes all over the world but the Double B isn’t one of them.”

“That’s not my fault, Jemma Lu, and you know it. I wouldn’t have left Picketwire if you had agreed to marry me.”

"You wanted Picketware more than me, Wylie."

"Now, that's not true."

"Okay, maybe just as much rather than more. Not that I was completely surprised."

"So why did you ever agree to go out with me? We dated for almost a year..."

"Half a year."

"Okay, but it seemed longer, and we also...I mean you didn't forget that we..."

"No, haven't forgotten, but..." Jemma Lu paused. She realized that her hands were gripping the arms of the chair. She moved them to her lap. "It all happened a long time ago. We were younger."

"We weren't teenagers, Jemma Lu. We'd known each other our whole lives."

"Which is why I should have known better than to ever get involved with you. I had turned thirty and maybe I just wanted to start a family and you kept asking me out. You wore me down, Wylie." Jemma Lu looked into her empty tea cup. There was a single leaf at the bottom. "But I came to my senses."

Wylie shook his head. "Now, look at us. Neither of us is married. Neither of us has kids - has an heir."

"Are you sure about that, Wylie?"

"Sure? Just ask my ex-wives."

"You don't have to be married to have a child."

"Are you talking about that rumor about me and Pam Martindale back in High School?"

"You know I'm not one for rumors, Wylie. I'm just saying that you've been around and a man wouldn't necessarily know the result of his, his..."

"Screwing around."

"I was trying to find a more polite way of saying it, Wylie."

"Then I apologize for not being polite in the nicest parlor in Picketwire. Look, Jemma Lu, if you've got some sort of point you want to make just tell me straight."

"My point is that while I don't know about your heirs mine are Picketware's employees, both past and present. They get the company."

"I heard you were giving it to them. Picketwire's a small town. Word gets out."

"It's not a secret. I've told everyone that's what I'm going to do."

"And that's why you should agree to go with my idea, Jemma Lu. The value of Picketware will soar and your employees stand to make a lot more money from their share of the company. And as for local ownership, I've moved back and I'm living at the Double B full time. In fact, I'd like nothing better than to have you come over. How about right now? I've got the old Chevy right outside."

"The last time I was there it didn't end very well."

"This time it can have a happy ending."

Jemma Lu rose from her chair and looked down at Wylie. Sitting in the middle of the couch, he seemed to have shrunk. "Well, Wylie, I've heard your idea."

Wylie slowly got up from the couch and looked at her from across the coffee table. "And what's your decision? Yes or no?"

"The agreement was that I would meet with you alone, hear your idea and decide whether it should be included in FRED X. In return you will cover the expenses for FRED X and provide twenty five thousand dollars for prize money."

"That's the agreement. I'll certainly live up to my side of it." He pulled a check from the inside breast pocket of his blazer and showed it to her. "This is for the fifty thousand – twenty five for the prize money and another twenty five toward the expenses. If the expenses are more than that I'll pay the balance. Now, what's your decision?"

"And I lived up to it on my side, which doesn't include me telling you what I decided. You'll hear from Rich Best whether your idea will be part of FRED X. You can leave the check on the tray."

"I guess that means you're turning down my invitation," Wylie said, dropping the check on the tray. "But, I don't take no for an answer."

"You did thirty years ago."

Wylie walked out of the parlor with Jemma Lu following him, several feet behind. He opened the front door and then turned to her and said. "I guess you didn't hear what I shouted after you when you were riding off with Howdy Hanks' on his motorcycle."

“What did you say?”

Wylie didn’t answer, he just turned, opened the front door and walked out.

## CHAPTER 21

### NOT FORGOTTEN

Other than the top of Mount Witt there is no better view in Picketwire than from a hill at the western edge of town. Looking out over gently rolling prairie at the Sangre de Cristo mountains it offers a truly sublime perspective. Of course, since it’s also Picketwire’s Cemetery, the view for its permanent residents is obstructed by six feet of earth. When Jane was a girl she would ride her bike on the paved walkways that meandered through the cemetery, stopping to read their epitaphs. She hadn’t been back since her return to Picketwire. After parking her car she walked to the area under a grove of elms where she stopped and looked at the headstones. Her great grandparent’s epitaph was carved in Japanese as well as English.

The day before Uncle Joji had told Jane and Bruce that the Japanese characters painted on the side of the building in the secret internment camp meant “not forgotten”. Only after he said that did he look at the photo on her smartphone. Then he nodded and said, “Yes, I was right, that is what is written.”

“How did you know?” She asked him.

“Because a young man who came to see me asked me to write those words in Japanese.”

“What young man?”

“He came by a couple of months ago. I never met him before. He said he was researching water conservation and heard that I practiced the Fukuoka method. That is a way of farming that conserves water that I learned while I was in Japan. It is the farming method I use here. When we finished talking about that he brought up Camp Amache. After we talked about it and that it was a great injustice to put Americans in prison simply because they were of Japanese descent, he said he had heard about another camp where Japanese Americans were imprisoned that was separate from Camp Amache and asked me if I knew about it. I told him what I knew.”

“What was that?”

Uncle Joji was silent for a long time before replying. "My father, your grandfather, told me about the camp. My father and I were driving on Highway Fifty near the turn off to the road that leads to where Camp Amache was and that is when he told me about what had happened to the Japanese Americans during the war and that there had been an internment camp up the road. I said I'd like to see it so we drove up to where it had been. There wasn't much left to look at that I remember but he said that he visited the camp when he was a young man. He described it like he was looking at it although it was invisible to me. I already knew that he and Japanese American men, were barred from joining the military except for those who were able to volunteer for the 442<sup>nd</sup> that fought in Europe. I used to be embarrassed about it when my schoolmates bragged about their fathers serving in the war. They made them sound like heroes, of course. Fortunately, my father and the other Japanese Americans living here were not considered to be as great a risk as those who lived on the coast so they weren't put in camps. However, they were allowed to visit Camp Amache. When he asked the people he met in the camp why there were so few young men he was told that many, unmarried young men had been taken away to another, secret, camp. They were told it was for security reasons. The people who told him were very afraid and he promised not to tell anyone because it would make trouble and they feared they might be sent to such a camp as well. My father also said that he still felt guilty that with so many of the young men missing he and his male friends were very popular with the girls in the camp."

"What did the young man say after you told him?"

"He thanked me and left."

"That's it?"

"Well, a couple of weeks ago he reappeared and said that he had found the camp where I said it would be and that many of the buildings were still standing. Then he said that he'd done some research and that the prisoners in the camp were forced to work for the Double B Ranch. He said the papers he found said that the ranch provided beef to the military during the war and because most of the men were fighting they needed workers. So this secret camp was established and that some of the male prisoners at Camp Amache who were in good physical condition were moved there. It was classified as a top secret because of the war effort but he didn't see how raising cattle could be called a top secret. He said that they were slave labor and that was the real reason it was a secret. Then he asked me to write down the Japanese characters that mean *not forgotten*. I wrote them on a piece of paper he gave me. As soon as you mentioned the writing on the wall I knew it must be those words. I was right."

"That is quite a secret."

"Yes, but there was another secret."

"There's more?" Bruce exclaimed. Jane had forgotten he was there.

"Some of the prisoners died and were buried in the Picketwire Cemetery."

"Where?" Jane asked him. "When I was a girl I used to ride out here on my bike and read the headstones and I never came across them."

"They are buried in the southwest corner where they don't even cut the grass. They are not even visible unless you are looking for them. The markers look like small stones that have rolled off the prairie. There are no names on them, only a number and a date. There were stories that there were bodies buried there in unmarked graves. People said that they were murderers who had been hung, crazy people, people who had died in an epidemic and couldn't be buried next to healthy dead people. All sorts of stories. One day me and a couple of my friends went to the cemetery to see if the stories were true. We found the markers and I noticed that the dates on them were from 1942 to 1944. Then I went to the County Clerk's office and looked at the death records for those years. I found that there were only a few deaths recorded during that period and those who died and were buried in the cemetery had headstones with their names on them. When I told my Father he said he agreed with me that it must be where they buried some of the prisoners."

"And you never told my Dad?"

"Yes, I disobeyed my Father and told him. Your Dad had overheard our parents talking about it and he kept asking me so I finally told him. I felt relieved to tell someone. But your Dad was still just a child and it disturbed him a great deal. He had nightmares and my Father found out. He was very mad at me for not keeping it a secret. He said it was wrong to burden anyone else with this knowledge. Then he made both me and your Dad swear not to tell anyone."

"I remember overhearing my grandparents talk about the camp once and when I asked my Dad he made it clear that they didn't want to discuss it."

"There should be no more secrets." Uncle Joji replied then looked off toward the mountains.

No more secrets, Jane repeated silently as she sat cross legged surrounded by the nine markers. She had written down the numbers and the dates for each of them on a pad of paper. The wind rustled the grass and blew strands of her hair across her face. Clouds drifted across the sky. It wasn't just who they were but how did they die? What were their families told? This knowledge had been passed down from her grandfather through her uncle and now to her. The young man Uncle Joji had told also knew. At least he had done something when he wrote not forgotten on the side of the abandoned building in the camp. But who would see the words and if they did

and translated them into English, would they know what they meant? She got up and started walking back to her car.

"I see you found them," someone called out. Startled, Jane turned and saw an old man in coveralls standing behind a marble headstone. He was thin, slightly stooped and his face weathered by years in the sun and wind. There was a pair of pruning shears in one of his gloved hands and some weeds in the other.

Regaining her composure, Jane asked. "You know about these graves?"

"I saw them buried."

"What?"

"I was only a kid, of course. My Dad worked here as the caretaker. I took over for him as caretaker when he died. He's right over there with Mom." He pointed at two headstones a few feet away with his pruning shears, then smiled and shook his head. "She used to complain that he spent more time with dead people than her. They both got what they wanted." He turned to Jane and said, "Anyway, I've worked here my whole life." He nodded at the headstone in front of him. "I've just been making a contribution to my retirement plan. Pulling some weeds from my six foot under pension. As you can see it's got my birth date, which is when I entered the family business, but my last day on the job will have to be carved by someone else."

Jane read the name on the headstone. "Lazarus Lamont. Your first name is really Lazarus?"

"My parents had a sense of humor. My Dad used to say that if Jesus came back and started raising the dead we'd be out of a job. I go by Laz. I tell people it's short for lazy." He placed the shears and weeds on top of the headstone, took off his gloves and they shook hands. Jane was surprised by the firm grip.

"I'm Jane Takamoto."

"You must be related to the Takamotos over there under the Elms. Nice folks. Never cause any trouble."

Jane laughed.

He chuckled and said. "That's good. That you can laugh, I mean. Most people seem to think that because it's a cemetery you have to be deadly serious."

"To answer your question, yes, I'm related. I grew up here and moved away but just came back. This is the first time I've been out here since I returned but I used to come out here quite often. I'm sorry that I don't remember you."

"I try to be invisible. Sort of like an undertaker at a funeral. See but not be seen."

"You said you saw the people being buried here when you were a kid?"

Laz's expression turned serious. He crossed his arms and looked at the markers. "I can see it now even though it was in 1946, a year after the War ended. I was only five years old at the time. It was after sunset. Twilight time. A truck drove up to the cemetery gate. The caretaker's house is right next to it. I heard it idling and looked out my window. My Dad went out, talked to someone in the cab and then opened the gate. He started walking and the truck followed him. I snuck out of my room and followed the truck that was following my Dad until he stopped over there. About five or six men got out of the back of the truck and dug nine graves, then they took plain wooden coffins out of the back of the truck and buried them. After they covered them up with dirt they placed those little stone markers down and drove off."

"Did your Dad ever say anything about it?"

"A few years later, when I was twelve or thirteen, I told him what I'd seen. He said it wasn't a regular burial but a re-interment because the bodies had been buried somewhere else and then been dug up and reburied here. According to him the folks who buried them didn't want anything on the stones but the cemetery rules stated that the markers had to identify the person and the date they died. However, it seems that the rule didn't say specifically that the identification had to be a name so that's why the markers just have numbers on them. The people who buried them said that was their identity number. The Cemetery Association changed the rule after that but, well, it was a little late for those fellows over there. They did put the date they died."

"I can understand why you never forgot what happened."

He nodded and said. "There was one more thing I'll never forget and that's what my Dad did after the bodies were buried and the truck left. He just stood there for a few minutes and then bowed his head and said something. I couldn't hear what he said so I asked him and he told me that he felt something needed to be said but since he didn't know anything about the people who had just been buried he didn't know what was appropriate. He didn't have his Bible with him so he decided to repeat the only poem he knew by heart. He had to memorize it when he was in grade school."

"What poem?"

"The Charge of the Light Brigade. Anyway, it's not the words but the thought that counts, he figured and I agree."

"Did your father tell you who the men were that buried the bodies?"



"He said he hadn't seen any of them before. The only person he recognized was the guy he talked to who was in charge. The guy had stayed in the cab of the truck so I didn't see him."

"Who was he?"

"Charles Boone, Wylie's dad."

## **RUF RYDER**

"I must apologize," Sister Beatrice said to Tony, her gloved hands placing the map on the table in her workroom. She had removed it from a cell next to her workroom-laboratory that had once been used for solitary confinement where valuable artifacts were now stored. "I saw it as just a very old map of the area and not as part of a legal document. Otherwise, I would have come straight to you and told you. After all, if it was stolen from your family and it should be returned to you. I don't know how I could have missed what seems obvious. I guess I didn't see the forest for the trees."

Tony liked Sister Beatrice. He had often shown her the items that he had found on his amateur expeditions around the area and she had treated his discoveries as if they were important artifacts worthy of careful examination. He hated to see how distraught she was. "I'm just happy that you discovered it. I mean, we thought it had disappeared for good. Many people said it never existed in the first place; that Don Francisco made it all up. Now, here it is in the flesh - I mean paper." Tony said, bending over for a closer look at the map.

"It's actually drawn on parchment, which is made from calfskin so you're right to say in the flesh," Sister Beatrice said. "I've carbon tested the ink, compared it to other maps of that time and the signature of General Armijo matches other documents he signed." She replied, pointing at the seal next to the signature, being careful not to touch it even though she was wearing latex gloves. "Probably most important is that his official seal is next to the signature, wax and all. The original seal is in the New Mexico History Museum in Santa Fe. I went down there and it's a perfect match."

"This must be the genuine article," Tony said.

"Artifact," Sister Beatrice corrected Tony. "I also had an authority on maps and documents, Professor Arthur Blechstein at the University of Colorado, look at it and he agrees that it seems to be authentic."

"Seems to be?"

"There is one issue."

"What's that?"

“Establishing provenance. It would help to be able to know the chain of ownership.”

“The chain ownership? There’s only one link as far as ownership and that’s my family. Whoever had it after that was either the thief or dealing with stolen property.”

“Let’s call it chain of possession, then.”

“Since you found it in a prison cell the guy who stole it had to be an inmate. Talk about chains, the guy was locked up behind bars.”

“It was unlikely that the person who hid the map was the same person who stole it since the map was reported stolen in 1850 and this place wasn’t opened until 1875. He would have had to hold onto it for twenty five years at least. The person who stole it could have given it to someone else and that person was the convict who hid it here.”

“Do you know who the inmates were who occupied the cell?”

“There is a master registry of all the convicts. The original is with the Colorado Department of Corrections but I was able to get a copy and I loaded all the information onto a computer database. It has things like their name, their date of birth, last known address, their criminal record, what they were sentenced for, the date they were incarcerated and the date they were released or died. Unfortunately, there’s nothing in it that tells us who occupied a particular cell.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Not exactly nothing. There is graffiti.”

“Graffiti?”

“Convicts wrote on the walls. Those who knew how to write, that is. Sometimes they signed their name or initials.”

“You mean like Kilroy was here?”

“Yes, only it would more likely be killed Roy.” After chuckling, she turned serious and said. “We can check any name or initials against the registry database.”

“Did you find any signed graffiti in the cell where this was found?”

Sister Beatrice smiled like she was about to let a cat out of a bag. “As a matter of fact, we did. We found two sets of initials and one prisoner signed his name. Three

prisoners in the registry had the same initials TW and four prisoners had the initials BG. The signature is Ruf Ryder."

"There was actually a convict with the name Rough Rider? That's what you call someone who rides wild horses."

"It's spelled r u f not r o u g h and r y d e r not r i d e r. There's a Rufus Ryder in the registry and he's also the only person with that last name so it has to be the same person."

"Probably preferred being known as a rough rider instead of a Rufus. Anyway, with a name like that I sort of hope he did it."

"He was only twenty five when he was incarcerated here so he couldn't have been the person who stole the map."

"Maybe the thief gave it to him as you suggested?"

"Yes, but it could also be any of the six people with the same initials on the wall or it could be someone who didn't feel like leaving his mark for history."

"Do you know anything about these people?"

"Just the information that's in the registry and now the database."

"What does it say about Ruf Ryder fellow?"

"I can pull it up on our computer." She walked over to a desktop computer. It was already on so with a few keystrokes she pulled up the file labeled Ruf Ryder. Tony looked over her right shoulder as she scrolled slowly through the information.

"Wait," Tony said. "It says he was convicted of committing grand larceny in Purgatory County."

"Yes, he's the only one who was serving time for a local crime."

"Local boy makes bad."

"Not just local but right next door," Sister Beatrice replied. "The Double B Ranch was the place that was robbed."

Francisco Way was more like a country lane than a street. It wasn't straight and it wasn't wide and it wasn't smooth but it did get to you to where you were going if that place was the Hacienda Medrano because the street had originally been the half mile drive from the Rancho Medrano gate. When "Don" Francisco Medrano

contributed part of the Medrano land to establish Picketwire one of his conditions was that “the paseo”, as he called it, would not be altered in any way. Another stipulation was that the Hacienda could never be sold and if no Medrano chose to live there it was to be donated to Picketwire. Tony’s parents were the current Medrano’s in residence and they might be the last since no one else in the family, including Tony, had expressed any interest in living there. After Francisco died the town council decided that it should be renamed in his honor. Paseo Medrano was the favorite until his oldest son, Alejandro, objected and argued that it be called Francisco’s Way because their father was so stubborn, a trait Alejandro shared and so he got his way.

Tony’s father, Roberto, had his office in the Medrano Building, a modest two story brick building at the beginning of Francisco’s Way not far from where the old gate once stood. Roberto’s office looked out at the canopy of Sycamore trees that lined Francisco Way. His name was stenciled in bold, black letters on the frosted glass of the door. It was no bigger or bolder than the names stenciled on the doors of the other five offices on the second floor. The frosted glass allowed the names to be scraped off without leaving a trace but that rarely happened. There wasn’t much staff turnover at Medrano Holdings, which reflected its investment strategy. As Roberto liked to point out, it was called Medrano Holdings not Medrano Droppings.

Roberto’s door was open as it usually was unless there was a need for privacy, which was hardly ever. Tony walked in without knocking. His father was sitting behind his desk staring at a computer screen. He was wearing his usual white shirt, suspenders and tie. Tony knew that his suit coat was on a hanger in the closet. Every employee at Medrano Holdings dressed for work. Each had a clothing allowance in the same amount that they could use at The Fashion Farm, whose motto was “clothes for the cultivated”. Roberto believed that dressing for work was like putting the on a costume that helped you get into the role you played. In the same way, when you left work you took it off and could leave the role behind. He believed that companies that encouraged their employees to wear the same casual clothes that they wore when they weren’t working, blurred the line and resulted in the person never being able to leave their job behind. Maybe that was his problem, Tony thought, that he didn’t dress up for work, and that was why he had such a hard time separating his work from the rest of his life.

Roberto looked up from the computer screen. “Hi Pop,” Tony said.

“Hello stranger,” his father replied swiveling his chair so he faced Tony, who had pulled up a chair and sat down.

“Stranger? I was just over for dinner the other night.”

“The other night was a week ago. You must have someone else cooking for you.”

Tony smiled broadly. He enjoyed going back and forth with his father. The two of them might not always have rapport but they sure had repartee. "Come on, Pop, nobody can compete with Mom."

"If that's the reason you aren't married, maybe I should cook when you come over instead of your mother."

"Pop, I'm not looking for someone who can cook for me. Mom taught me the basics and she said I'm not that bad. Hey, why don't I cook something next time I come over?"

Roberto grimaced and said, "If that's what it takes to have you visit I guess I can stomach it."

"Actually, I've been dating someone and maybe I'll bring her with me."

Roberto's face brightened. "Will she help you cook?"

"No, we just started dating. Isn't it enough that I bring her to dinner? I mean, this will be the first time I brought a woman I'm dating to dinner with you and Mom."

"Of course, it's more than enough, Son. I promise that if you bring this woman I will eat whatever you cook and I will also say that it is not bad. Now," Roberto said, cutting off any rejoinder by Tony. He nodded at the rolled up document Tony had placed on the desk. "What do you have there?"

"Hey, that's the reason I came by," Tony answered, unrolling the map and turning it so his Father could see it.

"What's this?" Roberto asked leaning forward to examine the document.

"This is a copy of an official map that shows that our land grant is for real. The one that was stolen. Don Francisco was telling the truth."

"Of course he was telling the truth, son."

"Of course, but this proves it."

"I hope you didn't need proof to believe Don Francisco."

"Of course not. Still, we can now show the world."

"You say this is a copy? Where is the actual map?"

"It's in prison," Tony answered as he sat down in one of the two chairs facing his father's desk.

“Prison?”

“Actually, it’s in Our Lady of Lost Souls but Sister Beatrice found it in one of the former prison cells. It had to have been stashed away by a convict. He probably thought it was a pretty safe place. I mean, who would look for stolen property in a prison?”

“Yes, who indeed. No wonder they could never find it,” Roberto sighed. “Does Sister Beatrice know who hid it there?”

“Not exactly. Sister Beatrice has a copy of the records for all of the convicts but there’s nothing in them that says which convicts occupied which cell. Still, there were six whose names match the initials that were scratched on the cell’s wall and one convict actually signed his name. His name was Ruf Ryder, if you can believe it. It’s spelled R u f R y d e r, and there was a convict named Rufus Ryder and he was convicted for stealing from the Double B.”

Roberto shook his head. “The map was stolen in 1850 and the prison wasn’t built until 1875 so if this Ruf Ryder was the thief he would have had to hold onto it for at least twenty five years and then smuggle it into prison and hide it. Sounds far-fetched if you ask me.”

“Ruf Ryder couldn’t have stolen the map, anyway, Pop, because he wasn’t born until 1860. Not only that, he was sent to prison for a crime he committed in 1883.”

“What was the crime?”

“Grand Larceny. He was from this area and stole something from the Double B Ranch. Local boy makes bad.”

Roberto slapped the top of the desk with his right hand and exclaimed. “That means he could have stolen the map and hidden it.”

“But that’s impossible, Pop. Like I told you, he wasn’t born until 1860.”

“He didn’t steal it from Don Francisco. He stole it from the Double B.”

“How would the map stolen from our family end up at the Double B?”

Roberto didn’t answer Tony. He got up from his chair and walked over to the door and closed it. He walked back to the desk, sat down and, finally, said. “What I am going to tell you is a secret.”

“A secret?”

"A family secret so you must promise to keep it confidential."

"Sure Pop."

"According to your grandfather Don Francisco the Boones stole the map."

"How did he know that?"

"He didn't trust C.W. Boone. Besides, the Boone's gained the most when the land grant was denied."

"I never knew that."

"There was no need for you to know. What would be the point since there is nothing that can be done about it?"

"But now we have this," Tony said, reaching over and picking up the map. "It's proof that the land was granted to our family."

"And what do we do with this proof? The Federal Government ruled against us in 1854. The matter is settled."

"How do you know? Maybe there's some legal action we can take."

"Legal action? The statute of limitations has long since expired."

Roberto walked over to the window. He stared at the sycamore tree. Finally he went back and sat down in his chair. He looked at Tony and said. "Don Francisco accused C.W. of stealing the map."

"And?"

"C.W. denied it, what do you think? He told Don Francisco if he tried to pursue this accusation he would not only pull his support for establishing Picketwire he would make sure it never happened. C.W. had a lot of friends in high places in Denver whose support was necessary to incorporate Picketwire as a town. Don Francisco knew that C.W. could carry out his threat so he promised to drop it. He told him that even though they both knew it was the truth it was a promise and he told C.W. that as a man of honor he would keep his word." He paused and looked at Tony. "The Medranos still keep their word. You understand what I am saying?"

## **CHAPTER 22**

### **THE LONG GOODBYE**

Not a creature was stirring in the Last Ditch although Shep, the bartender, was reading a book. That it was empty wasn't a surprise to Harry since it was two o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon. He couldn't remember the last time he had been there, or in any bar, for a drink this early on a weekday. He'd often had the urge to walk out of Bunch of Books and into the Last Ditch for a pint of beer instead of a cup of coffee at The Pretty Good but Harry wasn't one to give into his urges. Maybe he was only giving into a semi-urge since he was going to meet Howdy there. Still, as he left behind the bright sunlight and entered the cool twilight of the bar he felt like he was breaking some invisible barrier and he didn't regret it.

"Meeting Howdy Hanks here," Harry announced, feeling the need to explain his presence to Shep, as he sat down on a bar stool. Shep closed the dog eared paperback he'd been reading and picked up an empty pint glass as if Harry's appearance at that hour wasn't anything unusual. As he reached for the handle of the Hoppy Trails tap, which was Harry's usual beer, Harry cut him off by saying firmly, "I think I'll have a gin gimlet instead."

Shep's hand froze and he gave Harry a look of genuine surprise. "A gin gimlet? Where did that come from?"

"I've never had one before," Harry answered, less firmly.

Shep released his hand from the tap handle. "I've never made one before so I sure hope you know what goes in them other than gin."

"Half gin and half lime juice. At least that's what Phillip Marlowe says in *The Long Goodbye*."

"Who is this Marlowe guy and why is he saying goodbye?"

"He's a private detective and *The Long Goodbye* is a book by Raymond Chandler."

"No wonder I've never heard of him. I only read westerns," Shep said and held up the paperback. It didn't surprise Harry that it was Louis L'Amour's *Hondo*.

"I know, I sell them to you." Not only did Shep buy his westerns from Bunch of Books he was also the major contributor to their pre-read stock of more than eighty Louis L'Amour westerns. In fact, Shep had bought and sold the same book more than once. It was as if he was engaged in some sort of Louis L'Amour arbitrage. "Anyway, ever since I read *The Long Goodbye* I wanted to try a gin gimlet. I just never had the guts. You know, real cowboys don't drink cocktails."

Shep's face erupted in a wide grin. "Don't worry about having the guts, Harry, because you're not a real cowboy." Shep poured the gin into a cocktail glass then sliced a lime in half and squeezed its juice into the glass. "Good thing I've got these



limes for making margaritas.” He stirred it and handed it to Harry. He watched Harry take a sip. “Well, what do you think?”

“It tasted better in the book.”

“Well, you’re also not a real detective, Harry, so maybe that’s why.”

“Marlowe wasn’t real, either.”

“Trust me, if you drink enough gin gimlets he will be.”

Harry took another sip, pursed his lips and put the glass down on the bar. “He’ll have to remain a fictional character, then, because I can’t even finish this one.”

“Your usual?” Shep asked as he took the glass and dumped the remaining gimlet in the sink.

Harry nodded and with an I told you so grin, Shep filled a pint glass from the Hoppy Trails tap and slid it across the bar. In one smooth motion Harry grabbed the pint, toasted Shep with it and took a drink. “I guess I’ll have to settle for being a beer drinking bookseller.”

“What’s wrong with drinking beer?” Howdy said as he sidled onto the stool next to Harry.

“Harry just tried a gin gimlet because this detective he read about named Marlowe drank them.”

“Phillip Marlowe in The Long Goodbye,” Harry added.

“The Long Goodbye,” Howdy motioned to Shep that he wanted the same beer that Harry was drinking. “If it wasn’t already taken that’s what I’d call my new play.”

“People drink gin gimlets in your new play?” Shep asked handing Howdy a pint of Hoppy Trails.

“I leave gimlets and martinis and that sort of stuff to Noel Coward,” Howdy said, taking off his Stetson and placing it on the bar.

“Who’s no coward?”

“N O E L Coward,” Howdy said, spelling out the first name. “He was an English playwright.”

“Definitely not a cowboy. He’s also dead,” Harry said and then nudging Howdy in the ribs added. “Unlike Howdy here.”

"Are you saying I'm an undead cowboy? You know, undead is what they call a zombie."

"A zombie cowboy," Harry laughed. "You should write a play about that."

"Probably make a better movie than a play," Howdy said. "I've been thinking of writing a screenplay. Shoot out at the zombie corral or maybe undead riders of the purple sage."

"Now that's something I'd go see," Shep piped up.

"Of course, I wouldn't put my own name on it."

"How about Louis LeMort," Harry said, pronouncing in French without the t. "It means the dead in French."

"Now, wait a second, Howdy," Shep said. "You shouldn't make fun of Louis L'Amour's name."

"Louis changed his name to L'Amour," Harry replied. "And L'Amour means lover in French."

Dejected, Shep looked down at his copy of Hondo and rifled the pages with a thick thumb. "Here's to Louis L'Amour," Howdy said raising his pint in a toast. "A hell of a writer by whatever name."

"Damn straight," Shep answered, looking up. "And I bet he was also a damn good lover." Shep added a wink and then walked back to the end of the bar where he resumed his reading.

After each of them took a drink of Hoppy Trails, Harry broke the silence by saying. "It's funny that you said the title of your play should be The Long Goodbye because you never said goodbye when you left Picketwire. You just rode out of town on your motorcycle without any explanation. None of us understood why you left like that."

"Neither did I. That's why I never said goodbye."

"And you came back because you've figured it out and this play is your way of saying goodbye."

Howdy shook his head and cradling the pint in his two hands, in the mirror behind the bar two old men looked back. "I write all my plays as a way to figure out something for myself. It's always amazed me that people also find them entertaining. I thought that by writing this play and having it premier here in Picketwire I'd figure it all out..."

"But you haven't."

"Not yet and time is running out."

"You said after you read Pam's note that the plot was thickening but that it might become quicksand."

"Yep," Howdy said then took another sip of beer.

"Do you feel you're in quicksand?"

"Yep."

"So what do you do now?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"They say that the way to keep from going under in quicksand is to lean back and relax your body and that you'll float just like you were in water." Howdy said.

"And that works?"

"I don't know. I've never been in quicksand. Hell, I've never floated in the water. Never learned how to swim."

"I mean does it work for you as a playwright?"

"When I get writers block that's what I do. Instead of forcing things, thinking too much, I try to relax, free my mind." Howdy said then raised his glass. "Beer helps." He took a drink and added. "Also talking about something else."

"Like what?"

"Like when are you going to see Pam again?"

"I won't see her here, she made that clear," Harry said. "The closest she'll come to Picketwire is to look at it through a telescope from her mountain."

"So if the mountain won't come to Harry then Harry goes to the mountain, to paraphrase Muhammed."

"Yep," Harry answered. "To paraphrase you."

They sat there in silence for a minute then Harry put down his beer, turned on his stool and looked at Howdy. "Funny how you and Pam both left Picketwire right after graduation."

Howdy didn't look at Harry but rested his right elbow on the bar, curled his right hand around the pint glass and looked into the brown brew. If Rodin had sculpted the drinker instead of the thinker Howdy could have been the model. Finally he took a drink, straightened up and looked at Harry. "I never thought about that. No big mystery, though, I just wanted to get out of town and get to Fort Collins. Spend some time there before classes started at State."

"Anyway, you came back for a while after college and Pam never came back and still won't. That just seems to confirm the rumors about why she left."

"That she was pregnant with Wylie's child and he told her to take a hike instead of marrying her."

Harry nodded. "It seems to be the only explanation. Except the way she responded when I told her that was what people thought makes me wonder if there isn't some other reason."

"I guess you didn't read the note that she wrote?"

"That note was to you not me."

Howdy laughed. "If you had read the note you would have seen that she wrote that it was okay for you to read the note. That she didn't want to keep it a secret from you. If I'd known you didn't read it I would have brought it with me."

"What did she write?"

"She wrote that she didn't leave because she was pregnant, like we all thought. Notice, I said we because I include myself."

Harry felt both relief at being wrong followed by guilt at having believed it in the first place. "Then why did she leave?"

"Being in my play opened her eyes because her role was completely different than who everyone thought she was. People couldn't believe that she could play someone like that. Neither could she and that's when she started to see things differently, including herself."

Harry nodded. "She told me something like that."

"She realized," Howdy continued. "That she had been acting a part her whole life and playing that role in my play showed her there were other parts she could play:

That there were other possibilities in her life. She didn't know what they were but she knew they didn't include playing Wylie Boone's Barbie doll."

"She said Wylie Boone's Barbie doll," Harry repeated, shaking his head in amazement.

"Actually, those are my words. I believe her words were Wylie Boone's girl. Playwrights can't resist alliteration. But, getting back to Pam's story, on graduation night she and Wylie were supposed to go to a party. She was going to tell him it was over after the party. Instead of driving to the party, though, Wylie drove them out to Sunset Ridge. You know, the place we called rendezvous ridge back in high school because it was where kids went to park and fool around. Wylie was driving the candy apple red 57 Chevy of his that he was so proud of."

"He still has it, according to the interview with him they just ran in the Picketwire Press."

"Some guys get overly attached to their first set of wheels. You could call it a form of auto- eroticism."

"What do you call the attachment you have to that motorcycle you've been riding since high school?"

"Maybe I should get myself cycle analyzed and find out," Howdy deadpanned.

"I think you should just get on with what Pam wrote in her note," Harry said.

Howdy took a drink of beer and then continued. "So Wylie parked the Chevy up on the ridge. Since it was graduation night everyone was out partying so no one was parked there but them. Before Pam could say anything about breaking up, Wylie told her that he expected her to still be his girl and be faithful while he was away at college. I believe he went to some party school in California..."

"USC," Harry interrupted. "Pam was going to go to Picketwire College, which is where I went but, of course, she never showed."

Howdy nodded and continued. "Pam wrote that before she could respond to what Wylie told he pulled her closer and tried to take off her clothes. She told him to stop but he kept going. Finally, she screamed at him to take his damn hands off her." Howdy paused for a moment to let the words sink in. "Then Wylie told her that he could put his damned hands wherever he wanted because she belonged to him. Well, Pam didn't take that lying down-those are my words in case you're wondering, and she told him that she didn't have the Double B brand on her and never would and that she not only didn't belong to him she didn't love him. In fact, she didn't even like him."

Harry shook his head in amazement. "Those were Pam's words about not having the Double B brand on her?"

"Yep, I couldn't have written them better myself."

Harry shook his head. "So Pam wasn't pregnant and she dumped Wylie rather than the other way around. Boy, were we wrong..."

"There's more, Harry."

"More?" Harry slapped both of his hands on the bar. "He didn't, you know?"

"No, but you remember how guys would give the girl they were going steady with their senior ring and the girl would put it on a chain and wear it as a necklace?"

"I never had a girl to give it to. I don't even know where my ring is now."

"I never bought a ring," Howdy replied.

"Go on. Pam gave Wylie back his ring."

"Pam was starting to take it off the necklace chain but before she could finish Wylie tore the necklace right off, took the ring and put it on his finger. She told him to take her home. Instead, he opened the driver side door, walked over to the passenger side and dragged her out. She fought back, kicking and screaming, but he punched her in the face, threw her to the ground and kicked her in the ribs. Then he told her since she didn't want to be with him she could be with the coyotes while she walked home. Pam told him she'd report him to the police but he just laughed and said they were outside Picketwire's city limit and in the Sheriff's jurisdiction. If she reported it he'd just tell the Sheriff that he was the one who broke it off and she was so angry she got out of the car and walked back to town. She must have fallen in the dark while she was walking back to town and that's how she got hurt. The Sheriff wasn't going to take her word over a Boone's. He might even lock her up for making a false accusation. And, if she told her family or any of her friends what happened he'd have the Boone's attorneys sue her and her family and anyone else she told for defamation of character. Then he got back in his car and drove off."

"The bastard," Harry said, clenching both of his hands into fists. "After attacking her and beating her up he just leaves her there to walk back to town."

"Yep, but..."

"But, what?" Harry blurted loudly. Shep looked up from his book and Harry waved his hand that it was okay.

"But," Howdy said. "Pam yelled at Wylie before he drove off that she'd rather crawl home through a pack of coyotes than get back in his car. That he was the rotten core of his candy apple red Chevy."

"Rotten core of his candy apple red Chevy? Is that Pam or the playwright speaking?"

Howdy raised both of his hands in surrender. "Alright, she said she'd rather crawl home than get back in the car with him." Howdy answered. "But, she did write that when she finally made it home she didn't tell her family what really happened. Instead, she told them Wylie's version. She hated lying to them but was afraid that Wylie would carry through with his threat. She didn't want to have to lie to her friends or anyone else about how she got the black eye and bruises so she packed up and snuck out of town."

"That's why she didn't tell anyone what happened and left without saying goodbye."

"She also said I could use what she wrote in my play. Maybe that's her way of saying goodbye after all these years." Howdy paused and then added. "A long goodbye."

"Maybe it is, but what Wylie did to Pam is a hell of a lot harder to swallow than a gin gimlet," Harry said, then downed the last of his beer.

## **DOWN ON THE FARM**

Sue recognized Desmond's SUV as it parked in front of the Pretty Good. For one thing it was a Range Rover and for another she had noticed it before. Who hadn't. To be fair it didn't look like it had just been washed and waxed unlike the ones that cruised Rodeo Drive back in LA. When she got in the back seat, after greeting Desmond and Margaret, she couldn't help commenting on his choice of wheels.

Embarrassed, Desmond quickly explained. "This belongs to the company. My father insisted that I use it. Personally, I would rather drive something else."

"Like a Subaru Forester," Margaret cracked from the front passenger seat.

"Or a Toyota RAV," Desmond said. "The hybrid, of course."

Sue laughed and said. "As long as it's not a Hummer, Desmond. But seriously, I didn't mean to embarrass you, some of my best friends own Range Rovers."

"They do?" Desmond sighed in relief. "It's nice to know that this isn't the only one in Picketwire."

"Not here, but back in LA." Sue didn't add that they were ex-friends.

"Oh," Desmond said, crestfallen.

"Anyway, I'm pretty sure it rides better than my Prius on country roads so thanks for picking me up."

Margaret turned and looked back at Sue. "I'm so happy that you agreed to see the farm, Sue. When you mentioned that you were interested in farming I couldn't help asking you if you wanted to see Uncle Arvid's farm. I mean mine."

After a half hour drive they arrived at the farm. Desmond parked the Range Rover in front of the farmhouse. They got out and walked up the steps of the front porch. Standing there looking out at the farmyard and the fields beyond, Sue asked Margaret, "Are you really thinking of farming this, yourself?"

Margaret pushed up the brow of the straw hat she wore. It had a broad brim that tended to droop, but it at least provided some protection from the sun. She'd found it hanging on a peg and was the only piece of Uncle Arvid's clothing that she kept. Not because the clothes didn't fit but because they weren't fit to wear even if they did. She said, "My uncle gave it to me in his will on the condition that I had to farm it for a year."

"I'm sure you wouldn't have a problem getting someone to farm it if the rent was reasonable."

Margaret seemed to weigh the idea and then reject it with a sigh. "My uncle's wording in the will was pretty specific. I have to be actively involved in farming."

"There may be some legal way around it," Desmond offered.

"Maybe, but I don't think that would be right. If I want to have the farm then I have to agree to be a farmer... for at least a year."

Sue asked Margaret "How many acres does your Uncle Arvid, I mean, do you, own?"

Margaret replied, "Four hundred and thirty five acres, but it seems that Uncle Arvid only farmed some of it. It looks like nothing has been planted on at least half of it for a long time."

"That will make it easier for you," Desmond said. "You've already cut your problem in half."

"Two hundred acres still seems a big problem to me."

Sue nodded and said. "Yes, Margaret, I'd say you've still got quite a row to hoe."

"At least I have a hoe. I've also got a pitchfork, a shovel and a whole bunch of things in that barn over there, none of which I can name much less know how to use. Wait,



there is also a tractor. It's big and green. I don't even know how to start it, which is probably good because I wouldn't know how to stop it."

Desmond said. "If you can tell me what make it is I can do a Google search for operating instructions.."

"It's called a Farmall."

Desmond typed the name into his smartphone then announced. "They stopped making them in the 1980's so there aren't any operating manuals online."

Margaret sighed. "So it's a farmnothing."

"You could get a new tractor. Rich says that the ones they make now can even operate autonomously using gps guidance systems. The farmer just sits back and relaxes in the air conditioned cab as the tractor plows the fields."

"This one doesn't even have a cab," Margaret said. "Just a metal seat, a big wheel and a bunch of levers."

Sue looked at Desmond. "Rich probably didn't mention that a new tractor can cost between a hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand dollars. Even used ones can cost a hundred thousand."

"That's more than my Range Rover," Desmond said, shaking his head.

"Maybe we could hitch a plow to it and convert it into a range hoer," Margaret said, pulling Desmond's sleeve.

"Do you have water?" Sue asked.

"If you're thirsty I can get some from the house. It's from a well and there's no water softener so it's pretty hard. Apparently, Uncle Arvid liked his drinks on the rocks."

"Sorry, but I meant do you have water for irrigation? I know that a lot of the water rights around here have been sold."

"Oh that water," Margaret laughed. "When I looked through the documents that came with the title for the farm there were shares in something called the Purgatory Ditch Company."

Sue answered. "The ditch company owns a certain amount of water and a share entitles the shareholder to that water. Depending on the value of the shares the more water they're entitled to. The Purgatory Ditch Company has the rights to water coming from the Purgatoire River. I heard that the Boones have bought up a lot of

the shares of ditch companies that get water from the Purgatoire. I can't imagine that they didn't know about this farm so your uncle must have refused to sell."

"I'm not surprised because from what I can tell Uncle Arvid never sold anything except what he grew. Just look at all the junk around here," Margaret waved her right hand in an arc. "And there's so much stuff in the house you can hardly move around. I've spent a week digging through it and I've barely made a dent. It's not like it's piles of garbage or trash, though. Everything is neatly packed together in its own area according to some system that only he understood. I feel like I'm an archeologist. Fortunately, he kept all his legal documents in a safe deposit box at the bank."

Desmond said. "You should probably find out how much water your shares entitle you to. It would be hard to do much farming around here without irrigation."

Margaret nodded. "I guess I've come from the land of sky blue waters to the land of blue sky no water. It really is complicated." She turned to Sue. "Sue, didn't you say that if you wanted your restaurant to be a real farm to table then you needed to learn a lot more about farming"

"Yes, I think I said that I've got the table part covered but not the farm part."

"Would that learning include actually working on a farm?"

"I don't think there is any other way to learn farming."

"I bet they have computerized farm simulators," Desmond said. "I can Google and find out."

Sue put her hand on top of Desmond's smartphone to stop him. "That's okay, Desmond. I'd rather get my hands dirty and learn on a real farm, not a virtual one."

"In that case, what about this farm?" Margaret said, planting both hands on her hips and looking at Sue. "I've got plenty of dirt. We could learn together."

"I don't know if two heads are better than one if neither of them know anything," Sue laughed.

"But you knew about the water for irrigation and you know people who have the expertise. I mean, the only person I really know is Desmond." She reached out and touched his left arm. "I don't mean that you don't know anything, Desmond."

"That's okay, Margaret," Desmond replied, putting his right hand over hers. "The only farms I know about are server farms where computers harvest data."

"I do know a farmer who practices organic farming using a method that is suited for the arid land we have around here and he's agreed to teach me his method of farming."

"You could practice what he teaches you here."

"No."

"Why not?" Margaret said, taking off her floppy hat so that Sue could not miss the look of disappointment on her face.

"I mean, no, he should teach both of us."

Margaret broke into a broad smile and put the straw hat back on her head. "Then we could practice together here on the farm. When I was in school I always did better on tests when I studied with someone else."

"The difference is we'll have to eat our final exam."

## CHAPTER 23

### BACKSTORY

Tom leaned forward in his chair, both elbows on his knees. Gloria was sitting on the edge of her desk and Foster was leaning back in a chair with his boots on a desk staring out the plate glass window of the Picketwire Press office. "So to recap," Tom said, "We have interviews with the three people who escaped from the Sheriff and his posse and are holed up at Our Lady of Purgatory."

"Given sanctuary," Gloria corrected Tom. "Too bad the interview is off the record."

"We can still use them, we just can't quote them, publish their names or say where the interview took place. Same with my interview of Zelda Zenn even though that's not her real name."

"Too bad you can't mention that the secret meeting place where you met her was Sunset Ridge." Foster said.

"Why?" Gloria asked.

Tom sat up in his chair. "Sunset Ridge, the place Zelda thinks is her secret spot, used to be the place where kids went to park when I was in high school - we called it rendezvous ridge back then - and, you know..." He stammered, his face turning red.

"You mean make out," Gloria said.

"Hell, we were doing that when I was in high school," Foster said. "Kids have been doing it as far back as the horse and buggy days."

"Not anymore, because Zelda said that she's never seen anyone up there. It was sort of a shock to find out how much things have changed in just a few years since I was in high school. Makes you wonder where kids go now to..."

Gloria clapped her hands. "I could do a story on it." Gloria said.

"You'd probably have to go undercover." Tom stopped, his face turning red, again. "Not that I was suggesting that you..."

Gloria rolled her eyes. "I was only kidding about the story, Tom."

"Oh, right. Anyway, returning to the stories we're working on, looks like we've got some deep background on the escape of the undocumented immigrants from the interviews with Zelda and your interviews with the three people the Sheriff and his Posse are after who are hiding out at Our Lady of Purgatory..."

"Not hiding out, they are being given sanctuary," Gloria said.

"I stand corrected. Rigglesman must know that the place is a sanctuary site."

"So he probably suspects that's where they are. Do you think he would actually search a convent?"

Foster replied without turning his eyes from the window. "Why not, he thinks he's God."

"Then we need to have a reporter there," Tom said.

Gloria waved both of her hands in front of Tom's face. "What do you mean a reporter?"

"Sorry, Gloria, I meant to say that you need to be there if the Sheriff and his Posse show up."

Gloria crossed her arms and she gave a damned right nod.

"It's not if, it's when," Foster said. "He's going to claim he's in hot pursuit so he doesn't need a search warrant, which means when is now."

Tom said to Gloria, "You should get out there right away before the Sheriff and his posse get there."

"I'm leaving right now," Gloria said scooting off the top of her desk. She reached under it and pulled out a small backpack.

"What's that?" Tom asked.

"My go pack. It's got all my reporting gear and a change of clothes. I keep it here. It's right out of investigative reporting 101."

"Right..." Tom replied then shouted after Gloria, who was already halfway out the door. "Good luck and keep me posted." She gave him an okay sign with her right hand and closed the door behind her. Tom turned to Foster and said. "Meanwhile, we can't forget the Wylie hit and run."

"I'm on it," Foster said lifting his boots from desktop, stood up, put his cowboy hat on and started walking quickly toward the door.

Tom called after him. "Wait, we should talk about our next steps..."

Foster stopped with his hand on the door handle. "No time, I'm in hot pursuit."

"Hot pursuit of what?"

"A Jeep Wrangler."

Tom leaned back and surveyed the empty office. Maggie was meeting with their accountant. Rodney was out trying to talk Burrito Bomb into increasing the size of their advertisement although Tom guessed the visit would more likely increase the size of Rodney's waist. Virginia was attending a funeral. She not only wrote a deceased person's obituary she covered their funeral. According to Virginia it was like writing review of a play that opened and closed the same day. All this meant that Tom could go about his work without any distractions. Instead he started thinking about Sunset Ridge. When he drove Zelda up there it was the first time he'd been there in years. The last time had been with Jane just before she left for college. There were half a dozen couples parked there but they were probably the only ones who actually watched the sun set. A fitting visual metaphor for the end of their relationship. Zelda's dramatic account of her escape from the Sheriff and his Posse kept him from thinking about it but now... Tom pushed down on the arms and ejected himself from his chair. Without stopping he quickly left the office. Once outside he stood for a moment then turned and walked to Bunch of Books.

Tom walked inside setting off the bell that hung over the door. Just inside the entrance, Carlotta was carefully arranging books on one of the display tables. He stopped and watched her while she positioned the books. Finally, she stepped back to look at the table and brushed into Tom. She quickly turned around as he

retreated. Her expression went from startled to a smile in a milli-second. "Oh, hi Tom."

"I didn't mean to startle you," he said.

"Oh, it's my fault. Our book display system requires a lot of concentration and it's easy to forget that a customer could walk in."

Tom crossed his arms and looked at the display. "I don't understand how your system works. The subjects of the books and genres and even the covers don't seem to have anything in common but something always pops out that I feel like I really need to read. I know it's crazy but it's like it knows what I want to read before I do." Tom scratched his chin and asked. "How does it work?"

"You know those secret algorithms that search engines like Google use?"

"The mathematical formulas that are in their computer programs."

"Well, this isn't an algorithm but it's a secret."

"A secret?"

"A family secret. In fact, it's so secret that my Dad says he doesn't even know exactly why it works, just how to do it. I'm still learning from him. When he comes in he'll probably do some tweaking that is so subtle it's subliminal. But, you said something always pops out. What was it this time?"

"*The Lepidopterist's Dilemma*. I don't even know what a lepidopterist is but I'm interested in their dilemma."

"They study butterflies."

"What's their dilemma?"

Carlotta laughed. "You'll have to read it to find out. Wait here and I'll get you a copy." She walked over to a shelf, came back with the book. "I'll let you have it for free if you promise to do a review."

"I've never done a book review for the Picketwire Press," Tom shrugged and took the book.

"You never acted in a play before either so you're on a roll."

Tom winced. "Oh, the play..."

"I'm not going to let you weasel out of the promise you made to be in the play if Zelda agreed to an interview."

"No, of course not. An agreement is an agreement." He paused, stood up straight so that he was a good half foot taller than Carlotta and saluted. "Reporting for acting duty."

Carlotta laughed and said. "At ease, Tom. We'll go over our scenes before tonight's rehearsal like Max suggested. I can't leave the store right now, but we can rehearse here."

Tom looked at the door. "Can you lock the door while we rehearse so no one comes in?"

"If they do we'll have an audience. We might even get to practice taking our bows."

"Vows?"

"Bows." Carlotta laughed and bent over to demonstrate.

"Bows," Tom said. "I just hope they don't boo me off the stage."

"You'll be great, Tom," Carlotta said, punching him playfully in the arm. "Why don't we get started."

"Max didn't give me a copy of the script," Tom said.

"We can use my copy. It only has the scenes we're in together because Max and Howdy don't want the script leaked out. It also doesn't include the final scenes we're in since Howdy hasn't given them to Max yet." She walked over to a desk behind the checkout counter, opened a drawer, pulled out a binder then walked back. Tom put the *Lepidopterist's Dilemma* on the checkout counter.

"What do we do, hand it back and forth?"

"I don't need to look at it. I've already memorized my lines."

"Is there a lot to memorize?" Tom felt a ball of anxiety in the pit of his stomach.

"My role, Karla, has quite a bit, because she's Jolene's best friend. Billy doesn't talk much so you don't have a lot of lines to memorize. Sort of the tall, silent type, huh."

"I'm pretty good at acting being silent and tall."

Carlotta looked up at him and said. "Just my, I mean Karla's, type. Let's start," Carlotta opened the binder to the first scene and handed it to Tom.

Tom looked at the page. “Do I do anything when I’m not talking?”

“Of course, actors are always acting even when we’re not talking.”

“If I’m the tall, silent type I just have to avoid slouching and keep my mouth shut, then?”

“That part was a challenge for Larry. He’s only a couple of inches taller than me so Max had him wear cowboy boots with extra high heels and I had to wear flats. Larry could hardly keep his balance. Larry is also a real talker so keeping his mouth shut made him fidget. Max told him to just look at me like a dumbstruck and tongue tied teenage boy who can’t believe that he’s going out with the girl of his dreams.”

“So Karla is Billy’s dream girl?”

“I know that’s a stretch but, remember it’s only make believe.”

“No, I don’t see it as a stretch that Billy is in love with you.” Tom stopped, feeling the red all over his face. “I mean Karla, the person you’re playing.”

Carlotta laughed. “Love? Billy doesn’t have a clue about love or who Karla really is. He confuses lust with love.”

“Is Karla confused?”

Carlotta rolled her eyes and said. “She’s a teenage girl, which means she doesn’t have a clue about who she really is and that’s why she confuses his lust with love. He treats her like a queen so she sees him as her knight who will do anything she asks.” Carlotta laughed. “She thinks the pads and helmet that Billy wears as a football player are his shining armor.”

“So you see Billy as the confused and lusty football player and Karla’s the beautiful homecoming queen who’s the object of his desire?”

“No, Jolene is the homecoming queen. Karla is only a princess in her court. Actually, I see her as more of a lady in waiting. That’s the backstory for Karla that I created based on my own personal experience as a teenage girl. It helps an actor to create a backstory for their character based on their own personal experience. It helps understand the character’s motivation, what drives them, so the performance is more believable.”

“It’s pretty hard for me to come up with a backstory for Billy based on my own experience. I didn’t play football at Picketwire High or any sport, for that matter. Instead, I covered the games for the school paper. I was more like Don Quixote than Sir Lancelot.”



"You've never lusted?" Carlotta said and then added. "I'm only teasing. Seriously, there must be something that you can draw on."

"There is something in journalism that's like a backstory only we call it deep background. It provides context for the event that we're covering. Instead of relying on our own past experience we do research like interviewing eyewitnesses and experts. I wonder if I can approach Billy the same way?"

"What do you mean?"

"I could interview Howdy," Tom said. "As the playwright he should be able to tell me what he sees as Billy's backstory. That's almost as good as an eyewitness."

"I doubt he'll tell you anything. If he told you the backstory that he imagined for Billy then you might be able to guess what happens to him, and Karla as well, and Max says that Howdy doesn't want us to know anything more than what we have rehearsed so far. We're only going to find out what happens next to our character when we're ready to rehearse the next scene. Max calls it just in time play production."

With his right index finger, Tom tapped the binder. "In other words, what's in this is all that we know about the characters at this point?"

"Pretty much."

"I just don't understand why Howdy doesn't trust us to not leak the script and could tell us how things turn out between Billy and Karla."

"Maybe it's not a lack of trust that's holding Howdy back."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know if I should tell you this. Promise it's off the record. You can't put it in the paper or tell anyone."

Tom nodded. "I promise."

"Okay," Carlotta walked over to the front door and locked it. "My Dad and Howdy were best friends in High School but hadn't seen each other for years. Since Howdy came back they've been getting together pretty regularly." Carlotta paused looked at Tom and he gave an encouraging nod. She continued. "So yesterday, I complained about the way we only got a scene just before rehearsal because according to Max, Howdy didn't want us to have the entire script. I also said that it was like Howdy had some surprise ending that he didn't trust us to keep secret, which is what you just said. My Dad said that maybe it wasn't a secret because the ending might be a

surprise to Howdy as well. When I asked if he meant Howdy hadn't come up with the ending yet, his answer was that he was only saying that we should trust Howdy and not second guess him. Then he made it clear that he didn't want to talk about it anymore."

Before Tom could respond, there was a knock on the glass door. Harry was standing outside looking at them. Carlotta quickly went to the door and unlocked it. "Am I interrupting something?" He asked, unable to mask a grin.

Carlotta and Tom looked at each other before Carlotta answered. "Tom just joined the cast of the play and I'm helping him with his lines before tonight's rehearsal. I'm in all of Tom's scenes..."

"We're going out together," Tom said.

Harry put his hands on his hips, looked at both of them and grinned broadly. "It's about time you two went out together."

Tom and Carlotta looked at each other. "We're only rehearsing, Dad," Carlotta said.

"You're rehearsing going out together?"

"We're not rehearsing our going out, Dad. In the play Tom's character is Billy and Karla, the character I play, are going steady."

He shook his head in bemusement. "So the characters you both play are also going out together. I'll be. Well, I certainly don't want to disturb you so I'll just leave you to...whatever." Without waiting for an answer he left, locking the door behind him.

Carlotta and Tom both started laughing. Suddenly, Tom stopped and said to Carlotta. "Maybe your Dad's idea isn't so bad. If we go out on a date we might help each other make our characters, Billy and Karla, more believable."

Carlotta took a step closer to Tom, looked up at him and smiled. "It's like covering each other's back with a story to go with it."

## **THE GAME'S AFOOT**

Although Foster saw himself as more Sam Spade than Sherlock Holmes the game was afoot as he left the Picketwire Press, turned right and walked toward the Jeep Wrangler that had parked in front of Sue's Pretty Good Cafe. Foster looked the Jeep over and confirmed that it was a good match for the one he'd seen on Clint Crowley's surveillance video. Foster entered the Pretty Good and scanned the room casually. All the booths were full so he slid into an empty booth closest to the door so that he could see the entire restaurant, which was half full. Bea Trujillo, one of the two waitresses who were on duty, came over with a coffee pot and a mug.

"Anything else or just your usual black coffee?" she asked.

"Just coffee," he said, taking a sip. "Now this is what you call a heavenly cup of coffee."

"You know, Roy Trickett said the same thing the other day. Then said he was going to ask Sue if he could have his ashes put in his mug and hung up on his hook. He said it would beat the hell out of spending eternity in the cemetery's columbarium." Bea stopped and laughed, then added. "He said that way he'd not just be a regular customer, he'd be an eternal one."

"Roy's got a point," Foster said. "It's like being locked up in a safe deposit box. I wouldn't mind joining Roy up there on a hook."

"I don't know, Foster, remember you lost the right to have your own mug with your name on it hanging up there."

"I don't need my name on it. You can call it the remains of the unknown customer."

"Would I get a perpetual tip in return for not throwing your remains down the drain?"

Foster took a ten dollar bill out of his wallet and placed it on the counter. "I don't know about perpetual but I can give you a here and now tip if you can tell me where the man who walked in before me sat down."

Bea smiled, scooped up the ten and said, "You mean the guy in his late twenties? Kind of cute. Reminds me of Liam Hemsworth."

"I didn't see his face and I probably wouldn't think he was cute and I don't know who the hell Liam Hemsworth is so maybe you can just tell me where this guy is sitting?"

"He's in the booth in the far corner."

"You mean the young guy sitting with the woman and man. I've seen the woman before although I don't know her name but I've never seen the man. Do you know who they are?"

"I know the woman is Gretl Johan, because she's a regular. She's really down to earth. You'd never know that she's got a P H D. She told me she works for something called the Picketwire Institute up at the College."

"What's the Picketwire Institute do?"

Bea shrugged. "Institutes stuff, I guess. Anyway, I've never seen the young guy before but the man has been in here a few times. I waited on him once and he said he was a new professor at the college. I should go check on them to see if they need anything." Bea picked up a coffee pot from one of the burners and walked over to the booth. While pouring coffee she had a brief conversation with Gretl and then handed her the bill. Gretl picked up her smartphone and after tapping in some information she passed it to the two men who nodded their heads as they looked at the screen before handing it back to her. Gretl placed a ten and a five on top of the check and the three of them slid out of the booth. Foster pulled the brim of his Stetson down; the collar of his blue jean jacket up and hunched over his coffee so that they wouldn't see his face as they passed by. As soon as they walked out he stood up and reached for his wallet, extracted a five and put it under the empty mug. Foster watched them through the plate glass window as they stopped at the jeep and started to get in, then he got up and left the cafe.

Outside, Foster quickly crossed Carson Street and walked toward his own jeep, which was parked across almost opposite theirs. He climbed into his jeep, which he never kept locked and started the engine as he looked at the jeep across the street out of the corner of his eye. Gretl was sitting behind the young man who was at the wheel. She was looking at her smartphone screen. She said something to the young man and he started the jeep. In order not to arouse any suspicions, Foster shifted quickly into first and pulled out onto Carson going west, then slowed down, watching the other jeep in his rearview mirror. As soon as the other jeep started east on Carson, Foster made a u turn and followed them, keeping at least a block behind. After half a dozen blocks, they slowed at Sage Avenue. Instead of turning left toward the Mount Witt and Picketwire College as Foster had expected, their jeep turned right and entered a residential neighborhood called "Bungtown" because most of the houses were one story, stucco faced bungalows. It was a neighborhood where families had once crowded into the small homes but now populated mainly by young people who house shared and older people who lived alone. They drove two blocks and then parked in front of a bungalow. Foster knew the place. It was occupied by an older guy who lived alone by the name of Foster St.Vrain.

Did they suspect that he was shadowing them? Maybe Bea mentioned his interest in the young guy when she was giving them their check? Gretl could have been searching for his address on her smartphone? But why didn't they just confront him at Sue's? Maybe because it was too public? If they did suspect him and had come here to confront him then he'd have to think of some plausible explanation as to why he asked Bea about the young guy. He turned right on Juniper, the cross street just before his block, and then made a quick left into the alley. He made another left and parked under the carport behind his house. He ran to the back door, which he never locked, opened it and then walked quickly through the kitchen and into the living room. He pulled back the living room curtain an inch and peeked out. The three of them with Gretl in front were walking up the steps. Unless they had spotted him tailing them they would be waiting outside for him to return. Maybe they had come to his place for some other reason. In that case, he didn't want them to figure

out that he was the guy sitting in the booth wearing a Stetson hat and a blue jean jacket. Foster took them off and tossed them into a coat closet then he opened the front door. Gretl was standing on the porch along with the two men, her finger pressed against the doorbell.

"It doesn't work," Foster said. "I disabled it so I wouldn't be bothered by Jehovah Witnesses. I was just sitting in my Lazy Boy reading the paper and I heard someone come up the porch steps. You don't look like you're here to save my soul."

"We're not here to save your soul, we're here to hire you," Gretl replied.

## CHAPTER 24

### THE CONQUISTADOR

It was four in the afternoon and the Conquistador Lounge was empty except for the bartender. Elise had left work early and was still wearing her low couture ranger outfit, although she'd left her Smoky the Bear hat in her jeep. She had never been in the bar before, which was tucked away like an afterthought behind the Picketwire House Hotel's ornate lobby. She noticed immediately that it was quiet with subdued lighting. Instead of the usual big screen television mounted on a wall there was a mural. It was lit with lights recessed in the ceiling and depicted an armor clad conquistador on his horse pointing at the mythical Seven Cities of Gold. They seemed to float on top of a distant mesa. Elise ordered a margarita from Raul the bartender, whose name was embroidered on the red vest he was wearing. She told Raul that she was there to meet someone. He nodded as if a lone woman in the bar in the middle of the afternoon dressed as a ranger needed no explanation. Elise walked over to the middle of three banquettes that faced the mural and sat down at one end of the curved, black leather bench. A minute later Raul placed the margarita as well as a small bowl of chili coated peanuts in front of her and then walked back to the bar.

Elise took a sip of her margarita and looked at the mural that was now directly in front of her. She couldn't help noticing that the conquistador resembled Tony. She wondered if he picked this place to meet so she would have to look at his dead ringer on horseback. Elise smiled and in a low voice started singing the chorus of the Carly Simon song *You're So Vain*.

It was a song that described the guy she had dated prior to Tony. So far she hadn't noticed that trait in him and, thankfully, she didn't miss it one bit. Of course, they'd only been out on one date so...Suddenly she was interrupted by Tony's voice. "What are you singing?" Elise looked up. He was standing next to the banquette.

Elise hoped it was dark enough to hide her blush. "I didn't realize I was singing out loud. Just keeping myself company, that's all. She scooted over to make room for him

on the bench. There was a moment of awkwardness as they both debated whether to kiss. After all, they had already been on their first date the night before. Still, it was a public place even if the only other person there was the bartender. They settled for pecks on the cheeks instead.

“Sorry I’m late,” Tony apologized.

Elise nodded her head at the mural. “It’s given me time to admire your conquistador doppelganger.”

Tony smiled broadly. “That’s my great grandfather, Miguel. I guess there is a family resemblance.”

“How did your great grandfather end up on a mural in a bar?”

“Owning the hotel had something to do with it,” Tony answered just as Raul set a bottle of Dos Equis and a glass on the table in front of him.

After Raul walked back to the bar, Elise asked. “Your great grandfather owned the Picketwire House?”

“Miguel built it to serve the passengers on the Picketwire Railroad that he also owned. When his son, my grandfather Alejandro, sold the railroad to the Acheson Topeka and Santa Fe he kept the hotel. Our family still owns it.”

“Is that why you wanted to meet here, because you can get free drinks?” Elise said, jiggling her margarita.

Tony smiled and shook his head slowly. “The drinks are not free.”

“So we’re going Dutch?”

“We’re going Tony Medrano. Besides, the family business doesn’t allow for family freebies. If we want something from the business then we have to work for it. In this case, I’d probably have to wash dishes or something like that.”

“Why didn’t you go into the family business?” Elise asked.

“That’s better told over a long dinner than a couple of drinks.”

“Why not come over to my place for dinner. I’ll cook.”

“I’ll wash the dishes.”

They clicked their glasses. After sipping her drink, Elise asked, "Why did your great grandfather want to be painted as a conquistador?"

"There's a story behind it, obviously. It seems that Miguel caught polio when he was in his twenties and although he was lucky to survive apparently he didn't see it that way. He'd have to use crutches to walk for the rest of his life and as far as he was concerned being crippled was worse than being dead. Apparently, he felt that someone who had to use crutches could never be a real man. As a good Catholic...maybe good is an overstatement, but he was a Catholic, he believed that if he committed suicide he'd go to hell. So, as my Dad puts it, he started riding horses as if he was hell-bent for leather. I mean, he didn't have to worry about being crippled if he was thrown and he wouldn't be damned to hell if he was killed. Anyway, what he discovered was you not only don't use crutches when you're riding a horse, you can be as good a rider as anyone with two good legs. It turned out that he was not only as good as, he was better than most. He became one of the best horseback riders in the County, which is saying a lot. In fact, he competed in the Mexican charro competitions that are part of the Picketwire Rodeo and won a lot of them. He even had a portrait painted of him on his horse, Esperanza dressed in his charro outfit with the big sombrero and vest."

"Why isn't that one of your great grandfather hanging in the hotel instead of this mural of him dressed as a conquistador?"

"Apparently that was the original idea, but the story is that when he saw a sketch for this mural that had been commissioned for the hotel he changed his mind. Instead he asked the muralist, Manuel Vargas from Mexico City, to make some changes including putting his face on the conquistador." Tony waved at the mural. "I forgot to mention that this wasn't a bar then. It was part of the Hotel's lobby so everyone who came in the front door immediately saw the mural. In the nineteen fifties they decided they needed a bar and they walled this off from the lobby to create this space. Naturally, they named it the Conquistador Lounge because of the mural. By that time all the people who would have recognized the conquistador as my great grandfather were long dead. The charro portrait ended up in our family home, Hacienda Medrano."

"I can imagine the impression this mural must have made when it was in the lobby. If he didn't want to be seen as a crippled person this certainly does that."

"Yes, and that's the story that was passed down, but now..."

"But now what?"

"But now I think there's more to the story and that's why I wanted to meet here." Tony got up and walked over to the mural and stood there like a teacher in front of a blackboard. "I didn't notice this until yesterday when I came here for a beer after meeting with my Dad." He extended his right hand toward the conquistador's

outstretched arm. You think the conquistador is pointing at the seven cities of gold, right?"

"Yes."

"But as we know the Seven Cities of Gold didn't really exist." Tony moved his arm and pointed his hand at the cities. "They were a mirage."

"A mirage of mud would be a better way of putting it since all the only thing the conquistadors found were pueblos made of adobe, not gold."

"Exactly. No cities of gold exist," Tony said, then lowered his hand to the mesa on which the seven cities rested. "But this mesa does."

"It's Mesa del Oro on the Double B Ranch," Elise answered. "Oro means gold in Spanish so it makes sense that the painter used that mesa like a pedestal for the mythical seven cities of gold."

Tony sat back down beside Elise and said. "That does make sense and that's why everyone thinks that's the reason. But what if it's been positioned on top of the mesa for another reason and that's because the mesa is what the conquistador, my great grandfather, is really pointing at?"

Elise looked at the mural, then sipped her margarita and turned to Tony. "Okay, I give up, why is he pointing at the mesa?"

"The Mesa del Oro is on the Double B Ranch, right?"

"Right," Elise replied.

"And that means it's also part of the land that was originally included in the Medrano land grant according to the map that my great, great grandfather, Don Francisco claimed was stolen."

"So what you're saying is that Miguel isn't just physically pointing he's also pointing this out?"

"You've got it," Tony said as if she'd found the prize in a box of Cracker Jacks. "You know, I've probably looked at this mural hundreds of time but didn't see what Miguel was really doing, but now it's obvious."

Elise nodded her head in agreement. "But why did your great grandfather want to point this out in a mural that was prominently displayed in the lobby of this hotel?"

"Because he wanted someone to see it."



“Who?” Elise asked.

“The people who stole the map and, as a result, the Medrano land.”

“And you know who they are or were?” Elise pressed Tony.

Tony looked at Elise and explained, “I learned from Sister Beatrice that the cell where they found the map had been occupied by a convict named Rufus Ryder. He called himself Rufus Ryder, I kid you not. Anyway, it turns out that Ryder was convicted of stealing from the Double B Ranch.”

“You think he stole the map from the Double B? Couldn’t this convict just as well have stolen it from Don Francisco and just kept it?”

Tony shook his head. “Don Francisco said the map was stolen in 1850 and the convict wasn’t even born until 1860 so he would have had to have stolen it from the Double B. Not that it would have been listed among the items stolen. The last thing the Boones would want to claim is that this map was part of the property that was stolen from them, because they would be admitting that they stole it first. Of course, all of that is just circumstantial because there’s no direct evidence that Ryder stole the map or that it was Ryder who even hid the map and not some other convict who occupied that cell.”

“If this mural is Miguel’s way of accusing the Boones of stealing the map and, as a result, the land, did he know that the map had been stolen from the Double B by this Ryder character and was hidden in a cell at Purgatory Penitentiary?”

“No, I don’t see how he could have known that,” Tony let out a sigh. “But he did have some other evidence that his father, Don Francisco, passed on to him. Only he couldn’t make it public. I only found out about it yesterday from my Dad when I told him what I’d found out about the map.”

“What is it?” Elise asked.

“I can’t tell you. In fact, no Medrano can tell anyone.”

“Why not?”

“It’s got to do with our family honor: About keeping our word. I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you anything more than that. My Dad made it clear that as far as we Medranos are concerned the case is closed.” Tony leaned forward toward the mural. “Miguel up there could only accuse them indirectly in a mural because our Medrano family honor wouldn’t allow him to say what happened between Don Francisco and C.W. Boone. Anyone looking at the mural today wouldn’t even know that’s Miguel Medrano, my great grandfather in that conquistador outfit, much less what he’s really pointing at and why. It’s just some background decoration, like wallpaper.”

"It's hardly wallpaper," Elise said. "You know, it reminds me of the pictographs drawn on the rock walls in the Park. They were also intended to communicate a message. The prehistoric people the message was intended for understood it but for the people who visit the park today, they're just ancient decorations."

"Unless they hear your talk. I know the people on my tours tell me that they see the pictographs differently after hearing you."

"They also want me to translate what the pictographs are saying. Of course, we don't know for sure because there's no Rosetta Stone that we can use to decipher them."

"I really like the way you turn the tables and ask them what they think the pictographs are saying. Especially, when you tell them it's their opportunity to solve a mystery."

"Some of the things that visitors suggest are quite plausible based on what we know from research so who knows? It's sort of like crowd sourcing. Although in the case of your tour groups it would be tour sourcing."

"Tour sourcing," Tony repeated. "I like it."

"You know," Elise said laughed. "I can see you up there instead of your great grandfather only you're leading one of your tours. It would be called the Mystery of Mesa del Oro or something."

"That's it, Elise" Tony suddenly said, slamming the glass down, sending a wave of Dos Equis onto the tabletop.

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you over dinner."

## **DRIVE-IN**

Jemma Lu took a sip of the Chamomile tea and placed the cup back on the Formica tabletop of the booth in Sue's Pretty Good Cafe. She had ordered Chamomile because it was supposed to have a calming effect, but she was beginning to think that she should have gone to the Last Ditch for a martini instead. When she saw Howdy at Tanneyhill's Drug Store Jemma Lu was relieved that he didn't say anything in front of Milli that she'd ridden on the back of his motorcycle one other time. Relieved because she'd never told Milli the whole story about her breakup with Wylie, in particular the part about riding off with Howdy. The whole story was so, so surreal that Jemma Lu couldn't explain it to herself much less her best friend. Seeing no point in dwelling on the inexplicable. Jemma Lu had decided to push the entire episode out of her mind. And she had succeeded...until

both Wylie and Howdy returned to Picketwire. Running into Howdy a couple of days ago at Taneyhill's and then meeting with Wylie at Tuttle Mansion yesterday was like having a carpet pulled back. Jemma Lu couldn't avoid facing what she'd swept under the rug three decades before.

"Ready?"

Startled out of her rug reverie, Jemma Lu looked up at Howdy. He had slipped unnoticed into the seat across from her. She took a deep breath and replied, "For what?"

"Ready for our ride. Remember what you said when I saw you at Taneyhill's the other day and asked you if you wanted to take a ride?"

"I remember that I said not now."

"Exactly," Howdy grinned. "Well this is not that now, it's the now that's later."

"What?"

"Look, Jemma Lu, my bike is right outside and I've got a helmet for you."

"I asked if you'd meet me here."

"And I met you here so now we can go for that ride."

"But I asked if we could meet because we need to talk, Howdy."

"I know, Jemma Lu. We can take a ride and we can talk."

"We can't talk while riding on a motorcycle."

"We can talk to each other. We just won't be able to hear each other." Howdy laughed and then leaned forward over the table. "I've got just the place where we can talk."

Jemma Lu put the helmet on, then wrapped her arms around Howdy's back as he kick started the old Indian. The engine coughed then caught and she felt her entire body vibrate. Then they took off. She was glad she was wearing a helmet. Not because it might save her life but because it might save her the embarrassment of people recognizing her as they sped down Carson Street. In a few minutes they were out of town heading south on County Road 12, a two lane blacktop that was bleached gray by sun. Five minutes later they turned at the roadside marquee for the Star Dust Drive-In then slowly followed the gravel drive past the closed box office toward the theater's large white screen before coming to a stop in front of the concrete concession stand.

"The drive-in?" Jemma Lu said after they dismounted and removed their helmets. Howdy opened one of the saddlebags on the motorcycle and pulled out a paper bag then

pointed at a picnic table next to the shuttered take out window. “Just take a seat and I’ll explain.”

They sat down, side by side, on the picnic table bench facing the screen. Howdy opened the paper bag. Jemma Lu could smell the popcorn. “You brought popcorn.”

“What’s a movie without popcorn.”

“What movie?”

“Why, the one we’re going to watch, Jemma Lu.” Howdy tilted the open bag toward her. “Go ahead and have some.”

“I just see a blank screen up there, Howdy,” Jemma Lu replied, involuntarily reaching into the bag and pulling out a handful of popcorn.

“Perfect for projecting our thoughts,” Howdy said, helping himself to some popcorn. “We’ll both just look at the silver screen and tell each other what we see up there. Ladies first.”

“Okay, Howdy.” Jemma Lu looked hard at the screen. “Do you remember what happened between us thirty years ago?”

“After I picked you up at Wylie’s. How could I ever forget.”

“Yes, but also the week before that at the Picketwire Day Parade.”

“When you hopped on my bike: Surprised the hell out of me.”

“I was surprised myself. I was just standing there with Milli watching and I started thinking about all the Picketwire Day parades I’d seen. I was thirty then and the first one I can remember was when I was four. I realized that there was nothing that surprised me anymore. It was all predictable. Then it seemed like I was watching my life pass by and it was all predictable as well. That’s when I saw you at the end of the parade, riding on your motorcycle, this very motorcycle.” Jemma Lu pointed at the bike. “And that was a surprise so I just did something unpredictable. Something that no one would expect of Jemma Lu Tuttle, especially myself.”

Howdy laughed, “So you ran out into the street and asked if you could get on the back of my bike.”

“Then after the parade ended I told you not to stop and we kept going and ended up at that little place you were renting on Swink Street.”

“I invited you in for a drink.”

“We talked.”

“You did most of the talking.”

“There was some crying.”

“You did all of that.”

“Then we made love. We both did that.”

“If that memory wasn’t X rated I’d project it up there on the screen.” Jemma Lu poked Howdy in the ribs with her elbow, then leaned against him. Howdy continued. “I didn’t hear from you for several days until you called and asked if I could pick you up at Wylie’s.”

“You came over on your motorcycle.”

“We rode off into the sunset.”

“Happily.”

“Until you told me to get lost.”

“I did not,” Jemma Lu said, pulling away from Howdy and looking at him.

“When we got to your house you gave me a peck on the cheek and said you’d call. I waited a couple of weeks but you never called. I got the message and it was to get lost. So I left town.”

“Something came up that made everything more complicated. I needed some time to sort things out. I owe you an apology, Howdy.”

“I didn’t come back after thirty years for an apology, Jemma Lu.”

“Why did you come back?”

“I was thinking that there could be a sequel with a different ending.”

## **PICKETPEDIA**

Jane walked quietly through the sleepy wood paneled reading room of the Picketwire Public Library, past the oak reading tables, illuminated by green shaded lamps, and took the elevator to the third floor, which was as far as it went. When she got off she walked down the center aisle between rows of bookcases that branched off left and right like narrow side canyons until she reached a gray metal door. Opening the door Jane climbed a set of stairs up to the library’s attic. Massive roof trusses crisscrossed the ceiling and

crowding the space below were filing cabinets and metal shelves laden with boxes. Jane felt like she'd just climbed a mountain to meet a guru only this guru was in an attic instead of a cave and sitting at a desk instead of squatting on the ground in a lotus position. Jane made her way to the far end where Drexel Herbert, the Editor and Chief of Picketpedia, was sitting at a large desk back lit by a crescent window.

Jane stepped on a loose floorboard that let out a groan. It echoed in the cavernous like space and Drexel looked up, his thin face peering at her through the thick lenses of round wire rim glasses. He smiled, then pressed his hands against the desk-top, pushed down, and unwound his eighty five year old body until he was fully erect. Unlike a guru in a white robe, he was attired in a black suit, starched white shirt and black bow tie. He walked around to the front of the desk and greeted Jane.

"Jane Takamoto, what a surprise," he said, shaking her hand.

"Mr. Herbert."

"You can call me Drexel. I'm not your high school history teacher anymore."

"I'm sorry if I'm disturbing you...Drexel." It felt strange using his first name, especially since it was a strange name to begin with.

"Not at all. I needed to get up and stretch. At my age a stiff body can easily lead to rigor mortis. I usually do some Tai Chi rather than a stroll around my desk." He took a clean, crisply folded, white handkerchief from the inside pocket of his coat, bent slightly and wiped the dust off the chair facing the desk. Folding the handkerchief, he tucked it back into his coat pocket and waited as Jane sat down before returning to his side of the desk. "I heard that you had come back to town and that you are a minister at Picketwire Community Church. You know, I have to admit when you went out east to college I never expected you to return, much less as a minister."

"Neither did I. I guess that's why it's referred to as a calling not a career choice."

"A calling, yes," Drexel nodded. "That's exactly what happened to me when I took this position several years ago. I was called to it. Only in my case I wasn't called by God but by Paul Strand. He telephoned and told me he was finally stepping down as Editor in Chief after thirty years and had chosen me to be his successor. That was that. You can say no to God, but there's no exercising free will as far as Paul was concerned."

"So how is the work going?" Jane asked.

Drexel swept his hands in the air over the sheets of paper on the desktop. "The work is never ending. An encyclopedia is like a garden of knowledge that requires constant tending or it will be overcome by the weeds of ignorance. Somehow we've managed to keep Picketpedia blooming for over a hundred years."

“And you’re the chief gardener, I mean editor in chief.”

“Yes, but we depend on our many volunteers, our Picketpedes, who, if you will indulge me in continuing with the garden metaphor, plant, water and fertilize. Of course, I have to prune with my editorial shears here and there. In some cases such as this one,” Drexel tapped the sheets of paper on his desk. “It’s more a winnowing the kernels of fact from the chaff of circumlocution.” He pushed the paper aside and looked at Jane. “I daresay, Jane, you did not come to visit me just to ask how my work is going.”

“No, it isn’t the only reason. I’m trying to find out more about a particular place and I thought if anyone knew about it, you would.”

“What place?”

“It was an internment camp for Japanese Americans.”

“You mean Camp Amache.”

“Not Camp Amache, but another camp.

“The only entry in Picketpedia is for Camp Amache.”

“I know, I looked, and I can’t find anything about it in the library or online, but there must be something on it somewhere. I know it existed because Bruce, that’s my husband, and I saw it. Well, what’s left of it. It’s on the Double B Ranch, close to Dinosaur Tracks.”

“I love a good mystery, Jane. Just let me contemplate this for a minute,” Drexel said. He placed his elbows on top of the ink blotter, pressed the fingertips of both of his hands together and closed his eyes. It seemed to Jane like he was praying. He opened his eyes, slapped his hands on the blotter and announced. “It is possible that we have something on this mysterious place.”

“You might?”

“Picketpedia gets many submissions that don’t meet our rigorous standards. You would be amazed at what we get.” Drexel laughed. “Based on the reports of paranormal activities and UFO sightings that are submitted to us every year we are completely overrun with ghosts and little green men. But, there are other submissions that would be accepted except that it just misses the bar because it lacks sufficient supporting evidence. Those we retain in case such evidence is discovered.”

“You’re saying that you think that something has been submitted on the camp?”

“It’s only a theory but one we can test by looking in purgatory. That’s what we call the files where we keep submissions that are awaiting final judgement. If we get the

supporting evidence they are freed from purgatory and published in Picketpedia. If we get evidence that shows they are false they are cast into the flames of the incinerator. They used to be, anyway, but now they're shredded and recycled. Instead of burning in hell they are reincarnated as a roll of toilet paper." Drexel opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a flashlight and held it up. "It's not the most enlightened place so we'll need this for illumination. Now, let's go see what we can find. If there is something it should be under confining spaces."

Jane got up from her chair and followed Drexel. After winding their way through rows of files and shelves, Drexel stopped at the beginning of a row of olive colored metal filing cabinets. He used the flashlight to read the small cards attached to the front of each of the filing cabinet's four drawers. "Ah, here we are. Now if you hold the flashlight I'll see if we can find what we are looking for." Drexel rummaged through the files before pulling out one. "Eureka."

"You found something?"

"The file is labeled Internment Camp." Drexel pulled out a sheet of paper and an envelope. He opened the sheet of paper and said, "It's a note from my predecessor, Paul Strand that says the enclosed envelope contains an anonymous submission received by Picketpedia on March 12, 1986 and should not be opened unless evidence is submitted that a camp existed on the Double B Ranch where persons of Japanese descent were interned during World War Two." He turned to Jane. "I think this qualifies. Let's go back to my desk so we can see what's in the mysterious envelope."

After returning to his desk, Drexel sat down, took a letter opener from the top drawer and deftly sliced the envelope open. He extracted several sheets of paper, gently unfolded and read them. After reading each page he placed it on the desktop. Jane tried to read his face as he read but it was indecipherable. When he was finished he took off his glasses, wiped them, and put them back on.

"Well?" Jane asked.

"You know, Paul told me that being Picketpedia's Editor in Chief is like playing god because you have to make the final judgement. I always assumed that it was an observation on our power to accept or reject what is to be included. However, in this case the judgement goes beyond the pages of Picketpedia. I imagine he was relieved he didn't have to make the final decision in this case." Drexel sighed and handed Jane the sheets of paper. "You can read it for yourself since the indictment is now unsealed."

## CHAPTER 25

### BREAKOUT



Sister M's released the tumbleweed in her hands as she sat on her meditation mat near the edge of the bluff overlooking the Purgatoire River behind the convent walls. Sister Flora, who taught Sister M's the spiritual exercise, was a master gardener and explained that the tumbleweed was once rooted in the prairie but it was only after it freed itself from the soil and tumbled in the wind that it could release its seeds. She added that keeping your eyes and mind focused on the tumbleweed was the opposite of keeping your eye on the ball. "I like to think of it as the Tao of tumbleweeds." Her instructions were that you didn't throw the tumbleweed, you simply held it out and let the wind take it. Sister M's kept her eyes on the tumbleweed as it cartwheeled in the wind until it vanished over the edge of the bluff twenty feet away. She closed her eyes and felt the wind tug at her. Hearing something stir, Sister M's opened her eyes and was staring directly into the face of a prairie dog who had popped its head out of a hole about six feet away that she hadn't noticed. Neither of them moved as they looked at each other. Finally, Sister M's blinked and the prairie dog ducked back into the hole. Sister M's rose from her lotus position, rolled up her mat, and walked around to the front of Our Lady of Lost Souls and through the gate.

She had been struggling with what her next step should be since Sheriff Riggleman had stationed one of deputies outside the convent's gate a few hours before. This could only mean that Riggleman suspected that the three "illegals", as he called them, were hiding inside. Sister M's had no doubt that the Sheriff would soon show up with a search warrant. She had to find another place to hide them but first she had to find a way to get them out of the convent and past the Deputy. Now she had an idea.

Sister Beatrice looked up from the table she was hunched over as Sister M's entered her workroom. "What are you working on?" Sister M's asked.

"I wish I knew. I've been looking at these fragments for an hour trying to figure out how they come together."

Sister M's looked at the pieces laid out on the table-top. "What is it or was it?"

"I won't know until I can figure out how it all fits together. It's like doing a jigsaw puzzle without the picture on the box that shows you what it's supposed to look like when you're done." Sister Beatrice stood up from the bench and stretched her arms to the ceiling. "I needed a break, especially my back."

"You know the tunnels that prisoners dug to escape from here?"

Sister Beatrice nodded.

"You said that you were certain there are some that were never discovered by the guards."

"I'm not certain, I'm positive."

"Does that mean you've discovered some more?"

"Only one but I think there are probably others. Why, are you thinking of taking up spelunking?"

"No, I was thinking of using it to get out. Was it completed?"

"I'm pretty sure it was but the gate is a much better exit."

"Not if you want to avoid being arrested by the Sheriff's Deputy parked in front of it."

"Is the Sheriff after you?"

"No, but he's after the people we're giving sanctuary to and I'm pretty certain that he's going to be here soon with a search warrant. We need to move them from here to a safer place."

"There are plenty of places we can hide them."

"Then we'd have to lie when he asks if they're here."

"We could take the Fifth. I've always wanted to do that."

"Then he would definitely know they were here. No, the right thing is to tell him that we aren't hiding them."

"You think he'd believe us?"

"Probably not, but even Sheriff Riggleman wouldn't want to be seen as accusing an entire order of nuns of lying."

"What if he asks if we know where they are?"

"The only one of us who will know that is me and I'm their attorney. So you see the best thing to do is to move them to a safer place and the only way I can think of doing that is through a tunnel."

Sister Beatrice clapped her hands. "A prison breakout! There couldn't be a better way to test my theory."

"Theory? I thought you said you'd found at least one tunnel that had been completed."

"The tunnel I discovered is in the boiler room of the old powerplant. Like I said, I think it was completed but I've never gone all the way to the end, only twenty feet. If I wasn't so tall I might have made it farther but my sciatica started acting up and I was unable to stoop that far to conquer. However, I was able to measure the tunnel's length using a laser and it was almost two hundred feet long, which would put it well beyond the prison walls. Now we'll be able to find out where it ends up and prove that someone could use it to escape from here."

Ten minutes later they were inside the old powerplant, a squat, brick building with a smokestack on top that rose more than five stories. Sister Beatrice opened a steel door and they descended a stairway into a subterranean room with two large rusting boilers. She flipped a switch turning on the naked lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling high overhead. "I had a heck of time getting up there to replace the bulbs in those fixtures, but at least they work. It's still pretty gloomy down here. Of course, the boilers when they were going would have provided some light. I imagine that for the convicts who were assigned here it was like being condemned to stoke the furnaces of hell." She led Sister M's over to a large wooden three sided enclosure. "This was the coal bin. The coal came down a chute from up there. It's gone now. And this," she pointed at a rectangular opening in the wood side, "is the tunnel entrance." Sister M's stooped down and looked into the opening, following the beam from the flashlight Sister Beatrice had handed her. "The opening, as you can see, is quite large for a tunnel; four feet high by three feet wide so a person didn't have to crawl on their hands and knees. It's also level. Since this is the basement they didn't have to dig any deeper."

"Why wasn't it discovered?"

"Since this was the old coal bin for the boilers the convicts who dug the tunnel would have worked here. That meant they had access to shovels. No one would have questioned the dust and noise that was coming from down here. As you can see the bin has wood sides so all they had to do was clear away enough coal to get access and then remove some of the boards. You can see the section of boards next to the opening. They would place them back over the tunnel entrance when they weren't using it and then pile coal in front."

"Wouldn't the guards have been suspicious when they found that some of the convicts working in the boiler room were missing and had escaped?"

"You're assuming that some convicts escaped, but there's no record of anyone escaping from Purgatory."

"So if no one escaped that would mean the tunnel was never finished," Sister M's said as she stood up.

Sister Beatrice shook her head. "Not if my theory is correct. I believe this tunnel wasn't a way for prisoners to get out but a way to smuggle things in."

"What makes you think that?"

"One of the items that I found hidden in a cell was a small notebook that turned out to be a ledger. Not only did it record items being sold it included a mark-up for each item that was labelled T Tolls. I thought T meant transport, but the volume was much greater than one would expect from the usual method for smuggling of contraband that takes place in a prison. I couldn't figure it out. Then I found this tunnel and realized T meant tunnel and that the convicts who dug this tunnel charged a toll for every item that was smuggled in. Of course, it's only a theory, but if I'm right there's light at the end of this tunnel."

"There's only one way to find out," Sister M's said, then bent down and entered the tunnel. She walked slowly, hunched over, feeling the weight of the earth on top of her, held back by beams that shored up the walls and ceiling. Dust swirled in the light from her flashlight. She counted her steps as she walked, estimating that each step was approximately two feet. After fifty steps she stopped and called back to Sister Beatrice that she thought she was halfway. "The beams that are shoring it up look pretty sturdy...so far."

"Turn off your flashlight and see if you can see any light." Sister Beatrice's voice sounded like she was shouting into a well.

Sister M's switched off her flashlight. "Nothing but pitch black. This must have been what Jonah felt like after being swallowed by the whale."

"Are your eyes adapted to the darkness?" Sister Beatrice shouted back.

"They are but I can't say that the rest of me has. Anyway, it's still ink black." She turned the flashlight back on and resumed walking. After another twenty five steps she turned her flashlight off again. After a minute or so she thought it was a shade lighter than before. "It might be my imagination but I think it's a little bit lighter," she called back to Sister Beatrice.

"Maybe there is light at the end of the tunnel," Sister Beatrice's yelled back, although that could also be imagined since her voice was garbled as it echoed through the tunnel. Sister M's turned the flashlight back on and continued.

It was not her imagination since she could soon see light falling like gold dust from the tunnel's ceiling. When she got closer she could see that the tunnel widened and the ceiling was higher. It was a small room. It was also the end of the tunnel. A wooden ladder leaned against the side of the tunnel and stopped just below several boards nailed together to form a square. Light was sifting through the cracks between the boards.

Sister M's shouted back to Sister Beatrice that she had found the end and that it was a large space with a ladder leading to what appeared to be a hatch. "The rungs on the ladder are intact and it looks sturdy so I'm going to try it." Sister M's put her right foot on the first rung of the ladder and it held her weight so she climbed carefully up until she reached the hatch. After pushing back and forth on it she was able to slide it away and sunlight streamed in blinding her momentarily. I wonder if this is what God experienced after saying let there be light, she thought. After stepping on the next rung and pushing her head out of the tunnel she was surprised to see that she was only five or six feet from her meditation spot. Looking at the top of the hatch that she had pushed aside she saw that it was nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding prairie. She swatted away a tumbleweed that blew in front of her and climbed out into the sunlight. It may not match the description in the Book of Genesis but she was pretty sure this would have been the Garden of Eden to the convicts who dug the tunnel.

Less than fifteen minutes later Sister M's emerged from the entrance in the boiler room. "Well?" Sister Beatrice asked.

"It comes out behind the east wall about fifteen feet from the edge of the bluff."

Sister Beatrice hugged Sister M's. "Thank you for proving my theory, M's."

"Thank you for coming up with the theory, Bea."

"When do we stage the breakout?" Sister Beatrice could hardly contain her excitement.

"First, I have to arrange for someone to help me get them to the safehouse once they're through the tunnel and, second, I have to arrange for the safehouse, itself."

"Yes, but I'm sure you've worked it all out."

"In my head, but it's all theoretical until I work it out on the ground."

## **ON STAGE**

Zelda stood in the wings of the Tumbleweed Theater. Fred Dobbs, the theater manager, had let her in after she told him that she needed to get used to being on the real stage. Fred showed her how to turn off the house lights and told her he was leaving for the day so she should turn them off when she was done. After he left she walked out to center stage and imagined a spotlight shining on her. Zelda thought about what Max had told her when they had stood on the stage together; that there was an invisible glass wall between the stage and the audience.

As she stood there Zelda said her lines out loud for the scene they'd rehearsed the day before. Not just her lines but those of the other actors as well. She'd memorized all of them. Zelda felt like she could play all the other parts in the play when it was performed. Nothing against Carlotta, Tom and the others but she could bring the characters to life in this world, her world. She couldn't stop even if she wanted to and she didn't. On the other side of the glass she was Mary Ann Smithers, just another member of an anonymous audience, but on this side she was center stage as Zelda Zenn.

"Bravo." The shout blew the glass wall to smithereens. Zelda was suddenly aware of the audience of empty seats beyond the stage. Ambling down the left aisle was Howdy Hanks.

"How long have you been here?"

"I sort of lost track of time watching you up there. It sure was different than the scene I saw at the rehearsal last night. I've always wanted to write a one person play and now, by golly, it seems I've gone and done it and didn't even know."

"I'm sorry Mister Hanks."

"How about you calling me Howdy instead of Mister Hanks and I call you Zelda instead of Mary Ann Smithers?"

"Sorry...Howdy." Zelda stammered.

"And how about you not pretending to be sorry."

"You're right, I'm not sorry," Zelda declared.

"That's good because I wasn't planning on pretending to forgive you since I didn't see anything that you need to be sorry about. Anyway, I just came here with a draft of the next scene." Howdy waved the pages he held in his hand. "I like to read the draft on stage to hear how it sounds so I can make any adjustments before I give it to you all. But after watching you I think it would be even better if you read the next scene and I just sat here in the first row and watched. How does that sound, Zelda?"

"Sort of scary. I haven't memorized the lines so I'm afraid it would come off like I was just reading something out loud for the first time."

"Why don't you just give it a look through first and then decide whether to read it out loud." Howdy held the pages out toward her.

"Well, okay, I'll look at them, but if it doesn't feel right I won't do it," Zelda said, bending down and taking the pages.

"I wouldn't expect you to," Howdy replied as he sat back down.

Zelda glanced at the pages and then at Howdy, trying to hide her nervousness. “I don’t know if I can read this to myself with you sitting there watching me. I mean I can act like I’m reading to myself but then I’m not really reading.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t want someone watching over my shoulder when I write. Look, I’ll just pull my hat down over my eyes and take a nap. You won’t even know I’m here unless I’m snoring.” He slumped back in the chair, stretched out his legs and pulled the brim of his Stetson down.

Zelda waited for a few minutes and then read through the pages. Her lips moved and she made faces as she read, flipping back occasionally to reread something. Finally, she looked from the pages and called out. “Okay, Howdy, I’ll give it a shot.”

Howdy pushed up the rim of his hat and sat up straight. “Okay, let her rip.”

Fifteen minutes later Zelda was done reading the pages out loud. Howdy stared at her in silence.

“Well? Have you got anything to say?” Zelda asked.

*“And the word was made flesh comes to mind.”*

“That’s from the Bible, isn’t it?”

“John one, verse fourteen.”

“But you’re not a preacher, you write plays.”

“I’ve had more than a few folks tell me to get off my high horse,” Howdy said with a grin. “But to put it non-biblically, you took the words I wrote and brought them to life.”

“Really? Even though I only just read the words since I didn’t have time to memorize them?”

“Yes, really, because this was the first time anyone has said those words out loud.”

“Not even you?”

“Not out loud. Like I said, that’s why I came here. I need to hear how it sounds on stage so I can make adjustments. From what I just heard there’s only a few tweaks that are necessary.” Howdy got up from the chair. “If you can hand that back to me I’d like to note the places where I want to make some changes before I forget.”

Zelda handed the pages back to Howdy. He settled back into his chair, took out a pen and started scribbling on the script. She sat down on the edge of the stage and watched

silently. After a few minutes he looked up. “I hope I didn’t bother you by watching you write,” she asked. “I’ve just never seen a playwright at work.”

“I guess it’s only fair since I get to see you at work as an actor. Hard to believe you’ve never acted before.”

“Well, actually, it’s not the first time. I just don’t want anyone to know about what I did before.”

“Why is that?”

“This is really embarrassing, Howdy, but I feel like you ought to know this in case it comes out.” Zelda paused and then blurted. “I acted in a movie before I came here.”

“You were in a movie?”

Zelda bowed her head in shame then looked up. “That’s the real reason I moved here with my Mom to live with my grandmother eight months ago. We were living in Burbank, California. Everyone thinks of movies as being made in Hollywood but Burbank is where a lot of the film and television studios are. Anyway, I started hanging out with actors. There are tons of actors around there. They taught me all sorts of stuff about acting. Then one of the actors I met helped me get a part in a movie. It was really low budget so no one got paid but I thought it was my big break. Boy was I wrong.”

Howdy’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of movie, exactly, were you in, Zelda?”

“It wasn’t a skin flick, if that’s what you’re thinking. I mean, I was underage and I would never do one of those anyway. The movie was called *Killing All Kens* and it was about this girl who died and came back as zombie named Barbie and only killed guys named Ken.”

“Why guys named Ken?”

“Ken is the name for the doll who is Barbie doll’s boyfriend. You probably wouldn’t know that since I doubt you played with dolls. Personally, I was never into Barbie dolls, but the girl who became a zombie was really into them. Her bedroom was stuffed with Barbies. She was so into Barbie that she tried to find a boyfriend named Ken. However, none of the boys she met named Ken would go out with her so she read up on how to be a zombie, did some stupid chant and then drowned herself. After she was buried she came back as a zombie and killed all the Ken’s who rejected her.”

“And you played the Barbie character?”

“Yeah. I used a stage name, Marlene Maestro.”

“Marlene Maestro.” Howdy almost choked as he swallowed his laugh.



“I could never use that name again because it reminds me of that stupid film. That’s why I go by Zelda Zenn now.”

“I think Zelda’s a much better name.”

“Thanks, Howdy. It was a terrible film so I was relieved that it wasn’t released because Mattel, they’re the people who make Barbie dolls, found out about the movie being made and got a court order that shut down everything. It wasn’t the Barbie dolls that upset them so much, it was what happened to the Kens. Since it was a very low budget production there was no money for the special effects that were needed for the gory scenes when the Barbie doll zombie kills the Kens. So instead there were shots of Ken dolls with their legs, arms and heads ripped off and fake blood smeared on them. If they hadn’t used real Ken dolls I don’t think Mattel would have done anything.”

“I can see how they might object to that kind of product placement,” Howdy said. “So no one knows you were in this zombie Barbie doll kills Ken movie that was never released?”

“That’s what I thought, but then one of the scenes with me playing Barbie was posted on social media and someone sent it to my Mom. I never saw her so freaked out. She decided that she had to get me away from an unhealthy environment, which is what she called it. I felt like I’d been kidnapped by my own Mom. I was very, very angry believe you me.” Zelda paused and looked out at the theater as if every seat was full and said, almost reverently. “But now I see this as an opportunity to reboot my acting career. Only this time on the stage. Beginning right here in your new play.”

Howdy stood and held up the pages in his right hand. “I guess I better get back to work on this new play that’s going to launch your career in the theater.”

“Before you go can I ask you how you got started as a playwright?”

Howdy sat down again. “As a matter of fact, I started out as an actor in a play. Why, it was right here on this very stage.” He reached out and patted the stage. “But I kept forgetting my lines in rehearsals so I would just make them up. The director, a fellow named Byron Sturgess who taught theater at Picketwire College, didn’t like that and told me that since I thought my lines were better than Thornton Wilder’s – this was a production of *Our Town* - I should leave and go write my own play. I went home, wrote a play called *My Town* and gave it to him a few weeks later. He agreed to direct a production of it on one condition.”

“What was that?”

“That I not act in it.”

“You must have been pretty mad since you wrote it and all.”

“Nah, as I was writing I realized that writing plays is what I really wanted to do.”

How old were you?”

“Twelve.”

“You wrote a play that was produced when you were only twelve years old?”

“Yep, and Byron staged it just like he promised but it was a one performance matinee put on by the Tumbleweed Teen Theater. The audience were all kids from Picketwire Junior High, where I was in seventh grade. They all laughed a lot so I discovered that the tragedy I wrote was really a comedy. After that I just kept writing plays. Fortunately, unlike your situation, none of them were recorded and all of them were forgettable.”

“Not all of them were forgettable, because our next door neighbor told me that she remembered a play you wrote when you were at Picketwire High. She said it upset some people.”

Howdy turned and looked back at the empty seats of the theater. “Some people stood up and walked out on it before it was over while other people gave it a standing ovation, but no one fell asleep.”

“So is this new play about what really happened back then. I mean, it takes place in high school and there’s a play in it.”

“If I knew what really happened and why I wouldn’t have needed to write the play.”

“Well, anyway, I have to say that I can’t wait to see how everything turns out in the final act.”

Howdy winked at her. “You and me both.”

## CHAPTER 26

### PLAYED OUT

Desmond stretched and twisted his way through a smorgasbord of yoga positions, Ustrasana, Dhanurasana, Navasana, Marjariasana, Uttanasana, Hanumansana and Camatkarasana. Although he’d practiced yoga religiously for years he hadn’t achieved even a flicker of enlightenment. Now, as he sat cross legged in a lotus position he’d settle for a way that he could help Margaret with her farm. Instead he heard a car pull up. Untangling his legs he stood up and walked into the Happy Trails office that adjoined his bedroom. He could see the grin of a Chevy Silverado’s grill through the window. Desmond opened the front door just as Rich Best stepped down from the pick-up’s cab.

Rich walked up and looked at Desmond who was dressed in shorts and a tee shirt. “Guess you didn’t get the message I left on your voice mail about an hour ago.”

“I was exercising and put my phone on mute,” Desmond said, retreating behind his desk and picking up his cell phone and looking at the voice mail notification on its screen. He turned to Rich and asked, “What’s up?”

“What’s up is a meeting with none other than the big man, himself, Wylie Boone. ” Rich answered as he sat down in one of the two side chairs.

“Why are we meeting with Wylie Boone?”

Rich hunched forward, his elbows on his knees. “Jemma Lu called me yesterday and told me that she’d met with Wylie and heard his big idea.”

Desmond leaned back in his chair. “And?”

“She told him she would think about it and get back with her answer.”

“What was her verdict?”

Rich sat up straight, stretched out his right hand and pointed the thumb down.

“What was the big idea?”

Rich shrugged. “Don’t know. The deal was that he’d only tell Jemma Lu.”

“How did Boone take it?”

“She hasn’t told him. That’s why we’re meeting to deliver the bad news.”

“Why can’t she tell him?”

“She said that wasn’t part of the deal. He’d asked to meet with her and tell her his idea, which she agreed to do and that’s what she did. She never agreed to meet him a second time.”

Desmond raised the cell phone that was still in his hand. “Let’s just call him.”

Rich gave him a *you just don’t get it look*. “A face to face is our best chance to walk away with the contribution he promised. We don’t want to give him time to reconsider and bail on us. I already sent him a breakdown of the expenses that he promised to cover in addition to the \$25,000 for prize money.”

Desmond put down the cell phone. “Okay, I understand the reason for a face to face but I don’t understand why you can’t meet with him yourself.”

“I’m just a small town furniture dealer as far as he’s concerned, but you are a venture capitalist from Silicon Valley.”

“Not anymore. I’m just helping out my family.”

“Okay, but that gives you something in common with Wylie because he came back to run the Boone family business, the Double B Ranch.”

“I’m just running this trailer park.”

“Your family owns this place so it’s a family business. And you’re not just running a trailer park, Desmond, you’re heading up a turn around. That’s another thing you and Wylie have in common because he buys companies and turns them around.”

Desmond shifted uncomfortably, the skin of his bare thighs sticking to the chair’s seat. “When is this meeting?”

Rich looked at the watch on his wrist. “In half an hour.”

“At his ranch?”

“In Played Out.”

“Played Out? Is that an actual place?”

“More or less. Actually, it’s more less than more. It’s about a half hour from here.”

“I still don’t get why he agreed to meet with us instead of Jemma Lu?”

“He didn’t. I just said we would like to meet with him and he didn’t ask who the other person in the we was.”

In a few minutes Picketwire had disappeared in the rearview mirror of Rich’s Silverado. Inside the climate controlled cab the displays on the dashboard were out of the space age although the ride as far as Desmond was concerned, was more iron age. It felt like they were plowing through the sun softened asphalt like it was an untilled field. Desmond asked Rich how much the pickup weighed.

Rich patted the dashboard. “Three tons of heavy metal. The extended cab will hold four hefty guys or five skinny gals. I prefer the latter.”

“It looks brand new.”

“That’s because it is. I’ve only had it for a week. I drive a different pickup make and model every month. My customers are pretty devoted to their pick-ups so I don’t want to seem partial by picking one pickup over another. Talking about their truck is a good way to keep a conversation rolling. Establish rapport.”

“It must be pretty expensive to rent a different pickup every month.”

“The dealers let me have them for free. It’s part of their marketing. You’d be surprised how many of my customers I talk into trading up to the latest model. Of course, I’m careful not to try to persuade them to switch brands. There are four dealerships in the area and I rotate among them. Before this I had a Dodge RAM and next month it’ll be a Ford F250 and the month after that a Toyota Tundra. Now that Range Rover you drive doesn’t do much for around here. It’s more for Aspen or Vail. You should trade up for one of these babies.” Rich patted the dashboard again.

“Which baby would you recommend?”

“Whichever one I’m driving. That’s part of the agreement I have with the dealers. This month I can get you a sweet deal on a Silverado.”

“And I bet next month you can get me a sweet deal on an F250.”

Rich shot him a grin. “Are you calling my bluff, Des? Speaking of sweet deals, someone told me they saw you with Margaret Knutson at the Last Ditch.”

Desmond shifted uncomfortably and replied. “I’ve seen her a couple of times.”

“Is she still thinking of living on the farm her Uncle gave her? I haven’t heard back from her about remodeling the farmhouse after we met at the showroom.”

“She’s not only going to live there; she’s going to try farming the place.”

“Then she’s going to need some new farm equipment because I imagine what Arvid had was held together with baling wire. He used to come in asking for parts for equipment that hadn’t been made in years. I tried to convince him to buy something new or at least newer but he wasn’t interested. There’s a difference between used and used up. Why, he had an old Farmall tractor that should have been in a museum not on a farm.”

“I know, I saw it,” Desmond said, then quickly explained. “I drove Margaret and Sue Cohen out there yesterday.”

“Sue Cohen? I did hear that she was looking into buying a farm.”

“She and Margaret might team up.”

“If they don’t want to be a losing team then they’re going to need a really good coach.”

“Sue did say there’s a local farmer who’s agreed to help her out. I guess you could call him a coach.”

“Well, well.” Rich drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

“Well what?”

“Just that if Sue is involved then they will definitely want the very best equipment. Anyone who goes to her Café can see that. Plus, she’s the head of the Chamber of Commerce so she’ll want to shop local and you can’t get more local than FREDs.”

Desmond decided it was better to drop the subject. He’d already said more than he should have about Margaret and Sue’s plans. Desmond looked out the windshield at the ribbon of two lane black top unwinding before them across the prairie toward a fringe of trees. “Is that Played Out ahead of us?”

“That or a mirage, although there’s not much difference. Every time I’m out this way I’m surprised to find that it’s still there.”

“Where are we meeting Boone?” Desmond asked.

“There’s only one place to meet and that’s at MacDonald’s.”

“There’s a McDonalds out here?”

Rich laughed. “Not McDonalds but M A C D O N A L D S.”

In a couple of minutes they passed a sign with Played Out painted on it followed by the words *don’t blink or you’ll miss us*. Rich slowed the Silverado as they entered what looked like a set for the “westerns” that had once roamed television sets and movie theaters. Desmond half expected to see Clint Eastwood leaning in one of the doorways with a cigarillo on his lips, a hand resting on the butt of a six gun and his eyes locked on them in a steely squint. They pulled off the deserted street and came to a stop in a patch of gravel beside a one story building with a clapboard false front. It looked like a saloon except for the two gas pumps in front instead of a hitching rail. They climbed down from the pickup and walked to the building. MacDonald’s was printed in large black letters on the weathered façade above the front double doors. Inside was a cavernous room, with fans hanging like stalactites from the ceiling, their blades spinning slowly with a soft “whooping” sound. On the left side of the room was a counter with half a dozen stools, four tables, a pool table and against the back wall, several booths. On the right side were two rows of shelves displaying everything from western wear to motor oil to loaves of bread and cans of Spam. A handwritten sign above a cooler advertised its contents as beer, sodas, milk, sliced meats and cheese. There seemed to be a little of everything and not much of anything.

A man who'd been sitting reading a book behind the cash register stood up as they entered. He was in his fifties, tall, broad shouldered and barrel chested with a sun reddened face. He wore bib overalls over a white tee shirt. He bellowed out a howdy and then, recognizing Rich, he said, "Why if it isn't Rich Best." They shook hands and Rich introduced Desmond.

"Fergus MacDonald. Some people call me big Mac, which is better than being called a little weenie," the man said, a big smile on his face as he gave Desmond's arm several hearty pumps. "Welcome to the purgatory of Purgatory County."

"Come on, Fergus, it's not that bad," Rich said.

"No, it's not a hell of a place but I'm working on it." He broke into another grin then asked. "What brings you two to Played Out?"

"Wylie Boone asked us to meet him." Rich replied. "Looks like he's not here yet."

"Well, you're welcome to wait. If you bought something you'd be more than welcome."

Desmond ordered a coke and Rich a Doctor Pepper and they sat down on two stools. After placing the drinks on the counter, Rich asked. "Does Boone come here often?"

"He's been here once since he came back so if he comes today that'll make him a regular customer." Fergus chuckled. "That is if he wants to buy something I can sell."

"Since this is called MacDonald's you must be the owner." Desmond asked.

"Owner, bartender, waiter, cashier, cook and janitor. I'm also the mayor and city council, police force and garbage collector and half the population of Played Out. My wife's the other, better, half. That's not counting the ghost population. This is pretty much a ghost town so there's a lot more of them than us. Oh, I'm also the President of the Played Out Historical Society. Our motto is we may not have a future but we've got plenty of the past."

"Where did the name Played Out come from?" Desmond asked.

Fergus smiled and leaned his elbows on the counter. "That's not the original name. You see back in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth the U.S. government gave the railroads land in return for building their railroads. The problem for the railroads was what to do with land in areas like this where there's not much rain or access to water. That's when they latched onto this theory of dryland farming that claimed you could farm without needing any water. Somehow the crops themselves would cause more rainfall. The desert would bloom and the prairie would turn into a Garden of Eden. Apple trees where there was sagebrush. There were already plenty of snakes, of course, They persuaded a lot of folks from the east and new immigrants, especially the ones who'd

never farmed, to come out here on their railroads and buy their land. Of course the folks already out here knew that it was a bunch of hooey to farm this land without water. The wells they dug provided enough to wash dishes and drink but not enough to irrigate for farming. They knew that the only thing you could do with this land was raise cattle and, even then, you needed at least sixty acres per cow. But folks believed the hooey and came anyway and by 1910 there were small farms all around here and this town had been established. They named it Fertile Fields. As it turned out the only thing fertile about it was the imagination to come up with the name.”

“What happened?” Desmond asked.

“For a few years it seemed to work but those were unusually wet years as it turned out. However, as soon as the dry years came back what little topsoil there was to begin with had been eroded by plowing and over grazing so it all blew away with the wind. We still get dust storms. By 1920 the dryland boom had turned into the dust bust. That’s when folks cleared out and some of the departing citizens crossed out the name Fertile Fields on the signs coming into town and painted Played Out.”

“Why didn’t your family leave as well?”

“Leave? That’s when my family showed up. My great grandfather Angus MacDonald worked as a sales-clerk in the Denver Dry Goods Company in Denver, it was the largest department store west of Chicago. Well they up and fired him claiming that he wasn’t meeting his sales quota. Anyway, being a frugal Scot he’d put some money away but with a wife, two kids and another on the way he knew he couldn’t wait too long. Then he saw an advertisement for a manager for this place, which was called the Fertile Field Mercantile Emporium. He telegraphed an application for the job and got a reply right away that he’s hired, sight unseen. It seemed too good to be true and it was. When he arrived with his wife and kids instead of hiring him as the manager, the owner of the store told him that he had to go back east because of his wife’s health and he’d sell him the place for the value of the inventory. Again, Angus couldn’t believe his luck so he used most of his savings to buy the place. It was only after he took over the place and changed the name to MacDonald’s that he discovered that all the farms and businesses were going bust. He also found out that almost all of the store’s customers had been buying on credit with the security being their property. In less than a year he owned all the land around here as well as the town. The population had gone from five hundred to five. The fifth being my grandfather, who was born a few months after they arrived. Like I said, now there’s only Ellie and me. We have two kids but they left here when they went to college and one of them lives in Denver and the other in Missoula.”

“So you’re hanging on,” Rich said.

“Running this is more like a hobby than a business. Truth is Ellie and I don’t know what we’d do with ourselves if we left. Besides, even if we wanted to sell the place who would be interested in owning a town in the middle of nowhere. Especially one without much



water.” He paused then added. “Except the Boones and they’re the only people I can’t sell to.”

“Why is that?”

“Wylie’s granddad, C.W. Junior, tried to force Angus to sell the town and the land to him for next to nothing. He told Angus that if he didn’t accept his offer he would get the road closed and MacDonald’s wouldn’t have any customers or anything else for that matter. Angus found out that according to the law the road had to stay open as long as there was a town here. He told him that the MacDonald’s came to America from Scotland after being thrown off their land in the Highland Clearances and he wasn’t about to be cleared off his land by someone who acted like he was some Laird of the Prairies. He not only refused to sell but he swore an oath that no MacDonald would ever sell this place to a Boone. Fortunately the oath didn’t include leasing the land to the Boones and that’s what my Dad did. If it wasn’t for the lease payments, as small as they are, we wouldn’t be able to pay the bills. Wylie brought the whole thing up when he came by. The current thirty year lease is going to expire in six months so we need to negotiate a new one. He said if I didn’t agree to sell him the land he wouldn’t renew the lease. Not only that he said he wanted the town to be part of the deal.”

Rich screwed up his face in disbelief. “Why would Wylie include the town as well?”

“That’s what I wondered. If we lose the income from the lease we won’t be able to hold out for long. We won’t be able to pay the taxes on the land and Wylie will pick it up in a tax foreclosure. We’ll have nothing and the Boone’s will get everything. If I agree to sell at least we’ll walk away with something.”

“I guess that leaves you between a rock and a hard place.”

The bell above the front door jingled and Fergus looked up. “Speaking of a rock. Wylie has arrived.”

Desmond and Rich swiveled on their stools to look at the front door. A man wearing aviator sunglasses stood in the open doorway. He was dressed in black jeans and a black tee shirt that barely contained his muscle bound torso and biceps. After pushing his sunglasses up over his buzzcut he looked around and then stepped aside. A man wearing khakis and a maroon polo shirt limped through the door. The man stopped and peered at them and asked. “Where’s Jemma Lu?”

Rich explained to Wylie that Jemma Lu couldn’t make it and that he had a note from her. He introduced Desmond and they retreated to one of the back booths where Rich had handed Wylie the note from Jemma Lu.

“I guess that’s all she wrote,” Wylie sighed after reading the note, then folded it and inserted it back into its envelope.

“Maybe she wrote something more but that’s all she gave me,” Rich said.

Wylie gave Rich a hard look. “I meant that’s the end of it.”

“Oh, right. But look Mister Boone they say for every ending there’s a new beginning.”

“All beginnings are new but some ends are the end and this is one of them.”

“Are you still going to contribute to FRED X?” Desmond asked. “Jemma Lu met with you and heard your idea.”

“Which was a great idea,” Rich said.

“How do you know it was a great idea?” Wylie snapped. “The deal we agreed to was that Jemma Lu wouldn’t tell anyone what it was unless she said yes, so if she told you...”

Rich held both of his hands up. “Oh no, she didn’t tell us. I just meant that if you came up with an idea I’m pretty sure it would be a great one.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep my word. You’ll get the money.”

“Everyone knows you’re a man of your word,” Rich said, nodding his head vigorously.

Wylie sat back and looked at them with a bemused smile. “Everyone? I’ve made more than my share of enemies.”

“Well, of course there are always people who are jealous of someone’s success and want to run them down...I mean...”

Wylie waved his hand and Rich shut up then he reached into the front pocket of his khakis and fished out a check and handed it to Rich. “This should cover it, including the amount for expenses that you sent me.” He turned to Desmond as Rich pocketed the check.

“Are you related to Victor Goswami?”

“He’s my Dad. Why, do you know him?”

“We’re acquainted. What are you doing here?”

“Desmond is running one of the family businesses,” Rich said.

Wylie’s right eyebrow arched. “Really, your family has a hotel in Picketwire?”

“Not a hotel,” Desmond said. “It’s more like a trailer park.”

“A trailer park?”

“Well, we also accommodate RV’s.”

“Desmond is a venture capitalist in Silicon Valley,” Rich blurted. “But agreed to come here to turn around Happy Trails, that’s the name of the business. With his experience in Silicon Valley startups Desmond has been a great help with FRED X.”

“There’s a big difference between high tech and agriculture.”

“Desmond is helping with a new agricultural start up.”

“What’s the start up?”

“It’s more of a restart,” Desmond said. “I’m helping someone who inherited her uncle’s farm.”

“That wouldn’t happen to be Arvid Knutson’s farm?”

“Yes, why?”

“I’d like to discuss something with her...What’s her name?”

“Margaret Knutson,” Rich answered.

Ignoring Rich, Wylie addressed Desmond. “Can you ask Margaret to call me?”

“Can I tell her what it’s about?” Desmond asked.

“Just tell her I’ve got an offer that I don’t think she’ll want to refuse.”

## **VIRTUOUS ACTION**

Foster had replaced the television set he’d shot with a sofa he’d bought at FRED’s. Although Rich called the color Chartreuse it was more puke green, which was probably why it was fifty percent off. Foster covered it with an old Pendleton wool blanket. Scratchy was better than nausea. At least there was a place for Gretl, Ari and Will to sit after he invited them inside. He wasn’t sure which had been the bigger surprise; that they had ended up at his doorstep or that once he’d opened it they’d asked to hire him. Of course, he hid his surprise. After all he was working undercover. The only surprise when they introduced themselves was the second man, who turned out to be a professor of philosophy. After the three of them were seated on the sofa, Foster settled into the Lazy boy and asked. “What exactly do you want to hire me for?”

Gretl, who was sitting between Ari and Will answered. “We want you to help us stop Wylie Boone.”

“There’s a long line of people who want to stop Wylie. What’s your reason?”

Will, who had been perched on the edge of the couch looking like a student who can’t wait to be called on, said. “He’s stealing water and using it to grow marijuana. That’s more than enough reason.”

“How do you know that?” Foster asked.

Will opened his mouth but Gretl cut him off. “We have evidence that water is being diverted from the Purgatoire at night onto the Double B Ranch through a vacated irrigation ditch. It’s being used to supply water for growing marijuana. As you know, stealing water is illegal in Colorado and so is growing marijuana without a license...”

“And there aren’t any licenses issued for Purgatory County,” Foster said. “The problem is Sheriff Riggleman is responsible for enforcing the law. He’ll just say that he’ll look into it, which means it will never see the light of day.”

“We know Riggleman is under Boone’s thumb and won’t lift a finger.”

Maybe the middle one Foster thought. He said. “Not only that, if you tell Riggleman he’ll just warn Boone who will then fill in the irrigation ditch and dismantle the marijuana farm and wait until everything blows over.”

Gretl nodded her head in agreement. “That’s why we’re not going to take this to Riggleman but to the press. News and social media will go crazy with this because it involves Boone. Everyone will know what he’s up to and he won’t have a chance to cover things up.”

“Boone is like a cockroach,” Will said, hardly hiding his disdain. “He operates in the dark. The publicity this will generate is like turning on the lights. Once he’s exposed he’ll disappear into the crack he came from. It’s the worst thing that can happen to him.”

“Worse than being killed by a minivan?” Foster asked.

“But he wasn’t killed,” Will replied. “Maybe the driver didn’t even intend to kill him.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait until they find the person.”

“Maybe they won’t find him.”

“To get back to what we’re saying about the media,” Gretl interrupted. “Once the spotlight is on Boone he won’t be able to get away with stealing water.”

Foster settled back in the Lazy Boy and drawled. “Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out. Why do you need me?”

“We need someone to find people that Boone has stolen water from who will agree to come forward and speak at a press conference.” Gretl said. “Boone can’t know that we’re doing this until it’s too late for him to act. It has to take him by surprise so he doesn’t have time to cover everything up. If we start asking questions it’s liable to get back to Boone. That’s why we want to hire you. ”

“I see why you might need my help, but you can’t hire me...”

Will stood up and blurted, “This is a waste of time. You’re not going to help us.”

“Hold your horses and let me finish,” Foster replied, calmly. “What I was going to say is you can’t hire me because I’m already working on something that involves Boone. I can’t tell you what it is except that it doesn’t involve water or marijuana. It would be a conflict of interest if I was paid by you. I said you couldn’t hire me but that doesn’t mean I won’t help you.”

After Will sat back down, Foster said. “I do have one condition.”

“What’s the condition?” Gretl asked.

“That the Picketwire Press gets to do an inside story on all of this.”

Will was about to jump up again but this time Gretl put her left hand firmly on his right leg to stop him. “Okay,” she said. “But nothing can get out about this until we’re ready to go public.”

“Don’t worry,” Foster said. “There won’t be any leaks.”

“Sorry for dragging you along,” Gretl said to Ari. They were standing in front of the Picketwire Institute where Will had dropped them off. “This really isn’t your concern. I’m sure you would be happy to get back to philosophy.”

“You know,” Ari said with a sheepish grin. “According to Aristotle achieving true happiness requires both knowledge and virtuous action.”

“According to which Aristotle? The dead one or the one standing in front of me?”

“Both, but achieving true happiness is a lot better when you’re still alive.”

Gretl smiled. “Does this mean you consider what we’re doing as virtuous and not crazy.”

“Being a philosopher not a psychiatrist I’m not qualified to give an opinion on what’s crazy.”

“So you agree with Wittgenstein that whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent?”

“All I can say is that in this case Wittgenstein knew what he was talking about. But, seriously, what I can say is that I think what you’re doing is right, and I wish there was some way I could help.” Ari felt like he’d just been along for the ride. First in a Jeep and then on a couch. It seemed that he’d been a bystander his whole life. It was time to get off his ass.

“I’m not sure if it’s virtuous,” Gretl said. “But you could help with some vehicular action by giving me a ride. Will needs the Jeep to get back and forth from his bat cave or wherever it is he sleeps, assuming he sleeps so I’m without wheels.”

“Sure,” Ari said, nodding his head. “My car is at my apartment but it’s not far from here so we could walk there and I could give you a ride home.” When they got to his apartment he could invite her in for a drink, he thought. That could lead to some action, although not exactly the kind that the other Aristotle would consider virtuous. But, as Gretl had pointed out, that one was dead and he wasn’t.

”Not home it’s to a place I want to check out,” Gretl said, jarring Ari out of his contemplation. “It’s a bit of a longshot, but who knows.”

“Where is it?”

“Out in the country about thirty miles from Picketwire. It’s off the beaten track.”

“My car is a Honda Civic not an SUV so if this place requires any off road driving...”

“It may be off the beaten track but the road to it is paved, although you wouldn’t think so from the name of the place.”

“What’s it called?”

“Played Out.”

## CHAPTER 27

### ARVID’S WAY

Sue was feeling anxious as she waited for Joji and Margaret. She wasn’t worried about whether he and Margaret would get along, but whether the Pretty Good Café was good enough. He had told her that he had never been there and, in fact, he rarely went to a restaurant. It was almost ten, after the breakfast crowd had finished and the Café was

empty except for several older men who sat at the counter drinking coffee. Jerry, Larry and Gary were regulars who always sat side by side, linked not only by the rhyming of their names but their taciturnity. They sat in almost complete silence. Occasionally, one man would say something, no more than a handful of words. When he was finished there would be a long silence until one of them would say something in response, sometimes no more than a grunt or a chuckle. Sue once said to Bonnie, who worked the breakfast shift at the Pretty Good, that she didn't understand why the three men sat together since they hardly say anything to each other. Bonnie said. "They don't like to talk, but it's not like they aren't communicating with each other." Then she laughed. "The other day I even found myself listening in."

Joji walked in at exactly ten o'clock. Surprisingly punctual for someone who didn't wear a watch. Sue ushered him to the booth in the far corner next to the front window. This was the booth she preferred when she wanted privacy. Her usual seat was at the outside end of the bench whose back was to the wall. In LA this would be the power seat because whoever sat there wasn't cornered by the other occupants and could see everything in the room. To her surprise Joji took the spot. The problem Sue now confronted was that if she sat down opposite Joji she would have to slide over to the inside of the bench so that Margaret could sit down and then Sue would be cornered with her back to the room, which was the least powerful position. All of this added to her anxiety so instead of sitting down Sue decided that she should tell Joji that she was going to the Café's entrance so she could greet Margaret when she arrived. Before she could open her mouth Margaret walked up, gave a cheery hello, sat down and slid over to the inside of the bench, next to the window. As Sue took the now open seat at the end opposite Joji he nodded his head as if he had arranged this all along.

To Sue's relief after she introduced Joji to Margaret they seemed to hit it off. He said that he had known her Uncle and had been to his farm. Somehow that didn't surprise Sue that the two bachelor farmers would be acquainted. What did surprise her was what Joji said after Bonnie handed a cup of coffee to Margaret and placed a tea pot between Joji and Sue. "He was very interested in the Fukuoka method and had talked about giving it a try."

"Uncle Arvid trying something new?" Margaret started to laugh and then stopped. "I mean, he seemed so set in his ways."

"Maybe this was his way. Just because he stayed in one place doesn't mean he wasn't on an inner journey."

"Sounds almost mystical," Sue observed, pouring tea into Joji's cup and then her own.

"Maybe Arvid was really a Zen Lutheran," Margaret quipped.

Joji sipped his tea. It was Sue's favorite and she hoped he liked it. He nodded his approval, then said to Margaret. "And now you are on your way."

“Our way,” Margaret said. “We’re all in this together; the three farmeteers.” Then, turning serious, she asked Joji, “Sue says that this farming method of yours...”

“The Fukuoka method,” Sue said.

“Right, the Fukuoka method, doesn’t require much water?”

“That is correct. It is the natural way to grow in an arid climate such as this.”

“But Uncle Arvid owned quite a few shares in the Purgatory Ditch so he had access to water for irrigation and didn’t really need to use this method.”

“Yes,” Joji nodded. “But your Uncle didn’t believe in waste...”

“Anyone who’s been to his farm can attest to that,” Margaret laughed .

“Yes,” Joji smiled. “He was especially against wasting something as essential to life as water, so he wanted to use the water he was to wisely. He believed, as I do, in working with nature and not against it. That’s why he was interested in the Fukuoka method.”

“What was he going to do with the water that he was going to save using the Fukuoka method?”

“He didn’t tell me. I know that he had already cut back on irrigation and most of his acreage was fallow in anticipation of switching to the Fukuoka method when he died.”

“And now we’re carrying out his plan,” Margaret said. “It’s almost like he knew this would happen when he wrote his will leaving the farm to me.”

“Maybe,” Joji said with a smile and then took another sip of tea.

“We heard that Wylie Boone was trying to buy up all the shares in the Purgatory Ditch Company,” Sue said to Joji.

Joji poured some more tea from the pot and then answered. “Arvid told me that Wylie Boone wanted to buy his shares. He said that Boone offered him a lot more than the market price. Since the farm wouldn’t be worth much without the water rights he offered to buy it as well.”

“What did Uncle Arvid tell him?” Margaret asked.

“That he would get his shares and farm over his dead body.”

“Now that your Uncle is dead, Boone is going to contact you with an offer,” Sue said.

“Then he’ll get the same answer as the one Uncle Arvid gave him,” Margaret said.



“Boone likes to get his way,” Sue warned.

“Then he’ll have to take the highway because we’re taking Arvid’s way.”

## YOU CAN’T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT

Harry was perched on the stool at the check-out counter at Bunch of Books like a pot-bellied version of Rodin’s The Thinker trying to figure out a way to confront Wylie Boone about what he had done to Pam. How would he even arrange a meeting with Wylie since he was sequestered at his ranch after the hit and run and even if he did what would he say and if he could figure out what to say what right did he have to say it? Pam hadn’t asked him to get involved, much less to avenge her honor. Maybe he should get stoned like The Thinker? Marijuana was legal in Colorado and he knew where Carlotta kept a small stash. She wouldn’t object if he lit up one of her joints as long as it wasn’t in the bookstore, which had a no smoking policy. The only place he could think of was on the roof.

Harry opened the drawer in the check-out counter. Inside the drawer was a box where Carlotta kept some cannabis. He opened the box, reached in and pulled out a joint. Closing the drawer he got up from his stool and walked over to the door to hang the *back in fifteen minutes* sign. Through the glass he saw a 57, candy apple red Chevy pull up in front followed by a black Suburban. The driver’s door opened and Wylie Boone stepped out. At the same time two beefy men got out of the Suburban. All three of them headed for the bookstore so Harry quickly retreated to his position behind the check-out counter. Sitting down just as the door opened he didn’t have time to dispose of the joint so he hid his right hand below the top of the counter.

“Harry Bunch,” Wylie said with a smile that was as fake as a three dollar bill. “Been a long time.”

“About thirty years,” Harry answered. He didn’t offer to shake Wylie’s hand and not just because its fingers were wrapped around the joint. “Where are the two bodyguards that came with you?”

“I told them to wait outside. They’re not into books.”

“And you are?”

Wylie reached out and picked up a book that had been arranged on the display table according to Harry’s book bunching system and then put it back in another spot. “I used to come in here. I remember when I was in high school buying *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Harry answered, fighting the urge to go over and put the book back in its proper spot.

“That was when your Dad still ran the place. Then he passed it on to you like my Dad did with the Double B. We’re both running a family business.”

“You own a lot of businesses.”

“Those are things I buy and sell. They’re nothing to me but an investment. But the Double B was passed on from one generation of Boones to the next; it’s a legacy. It’s not really mine to sell. I bet that’s what this place is for you.”

“It’s easier to keep this place in the family since there’s not a lot of folks interested in buying a bookstore.”

Wylie laughed. “I have to admit that investing in Amazon early on was a hell of an investment for me.” Without waiting for Harry’s response, he asked. “At least you have someone in the family to pass it onto. What’s your daughter’s name?”

“Carlotta,” Harry answered, rolling the unseen joint nervously between his fingers. “If she wants it. So far she does. Who are you going to pass the Double B onto?”

“Now, that is a problem since I never managed to have one kid with any of my three wives. There are some distant relatives but if they got their hands on it they’d just sell the place.” Wylie sighed. “I guess I’ll just have to avoid dying.”

“Seems like you did that up in Aspen.”

Wylie laughed nervously. “Yeah, I guess I dodged the bullet or, the minivan, to be exact.”

“Is there anything you’re interested in buying? We still have Ayn Rand’s books. You can find them under fiction although they should probably be in the fairy tale section.”

“No, I was interested in something rarer.”

“What’s that?”

“I was going through the records for our library at the ranch...”

“Ayn Rand’s books wouldn’t fill a shelf, much less a library.”

“I have to admit that my contributions to it are pretty skimpy. Some of the books were bought by CW and then the library was added to by my grandfather and, then, my Dad. But, as I was saying, while I was looking I noticed that some books I remember reading as a kid were missing.”

“You didn’t notice that they were missing until now?”

“I avoided the library because that’s where I found him. He was sitting in his favorite chair with the reading light on and a book in his lap, like he’d fallen asleep while reading.”

“I’d say that was a nice way to go.”

“Yeah, well, the glass of whiskey and bottle of sleeping pills helped.”

“Are you saying your Dad committed suicide?”

“He was dying anyway. Had terminal lung cancer. Never quit smoking and had a pack of Marlboros next to the glass of whiskey. Maybe he’d been committing suicide for a long time.”

“A long goodbye,” Harry said.

“Now that’s a good way to put it.”

“It’s the name of a Raymond Chandler book. We have it in our mystery section over there.” Harry used his left hand to point in the direction of the mystery section.

Wylie looked in the direction that Harry pointed. “Well, my Dad was a mysterious guy. Always seemed to be hiding something.” He turned back to Harry and said. “But, to get back to what I was saying, after I found him there I avoided the library after that and for the last thirty years I’ve pretty much avoided the ranch.”

“And now you come back and find these books missing.”

“Exactly. So I looked in the inventory that lists what’s in the library, Boone’s like to keep track of what we own even if it’s a book, and discovered that my Dad gave them to Miss Bennett just before he died. She was the first grade teacher at Coronado. I believe you and I were in her class together.”

“I believe you’re right.”

“That surprised me. That he would give them to her. Especially, since they’re first editions and worth quite a bit.”

“I guess they were good friends.”

“He never mentioned her. As far as I know he didn’t have any good friends. I don’t think he was close to anyone, not even my mother. I think when she divorced him he was happy to see her leave so he could just sit in the library drinking, smoking and reading.”

Harry thought about whether to mention to Wylie the more than friendly note from his Dad to Rosalind that he'd found in one of the books, but before he could decide Wylie said. "Anyway, when I discovered the books had been given to Miss Bennett I decided to find out what happened to her books when she died and I was surprised to find out that you bought them."

"I don't know why you'd be surprised since this is the only bookstore in town and we do have rare books. She had quite a few of them."

Wylie nodded. "What I'm wondering is whether you still have some of them?"

"I still have all of them."

"Great," Wylie's face lit up in a genuine smile. "Because I'd like to buy them. I'm restoring the ranch house and one of the things I want is to have all the original books that were in the library. Those books are part of the Boone legacy that was handed down and it wasn't right for my Dad to give them away."

"Well he did. And now they belong to me. And I'm not interested in selling them. I guess you could say that they're now part of the Bunch legacy," Harry answered.

Wylie's smile evaporated. "I'll pay you more than the fair market value."

"Still not interested."

"Everything has a price, Harry, just name yours."

"Really, then what's the price tag for your legacy, the Double B?"

Wylie shook his head. "A lot more than you can afford, Harry."

Harry smiled and said. "Then my price is a lot more than you can afford. Do we have a deal?"

"Okay, Harry, I get it."

"No you don't get it, Wylie, that's the point. You're used to getting what you want, but not this time."

"Why Harry Bunch, is that a joint you're holding?" Wylie answered, calmly.

Harry suddenly realized that he had raised his right hand and was pointing at Wylie with the joint. "Yeah," he said, placing the joint on the countertop. "You got something against marijuana."

“Hell no,” Wylie said with a grin. “I’m all for marijuana. I’ve bought a number of cannabis dispensaries in Colorado since they legalized it in 2012. You probably bought that joint you’re about to smoke at one of them and didn’t even know it.”

Harry wanted nothing more than to wipe the grin off Wylie’s face. “I just remembered we have a no smoking policy in the store,” he said and then reached out, picked up the joint he’d just placed on the counter and dropped it in the wastebasket.

Wylie put both of his hands on his hips and stared angrily at Harry. He opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but then turned and walked out the door. Harry watched Wylie through the window as he got into the Chevy and, without waiting for the two bodyguards to get in the Suburban, he peeled out leaving a strip of steamy rubber on the pavement. Harry stooped down and picked the joint out of the wastebasket, put it in his mouth, lit it with a lighter that Carlotta also kept in the drawer and inhaled deeply. To hell with the no smoking policy. This one was for Pam.

## **JUKEBOX MEMORIES**

Tom hadn’t been on a date for a very long time, much less a first date. Besides, this was research for their parts in the play and if he was Billy and Carlotta was Karla then this really wasn’t their first date since they were going steady and they were both seventeen year old seniors in high school. Carlotta had even suggested that they meet at Tanneyhill’s, since the play had a scene that took place in a drugstore with a soda fountain. When he entered the drugstore Carlotta was already seated in one of the booths against the window opposite the soda fountain. He noticed she was flipping through song selections on the tabletop jukebox. He’d written about the vintage Seeburg Wall-O-Matic system when he’d done a story on Tanneyhill’s. Before Tom could sit down facing her across the formica tabletop, Carlotta scooted over toward the window and patted the space on the bench beside her. “Remember, we’re going steady.”

“Oh, right,” Tom replied, sheepishly.

“What songs do you think Billy and Karla would have played?” She asked after Tom was seated beside her.

“How would I know. That would have been more than forty years ago, way before we were born.”

“That’s how old a lot of these songs are. Some of them are older. They even have songs by Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee.” Carlotta pointed at a song. “They even have The Beatles’ *I Want to Hold Your Hand* from 1964.”

“Can I help you two?”

They both turned and looked up at a man in his seventies. It was Lyle Tannyhill, who had retired but still came in to help his son Trent, who had taken over the family drugstore.

“Hi Lyle,” Carlotta replied. “Do you remember what high school students would have listened to on your jukebox back in 1978?”

“That’s a long time ago.” He paused and thought a minute then said. “Nope. Now I do remember one song your parents, Tom, used to listen to when they were dating and came in here. It was right after I had graduated from pharmacy school in seventy five and moved back here to help my dad run this place.”

“They graduated in 1976,” Tom said. “That’s just a couple of years before 78.”

Lyle nodded his head. “76, right.”

“Why do you remember what they listened to?” Tom asked. When he thought of his parents he it was hard to even imagine them as kids in high school.

“Because they kept playing it over and over while they sat here mooning at each other...” Lyle stopped and grinned. “Why as I recall they used to sit in this very booth. Like father like son.”

“We’re just friends,” Tom stammered.

“We’re on a date,” Carlotta said nudging Tom with her elbow.

“Our first date,” Tom said, then asked. “What was the song?”

“*Love Will Keep Us Together* by The Captain and Tenille. I actually liked the song but after hearing your parents play it over and over I got so sick of hearing it that I removed it from the jukebox. I told your folks they’d worn it out.”

“It’s hard to believe that my folks were...”

“Young and in love,” Carlotta said, smiling at Tom.

Feeling his face redden, Tom turned and asked Lyle. “What about Harry, Carlotta’s dad? He must have come in here when he was in high school.”

“Harry came in, but I don’t remember what songs he listened to,” Lyle said. “In fact, I don’t recall him ever listening to the jukebox when he was in here by himself.”

“That’s because you wouldn’t have had any of the songs my dad listened to back then on your jukebox,” Carlotta said.

“Why, what were they?” Lyle asked.

“The Sex Pistols, Ramones, Dead Kennedys...”

“But those are punk rock bands,” Tom said.

“Punk rock,” Lyle echoed. “I never would have guessed that about your father, Carlotta.”

“No one did,” Carlotta replied. “Dad told me he used to sit in his room and listen to punk rock on headphones. He also told me that when he was shelving books in the store at night he would play punk rock cassettes on a tape recorder with the volume all the way up.”

“Can I ask why you’re interested in what kids were listening to in 1978?” Lyle asked.

“We’re doing research for a play we’re both in,” Carlotta answered.

“It’s set in 1978,” Tom added.

“So you’re in this new play that Howdy Hanks wrote,” Lyle said.

“We’re not supposed to tell anyone what it’s about it before it opens,” Carlotta said.

Lyle sat down on the bench opposite Carlotta and Tom. “You know Howdy used to come in here when he was in high school and then after he came back from college.”

“Do you remember what he listened to?”

Lyle scratched his chin. “As I recall he liked Willie Nelson. Sometimes he would sit for hours at the counter writing in a notebook and drinking black coffee. I didn’t realize until later that he must have been writing a play. I never thought at the time that he’d become famous. No one did...” Lyle drifted off for a minute as if he was conjuring up the past, then he said. “My grandson, Mike, told me he came in the other day. Sorry I missed him. It must be more than thirty years since I last saw him.”

“I wonder if he played Willie Nelson when he came in for old times sake,” Carlotta laughed.

“Mike said he talked with Jemma Lu Tuttle and Milli Pacheco. They come here all the time. I remember Jemma Lu coming here when we were both kids. Of course, she was younger than me. Still is.”

“So Howdy and Jemma Lu know each other?” Carlotta asked.

“I would say so. They dated each other during high school.”

“What happened after they graduated from high school?”

“Howdy went away to college. Jemma Lu went to Picketwire College. Then she started coming in with Wylie Boone after he came back after college. They got engaged but then they split up.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Then Wylie left town,” Lyle paused and then added. “I believe it was around that time that Howdy left as well and so did Jemma Lu, although she was only gone a year. Went to Europe.”

“Have you seen Wylie since he came back?” Tom asked.

Lyle shook his head. “He’s pretty much holed up at the Double B from what I understand.”

“Do you remember what Wylie listened to in high school?” Carlotta asked.

“I don’t remember what songs he liked to play when he came in during high school, but I’ll never forget one song Pam Martindale played...”

“Who was Pam Martindale?”

“She was Wylie’s girlfriend in high school. It’s hard not to remember her because she was the Homecoming Queen, which is about as close as you get to winning a Miss Picketwire beauty pageant.”

“What song did she like to play?”

*“You don’t Own Me.”*

“By Lesley Gore!” Carlotta exclaimed.

“You know it?” Tom asked.

In response, Carlotta started singing the song.

*“You don’t own me  
I’m not just one of your many toys...”*

“That’s it,” Lyle said.

“It’s one of the classic women’s empowerment songs,” Carlotta declared.

“I didn’t know that, but what did I know, or any of us guys back then. But, to get back to what I was saying, I’ll never forget Pam playing it because she came in the same morning as the graduation ceremony and sat in the last booth for a long time drinking coffee and playing it over and over. Then, all of sudden, she put a five dollar bill on the table, which



was a lot of money back then, and without waiting for change she got up and left. When she walked out she said goodbye like we'd never see each other again." Lyle paused and looked over his shoulder at the back booth. Finally, he turned back and looked at them. "That was the last time I saw her. I heard she left town the next day. Haven't seen her since." He slapped both of his hands on the Formica tabletop. "Now what would you two like to order? I'm helping out at the soda fountain today. I can still make really good chocolate shakes."

After Lyle took their orders for chocolate shakes, Tom said. "Howdy and Jemma Lu and Wylie Boone and this girl Pam, the homecoming queen who suddenly leaves town, were all dating in high school. Then right after graduation Pam leaves town suddenly and Howdy and Jemma Lu break up."

"Howdy and Wylie both went away to college," Carlotta said. "And Jemma Lu stayed here and went to Picketwire College."

"Then Wylie comes back after college and he and Jemma Lu start going together. Then Howdy comes back."

"And then Wylie and Jemma Lu break off their engagement."

"Then all three of them leave town."

"Jemma Lu's only gone for just a year, but Wylie and Howdy for thirty years."

"And now they're back..." Tom was interrupted by Lyle as he placed the chocolate shakes in front of them.

"...together in Howdy's play," Carlotta added.

## CHAPTER 28

### SOMETIMES YOU GET WHAT YOU NEED

Jane was both astonished and saddened at what she read in the eleven typed pages Drexel Herbert found in the Picketpedia files of submissions that lacked evidence – what he referred to as "purgatory". "You have to publish this in Picketpedia," she said, handing the pages back to Drexel. "What I told you about me and my husband discovering the abandoned camp and my uncle's story that grandfather told him about the camp supports it."

Drexel held the sheets of paper in his hand, as if weighing them. "What you told me is certainly evidence that supports what's written in this account. However, there is still the fact that there is nothing in this document that identifies who wrote it. The only thing we know about it is that Picketpedia received it on September 2, 1980. That's more than

forty years ago. What the person who authored this has written will create quite a stir to say the least and without knowing who that person is we can't judge its veracity. Were they an eyewitness or are they relating something they were told and, if so, how did that person come by their information? Without that knowledge we will need corroboration from other sources that can back this up. Until then, I'm afraid this must be cast back into purgatory."

"But Mr. Herbert..."

"Drexel."

"Drexel, there must be some way to make this public," Jane pleaded. "It's just wrong to file this away in your Picketpedia purgatory where it could spend eternity waiting for additional evidence. People need to know what's written on those pages you're holding account."

"Yes, I see. There is the call of history to consider" Drexel placed the pages on his desk, tapped them as he knitted his eyebrows in thought. Finally he said, "There is one possibility..."

"What?" Jane almost leapt from her chair.

"Although I'm not a religious person it's my understanding that what someone tells a member of the clergy is confidential. Like what a priest hears in the confessional. Is that correct?"

"Yes, but what does this have to do with what we are talking about?"

"Just wait here a minute I'll be right back." Drexel took the file and walked behind a partition next to his office space. There was the hum of a copier and a couple of minutes later he returned and placed a manila envelope on the desk and pushed it toward her. Then he clasped his hands together and looking directly at Jane said in a solemn voice, "I confess that I am giving you a copy and suggesting that you might want to show it to Tom Tiddings and see if the Picketwire Press will do a story on it." He paused and then closed his eyes as he continued. "And by doing this I also confess that have sinned against Picketpedia by violating my responsibility as its editor in chief." He opened his eyes and said with a wink. "I hope I haven't committed a mortal sin."

"Trust me, you haven't," Jane said with a broad smile as she took the envelope.

Back in her office at Picketwire Community Church, Jane slipped the copy of the account from the manila envelope. She decided to follow the ancient mystical practice of *Lectio Divina* in which you read the text several times slowly after which you meditate then pray and finish with a few minutes of contemplation. As she contemplated the internment camp appeared in her mind's eye, but it was now populated by people who looked like

her. Then the scene shifted to the unmarked graves in the Picketwire Cemetery. They were open and empty. The ghosts in the ghost camp had been resurrected. Jane was convinced that the account was a true one. As Drexel had suggested in his “confession” she needed to show it to Tom and ask him to publish it in the Picketwire Press.

Jane picked up the sheets and held them suspended in the air above the desk as if she was weighing them the same way Drexel had. She and Tom hadn’t talked to each other since her return to Picketwire. When she spotted him sitting in one of the pews as she gave her first sermon she had expected they would meet. As she stood at the back greeting people after the service Jane wondered what he would say, what she would say, whether they would even say anything and just shake hands like two strangers. As she greeted each person she glanced over their shoulders at the line behind them, hiding her anxiety behind her pastoral smile. After the last person filed past she stood there wondering if Tom was waiting until everyone was gone to suddenly appear so that they could talk in private. When he didn’t appear it was clear to her that Tom had slipped out so that he could avoid her. Jane suddenly felt guilty as she realized that she had not only felt disappointment but relief. She slipped the sheets of paper back into the manila envelope, stuffed the envelope in her purse, slung her purse over her shoulder and walked out of her office.

Tom was in the middle of writing his weekly column and having the usual hard time when Jane walked into the Picketwire Press office. Fortunately, the high roll top desk hid the lower half of his face with its stunned expression. He jumped up from his chair, which like the desk had also been passed down from his grandfather.

“Oh, there you are,” Jane said walking over toward the desk, her right hand clutching the manila envelope. “I hoped I’d find you here.”

“You did?” Tom stammered as he stepped from behind the desk. “I mean, well, here I am.”

“Yes, and here we are.”

“I was meaning to come by the Church and say hello.”

“I beat you to it,” Jane replied with a smile, deciding it was better not to mention that she had seen him in Church when she’d given her sermon.

“Please, have a seat,” Tom said, pulling out the chair from behind Gloria’s desk over. “This is one of those ergonomic chairs with all the knobs and levers so you can adjust it. I bought it for a reporter I just hired but she’s out right now.” After Jane sat down he retreated to the straight back, oak chair from behind his desk.

“I see you’re still sitting in your grandfather’s old chair.”

“Yeah,” Tom said running his hands along the arms of the oak chair that had been polished by years of elbows. “The same chair, the same desk, the same job. Unlike you. I mean you left and went off to the east coast...”

“And now I’m back.”

Tom nodded. “And you’re a reverend and you’re married.” There, Tom thought with relief, he’d said it. “I was surprised when I heard.”

“That I’m married or that I’m a minister?”

“You always said you wanted to get married and have kids,” Tom answered, leaving out that he had expected at one time to be the husband and father. “But I don’t remember you talking about wanting to be a minister. That surprised me.”

“It surprised me as well. I guess that’s why it’s a calling rather than a wanting. What about you?”

“Nothing surprising in my life,” Tom sighed, looking around the office. “This must be my calling because it sure isn’t something I wanted. But, as the Rolling Stones song goes, you can’t always get what you want.”

“But you might get what you need,” Jane said, paraphrasing the song’s next line. “Not just what you need but you’re doing something here that is really important for the community by reporting on things that they need to know. Things that have been covered up.”

“Like what?”

“Like this,” Jane replied, pulling the sheets from the manila folder and handing them to Tom.

“What’s this?” Tom asked, looking at the papers that he held.

“Just read it...please,” Jane said.

Tom read the papers, placing each sheet he’d finished face down on the top of his desk. After the last sheet he turned the pile face up and looked at Jane. “Where did you find this?”

“Picketpedia. It was in their files. I went to see Drexel Herbert this morning and asked if he knew about a World War Two internment camp and he looked in the filing cabinets where they keep submissions they received but never published. He refers to it as purgatory.”

“Why didn’t they publish it?”

“Drexel said that they require independent corroboration, especially since it was submitted anonymously.”

“But he let you make a copy of it so you could show it to me?”

Jane looked down at her clasped hands and said. “I’m afraid that’s covered by pastoral confidentiality.”

Tom sputtered. “Everyone knows that Drexel’s an agnostic.”

Jane grinned. “I gave him special dispensation.”

“Is there any evidence at all that supports what’s in this?”

“I can verify that the camp existed because Bruce, that’s my husband...”

“I know, we published a wedding announcement. Bruce Levinson. Native New Yorker. B.A. from Columbia. Harvard MBA. Works for one of those big consulting firms in New York...”

“Bruce quit when we moved here,” Jane said, cutting off the recitation. “Anyway, as I was saying, Bruce and I found the abandoned camp when we were on a hike. When I asked my Uncle Joji about it he said that he’d heard about it from my grandfather. He also told me that he’d found the unmarked graves that are mentioned in what you just read. I went to Picketwire Cemetery and saw the blank stones marking the graves. While I was there I spoke with the caretaker, Lazarus Lamont, who told me that in 1946 when he was five years old he had seen the burials. When he was a teenager his dad told him that the bodies had been disinterred from the camp and were being re-buried.”

“That supports what’s in here about burying bodies just outside of the camp and then moving them later to the cemetery,” Tom said, fingering the pages.

“There’s more,” Jane said. “My Uncle also told me that a young man visited him recently and asked about the camp. He told my Uncle he’d been doing research on the camp and that he’d come across some papers. Some of the things he told my Uncle he’d found in the papers, the prisoners in the camp being used as forced labor on the Double B, for example...”

“Are also mentioned in here. Now, if we could find this man who visited your Uncle and see the papers he’s referring to they could provide real corroboration for what’s in this account. Did your Uncle describe him?”

“Uncle Joji just said he was in his twenties, medium height and weight.”

“Not much to go on.”

Jane laughed. “My Uncle isn’t very good at describing people. Now, plants and animals he’s great at but when it comes to humans...” Her voice trailed off as she shook her head and looked at the floor. Then, suddenly she looked up at Tom and said. “Wait, now I remember, he said the guy was driving a Jeep, but lots of people around here drive them.”

“A jeep! Was it a Jeep Wrangler?”

“Yes, why?”

“A Jeep Wrangler was spotted tailing Wylie Boone when he left his ranch the other day.”

“You think it’s the same Jeep?” Jane asked, bending toward Tom so that their faces were only a couple of feet from each other.

Tom leaned back, tipping the oak chair onto its rear two legs. “From what your Uncle said this young man who was driving a jeep wrangler was pretty angry at the Boones because of the camp. We thought that whoever was tailing Boone might have been involved in the hit and run in Aspen that nearly killed him, but maybe it’s this guy instead.” Tom leaned back again, even more and searched the ceiling. It could even be the same guy, he thought.

“Isn’t that all the more reason for you to do a story on this?” Jane pleaded.

Tom rocked back and forth on the rear legs of the chair as he scratched his chin. “Well...” Suddenly there was a crack and he was on the floor looking up at Jane. Tom scrambled to his feet and looked at the chair, his hands on his hips. One of the back legs had snapped. “What the...”

“Hell,” Jane laughed.

“The hell,” Tom repeated then turned to Jane with a grin on his face. “I think granddad just sent me a message.”

“What?”

“That I can’t sit on this story.”

## **MYSTERY TOUR**

When Tony had called Sister Beatrice to ask if they could meet about the new tour he was planning she quickly agreed. In fact, she added, she and Sister M’s had something they wanted to discuss with him as well. While he drove to Our Lady of Lost Souls convent Tony went over what he was going to say. Suddenly seeing a sheriff’s patrol car

on the side of the road, he hit the brakes. Instead of radar gun pointing at him from the window Tony saw a deputy sheriff with a half-eaten sandwich in his hand looking at him as he passed. It was certainly a better spot for a lunch break than a speed trap, Tony thought. Still, to be safe, Tony kept his speed down as he continued on.

Sister Rachel, who was sitting behind the reception desk in the Welcome Center, told Tony that Sister Beatrice and M's were in the museum next door. Inside the entrance he found them standing next to an exhibit mounted on the wall that showed the layout of the old Purgatory Penitentiary superimposed on a map of the area.

After greeting both of them Tony asked what they wanted to discuss. "No, you go first, Tony," Sister Beatrice insisted. "Tell us about this new tour you're working on?"

"I'm putting together a mystery tour and I'd like your help."

"My work is all about solving mysteries," Sister Beatrice laughed. "Do you have any particular one in mind?"

"Sure," Tony responded with enthusiasm. "The mystery is how a map that was stolen from my great, great grandfather, Don Francisco Medrano, that was proof of the Medrano Land Grant, ended up hidden in a cell that was once occupied by a convict named Ruf Ryder who was in prison for robbing the Double B Ranch."

"And the solution to this mystery is that Ryder stole the map from the Double B and that C.W. Boone was the one who stole it from your great, great, grandfather, right?" Sister M's asked.

"That's one possible solution for the mystery," Tony said, then paused as he considered what to say next since Don Francisco had given his word of honor to C.W. Boone that the Medrano family would never publicly accuse the Boone's of stealing the map. "But I'll make it clear that our family isn't accusing the Boones of stealing it."

"Good, because there aren't enough facts to support it," Sister Beatrice said. "The only evidence we have is finding the map in what was once a prison cell. It could just be a coincidence that the cell was occupied at one time by Ryder. While there is evidence that the map is authentic, how it got from your family to the cell is just conjecture at this point. There's no proof that C.W. Boone stole it from your family, or that this convict Rufus Ryder stole it from the Double B, then smuggled it into prison and hid it in his cell."

"If there was proof it wouldn't be a mystery," Tony replied. "All I'm asking is if you'll let me bring the tour group here and show them the cell and the map of the stolen land grant and if you'll tell them that there's evidence that it's authentic and, also, that Rufus Ryder had occupied the same cell while he was serving his sentence for stealing from the Double B. That's all."

“That’s enough for people to suspect that Ryder stole the map from the Boone’s,” Sister M’s laughed. “You don’t have to accuse the Boones stealing it from your great, great grandfather, others will do it for you.”

Tony shrugged, a slight smile grazing his lips. “We can’t stop people from trying to solve a mystery on a mystery tour.”

“Wylie Boone will try. He might even file a lawsuit. Suing people is like a shoot out for him and he has a lot of gunslingers with law degrees.”

“Does that mean you won’t agree to be part of the tour?”

“Of course, we’ll be part of it,” Sister Beatrice replied firmly. “After all, you’re only asking us to show your tour group the evidence that’s been uncovered. Besides we love a good mystery, don’t we M’s?”

“And, we’re not going to be intimidated by Wylie Boone,” Sister M’s added.

Visibly relieved that they had agreed, Tony asked them about the matter they wanted to discuss.

“We have a mystery tour of our own we’d like you to help us with,” Sister M’s said. “Actually, it’s more of a mystery escape than a mystery tour since it involves several people who will mysteriously escape from here.”

“But no prisoner ever escaped from the Purgatory Penitentiary,” Tony objected.

“You’re correct that no one ever escaped. This escape hasn’t happened...yet.”

“Why would someone want to escape from a convent?”

“You saw one of Riggleman’s deputies parked on the road here?”

Tony nodded. “He was eating lunch, why?”

“He isn’t parked there on a lunch break. Riggleman is keeping us under surveillance while he waits to get a search warrant approved. As soon as he does he can come in and look for the three undocumented immigrants we’re hiding.”

“That’s why we need to move them,” Sister Beatrice said.

“You’re going to try and sneak them past the deputy?”

“No, they’re going to escape through a tunnel that Sister Beatrice discovered,” Sister M’s said.



“It starts here in the old power plant,” Sister Beatrice said, turning to the diagram on the wall and tapping the power plant on the prison layout. Then she drew an invisible line with her finger to a point halfway between the east wall and the edge of the bluff overlooking the Purgatory River. “And it comes out here.”

“I don’t get it. What was the point of digging a tunnel if no one ever escaped?”

“No one escaped through the tunnel,” Sister Beatrice explained. “Because convicts used it to smuggle in contraband not to escape.”

As Tony stepped closer to the diagram then, turning to face Sister M’s and Sister Beatrice, he said. “In other words, what you’re planning is a breakout without the Sheriff even knowing.”

“Yes,” Sister M’s replied. “That’s what I meant by calling it a mysterious escape because it needs to remain a mystery as far as Rigglesman is concerned.”

“Why do you need my help?”

“We need your help because once they escape through the tunnel and get to the other side of the wall we still need to get them to a safe house without anyone seeing them.”

Tony shook his head slowly. “The problem is there’s only one road in and out of here and that’s the one the Sheriff is watching. And if they try to slip by the deputies on foot it will be a long walk and the only cover to hide behind is sagebrush.”

“You have a tour that you do on horseback, right?” Sister M’s asked.

“It’s our signature tour called Riders on the Purple Sage.”

“We’d like you to lead a special Riders of the Purple Sage tour that includes this stretch of the Purgatory River below the bluff.” Sister M’s traced a route on the diagram.

“There’s a path from the top of the bluff down to the river. I’ll lead them down to where you’ll be waiting with the horses.”

Tony scratched his chin and looked at the diagram. “When does this have to happen?”

“As soon as possible. Tomorrow at the latest. I know through my sources at the county courthouse that Rigglesman will likely get his search warrant by tomorrow afternoon. The only thing holding it up is that this is a convent.”

“Well, at least I’ll only need four horses. One for me and three for them. That makes it easier on such short notice. I can pick them up and transport them to a jumping off spot for the tour. There’s a place near the river about a mile from here that I’ve used before. After I pick them up we’ll ride back there and I can drive them to the safe house you mentioned. Where is it, anyway?”

“We don’t know.”

“You don’t know where the safe house is?”

“That’s because we don’t have one yet. It isn’t easy to find a safe place, especially in such a short time frame. Ideally it should be a place that no one would suspect and would be outside Riggleman’s jurisdiction.”

“You mean somewhere outside the county?”

“Inside. We don’t have time to arrange something like that. Someplace in Picketwire would be best since it’s the only town in the county that has its own police force so Riggleman’s authority is limited and he doesn’t have free rein.”

“So we need a place in Picketwire that no one would suspect as a hiding place?”

“Any ideas?”

Tony inhaled deeply and looked at the ceiling as he thought. Finally, he exhaled. “One.”

Tony’s father, Roberto, sipped from a glass of brandy while his mom, Delores, knitted as they listened to Tony. When Tony stopped, his father hunched forward, rolling the half empty glass between his palms and said, “So if I understand what you just said, you are asking us to hide three people from Sheriff Riggleman here at Hacienda Medrano.”

Tony nodded. “If he catches them he’ll hand them over to ICE and they’ll deport them without even a hearing. ICE stands for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.”

Delores looked up from her knitting. “Your father and I know what ICE stands for, Tony. What we don’t understand is why you haven’t told us until now that you’re involved in helping undocumented immigrants.”

“I didn’t want you to worry about me getting arrested.”

“But you’re not worried about us, your parent’s, being arrested?” Roberto asked, reaching for the bottle of Presidente brandy and pouring some into his empty glass.

“Of course I am,” Tony said. He was standing with his hands on his hips in front of the large fireplace framed by tiles in the rustic living room of Hacienda Medrano, the pinon scented fire basting his back. “But this is one place where Riggleman wouldn’t suspect that they’d be hiding. Even if he did, he doesn’t have jurisdiction in Picketwire so he doesn’t have the authority to search houses and arrest people. Besides, they’ll only be here a couple of days until we can arrange their safe passage out of the area.”

“And if we refuse to take the risk?”

“It’s your house...”

“No,” Roberto cut him off. “This is our family’s hacienda and it’s our duty to avoid doing anything here that brings dishonor.”

“And you believe this would bring dishonor, is that it?”

“No, it would bring dishonor if we refused.”

“You’re saying they can hide here?”

“We are saying that they are welcome to stay here as our guests,” Delores answered, putting her knitting down and rising from her chair. “Now, since we don’t have much time before they arrive I need to prepare three of the bedrooms.”

After Delores left the room, his father filled an empty glass with brandy and handed it to Tony. As they clicked glasses, Roberto said. “To doing what is honorable.”

After taking a large swig, Tony said. “Speaking of honor, I need to tell you about a tour that I’m putting together...”

## CHAPTER 29

### THE PLAY’S THE THING

“That’s a wrap for tonight,” Max announced to the actors and crew assembled in the sanctuary of the Picketwire Community Church. “Starting tomorrow we’ll be rehearsing on the Tumbleweed Theater stage instead of here and on Thursday we’ll have a full dress rehearsal. We’re opening in less than a week so get your lines down.” He turned to Zelda as she was starting to leave and said. “You and Mike need to stay.”

“Why do I have to stay?” Zelda demanded. Max sounded like one of her teachers ordering her to stay after the rest of the class was dismissed.

“Because we’re going to rehearse the final scene. I asked everyone else to leave because it needs to be kept a secret. We won’t be rehearsing this scene in front of the other members of the cast so they will be seeing it for the first time on opening night along with everyone in the audience.”

“But we’ve all agreed to keep it a secret.”

“If the others see what’s in this last scene they might not be able to resist the temptation to tell someone,” Howdy answered. He’d left his perch in the back pew and joined them in the front of the sanctuary. “And I don’t want to lead anyone into temptation, especially in a church. I’m damned enough as it is.”

“You and Mike Arnold are the only ones in the final scene,” Max explained. “After the dialogue between Clay and Jolene, Mike will exit stage left and the spotlight will be on you as you deliver Jolene’s soliloquy that ends the play.”

“You’re our closer,” Howdy added.

“You mean this scene is like the last second of a game with our team down by one and I have the ball in my hands?”

“Exactly,” Max said. “You get to score the winning touchdown.”

“I played basketball not football.”

Max handed Zelda the script for the final scene. “Then just think of this as a basketball and you get to shoot the winning basket.” He looked around the now empty sanctuary. “Where the heck is Mike?”

“Here,” Mike Arnold announced walking through the doors at the back of the sanctuary. “Had to use the men’s room.” He strutted down the center aisle, every inch the leading man in his own mind and every centimeter of conceited jerk in Zelda’s.

“There is no men’s room,” Zelda shouted at Mike, not trying to hide her annoyance. “The restrooms are unisex.”

“Not when I’m using them,” Mike answered, then looking around the sanctuary asked. “Where is everyone?”

“It’s the final scene and Clay and Jolene are the only characters in it,” Max answered handing him a copy of the script.

Mike took the script and smiled. “I was wondering when I’d get my shot at really showing my acting chops.”

“Sorry to dim your star turn, Mike. But it’s more like I get the shot and you get an assist,” Zelda said.

After giving Mike and Zelda a few minutes to look over their lines in the script, Max asked if they were ready for a read through.

“Before we start I have a question,” Mike announced, waving his copy of the script at Max. “You told me to think of Clay as being like Hamlet. Only instead of being the Prince of Denmark, Clay is the only son of the biggest rancher in the State of Colorado.”

Max nodded in agreement and said. “Clay will take over his family’s cattle kingdom.”

“Right, so if Clay is like Hamlet why don’t I get a ‘to be or not to be’ soliloquy?”

“In this case it’s not to be,” Zelda murmured under her breath.

“What did you say?” Mike asked.

“Nothing,” Zelda answered.

Mike walked over to Zelda, looked her in the face and said. “It sure sounded like you said more than nothing.”

“It was the sound of nothing, like your soliloquy.”

Before Mike could respond, Max walked over and put his arm around his shoulder and gently pulled him back. Leading him away from Zelda he said, “Now that I think about it, Hamlet is too sympathetic a character; Clay’s more like MacBeth.”

“Macbeth!” Mike blurted, then broke free of Max’s arm, stepped forward to face the empty pews and declaimed. “*Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage. And then is heard no more.* Macbeth, Act 5 Scene 5.” He turned to Max and sighed, dramatically. “Now I know how he felt.”

“Laurence Olivier couldn’t have delivered those lines better, Mike” Max said. “You know, we’re planning a Shakespeare festival for next year and I’ll make sure you get a lot of opportunities to, as you say, show your soliloquy acting chops. Now, can we get on with the rehearsal.”

“Wait, I have a question,” Zelda announced.

“You too,” Max said as if he was reciting the *et tu Brutus* line from Julius Caesar

“The question I have is about the script so it’s for Howdy, not you.”

“Shoot,” Howdy answered from the middle of the front row pew where he’d seated himself with a copy of the script in one hand and a pencil in the other.

“There’s nothing in here about Jolene getting her revenge on Clay for the way he abused her. I don’t think it’s right that the play ends without Jolene getting even. I mean, Clay attacks Jolene because she breaks up with him, then he throws her out of his car and drives off. If I was Jolene I’d make sure he paid big time for what he did. I’d...”

“But you’re not her,” Mike interrupted. “You’re just someone named Zelda playing the part of a character named Jolene. Any real actor would know that.”

“Shut up, Mike,” Zelda answered, curtly. “I’m talking to Howdy. Why don’t you go back to your men’s room and work on your Larry Oliver impersonation.”

“Olivier, his name is Laurence O-live-ee-yeh,” Mike answered. “He was one of the greatest Shakespeare actors of all time.”

“Have you seen him in a play?” Zelda demanded.

“No...” Mike stammered. “He died before I was born.”

Zelda, put her hands on her hips and spat out, “Well hells bells, Mike, then if this guy O-live-e-yeh is dead there’s no one standing in your way to be the greatest actor of all time.”

“You don’t have a clue as to what great acting is,” Mike snarled.

“That’s it!” Max barked, holding out both hands in a signal for them to stop.

Zelda and Mike turned their heads to Max in a rare moment of unison. When he had their attention he continued calmly. “The emotion you two just expressed, the antipathy toward each other you showed, is exactly what Jolene and Clay need to display in this scene.”

“Huh?” Mike grunted.

“You mean it’s good that we can’t stand each other?” Zelda added.

“You see,” Max continued in a mellifluous voice. “Great acting is when the actor taps into their own emotions and channels them into their character. Otherwise it comes across as phony and make believe. You’ve both tapped into your emotions so now we need to channel them into Jolene and Clay.”

“Right,” Mike nodded in agreement. “Like in method acting.”

“I prefer to call it the Stanislavski system.”

“Stan, whoever’s system, will have to wait until Howdy answers my question.”

“His name is Konstantin Stanislavski,” Max said.

“That’s more of a tongue twister than O-live-ee-yeh.”

“He was Russian. In his system an actor draws on their own emotions to form the character they’re playing.”

“Is he dead too?”

“Well, yes...”

“Well, then, he can’t answer my question.” Zelda turned back to Howdy. “Now Howdy, why doesn’t Jolene get even with Clay and make him pay for the way he abused her?”

“She does,” Howdy answered, calmly, his eyes locked on Zelda’s.

“How?” Zelda held up the script. “It isn’t it in the play?”

“That’s because it is the play.”

## **BREAKING AND ENTERING**

It’s really impossible to cook for only one person anything worth eating and Jemma Lu liked to cook. She also hated to waste food. The results were the leftovers that she placed in plastic containers and took to work the next day along with a sack lunch with an orange and Greek yogurt for herself. She would put them in the refrigerator of the employee kitchen and by the end of the day the containers, empty and washed, would be stacked on the countertop. After finishing her less than full portion of Mexican braised short ribs with squash and corn Jemma Lu was just sitting down with a fresh pot of tea when there was a knock on her door. Not many people visited Jemma Lu at home so she peeked out the window near the door and saw the lanky frame of Foster St. Vrain.

When Jemma Lu opened the door, Foster apologized. “I know it’s late, Jemma Lu but I have some information on the person who tried to kill Wylie.”

Jemma Lu invited him in and asked him to take a seat in the living room. Foster took off his cowboy hat and followed Jemma Lu into the living room where she directed him to sit in one of the antique armchairs with a lace antimacassar draped over its back. “I just made a fresh pot of tea if you’d care to join me.”

“Sure,” Foster replied.

After getting another teacup and saucer from the sideboard in the dining room Jemma Lu placed it on the coffee table next to the tea pot. She sat in a chair facing Foster and poured the steaming tea into both of their cups. “It’s a Native American herbal tea made from a blend of sagebrush and prickly pear cactus. We sell it as part of our Pickettea brand.” She explained, pushing a small jar with a spoon in it toward him. “It’s a bit strong so you should add some honey.”

Foster stirred in a generous dollop of honey and then tried to fit his thick right index finger through the small handle of the dainty cup. Finally, he gave up and clasped it in his right hand then took a sip. "This is pretty good, Jemma Lu."

"It's good for you as well. Calms a person down."

"I guess if I drank this instead of beer I wouldn't have shot my television set."

Jemma Lu laughed then took a sip of tea. Foster noticed that her index finger slipped right through the cup handle. She placed the cup back in the saucer on the coffee table and asked. "Now, what's this new information you have?" Foster shifted uncomfortably in the straight back chair. "I know it's not as comfortable as your recliner," Jemma Lu said. "These antique chairs have horsehair padding."

"I guess it's like being back in the saddle," Foster answered, then leaned forward and gingerly set the teacup into the saucer resting on the coffee table. He pulled a small notepad from the breast pocket of his shirt. "I think I might have found the person who tried to kill Wylie. He really dislikes Wylie," he said, opening the notebook.

"There's a lot of people who dislike Wylie."

"Yes, but this guy wants to stop him from stealing water."

"Stealing water?"

"He claims that Wylie is illegally diverting water from the Purgatoire and using it to grow cannabis. There's another person he's working with who claims the same thing. They say they've seen the illegal farm. I know it's hard to believe."

"You're right that it's hard believe and I wouldn't if Wylie hadn't told me that he was doing it."

"He told you?"

"It was part of a business proposition he made the other day. He left out the part about stealing water. Stealing water doesn't seem like enough of a reason for someone to want to kill Wylie."

"They lynched people for stealing water when this was still the wild west."

"This isn't the wild west, anymore, Foster."

"Nope, that's why they'd use a moving vehicle instead of a noose. I guess you could call it progress although it seems that the intent wasn't to kill Wylie. At least that's what the guy told me."



“He confessed to you?”

“It wasn’t a confession. It was more like a conversation. He didn’t know that I suspected him when we talked.” Referring to his notes, Foster continued. He filled Jemma Lu in about Clint’s video of a Jeep Wrangler following Wylie from his ranch and how he’d seen the same Jeep parked in front of the Pretty Good. That he’d observed the driver meeting with two other people. Then how he’d tailed them from the Pretty Good to his own house where they’d told him about Wylie stealing water and his illegal cannabis operation and then said they wanted to hire him to find victims of Wylie’s water theft. He stuffed the notebook back in his breast pocket, picked up the cup of tea and took a sip.

Jemma Lu shook her head in amazement. “They hired you?”

“I told them I’d work with them but not for them. I didn’t want to have a conflict of interest.”

“You didn’t tell them you were working for me, did you?”

“Nope, that’s client confidentiality. I told them I was doing some investigative work on Wylie for the Picketwire Press.”

“You’re working for the Picketwire Press?”

“It’s more like volunteering. Tom needed someone with my investigative skills to help him with his coverage of Wylie and I told him that I had a personal interest in finding out who was trying to kill him. I didn’t tell him that you were the person who had the interest.”

“Why don’t they just turn Wylie in for stealing water and growing illegal cannabis?”

“It’s in the Sheriff’s jurisdiction so they’d have to turn him into Rigglesman, which means it would go nowhere. In fact, Rigglesman probably knows all about it.”

“Right, I must have been crazy to suggest that.” Jemma Lu poured some more tea into their cups as she mulled what Foster had told her. After sipping from her cup, she said. “Based on what you told me I’m not convinced that this fellow is the one who tried to kill Wylie.”

“That’s because I haven’t told you that I’m pretty sure he’s hiding a blue minivan.”

“Why do you think that?”

“After they left my house I followed them back to the Pretty Good where this guy, Will, dropped them off. He’s in his late twenties, wears his hair in ponytail and works for the Picketwire Institute, some sort of think tank at Picketwire College...”

“I’m familiar with it.”

“I figured you would be since you know just about everything about Picketwire.”

Looking at his notes again, Foster said. “The woman introduced herself as Gretl Johan and said she was the Director of this Institute.” Foster looked up. “Since you also seem to know everybody in Picketwire I’m guessing that you know her?”

Jemma Lu nodded.

“The other guy said he was a professor of philosophy at the College. His name is Ari Nakos. I suppose you know him as well?”

“I haven’t met him, but Sid Tenken, who’s the Chair of the Philosophy Department, told me Professor Nakos is a new member of the faculty. He says he’s a rising star in the field. I wonder how he got involved in this?”

“I’m pretty sure it doesn’t have anything to do with philosophy,” Foster said, putting his now empty teacup down.

“Philosophy has something to do with everything, Foster, that’s why it’s called philosophy, which means love of wisdom.”

Foster replied with a grin. “He may teach philosophy, but the way he looked at Gretl Johan he’s in love with more than her wisdom.”

“I didn’t know you were also an expert at detecting love,” Jemma Lu laughed. “Anyway, just continue with your story and tell me what happened after Will dropped off the two lovebirds.”

“I followed him. He drove to a small house on Bisonview. He parked in the driveway and after he went inside I checked out the Wrangler. It was unlocked so I looked in the glove compartment and found the registration. The Jeep belongs to his boss, Gretl Johan. I figured that if he was using her Jeep there must be something wrong with his own vehicle. At the end of the driveway was a single car garage. I tried the door and it was locked, which made me suspicious because most people in Picketwire don’t lock their houses much less their garages. I’ve got a hunch that there’s a blue minivan parked inside. With the police looking for a blue minivan with a bashed in front end he obviously couldn’t take it to a body shop to get it repaired so he’d have to stash it somewhere. That’s also why he’s using this Gretl Johan’s Jeep Wrangler. Now that it’s dark, I’m planning to go over there after I leave here and see if my hunch is right.”

“Break in?”

“Pick the lock and walk in was more my idea.”

“If your hunch is right, what happens then?”

Foster shrugged. “That’s for you to decide, Jemma Lu. I’m working for you. If there’s a blue minivan with a Porsche size dent in its front inside the garage then Will Raines is the guy you’re looking for.”

Jemma Lu’s hands clenched the arms of the chair. “His last name is Raines?”

“I can see you’re surprised. Will Raines is a heck of a name for a hydrologist since they’re experts in water.”

Jemma Lu unclenched her hands and gave a wan smile. “Let’s find out what’s in this Will Raines’ garage before we, I, make a decision.”

“Right, you don’t have to decide what to do now.” Foster got up. “But now that it’s dark I better get going and check out the garage. I’ll let you know if my hunch is right. ”

“No, you won’t,” Jemma Lu replied. “Because I’m going with you.”

“What? Why would you want to do that?”

“Let’s just say I have a hunch as well, only unlike your hunch I hope I’m wrong.”

Foster parked a short distance down the street from the house on Bisonview. Fortunately, it was a moonless night and there were no street-lamps. Even better, the Jeep Wrangler was no longer in the driveway.

“We’re in luck,” Foster said. “Will’s not here.”

“Maybe he’s here but he parked the Jeep in the garage and since it’s a one car garage that would mean there’s no minivan hiding in there,” Jemma Lu said.

“I don’t see any lights on in the house.”

“Maybe he asleep.”

“It’s Friday night and he didn’t strike me as an early to bed guy. Anyway, we’ll find out after I pick the lock.” Foster reached under his seat, grabbed a flashlight and stuffed it into the pocket of his tan barn coat. Jemma Lu started to open the passenger door. “You sure you want to do this?”

“If I’m going to make the decision that could send this young man to jail I need to see for myself what’s in that garage.”

“Okay, but put this on.” Foster reached back, picked up a gray sweatshirt and handed it to Jemma Lu.

“What’s this?”

“One of my hoodies.”

Jemma Lu held it up. “It’s huge, Foster. I’ll look like a tent.”

“We’re not going out on the town we’re breaking and entering. The more of you it covers the less anyone will be able to describe.”

Jemma Lu pulled on the hoodie and got out. They walked to the house. Foster peeked into one of the windows and gave Jemma Lu an all clear thumbs up then they continued up the driveway to the garage’s side door. “Should I hold the flashlight so you can see?” Jemma Lu whispered.

“You do that and someone might see us as well. Besides it’s all touch.” Foster answered then bent down, inserted something resembling a paperclip into the keyhole and turned the doorknob. He pushed the door open and they both entered then closed it behind them and lit up the room with his flashlight. “Sure looks like a blue minivan to me.”

They walked to the front of the minivan. The beam from Foster’s flashlight played across the badly dented front end that was streaked with rent paint. “I’m pretty sure that’s a Porsche’s red paint and not lipstick.”

“Maybe the minivan belongs to someone else and this Will Raines agreed to let the person use the garage,” Jemma Lu said.

“I agree that a minivan isn’t exactly the vehicle of choice for a guy his age. Still, like I said, why would he need to borrow Johan’s Jeep if it isn’t his? Anyway, there’s one way to find out. We’ll just check the registration. Foster opened the passenger side door and then the glove compartment. After fishing around he pulled out the vehicle registration and looked at it with his flashlight. “You’re right, Jemma Lu, his name isn’t on the registration.”

Jemma Lu exhaled in relief. “Then, it doesn’t belong to him.”

“Nope, the registration says Linda and David Raines and the address is in Fort Collins. Must be his parents.”

“Let me see,” Jemma Lu said, snatching the registration out of Foster’s hands. He held the flashlight up so she could look at it.

“We should put the registration back and get out of here before Will gets back or wakes up or stops watching Netflix or whatever the hell he’s doing.” Foster grabbed the

registration out of Jemma Lu's hands then stuffed it back in the glove compartment and closed the minivan's door.

Foster had just closed the garage's side door behind them when they were lit up by the headlights of a Jeep that was turning into the driveway. "Pull the hood over your head, look down and let me do the talking," Foster said to Jemma Lu.

The Jeep stopped, the driver's door opened and Will Raines stepped out. "I'm Foster St.Vrain," Foster said before Will opened his mouth. "The detective you hired today."

"Sure, I recognize you, but what are you doing here?"

"I just came by because I had a couple of questions I wanted to ask you."

"How did you know where I live?"

Foster laughed. "If I couldn't find out where you live I'd be a piss poor detective."

Will nodded. "Okay, I'll buy that." He pointed at Jemma Lu. "Who's this guy in the oversized hoodie?"

"Oh, this is Jim, one of my detectives. Jim's been working undercover on a case and didn't have time to change."

As Foster talked Jemma Lu peered out at Will through the opening in the hood. Then she walked closer. Her face was still hidden in the shadows of the hood as she looked up at him like she was studying his face. Will stepped back. Jemma Lu said. "I'm not Jim and I don't work for Foster."

"Well, then, who are you?" Will looked asked.

Jemma Lu pushed back the hood.

"Why, you're Jemma Lu Tuttle!"

"I'm also your birth mother."

## CHAPTER 30

### VIRTUOUS RECYCLE

At forty feet, the 1955 Spartan was the largest trailer you could rent at Happy Trails. Inside its polished aluminum skin was a spacious wood paneled interior with a master bedroom in the rear, a large kitchenette with a four burner stove, a dining banquette and a bathroom, that most importantly for Margaret, had a tub. She stood at the counter next to

the sink mixing two gin and tonics. “Do you miss it?” Margaret asked Desmond who was half sitting on the outside end of one of the banquettes of the dining area next to the kitchen.

“Miss what?”

“Your previous life,” she said handing him one of the drinks.

“Which one?” Desmond asked, getting up then walking over and opening the Spartan’s front door for Margaret.

“There’s more than one?” Margaret said after they had settled into in the canvas director’s chairs on the small front porch.

“Hindus believe in reincarnation.”

Margaret punched him playfully on the arm. “I meant your life in Silicon Valley.”

“Silicon... Valley,” Desmond repeated, emphasizing the word silicon. “It’s all about reincarnation.”

“I thought it was all about the revenge of the nerds,” Margaret answered and then took a drink of her gin and tonic.

Desmond stifled a laugh. “You know how some scientists believe that alien forms of life on other planets could be based on silicon in the same way life on earth is based on carbon?”

“Yeah, but what’s that got to do with reincarnation?”

Desmond eyes lit up. “Because it doesn’t just happen on other planets it’s what happened in Silicon Valley only it was through reincarnation not creation. First carbon based lives get reincarnated on silicon chips then following a cosmic Karmic algorithm they’re reincarnated in various artificial intelligence versions...1.0, 2.0, etc...”

“Does that mean there’s some version of Nirvana for these silicon souls?”

“Yes, it’s called the cloud.”

“I guess I prefer the carbon based version of life that drinks gin and tonics,” Margaret said, clinking her glass against Desmond’s. “And the only clouds I’m interested in are the ones that provide rain for the crops.”

“Spoken like a farmer,” he said. “I guess you don’t miss your previous life in Golden Valley.”

“My current reincarnation is working out just fine,” Margaret replied, then shifted in her chair and looked at Desmond. “But you still haven’t answered my question as to whether you regret leaving the life you had in Silicon Valley.”

Desmond stared at the line of vintage trailers and RV’s across from where they were sitting. A 1954 Silver Streak Clipper, a 1972 Winnebago Brave RV, a Shasta AirFlyte, a 1968 Clark Cortez RV and the shiny, aluminum crown jewel, a 1960 Airstream Safari. Not a programable part in them. You couldn’t get more low tech. Unlike Silicon Valley these start-ups were rolled out on wheels that transported you in a real world. Desmond realized he’d left the world of venture capital for adventure. “I did miss it at first but this place has sort of grown on me.”

“It does have a certain sans chip charm to it...as well as running water.”

Desmond looked at Margaret. To think he’d met someone he really, really liked the old fashioned way through a chance encounter after all the algorithm driven online dates he’d been on. A real retro relationship. “With your permission I’d like to use that phrase in the marketing material I’m putting together. Not the bit about running water, though.”

Margaret smiled. “Permission granted, but speaking as one who owns a farmhouse with charm but no indoor plumbing you shouldn’t underestimate the appeal of running water.”

“Speaking of water, I’ve been thinking of ways to conserve it. A lot of water is wasted here.

I want to make Happy Trails more environmentally friendly.”

“You’re not going to ban taking a bath are you?”

“Of course not. I was thinking of replacing the toilets with ones that use less water. That sort of thing.”

“If you really want to save water on toilets you should check out the composting toilet that Gretl Johan has in that cute little vintage trailer she’s in.”

“I didn’t know that’s what she had in there. She owns her trailer and rents the space so I’ve never been inside.”

“It’s pretty neat inside,” Margaret said. “I saw her watering the flowers in the window boxes she has and I told her how much I loved her trailer. She told me it’s not a trailer but a shepherds hut from a sheep ranch around here. Then she gave me a little tour - little being the operative word since it’s a tiny space - and showed me her compost toilet. She said she’d help me install one in the farmhouse.”

“I guess that would solve your indoor plumbing problem.”

“The flushing part but not the drinking and washing part. You can’t drink sawdust or take a bath in compost,” Margaret said. “Say, why don’t we go over there right now and see if she’s home? If she is then she can show you how it works.” She quickly added. “I mean explain how it works not give a live demonstration.”

Gretl handed Ari a glass of water and sat down beside him on the steps of her shepherd’s hut. Ari looked at the glass, then said. “After being with you and Will I know a lot more about this stuff, but what I really want to know more about is you.”

“Sixty percent of me is water,” Gretl replied, then took a long drink. “Maybe a bit more now.”

“Okay, but all I know about the other forty percent of you is your name, that you live in this shepherd’s hut that you inherited, that one of your great grandparents was a Basque and the other a Jew, that you read the same detective books as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, that you work for a mysterious place called the Picketwire Institute and according to the business card you gave me you’re its Executive Director and you have a PhD.”

“My PhD is from Stanford.”

“In what?”

“I started out in astrophysics but ended up in geophysics.”

“In other words, you gravitated to something more down to earth.”

“That’s pretty funny,” Gretl said. “And here I thought philosophers were supposed to be serious.”

“Then, seriously, telling me what you got your PhD in isn’t all that personal.”

Gretl put her right index finger to her chin as if in deep thought. “Hmmm, something more personal than geophysics...”

“Howdy neighbor,” Margaret interrupted as she and Desmond approached them, their gin and tonics in hand. Jiggling her glass, she added. “We’re having a Happy Trails happy hour.”

Gretl introduced Ari to them, explaining that, “Desmond is my landlord.”

“I don’t think of myself as the landlord,” Desmond said, shaking Ari’s hand. “It sounds so...so...”



“Lordly,” Margaret said.

“Yeah.”

“Since you’re lord of Happy Trails why not call yourself the trail boss instead.”

“I think I’ll just stick with Desmond,” he replied then turned to Gretl. “Margaret tells me you have a composting toilet.”

“Do I need permission for it?”

“No, not at all. It’s just that I’d like Happy Trails to be more environmentally friendly and was thinking that I could start by replacing the toilets with ones that use less water.”

“My toilet uses zero water. Just sawdust.”

“I was thinking of something not so complicated.”

“But it’s not complicated at all,” Gretl answered. “Plumbing is what’s complicated with all those pipes and hook ups, not to mention the leaks. With a composting toilet you just do your business, sprinkle some sawdust over it, empty the compost when the container gets full and use it to fertilize your garden where you can grow vegetables that you eat and then excrete.”

“It’s a virtuous recycle,” Margaret said.

“Maybe you could show me this virtuous toilet?” Desmond asked Gretl.

“I’ll not only show you; you can try it out if you want.” Gretl said getting up.

Gretl ushered Desmond into the shepherd’s hut where she explained the compost toilet and a few minutes later they rejoined Ari and Margaret.

“Pretty nifty isn’t it?” Margaret quipped handing Desmond back his gin and tonic. “Did you try it out?”

“I passed, but I have to admit it doesn’t look very complicated.”

“I told Desmond that you offered to help me install one in my farmhouse,” Margaret said to Gretl.

“How could I not after you told me that George Takemoto was going to teach you and Sue Cohen how to farm using the Fukuoka method, which requires minimal water.”

“I was surprised that you knew about the Fukuoka method,” Margaret said.

“It was really a young colleague of mine at the Picketwire Institute, who is a hydrologist, that told me about it and that he had met Mister Takemoto. My colleague is convinced that it should be used here. I think your farm can demonstrate that it is effective and will hopefully spur others around here to adopt methods that conserve water,” Gretl said, then turned to Desmond. “And if you installed composting toilets here that could help convince people in town to consider putting them in their homes and businesses. It would really cut down the amount of water that’s wasted.”

“We’re doing our part by diluting our tonic water with gin,” Margaret said, raising her glass.

After the laughter subsided, Ari said. “Seriously, about water...” He paused and looked at Gretl. “And I’m not speaking as a philosopher.” Turning back to Margaret and Desmond he continued. “I didn’t understand how important water was until Gretl took me to this town today and the owner told us that everyone moved out because of a severe water shortage.”

“Wait a second!” Margaret exclaimed. “How can a person own a town?”

“By default,” Gretl said. “When the droughts came there wasn’t enough water for irrigation so the farmers left and once they left there weren’t any customers for the stores and businesses so the townspeople left. Except for one family who stayed so they ended up with the town and the surrounding land.”

“Are you talking about Played Out?” Desmond asked.

“You know the place?”

“I drove over there yesterday with Rich Best to meet someone at MacDonalds.”

“You’re saying they don’t have water but they have a McDonalds?” Margaret asked, shaking her head.

“This MacDonalds doesn’t have the golden arches and its spelled M A C not M C. Fergus MacDonald is the name of the owner.” Desmond answered then turned and asked Gretl and Ari. “What took you to Played Out?”

“I wanted to check out a rumor that Wylie Boone was trying to buy out the MacDonalds.”

“Wylie Boone is the person we were meeting at MacDonalds. He promised to donate to FRED X.”

“What’s Fred X?” Ari asked.

“Farm and Ranch Entrepreneurship Expo.” Desmond answered. “It’s a project that Rich Best came up with to promote rural entrepreneurship. He got the idea from TED X. Anyway, I agreed to help him. But that’s another story so to get back to what you said, Fergus MacDonald told Rich and me the same thing – that Boone wanted to buy him out and was putting a lot of pressure on him. He said that he didn’t want to sell because of some family thing about never selling to the Boones, but he said that Boone is putting a lot of pressure on him, including threatening to not renew his lease, which is their major source of income. What Fergus couldn’t understand is why Wylie Boone insisted that the town be sold to him as well as the ranchland that he’s leasing. I have to admit it doesn’t make much sense.”

“That’s because he may not want the land or the town on top of it, but what’s under it.”

“What would be under it that has any value? Oil? Gas? Gold?”

“Something even more valuable around here,” Gretl answered. “Water.”

“But that’s one thing everyone knows it doesn’t have. That’s why Played Out is played out.”

“That’s what everyone thinks they know, but the hydrologist colleague of mine that I mentioned has been studying Purgatory County for any hidden sources of water and he thinks there’s an aquifer under Played Out. It’s deeper than the normal water table so the wells never reached it, which is why it hasn’t been discovered. It’s not large but he thinks that if proper water conservation methods are used it can supply the town and farms in the area for years to come.”

“Does Fergus know about this?”

“He didn’t until today when we met and I asked for his permission to sink a deep test well to see if our hunch is right.”

“And you think Wylie knows about this aquifer and that’s why he wants Played Out?” Desmond asked.

“My colleague discovered that Boone had a drilling rig on the property he leases from the MacDonalds and figures that he dug a test well. Of course, he wasn’t going to share that with Fergus.”

“So Wylie Boone is after their water just like he wants mine,” Margaret said.

“What do you mean he wants yours?” Gretl asked.

“I inherited my Uncle Arvid’s ownership interest in the Purgatory irrigation ditch and he told Desmond that he wants to buy me out. Not that I’m interested in selling. A farm, even one that uses the Fukuoka method and has a composting toilet, still needs water.”

“Why does Boone want to buy up everyone’s water?” Desmond asked.

“Not just buying,” Gretl said “He’s diverting it from the Purgatoire even though he doesn’t have the water rights. In fact, some of that water is owned by the Purgatory Ditch Company that you have shares in.”

“That’s stealing...from me!” Margaret exclaimed. Noticing that she had spilled some of her drink when she gestured with her hands, she apologized. “Sorry for watering your place with my gin and tonic. Anyway, there must be a way to stop him even if he is Wylie Boone.”

“There is,” Gretl said. “And you can help.”

## **GOTCHA**

Just when Harry needed a drink he discovered he was out of coffee. His shiny, top of the line Italian espresso machine was as useless as a sleek Italian sports car without gas. There was nothing to do but set the plastic hands on the cardboard clock face of the closed sign for fifteen minutes and hang it on the front door so he could go next door to Sue’s Pretty Good Café. It was between breakfast and lunch and the only people in the The Pretty Good were Bea Trujillo who was sorting silverware and Sue Cohen at the far end of the counter hunched over her laptop. Still, it seemed impolite if not downright antisocial to sit at a booth or table and make Bea walk over to take his order. Instead, Harry sat down on one of the stools at the counter and asked Bea if she could make him a latte.

“I’m surprised that you’d want to drink one of our lattes instead of one you make with that fancy Italian espresso machine of yours,” Bea answered.

“Turns out you can’t make a latte without coffee no matter how fancy the espresso machine.”

After making the latte, Bea placed the cup in front of Harry. “I hope my latte isn’t too much of a letdown for you.”

“As they say, better latte than never,” Harry said, then took a sip and was pleasantly surprised. “And I must admit this latte is not only better than nothing, it’s really good.”

Sue Cohen walked over and put her arm around Bea’s shoulder. “Bea is our espresso queen,”

“Just call me Be-a-rista,” Bea replied cheerfully with a grin then turned to wipe down the steamer on the espresso machine.

Sue crossed her arms and leaned on the counter and looked at Harry. “By the way, I couldn’t help noticing that Wylie Boone paid you a visit.”

“Hard to miss with that fifty seven, candy apple red Chevy of his.”

“And those men in black bodyguards,” Sue said, unable to suppress a giggle.

Harry chuckled in return. “It’s like Wylie rode into town with his gang and were going to bust some books out of jail.”

Sue leaned closer to Harry and whispered. “I’m curious as to what books he wanted to buy, or is that confidential?”

Harry whispered back. “Really hard core stuff like Peter Pan, Wizard of Oz, Wind in the Willows.”

Sue rolled her eyes and dropped the whisper. “You have to be kidding, a billionaire, vulture capitalist like Wylie Boone reading children’s books.”

“I don’t think he’s interested in reading them. He said he wants them because they used to be in the library at the Double B when he was a kid and he noticed they were missing. Part of his ranch restoration project.”

“At least he decided to shop locally instead of ordering them on Amazon.”

“He didn’t have a choice since he wanted the copies that had originally been in the library rather than duplicates. They’re all first editions.”

“And you have them?”

Harry nodded. “I bought them from a woman named Rosalind Bennett. Technically, it was from her estate - she died just before you arrived - but we agreed to the purchase while she was still alive.”

“The Rosalind Bennett!”

“You’ve heard of her?”

“Of course, I’ve heard of her. She was a founder of the Picketwire League for Independent Women. I’m a card carrying member, although you don’t actually get a card when you join.”

“Then you’ll be happy to hear that PLIW along with the Picketwire Public Library received all the proceeds from sale.”

“Jemma Lu, who sponsored me for membership in PLIW, said that Rosalind was a role model for her and other girls in Picketwire when they were growing up.”

“She was also a hell of a first grade teacher for little boys like me.” Harry patted his belly and added. “Although, it’s probably hard to imagine me as being little.”

“How did she end up with books from the Double B library?”

“Wylie’s father, Charles, gave them to her. From what I’ve been told they were friends at one time.”

“Rosalind Bennett and Wylie Boone’s father were friends?”

“It was before Wylie was born. Charles wasn’t married then.”

“Were they more than just friends?”

“They might have shared more than a passion for books but...” Harry voice trailed off and he shrugged his shoulders.

Sue knitted her brow in consternation. “I find it difficult to imagine that the Rosalind Bennett that Jemma Lu told me about would have any romantic interest in a Boone.”

Harry replied with a smile. “Then I guess you don’t know that Jemma Lu and Wylie dated?”

Sue stood up straight. “What? First it’s Rosalind and Charles Boone and now you’re telling me that Jemma Lu was involved with Wylie Boone.”

“It was at least thirty years ago, Sue.”

“You’re saying he was a nice guy thirty years ago?”

Before answering Harry took another drink of his latte. “I grew up with Wylie, in fact he and I were in Rosalind’s first grade class together. As I recall he was a pretty nice as a little kid but then his ego started inflating and by the time he graduated from high school he was completely full of himself. To paraphrase Ernest Hemingway, he became an asshole gradually then suddenly.”

Sue laughed so hard she started to cry. She grabbed a napkin from the holder on the counter and dabbed at her eyes. “Sorry,” she apologized. “That sometimes happens to me when I laugh really hard.” She stuffed the napkin in the pocket of her jeans.

“Anyway, you were saying that you sold him these books that he wants for his library.”

“No, I told him I wouldn’t sell them to him even though he said I could name the price.”

“They’re that valuable to you?”

Harry smiled. “No, they’re that valuable to him.”

Sue nodded. “You want to show him that he can’t buy everything. It’s about time someone did.”

“Actually, I found out recently that a woman showed him that a long time ago, only he didn’t get the message.”

“Was the woman Jemma Lu?”

“No, this was before Jemma Lu and Wylie started going together, although Jemma Lu probably gave him the same message and he ignored it as well.”

“You think he got the message this time when you told him you wouldn’t sell him the books no matter what he offered to pay?”

“Nope,” Harry answered then finished his latte. He put the cup down and looked at Sue. “The only message Wylie is going to get is gotcha.”

## **LOCKED UP**

As soon as she saw the Sheriff’s patrol car blocking the gate of Our Lady Of Lost Souls, its lights flashing, Gloria knew that this would be a scoop. She pulled off and parked. Looking at the two purses on the seat next to her, she picked the small one. The last thing she wanted was to be delayed as the Deputy made her empty everything in the larger one. Making sure her pad and paper and smartphone were in the purse, she put the lanyard with her press ID around her neck, got out of her car and walked up to the Deputy Sheriff who was leaning against the patrol car with his arms crossed over his ample belly. He stood up straight, rested his right hand on the butt of his holstered gun and looked at Gloria as she approached, at least she assumed he was since his eyes were hidden behind aviator sunglasses.

The bigger they are the harder they fall Gloria thought before she stopped several feet from him and asked. “What’s going on, officer?”

“No comment.”

Gloria pulled out a pen and small pad from her purse, and said out loud as she wrote slowly. “Deputy Sheriff...” Gloria looked at his nametag. “Tucker refuses to state why he is blocking the entrance to Our Lady of Purgatory. It appears that he is part of a raid being conducted by the Sheriff’s Department on a convent.”

“I didn’t say that. I said no comment.”

Gloria held her pen poised over the pad. “You deny that this is a raid on a convent, a community of nuns?”

Officer Tucker put his hands on his hips and looked up at the sky.

“You think you’re going to get any help answering my question from up there?” Gloria wisecracked.

He looked at her, shifted his weight back and forth. “It’s not a raid. Okay? It’s a search. We started...” He looked at his wristwatch. “At 0700.”

It was already 9 :30 AM so Gloria knew she needed to move quickly. “What are you searching for?”

“You’ll have to ask Sheriff Riggleman.”

“And where is the Sheriff?” This time it was more of a demand than a question.

Deputy Tucker looked down at the pointed toes of his cowboy boots peeking from behind his pot belly, and mumbled. “He’s inside...searching.”

“Thanks,” Gloria said, stuffed the pad in her purse and quickly walked around him.

Deputy Tucker called after her. “Wait, where do you think you’re going?”

Without stopping, Gloria shouted back over her right shoulder. “No comment.”

Inside the Visitor’s Center she showed Sister Rachel and Sister Louise her press ID and announced that she was there because she’d heard about the search and asked where the Sheriff was. “He and his Deputies- there are several of them - are inside searching for some undocumented immigrants that they claim we’re hiding,” Sister Rachel answered.

Sister Louise added. “Sisters Mary Margaret and Beatrice are with them.”

“I wonder if I can talk with the Sheriff and Sister M’s and ask them some questions?”

“Sure, I can take you,” Sister Louise, answered. “It might take a while to find them, though.”

Fifteen minutes later they entered Cell Block B where they found Sister Beatrice and a Deputy. Gloria flashed her press ID at the Deputy with Miller on his nametag. “Where’s Sheriff Riggleman?”



“We don’t know. He said we should split up and me and Bernie...Deputy Peters, who’s up there.” He looked up at the top tier of cells where a Deputy was leaning over the railing looking down at them. “We should search this cell block while he’d go ahead with JT, that’s Deputy Thomas, and the other nun....”

“You mean Sister Mary Margaret?”

“Yeah, the nun who’s a sister and also a lawyer.” He spat out the word lawyer as if it was a plug of chewing tobacco.

Gloria pulled out her cellphone. “Give me the Sheriff’s number so I can call him and find out where he is.”

“Don’t waste your time,” Deputy Miller replied. “There’s no service here.”

Sister Louise explained. “We have bars on our cells but none on our phones.”

“Then I’ll just have to go and find him,” Gloria said, pocketing her cellphone.

“I better go with you or we’ll be searching for you as well,” Sister Louise said.

When they entered Cell Block C another Deputy was jogging toward them. “Where’s the Sheriff?” Gloria asked.

The Deputy stopped and said, “He’s trapped in a cell.”

“What?”

“He’s locked inside one of the solitary confinement cells at the other end of the cell block.”

“How did he do that?” Sister Louise asked, unable to hide her incredulity.

“We split up and I was searching the cells at this end and he went down to the other end where the solitary confinement cells are. A few minutes later I heard this heavy metal door slam shut and the Sister who was with us started shouting something so I high tailed it over to where they were. I figured the Sheriff had found the illegals but when I got there the Sister was standing in front of one of the solitary confinement cells. Its steel door was shut and she told me the Sheriff was locked inside.”

“But the cell doors can only be locked from the outside with a key so it’s impossible for someone to lock themselves inside.”

“Well, the Sheriff sure as hell found a way,” Deputy Thomas said. “Sorry for language, Sister.”

“Don’t be, we use the word all the time, although not necessarily the way you just did.”

“Anyway, Deputy Thomas continued. “The Sister said that all the keys are kept in the old Captain of the Guard’s office, which is all the way at the other end of the prison. It seems that our cellphones don’t work in here so I’m on my way back to get the key. I’m sure the Sheriff is mad as... well you know. He’s probably cursing a blue streak although you can’t hear him through the door. There’s only a small slot in the door and it seems to be rusted shut. Well, I got to get going.”

“I’m going with you,” Sister Louise said. “Otherwise, you’ll never find the Captain of the Guard’s office much less the right key. You can run if you want, but it won’t get you there any faster because I’m walking.”

After they left Gloria walked to the end of the Cell Block where Sister M’s was standing beside the closed steel cell door.

“What are you doing here?” Sister M’s asked.

“Covering what started out as a breaking news story, but’s now it seems more like a breaking out story. How did the Sheriff lock himself in there? Sister Louise said it was impossible since it can only be locked from the outside with a key.”

“You’ll have to ask him yourself after we get him out. Our only communication has been pounding on the door. Unfortunately he doesn’t know Morse code.”

“You do?”

“I still remember a bit from when I was a Girl Scout. They gave me a merit badge for it, but probably would have preferred it if I earned it for selling cookies.”

“What do we do now?”

“We wait.”

“You think he’s okay?”

Sister M’s looked at Gloria and said. “The Sheriff is locked inside an eighty square foot cell behind a solid steel door in total darkness. Of course, he could see this as an opportunity to take up meditation.” She paused and added. “That was off the record, by the way.”

They waited almost an hour before Deputy Thomas and Sister Louise returned. They were accompanied by Sister Beatrice and the other Deputies. “Sorry it took us so long but first we had to find the key to open the cabinet where all the keys are.” Sister Louise explained, as Deputy Thomas held up a ring with half a dozen keys attached.

“Fortunately, even though we don’t lock people in the cells we didn’t throw away the keys. Inside the cabinet we found this ring with six keys on it hanging on a hook labelled solitary confinement. There are six solitary confinement cells so one of the keys should fit the lock on this door.”

Deputy Thomas tried the keys in the lock one after the other until he reached the last key on the ring. “If this one doesn’t work we’ll have to get an acetylene torch and cut through the steel,” he said, inserting it into the keyhole and turning it. The lock clicked and he pulled open the heavy door open. Sheriff Riggleman didn’t emerge so Deputy Thomas went inside the cell. A minute later they came out with the Sheriff’s hand on Deputy Thomas’ shoulder to steady himself. He held up his other hand to shield his eyes from the sunshine that flooded into the cellblock from the windows high overhead. Deputy Thomas plucked a pair of aviator sunglasses from his breast pocket and gave them to the Sheriff. After putting them on Sheriff Riggleman withdrew his hand from Deputy Thomas’ shoulder and stood there silently, his eyes now hidden behind the dark lenses.

Finally, Deputy Miller broke the silence. “How are you Sheriff?” The Sheriff looked at him but didn’t say anything. “Tucker can drive you back to the Sheriff’s Department and me, Bernie and JT will continue the search.”

“Sheriff,” Gloria called out. “Before you leave can you answer some questions about the search, Sheriff?”

The Sheriff shook his head and said with a slight quiver in his voice. “I’m calling off the search. I’d appreciate it if everyone left except Sister Mary Margaret. I want to talk to her about what just happened.”

Deputy Thomas, who was standing next to the Sheriff, leaned over and said softly in his right ear. “Okay, Sheriff, but you should know that if you think the Sister locked you inside that cell I don’t see how she could have. It takes a key to lock it and the only key is on this ring I’m holding and I had to go all the way to the other end of the prison to get it.”

“Deputy,” Sheriff Riggleman replied. “I don’t want to talk to the Sister because I think that she locked me inside the cell, I need to talk to her because of what happened when I was in there.”

## **CHAPTER 31**

### **MEXICAN STANDOFF**

Dave Sanderson sat in his pastor’s study at the Picketwire Community Church, Bible open, reading the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Even though he knew it by heart he didn’t want to bypass any of his exegetical duties when it came to preparing a sermon. When he got to “leadeth me beside the still waters” he envisioned the still waters of the mountain lake where he

would soon be spending a week fly fishing. When he continued the words “Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” prompted another vision, but this time it was of him casting with his fly rod. Suddenly the door opened and Jane appeared. “I hope I’m not disturbing you, Dave.”

“I was just thinking about a sermon on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. I’m trying to come up with something new that will hook people,” Dave sighed. “I need a break. What’s on your mind?”

“I need to give you a heads up on something.”

“OK.” He nodded toward the chair in front of his desk. “Have a seat.”

“I have to give you some background first,” Jane replied after she sat down.

“I’ve got time,” Dave answered settling back in his chair.

Jane told Dave about finding the World War Two internment camp for Japanese Americans on the Double B Ranch, discovering the unmarked graves of prisoners of the camp in the Picketwire Cemetery and the anonymous report in the Picketpedia files. “I just came from meeting with Tom. I told him the same thing I just told you and said that he needed to run a story on it. He agreed. And now I realize that I should have told you first, because people might think the Church is involved.” She paused and looked at Dave feeling only slightly less guilty that she hadn’t told him before.

After taking a minute to consider what Jane had said, Dave responded. “No need to apologize about the Church, but are you ready to have your name in the paper? It’s likely to create quite a stir.”

“Yes, but I’ll tell Tom that he needs to make it clear that I am doing this as a private citizen and it has nothing to do with the Church.”

Dave clasped his hands, leaned over the desk and looked Jane straight in the eyes. “You’ll do no such thing, Jane. Speaking truth to power is what this Church and our ministry are all about. Should be, anyway.” Dave sat back and patted the open Bible. “Like it says in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, *though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil* and Wylie Boone is going to be pretty darn upset when he reads this story in the paper, to say the least.”

“He won’t have to wait until he reads it. Tom is going over to the Double B this afternoon to tell Wylie Boone that the Picketwire Press intends to run the story and ask for his response.”

“My guess is that his response is going to be unprintable. I’d sure like to be a fly on the wall, though,” Dave said, imagining the flies in his tackle box and picking the Wooly Bugger.

“I’m going to be there.” Jane replied, then noticed that her hands, which she had placed on top of the desk, were now clasped together as if she were praying. She moved them to her lap.

Dave’s face erupted in surprise. “Did I hear you right, that you’re going be with Tom when he confronts Wylie?”

“It’s only fair since I’m the one responsible for the story.”

“I understand,” Dave sighed. “But Wylie Boone’s not known for being fair or turning the other cheek. His version of the Golden Rule drops the second half, *as you would have them do unto you* so he’s likely to do unto you just about anything to get off the hook.”

With several feet and the center console of Tom’s SUV separating them, Jane was reminded of the intimacy they once shared in the subcompact car he drove in high school. My god they talked and talked, she almost exclaimed out loud. Not that they didn’t do some other things as well. Especially the last time when they parked at Sunset Ridge just before she left for college. Amazing how you can contort your body in a confined space when you’re a teenager. She looked out the side window to hide the smile the memory had aroused.

“You’re awfully silent,” Tom said.

Turning to him, smile suppressed, Jane replied. “I was just thinking about how much bigger this SUV is than the car you had in high school.”

“Yeah,” Tom laughed. “It was like driving a cardboard box on roller skates. Still, it was my first car and I miss it. For me, that car was freedom as much as transportation. As much about getting away as going somewhere.” Not that he’d succeeded in getting away, unlike Jane.

“Now, instead of getting away in a car people just look at their smartphones,” Jane sighed.

“Well, right now we’re in an area where seldom is heard a discouraging word on your cellphone, or anything for that matter. Nobody to talk to but each other. Not...I mean that I don’t want to talk to you. In fact, it reminds me of the times we spent together ...I mean...”

“I heard you were dating Carlotta Bunch?” Jane cut off Dave’s stammering.

Relieved, Dave answered. “We’ve only gone out a couple of times. Although for some people in Picketwire that means we’re already halfway to the altar.”

“I’m sorry, it’s none of my business.”

“I don’t know, as a minister you’re sort of in the marriage business.”

“Believe it or not, I haven’t married anyone.”

“What?” Tom gave Jane a quick look. “You haven’t married anyone?”

“I married Bruce, of course, but I haven’t officiated at a marriage. Even though I graduated from seminary a few years ago I wasn’t ordained until I was called to be Associate Pastor at Picketwire Community Church.”

“Then I’ve got you beat,” Tom said with a grin.

“What do you mean?”

“A year ago a friend of mine asked me if I’d officiate at his wedding so I went on the Internet, paid twenty five bucks and was ordained a minister in the Church of Living Happily Ever After. I even did some premarital counseling over drinks at the Last Ditch.”

Jane laughed. “A church that exists just to ordain people so they can perform marriages like this Church of Living Happily...”

“You left out Ever After.”

“Whatever,” Jane rolled her eyes. “Calling that a real church is like calling something that only publishes wedding announcements a newspaper.”

“I get your point, although wedding announcements are probably the most popular part of the Picketwire Press...along with the obituaries. Anyway, I didn’t renew my ordination so if anyone asks me to marry them I’ll refer them to you.”

“I’d much rather be officiating at my first wedding, even my first funeral, than meeting with Wylie Boone.”

“Yeah,” Tom said. “But remember you’re the one who insisted on coming with me.”

“I know. It’s just something I have to do.”

“Where’s the lady reporter who was with you the last time?” Wylie asked after Tom and Jane had been ushered into the living room of the Double B Ranch house by a butler in blue jeans and cowboy boots.

“You mean Gloria Herrera,” Tom answered. “Like I said on the phone this isn’t about the hit and run story, which is what Gloria is covering.”

Wylie looked at Jane, somehow managing to convey both intimacy and intimidation. “So you’re another reporter?”

“I’m not a reporter,” Jane answered.

“This is Reverend Jane Takamoto,” Tom jumped in. “Associate Pastor at Picketwire Community Church.”

“A Reverend!” Wylie seemed genuinely surprised, which Jane sensed, was a rare and uncomfortable feeling for him. Good, she thought.

“But I’m not here in that capacity,” Jane said.

“It would be a waste of time for both of us if you were. I stopped believing in God a long time ago. It was only fair since from what I could tell he’d stopped believing in me. Now, why don’t you both take a seat and tell me about this story that you want me to respond to.”

After settling into leather easy chairs Tom launched into a description of what they had uncovered, including the role Jane played. “Is there anything you want to challenge?” Tom asked when he’d finished. “That you think is unfair.”

“Nice to know that you want it to be fair and balanced,” Wylie said with a wry smile. “Can I see this report that was discovered at Picketpedia?”

Tom pulled out a sheaf of papers from his briefcase and handed it to Wylie. Wylie put on a pair of glasses that had been sitting on the side table next to him and read the report. When he was done reading, he took off the glasses and handed the papers back to Tom. “Since the person who wrote this chose to remain anonymous how can you verify any of it?”

“Even though we don’t know who wrote it, parts of it are consistent with what we do know from other sources. For example the part in the report that describes how some of the people who were imprisoned and worked in the camp on your ranch and that those that died were buried in unmarked graves in the Picketwire Cemetery is corroborated by an eyewitness so we know those parts of the report are accurate.”

“That same eyewitness says that it was your father who supervised the burial,” Jane added.

“You’re going to include that in this story you print?”

“We haven’t written the piece yet,” Tom answered. “We want to give you a chance to respond so if you have anything to tell us that contradicts what’s in this report this is your chance.”

“Thanks for the opportunity, but before I say anything on the record I’d like to talk to the Reverend. Alone. I suddenly feel the need for some spiritual guidance.”

“Jane said she wasn’t here in an official capacity,” Tom said, protectively.

“That’s okay,” Jane said.

Wylie stood up and said, “Tom you can wait here while we go somewhere else where the Reverend Takamoto and I can have our spiritual discussion.”

Jane followed Wylie from the living room, down a hallway, then through a door and onto a broad stone patio. Stretching out beyond the patio was a corral and half a dozen ranch buildings. Wylie stopped and without prompting pointed at one of them. “That’s the old bunkhouse. A hundred years ago more than thirty ranch hands and cowboys - quite a few were Mexican vaqueros - slept there. Tried to sleep, anyway what with all the night noises that a bunch of men can make. That building next to it was the cookhouse and dining hall. There was a whole little community here back then. Even had a church. Sort of, anyway. It’s called a Morada...”

“A Morada is what the Hermanos Penitente call their meeting house.”

Wylie nodded. “A lot of the Mexican vaqueros who worked here were Penitentes and they asked my Great Grand Dad, C.W., if they could build a Morada where they could meet. C.W. said that he’d rather have them whipping themselves for their sins in a Morada than getting drunk and shooting each other in a saloon. Anyway, he let them build it and that’s it over there.” Wylie pointed at a long adobe building set back from the others. “Dad closed it after my Grand Dad, C.W. Junior, died. None of the people who worked here were living on the ranch at that point so there was no reason to have a Morada anymore. Dad was going to use it for something else but...” Wylie paused and looked down at the ground for a second. “He never got around to it. It’s pretty much the way they left it.”

“There’s a Morada near my family’s farm,” Jane said. “From what I understand it’s still being used for meetings.”

“You ever see the inside?”

“Since it’s a secret religious society for men I’m never going to be allowed inside.”

“Well, now’s your opportunity.”



They walked to the building. Wylie pushed open one of the double cedar doors and Jane followed him into a long narrow room with a high ceiling supported by thick wooden beams. The only light was from a few windows set high in the walls. "There aren't many windows so it's pretty dark in here. They lit it with candles and lanterns."

Jane walked over to look at a series of pictures that had been painted on the white plaster walls. "These are the stations of the cross." She walked to the far end of the room where there was a large painting on the wall. "This is of the Virgin Mary".

"Our Lady of Sorrows is what the Penitentes called her according to my Dad."

Jane moved to the left several feet and stopped. "The altar and crucifix must have been here."

"They took down the crucifix when they de-commissioned the place."

"De consecrated."

"Whatever you call it. Anyway, I never saw the crucifix but my Dad said that it was life size and painted."

"What's through this door?" She asked walking over to a closed wooden door to the left of where the altar would have been.

"It's sort of a storeroom. It's not locked if you want to look inside, but it's pretty dark in there."

"I can use the flashlight on my iPhone," Jane said, taking it out of her purse. She swung the door open and stepped inside. Other than the sunlight that traced the vents in the wooden shutter on the window set high in the far wall the room darkness filled the space. She switched on her iPhone's flashlight and played it around the room. "There's a big wooden cross in here," Jane called back to Wylie who stayed outside. "The Penitentes must have used it when they re-enacted Christ carrying the cross to Golgotha." She bent down. "There are also yucca leaves on the floor. They must be from the whips they used to scourge themselves."

"Dad said they called those yucca leaf whips disciplinas."

Jane emerged from the room and said to Wylie, who stood with his hands tucked into the front pockets of his jeans, rocking slowly on the high heels of his cowboy boots. "I felt like I was in a tomb."

"You're the first person who's been in there since my Dad died."

"This room is where your father died?"

“I found him slumped over that cross in there. His shirt was off and he’d been whipping himself. Caused a heart attack. I carried his body to his bedroom. Then I washed off the blood where he’d whipped himself and dressed him in his pajamas. I told everyone that he died in his sleep.”

Jane reached out and put her hand on Wylie’s left arm. He looked up at her. “I’ve never told anyone this before.”

“Why do you think he was in there whipping himself like he was a Penitente?”

“It didn’t make sense to me, until now when you showed me that report.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dad wrote it.”

“How do you know?”

“For one thing the date on it is a couple of days before he died and for another I recognized the type as the same as an old typewriter we had at the house. It was one of those old Underwood manuals and the letters for a and d were worn the same way as the ones in the report. I know because I used it to write my papers for high school. It’s probably still in a closet. I think that he was in that room trying to punish himself for what he’d done by setting up that camp and using the Japanese...”

“Americans,” Jane said. “They were Americans.”

“Right,” Wylie nodded his head. “All of his drinking must have been his way of dealing with what he’d done but then the doctor’s told him that if he didn’t stop he’d be dead of a heart attack or cirrhosis of the liver in less than a year. I was still living here at the Ranch, but that’s another story. Anyway, I told him that he had to do what the doctor ordered. He promised me he’d stop. When I found his body three days later there was an empty bottle of Tequila next to it. I thought the empty bottle explained why he’d gone in here and did what he did. That he was drunk. Not totally convincing because by then he could drink a bottle and seem to be cold sober, but it was the only explanation I could think of at the time. But now...” Wylie shook his head and looked away, toward the picture of Our Lady of Sorrows.

“He was trying to atone for what he’d done.”

Wyllie shook his head. “Seems like he got religion and I lost it.”

“By telling me this you’re confirming that the report is true and Tom can run the story.”

Wylie looked at Jane. “I asked you to meet with me privately for spiritual advice and because you’re a minister that means whatever I just told you is confidential. You can’t tell anyone without my consent, right?”

“Yes, but...”

“I’m not going to say that my Dad wrote that report. That he, the Boones, did the things that it says.”

“But...”

Wylie held up his right hand to stop Jane. “But I’m also not going to say that what’s in it isn’t true. I might be a bastard but I’m not a bald faced liar. And I’m not going to try and stop Tom from printing his story. I’m not going to say anything. I won’t confirm or deny. Call it a Mexican standoff.”

## **WHO DONE IT**

Tony stood at the door to the Conquistador Lounge in the Picketwire Hotel with one of his tour guides, Olathe Sweetgrass, who’d been driving the Purple Sage’s minibus on the Mystery Tour. The tour started there eight hours earlier when Tony had greeted the group after a complimentary free breakfast. The tour had sold out, which was surprising since Tony had advertised the tour through the Picketwire Visitors Center only two days before as a tour for visitors and others new to the area. The fact that it was free and included breakfast, lunch, dinner, and cocktails probably had something to do with the tour “selling out” with twelve people signing up. A thirteenth person was added as an “ex officio” member when Tony asked Tom Tidings if he would assign Gloria Herrera to cover the tour. When Tom suggested that Eleanor Perceval, the Picketwire Press theater critic would be a better person to review the tour, Tony had countered, “It’s not the tour but the mystery that should be reviewed and who is better suited for that than an investigative reporter like Gloria?” Tony added that a major stop on the mystery tour would be the old Purgatory Penitentiary, which happened to be the subject of Gloria’s recent front-page story; an eyewitness account of Sheriff’s Rigglesman’s search for what he called “illegals” that he claimed were being harbored by the nuns of Our Lady of Lost Souls Convent.

Tom had agreed to assign Gloria. “Maybe while you’re there she can solve the mystery of how Rigglesman got himself locked in solitary confinement, because he hasn’t said a word about what happened,” he said. “All we know is that he called off the search and left.”

After everyone had gathered in the Conquistador Lounge that morning Tony had gone over the itinerary while Olathe handed out a map of the route that not only marked the

stops but the boundaries of the original Medrano land grant and the Double B Ranch. Tony told the group the details of the mystery would unfold during the day with a series of clues and that it spanned two centuries, involved multiple thefts, an imprisonment, and the discovery of a map. After several stops where they would be presented with clues, they would return to the Conquistador Lounge. Over their favorite cocktail the participants could then offer their solutions to the mystery. The tour would end with dinner.

“That reminded me of Clue,” Olathe said to Tony after the members of the tour had finished their cocktails, solved the mystery and were on their way to the dinner. “Except that this is a cocktail lounge not a library and this isn’t one of those manor houses and none of the people looked like Miss Marple or Hercules Poirot, although that tall, skinny guy in the Bermuda shorts could be Sherlock Holmes. I’m sure glad they didn’t decide that the chauffeur did it since I’m the one who drove them today.”

Tony laughed. “Were you surprised at the solution to our ‘who done it’ mystery that they came up with?”

“Let’s see, based on the clues they decided that this Ruf Ryder character stole a map of a Mexican land grant from Wylie Boone’s ancestors who had stolen it from your ancestors, the Medranos, which meant that the Medranos couldn’t prove what land had been given to them under the grant. Based on that they concluded that the Boones stole the land from the Medranos and made it part of the Double B Ranch. No big surprise that they decided ‘who done it’ was the Boones.”

“And what did you decide?”

Olathe looked at Tony and gave a weary shake of her head. “That everyone done ‘done it’ ... to us Native Americans. All the land was stolen from my ancestors. I mean all this other stealing was just fencing the land, but not with barbed wire, like it was stolen goods. Of course, none of this is a mystery to us ‘Indians’.”

“Got a minute to answer a few questions?” Gloria interrupted, saving Tony from figuring out how to respond to Olathe.

“Don’t mind me,” Olathe said, “I’m heading into the dining room for my free meal. Solving mysteries makes me hungry.”

After Olathe left, Gloria held up a small digital tape recorder and asked Tony, “One thing I don’t understand is why you used this tour to accuse the Boones of stealing land from your family when you could have had a press conference or taken out a full-page ad or something.”

“Wait a second,” Tony said, giving Gloria a cease and desist look, “I didn’t accuse the Boones of anything! The members of the tour group decided that based on the evidence the Boones were the most likely culprits.”

“If you’re not going to accuse them then I guess that rules out taking legal action. Although even if you did Wylie would just hang it in his lawsuit closet where his legal moths would eat holes in it.”

Tony laughed. “That laugh is off the record, by the way.”

“Too late,” Gloria giggled. “I’ve already got it on tape.”

“Please add that I’m just a tour operator who conducted a mystery tour in which certain evidence in an unsolved crime was presented.”

Fighting an urge to break out laughing, Gloria said, “Right, and it’s just a coincidence that when it was over the people on the tour voted that the Boones stole your family’s land?”

Tony nodded and said solemnly, “Just like it’s a coincidence that twelve people is the same number for a jury.”

Gloria rolled her eyes and then switched off her tape recorder and stuffed it in her purse. “I assume it’s okay if I interview the jury, I mean tour group?”

“Of course, and enjoy the dinner as well and please fill out the evaluation form.”

Gloria grinned and said, “You can read my evaluation on the front page of the Picketwire Press.”

As she walked away Tony said. “You should interview Olathe as well.”

“Okay, but I hope she’s going to actually name the guilty party unlike her boss,” she replied over her shoulder as she left the lounge.

“Guilty parties,” Tony said as he looked at the mural of his great grandfather attired as a conquistador, astride his horse, pointing at the stolen land.

## CHAPTER 32

### FIFTY-FIFTY

Jemma Lu wasn’t someone who liked surprises and, as it turned out, neither did her son. After she had blurted out that Will was her son while standing in the driveway of the house on Bisonview he stood there in stunned silence. Foster, recovered from his own surprise at Jemma Lu’s revelation, suggested that the two of them might want to step inside the house so they could have a private conversation. Without

saying a word, Will unlocked the side door and Jemma Lu followed him inside. The living room was sparsely furnished with an overstuffed easy chair that looked like a yard sale reject, several folding chairs and a card table with a laptop computer and a coffee mug on it. Jemma Lu sat in the easy chair and Will took one of the folding chairs. They looked at each other in silence. She could see traces of herself in him. The high cheekbones, the dark eyes.

"What do you mean, you're my mother?" Will demanded, breaking the silence.

"I mean I gave birth to you," Jemma Lu answered softly.

"But how do you know it was me and not somebody else?"

"When we looked at the registration for the minivan in the garage it was registered in the name of the couple that had adopted you and the address in Fort Collins was where they lived." Jemma Lu's heart flipped. "You do know you were adopted, don't you?"

"Of course I know. My adopted parents told me when I was twelve. They said that the woman who put me up for adoption wanted to remain anonymous. After they told me that I kept thinking she would appear some day, but finally I realized that as far as she was concerned I didn't exist and I decided that she didn't exist as far as I was concerned." He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, his eyes boring into Jemma Lu's. "And now here you are claiming to be her - my real Mom."

"I'm not claiming to be your real Mom," Jemma Lu stammered. "The woman who adopted you and brought you up is your real Mom. I'm saying that I'm the woman who gave birth to you."

"Yeah, well," Will said, shaking his head. "This whole thing is unreal. First, you don't want to have anything to do with me and now you do."

"You have to understand that I thought that my remaining anonymous was what was best for you."

"For me?" Will snorted. "What was best for you, you mean. You didn't want me to know about you because you were afraid your bastard son would suddenly appear and screw things up for you."

Jemma Lu flinched at the word bastard. "That wasn't the reason..."

Will cut her off. "So why tell me now after thirty years?"

"To stop you from killing your father," Jemma Lu blurted.

Will flinched like he'd been slapped. "What do you mean?"

"That's what you tried to do with the Minivan in the garage."

"Wait!" Will jumped up from the chair, knocking it over in the process. "You're saying that my biological father is Wylie Boone?"

"There's a chance that he is," Jemma Lu swallowed and then added. "But there's also a chance your father could be someone else."

Will looked down at Jemma Lu who sank back into the overstuffed easy chair as much as she could. "You mean you were sleeping with two men at the same time?"

"I wasn't sleeping with two men at the same time," Jemma Lu stammered. "It was with one and then later, the other one and it was just once with each of them. Then I found out I was pregnant, and I left town."

"And you picked Wylie Boone, of all people to be one of them?" Will spat out the name, not hiding his disgust.

"I was engaged to him at the time." Jemma Lu grabbed the plump arms of the easy chair and pulled herself up as straight as she could, which was like extricating herself from quicksand. She wasn't going to be intimidated, especially by her own son.

"You're kidding me. You were actually going to marry Wylie Boone."

Jemma Lu looked at her hands. They were clasped as if she were praying and maybe she was. She looked up at Will. "I wasn't in love with him..."

"But you were going to marry him."

"I broke it off," Jemma Lu said, her voice trembling. "Could you please sit down."

Will picked up the folding chair and sat down facing Jemma Lu. "You broke it off, but not before you..."

"Just once and I didn't want to..."

"You mean he raped you?" Will said, his hands balled into fists.

"No, he didn't rape me." Jemma Lu said then paused and searched for the right words, but here were no right words. "It's just that Wylie can be very persistent. He's used to getting what he wants."

“And he wanted you.”

“What Wylie really wanted was Picketware. I wasn’t going to give him that. Wylie wasn’t in love with me anymore than I was with him.”

“Does he know that he has a son?”

“No. Besides, as I said there was another person so you may not even be Wylie’s son.”

“And who is he, my other possible father?”

“Howdy Hanks,” Jemma Lu whispered.

“Howdy Hanks,” Will repeated and shook his head slowly. “You were sleeping with Howdy Hanks as well as Wylie Boone.”

I grew up with both Howdy, and Wylie. I’d known them my whole life. I was never really a close friend with Wylie...”

“Agreeing to marry him sounds pretty close to me.”

“But I didn’t marry him,” Jemma Lu almost screamed, then as calmly as possible she continued. “What I was going to say was Howdy and I had always been close friends but only friends until I ran into him and, well...”

“And that was while you were engaged to Wylie?”

“Yes,” Jemma Lu sighed. “But I broke off the engagement right afterwards. I knew that I not only didn’t love Wylie, but I loved Howdy. Wylie didn’t take it very well – breaking up, I never told him about Howdy, although I’m sure that he was more upset that he’d lost Picketware than me. We were at the Double B and he told me I could walk home. So, I called Howdy and he came on his motorcycle and...”

“You rode off into the sunset like the end of some western movie.”

“As a matter of fact, we did ride west toward Picketwire and the sun was setting.” Jemma Lu smiled at the memory.

“What happened then?”

“He took me home and...”

“And?”

“And I told him I needed some space. He left town a few days later.”



The anger left Will's face and it settled into thought. Finally, he said. "You only slept with each of them once?"

Jemma Lu nodded.

Will let out a slow, long breath then said. "So at least I've got a fifty fifty chance that Wylie Boone isn't my father."

"And a fifty-fifty chance Howdy Hanks is."

"And you never told Howdy that he might have a son?"

"No, I never told Howdy just like I never told Wylie, or anyone for that matter. No one even knows I had a child."

"Except me," Will answered. "What am I supposed to do now that I know?"

"You mean what are we going to do? We're in this together," Jemma Lu said. She felt tears welling in her eyes and she couldn't remember the last time she had cried.

"You wouldn't be in this position if it wasn't for me."

"If it wasn't for you I wouldn't be here at all, or anywhere for that matter," Will replied

Jemma Lu wiped away a tear with the back of her left hand. "So, you think you can forgive me?"

"It would be easier if I knew for sure that Howdy was my real dad and not Wylie."

"Your real Dad is the one who raised you. The same goes for your real Mom."

Will nodded. "So, what do I call you?"

"Everyone calls me Jemma Lu."

"I'm not just anyone, am I?"

"I didn't mean it that way. What do you want us to call each other?"

"I don't know, yet. We only met a few minutes ago. I mean other than when I was born. We need get to know each other before deciding anything. Also, if it comes out that I'm your son then Howdy or Wylie will probably want to know if I'm their son. There's no way in hell I want to be Wylie Boone's son - that would be unreal."

"Then we both agree that It's better to not tell anyone else for the time being."  
Jemma Lu said with noticeable relief.

Will nodded. "Agreed, but what do we do about Foster? He was standing next to you when said you were my mother."

"Foster won't tell anyone," Jemma Lu answered quickly.

"Why are you so sure?"

"Foster is working for me as a private investigator so everything that happened is confidential and he can't disclose it without my permission."

"Yeah, well we thought he was working for us," Will said.

"I'll talk to him. I've known Foster a long time...and before you even think it, not in the way I knew Howdy and Wylie."

"I need a drink," Jemma Lu announced once she was in the passenger seat of Foster's Jeep.

"So do I," Foster replied. "But it's not tea."

"Agreed," Jemma Lu said with a laugh. "Do you know of a place where we can have a drink and no one will notice us or overhear our conversation?"

"As a matter of fact, I know just the place." Foster said as he started the Jeep. "It's at the edge of town and I'm pretty sure that you've never heard of it and, as hard as it is to believe, I'm pretty sure that its clientele won't know that you're Jemma Lu Tuttle or, that there even is such a person."

Five minutes later Foster parked in front of a one story building that was shedding its stucco like dead skin. The only light other than the canopy of stars came from a fixture next to the front that illuminated the word *Bar*, with a black line over it painted on the stucco. Jemma Lu thought was just another crack. "No wonder I haven't heard of it – it doesn't have a name."

"Sure, it does," Foster said. "See the black horizontal line above the word Bar. It's the Bar Bar."

"I thought that was another crack in the stucco," Jemma Lu said, shaking her head. "Anyway, as long as there's a real bar inside."

There was and it was a long bar with half a dozen solitary men wearing cowboy hats that were in the same beat up condition as the stucco outside. They were hunched over their drinks and separated from each other by at least one empty stool. No one looked at Jemma Lu and Foster as they entered, including the bartender, who was at the end of the bar reading a magazine.

“There’s a table in the far corner where we can sit,” Foster said, taking Jemma Lu’s left elbow and steering her away from the bar toward the back of the room. After she was seated, Foster asked what she wanted to drink and she asked for a vodka martini.

A couple of minutes later Foster returned with a long neck bottle of beer in one hand and a shot glass in the other. “He didn’t have any vermouth so this is just vodka.”

“I’ll just think of it as a very dry martini,” Jemma Lu said, taking the glass. “I hope no one will mind if I sip it instead of downing it all at once.”

“I won’t, and no one else has even noticed that we’re here, except for the bartender who went back to reading the latest issue of *Cowboy Times* magazine.”

They both sipped their drinks and then Jemma Lu asked. “You won’t tell anyone what happened back there?”

“We found the guy who was trying to kill Wylie and that’s what you hired me for and I don’t think he’s going to try again after what you told him. Case closed.”

“I mean about what I said to Will.”

“About you being his mother?” Wylie said smiling. “Guess I helped you find your missing son as well as the guy who tried to kill Wylie.”

“He wasn’t missing. I gave him up for adoption when he was born and he was never supposed to know that I was his birth mother.”

“Then why did you tell him?”

“Because Wylie Boone might be his birth father.

“Wylie,” Foster exclaimed, almost choking on the beer.

“You’re surprised?”

“Damn right.”

“Wylie and I were engaged thirty years ago. I called it off.”

"I never knew you were going to marry Wylie."

"Not many people did. I called it off before we made it public." Jemma Lu finished the vodka.

"You called it off even though you were pregnant."

"I didn't know I was pregnant when I told him, but it wouldn't have made any difference. I wouldn't have married him anyway. Besides, I don't know for certain that he was the father... It could be Howdy Hanks."

"Howdeeee Hanks," Foster repeated, drawing out the last syllable of the first name. "Now that isn't a surprise. I could see you two together."

"They both have a fifty-fifty chance of being the father."

"In other words, the kid's father is either the Sagebrush Shakespeare or Wylie Coyote."

"Neither of them knows I was even pregnant. No one does."

"If you want to know which one is Will's father you can do a paternity test."

"But then I would have to tell both of them they might be a father in order for them to agree."

"Not necessarily. We just need some DNA from one of them. If they don't match and aren't Will's father then the other one is. Of course, we'll need a sample of Will's DNA as well."

"I can't ask Will," Jemma Lu said, nervously rolling the empty shot glass with the fingers of her right hand. "He's already had the shock of finding out I'm his birth mother and, besides, we just agreed to take some time to think about any next steps before we did anything."

"I've already got his DNA."

"But how?"

"See that shot glass you're fingering like you'd like a second shot of vodka?"

"One is my limit."

"Yeah, well, we're already in the outer limits with all of this. What I'm getting at, though, is that all I have to do is pocket that glass you drank from and send it to a DNA testing lab and they'll tell me what your DNA is. When Will and his friends, Ari

and Gretl, came to my place to ask me to work for them I offered them something to drink. The choices were limited – either water or beer. Will had a beer and it's still in my recycle bin."

"I don't know if Will really wants to know, or me for that matter."

"Look, the lab results will come back in a sealed envelope sent directly to you. You can do what you want with it. You can open it or not. It's you call."

"Okay."

"We still need a sample of either Howdy or Wylie's DNA. I don't think Wylie is going to accept any invitation from me to get together for a beer but maybe Howdy will."

"No," Jemma Lu said, emphatically, releasing the empty shot glass from her hand.

"You don't want me to try?"

"No, I meant that I'll get it from Howdy. Can you drop me off at the Wobbly Building?"

## **GUILTY CONSCIENCE**

There she was sitting between a famous playwright and director. Maybe the director wasn't famous yet, but he would be after the play opened on Broadway, which Zelda was certain would be its next stop after the world premiere in Picketwire. Of course, he wouldn't be as famous as her after she reprised her leading role on the Great White Way. Not that she would let the fame go to her head. They were sitting at a table in the Mother Jones Bar. Howdy was drinking a beer from a long neck bottle and Max a glass of red wine and she was sipping a coke through a straw. She'd only been in Mother Jones once before and on that previous occasion the bartender refused her drink order because she was under age dismissing with a loud laugh her explanation that she was clearly over twenty one and could prove it except that she hadn't bothered to bring her ID because she'd never been carded before because it was so obvious. She was relieved to see that there was another bartender so there was no risk of a recounting of the humiliating event in front of Howdy and Max. Just as fortunate was the absence of Mike Arnold, the guy playing Clay to her Jolene. After the rehearsal of the last scene of the play Howdy and Max had asked if they wanted to join them for a drink. To Zelda's delight, Clay declined announcing that he had a hot date.

"I thought the rehearsal went pretty well," Max announced. "A couple of dress rehearsals in the Tumbleweed and we should be ready for the opening next week." He turned to Zelda and said, "You've been great in rehearsals, Zelda, especially that last scene we just rehearsed."

Zelda played with the straw and said to Howdy. "With all due respect, Mister Hanks...I mean Howdy, I don't get what you mean when you said the play is Jolene's revenge."

"The plays the thing."

"Yes, I know the play is a thing."

"The plays the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king," Max voice soared dramatically. "Hamlet's soliloquy in Act 2 Scene 2 in which Hamlet says that he is going to write a play that shows a king being murdered, just like his uncle Claudius killed his father so that he could become the King of Denmark and marry Hamlet's widowed mother. Then the play is performed in front of Claudius and his mother it will provoke Claudius into displaying a guilty conscience. So you see, Zelda, the play is the thing Hamlet uses to get his revenge on the guy who killed his father."

"Okay, I get what Hamlet is doing even though I would have just kicked Claudius' ass," Zelda replied. "But there's nothing in Howdy's play about Jolene writing a play so she doesn't get any revenge on Cal."

"Jolene is based on a real person," Howdy announced.

"Jolene is real?"

"That's not her real name but there is a person that I based Jolene on."

"What about Clay?"

"Let's just say that I didn't make Clay out of nothing, like God made Adam."

Zelda's eyes widened. "And the things that Clay does to Jolene?"

Howdy nodded. "They're based on things that happened."

"Where did all this stuff happen?"

"Here in Picketwire," Howdy answered then took a sip from the long neck bottle of beer, placed it on the table and added. "It was a long time ago,"

"Are any of the people still alive?" Zelda pressed.

"Most of them, including me. Unlike in Hamlet where all the main characters end up dead, including Hamlet."

"You're in the play?" Max asked in astonishment. "I mean, there's a character in the play based on you?"

"Which one?" Zelda quickly followed up. It was as if she had hooked Howdy and wasn't about to let him off.

Howdy shifted uncomfortably in his seat feeling like a trout trying to shake the hook lodged in its lip. Then, to the rescue, a voice cut through the silence. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

"Jemma Lu," Howdy answered with relief.

Jemma Lu was standing next to the table. "You weren't in your room at the Ludlow Lodge, Howdy, so I took a chance that you might be in here," she explained.

"We were just having a drink after rehearsal," Max said then introduced Jemma Lu to Zelda. "Jemma Lu Tuttle is the owner of Picketware."

"Zelda's the lead in my play," Howdy added, pulling out the chair next to him and inviting Jemma Lu to sit down.

"I play Jolene," Zelda declared. "Howdy was just telling us that she's based on someone he knew a long time ago only that's not her real name."

"Anyone I know?" Jemma Lu asked. Jolene and Jemma Lu sounded similar but from what she could tell already if Zelda was playing her she was woefully miscast.

"You might remember her, but she moved away a long time ago," Howdy answered.

"What happens to Jolene?"

"She..." Zelda started to answer, but was stopped by Max's hand on her shoulder. "Sorry, but Howdy here insists that what's in the play remains a secret until opening night."

"If you excuse us Jemma Lu, Zelda and I have to leave."

"We do?"

"So you can work on your lines before our next rehearsal."

"i know my lines."

"These are new lines."

"What new lines?" Zelda asked looking at Howdy.

"You haven't seen them yet," Max answered. "Howdy added them to the script while we were rehearsing and gave it to me. It's in my car."

"Nothing major, just some tweaks," Howdy said, playing along with Max.

"Okay," Zelda said, and reluctantly rose from her chair.

After Zelda and Max left the bar, Jemma Lu said, "I know that you're keeping the play a secret, but I didn't know that you were basing a character on someone we knew." Howdy had escaped Zelda's hook and now he felt that Jemma Lu was fishing for answers. He was relieved when she added, "I guess all writers base the things they write on their own experience. Of course, they disguise it so that no one would know."

Howdy was let off the hook again, but only until opening night. "Anything in particular you wanted to see me about?"

"Nothing in particular," Jemma Lu answered. "I was passing by after a meeting and thought I'd stop in and see if you wanted to have a drink. I can see that you already have."

"Not with you," Howdy said with a smile. "What do you want to drink?"

"A gin and tonic."

"How was your meeting?" Howdy asked after he returned from the bar with a gin and tonic for Jemma Lu.

"What meeting?"

"The one you just came from."

Jemma Lu laughed. "Forgettable, obviously. I've been to so many meetings I can't keep them straight."

"I sure as hell won't forget our meetings."

"Yes, we really opened our minds to each other."

"The most memorable was when we opened our bodies as well as our minds."

Jemma Lu nudged Howdy in his side with her elbow. "Howdy!"

Howdy turned to her and said with a twinkle in his eye. "Just talking about the meeting when we solved the mind-body problem."



Jemma Lu smiled and clinked her glass against Howdy's bottle of beer. "To memorable meetings."

"Past and future," Howdy replied and finished the last of his beer.

"I need to get going," Jemma Lu said.

"You didn't finish your drink."

"It wasn't the drink I stopped by for, besides I'm not driving home, I'm walking home. One of the people at the meeting dropped me off here."

"I'll run you home on my bike and don't worry, I only had this one beer. Let me just settle my tab and I'll meet you at the door." As Howdy got up and started walking away toward the bar with his back to Jemma Lu she grabbed his empty beer bottle. Despite her guilty conscience for going behind Howdy's back she stuffed the bottle into her purse.

## CHAPTER 33

### TRICKY PROPOSAL

But why did Wylie want the books? Were they like Rosebud, the childhood sled in Citizen Kane, the explanation for his behavior over the years? Why did Harry even care why? It was enough that Wylie wanted them and couldn't have them. Just like he had wanted Pam, but couldn't have her. Harry smiled. Not only had she said no to Wylie she'd said yes to him. The bell over the door rang, ringing Harry out his reverie. It was Howdy.

"What brings you here?" Harry asked Howdy. "Shouldn't you be over at the Tumbleweed fine tuning your play for the premier on Saturday."

"Nope," Howdy answered, shaking his head. "I'm leaving the fine tuning to Max. I'm the designer of this theatrical vehicle not the mechanic. The test run is now in his hands. I'm just trying to get my mind off the whole damn thing."

"So you decided to come over here to read a book or to talk? Of course, you'll have to buy the book."

"They do say talk is cheap."

"Yeah, but they also say that time is money so spending time on cheap talk can add up."

Howdy chuckled. "They could say we both have our heads up our aphorisms." He took off his Stetson and placed it on the leaned checkout counter opposite Harry who was perched on the stool. "I was actually debating as to whether I should to get the hell out of town before the curtain goes up. Joseph Campbell said that the great monomyth is the hero going on a journey, but what about the antiheroes who go on a journey before the shit hits the fan?"

"You're afraid that's what's going to happen?"

"I'm afraid that it won't happen," Howdy grimaced.

"You don't want people to like your play?"

"Oh sure, except for the one person who should hate it."

"You mean Wylie Boone. From what you've told me he'll hate it."

"But, the problem is, he has to be there and he hasn't bought a ticket."

"Maybe he doesn't want to attend the premiere and will come later."

"Later is too late because the reviews will be out and he'll know what's in it."

"Yeah, I see your point," Harry said. I wish I could help. I'd love to see him covered in shit. In fact, I'd send a personal invitation. Unfortunately, I'm on his own shit list since I just turned him down when he asked to buy some books that used to be in the Double B Library."

"The ones you bought from Miss Bennett?"

Harry nodded. "He even said I could name my price."

Howdy put his elbows on the counter and leaned toward Harry. "If we put our heads together we can come up with something."

"Two heads are better than one," Harry laughed. "We're on an aphorism roll."

"Rollercoaster, more like it," Howdy said, standing up straight.

"So the question is how can we lure Wylie to the premier?" Harry went into a thinker's pose with his right elbow on the counter and right hand supporting his chin. Suddenly he dropped the hand and announced. "Hey, that gives me a crazy idea. What if we can get Jemma Lu to invite him?"

Howdy rocked back on his high heeled cowboy boots in surprise. "Jemma Lu?"

"You do know that they were going to get married, don't you?"

"Yeah, but she backed out of it."

"That doesn't mean he still doesn't hold a torch for her and Wylie likes to play with fire."

"Getting Wylie to accept the invitation is the easy part, but how in the hell can we get Jemma Lu to agree?" Howdy asked, scratching his forehead.

"Hey, my head came up with the idea, now it's your head's turn to figure out how to make it happen. Think like a playwright, what would Shakespeare come up with?"

"Trickery."

"Okay, then how do we trick Jemma Lu into inviting Wylie?"

"I couldn't trick Jemma Lu. A play is one thing but this is real life and..."

"And what?"

"Jemma Lu and I have gotten together a couple of times since I've been back..."

Harry laughed. "Why Howdy, you're still holding your own torch for Jemma Lu."

"It's more like I've lit a match at this point."

"I'll say it's a match. I always thought that you and Jemma Lu should be together."

Howdy walked over to the table with the book display.

"Wait, did you and Jemma Lu have some secret thing going on?" Harry asked.

"If it's a secret you know I can't tell you. It's off limits to trick Jemma Lu into inviting Wylie, but we can trick Wylie into thinking that she has."

"Now that would be downright nasty of us," Harry said with a grin.

"Couldn't happen to a nastier guy."

Howdy picked up one of the books from the display, then the one next to it. He held them up to Harry. "The way you display the books on this table makes no sense to me, but yet when I saw this book." Howdy held up a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. "I was also drawn to this other one." He held up the copy of *Lord of the Flies* that was

in his other hand. "Even though I've read them both and they don't seem to have anything in common. Why do you think that is?"

"I don't think, I know. It's part of the Bunch book display system," Harry replied with a proud smile.

"And how does this Bunch system of yours work?"

Harry laughed, "You and Amazon would both like to know and that's why it's a secret. I take it you aren't going to buy them, though, since you've already read them." Harry sighed. "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink."

Howdy put the books back on the table in the same position as before. "This system of yours gives me an idea. We don't invite Wylie directly we make him believe that he needs to be there to stop Jemma Lu from doing something."

"What could she do at your premier that he would want to prevent?"

"She could say I do."

"I do to what?"

"To my proposal at the premier after the shows over."

"You're going to propose ... marriage?"

Howdy winked, "Wylie just needs to believe that I'm going to propose."

"Got it," Harry said, nodding his head. "Still, doesn't he have to believe that Jemma Lu would accept your proposal?"

"Wylie will play the odds. The message he gets that says I'm going to propose just has to make him believe that there's more than a fifty-fifty chance that Jemma Lu will accept."

"Okay, but if I'm Wylie what's in it for me if all I do is stop Jemma Lu from getting married? That doesn't mean she's going to turn around and marry me instead."

"Wylie's the kind of guy who believes that if he can't have what he wants, nobody can, especially when that nobody is me. That's what's in it for him."

"You've sold me on your idea," Harry said. "Now, how are you going to get this message that he can't ignore to Wylie?"

"That's where you come in."

"I do?"

"You send Wylie a book with a note from you that tells him I'm going to propose."

"Why would he believe that I would do something like that?"

"Wylie knows you dislike him so he'll figure you're doing this to add insult to the injury you gave him when you wouldn't sell him the books he wanted. It's something he would do so he'll probably even admire you for it. I'll write out what you should put in the note." Howdy took a small notebook from the breast pocket of his blue jean jacket and scribbled something on it, then handed it to Harry.

Harry looked at it, arching his right eyebrow then put it down on the counter.

"Pretty good, but then you are the Sagebrush Shakespeare."

"All we need now," Howdy said. "Is a book that will go with that note. Something that will amplify the message so it sticks in Wylie's craw."

Harry walked around the counter and over to the display table. "I've got just the right one." He handed Howdy a book.

Howdy read the title, "Wedding Etiquette by Emily Post," He chuckled, "Now what are the chances that this very book would be on your display table?"

"No chance at all," Harry replied.

## **ATONEMENT**

A core principle in Sheriff Riggleman's political creed was to never confess to making a mistake. People might forgive you but they wouldn't vote for you. But that's what he was about to do. Not only confess but his confessor would be a Nun not a priest. He had seen the light. It had appeared after the door of the windowless solitary confinement cell had slammed shut and he was locked inside. In the pitch black he felt a panic attack coming on as the memory of being locked in the root cellar of their sorry excuse for a farm when he was a small boy. Most of the time he didn't even know why his Dad was punishing him. When he pulled the flashlight from his belt that also held a holstered gun and handcuffs his shaking hands lost their grip. The sound of the flashlight hitting the floor was like a stone hitting the bottom of a dry well. Riggleman got down on his knees and frantically tried to find the flashlight, cursing and wiping away tears. Suddenly a blinding light appeared. It was just like the light from the lamp he used during interrogations at the Sheriff's Department only this time it wasn't his voice demanding a confession from the squirming suspect.

"What did you confess to?" Sister M's asked after listening to Riggleman. She'd heard jailhouse confessions before but never from a someone who put people behind bars.

"Nothing. He said - it was man's voice..." He paused and looked up at Sister M's. "I'm not saying God is a man."

"That's okay, I know she isn't."

"Anyway, he said he already knew all the execrable things I'd done in my life. I didn't know what the word means but I figured it was pretty bad..."

"Detestable," Sister M's said.

"That bad, huh?" Riggleman nodded his head. "Well, who am I to argue with God, especially when I'm locked in a cell."

"So you think God told you that you didn't need to confess?"

"Not think, I know. Believe me, when God speaks you know. I mean, you're a Nun so you know that."

Yes, I should know, shouldn't I, Sister M's thought. "Who are you supposed to confess to?"

"To you, of course. That's why I told you about the vision."

"Me?"

"God said that after I confessed to you, then you would tell me what I had to do to atone for my execrable acts."

"I'm not doubting that you had some sort of vision, Sheriff..."

"Call me Jesse."

"Jesse," Sister M's repeated, more than willing to call him anything but Sheriff.

"It was a real vision from God. It was like in the Bible when Paul is blinded when he was on some road..."

"The Road to Damascus."

"Right, that road. I know I wasn't on a road but locked in a cell and I wasn't blinded like him, but, then, he wasn't wearing a pair of sunglasses." Riggleman touched the pair of Ray Bans that one of his deputies had given him when he was released from

the solitary confinement cell. "But God told Paul to stop prosecuting the Christians and he told me to stop prosecuting the illegals, only he called them undocumented immigrants."

"Persecuting not prosecuting and it was Jesus who appeared in the Vision and he asked him why he was persecuting him."

"Okay, so maybe it was Jesus who was in my vision. I only saw the light and heard the voice. He didn't give his name."

"It doesn't matter. The voice told you that I would help you atone for persecuting the undocumented workers, is that what I'm hearing?"

Riggleman nodded and said, "Do you think that ordering my deputies to drop the search for the illegal, I mean undocumented, immigrants counts as atonement?"

"Atonement is not just refraining from doing bad deeds in the future, it's also making amends for your past actions."

"That's why God said you'd help. I only know about sending people to jail."

"There's a fine line between punishment and penance." Sister M's explained that the first penitentiary was the Walnut Street Jail constructed in 1790 by Quakers in Philadelphia and was where inmates were confined to individual cells where they could reflect on their crimes. "It was supposed to encourage penance rather than inflicting punishment, reform rather than retribution."

"They wanted criminals to have the same kind of vision I just had when I was locked up in that solitary confinement cell," Riggleman said, pursing his lips and nodding his head.

"Not quite, Quakers believe that God appears as an inner light and speaks in a still, small voice."

"Then I sure didn't have any Quaker vision."

More of a quaking experience, Sister M's thought, noting that Riggleman's hands were still shaking from his spiritual sound and light show. No, the Quaker experience was more like hers- sitting in her cell, in silence, inner eyes wide open, scanning the dark night of the soul for a faint glimmer from God.

"You are going to help me aren't you? God told me you could help because you had some first-hand experience with this atonement business."

How could Riggleman know that atoning for sending an innocent man to prison when she was a prosecutor in Chicago was why she had joined the Sisters of St.

Leonard at Our Lady of Lost Souls and was providing free legal counsel to those in need? He couldn't know. Sister M's never told anyone except a priest when she had gone to confession at a Church near the Courthouse right after the incident. She didn't even think the priest listened to her because he just told her to say an Our Father and three Hail Mary's twice a day for a week, which was hardly penance for what she'd done. It was more like putting a bandage on a child's knee for a minor scrape to make the kid feel better. The point wasn't for her to feel better, it was to make things better for others. And that's what a still, small voice told her after her confession. Rigglesman wouldn't know any of this. Was this proof that God had actually spoken to Rigglesman, only in a loud voice? The answer was that it didn't matter. Sister M's knew what her answer should be. She said, softly, "Yes, I'll help."

"Rigglesman wants to atone for persecuting the undocumented immigrants?" Sister Beatrice asked as if she couldn't possibly have heard Sister M's correctly.

"He claims he had a vision from God when he was locked up in the cell."

"And you believe him?"

"Whether I believe him or not he believes he had a vision," Sister M's replied.

Sister Beatrice shook her head in amazement. "I wonder if I should add Rigglesman's claim to have had a vision to the historical placard outside the solitary confinement cells."

"I don't know that we want to promote his sainthood," Sister M's laughed. "Anyway, Rigglesman and I agree that his vision should be kept a secret. It would eliminate the element of surprise, which is necessary for the atonement plan to work."

"You've already got a plan?"

"It just came to me all at once and when I shared it with Rigglesman, he agreed to it."

"Sounds like you had a vision of your own."

## **COOKED UP**

"This is some stove," Margaret said, gliding her right hand over the top of the massive Vulcan in Sue's kitchen.

"To me it's part of the furniture," Sue replied. A really, really big part, since the six burner, two oven commercial stove took up as much space as a sofa, which she



didn't have in her combination kitchen-dining-living room and, if you counted the fact that her bed was in an alcove, bedroom.

"I could get turned on by this."

Sue patted the stove. "Although me and Vulcan have had a long relationship, it's been platonic."

Margaret laughed and then sipped from the glass of the Malbec that Sue had poured for each of them. "Seriously, my tastebuds are blooming just looking at this stove."

Sue turned the flame down under a pot. "I hope they don't wither when they get a taste of this chili. It might be too hot for you."

"Just because I'm from Minnesota doesn't mean I don't like hot food. I love Indian food and it's spicy."

"I'm using organic chili peppers from Joji's farm. I thought we should taste some of the food we'll be growing." She dipped a spoon into the pot and held it out to Margaret, who opened her mouth and let the chili slide in. "If it's good we could add it to the menu at the Pretty Good and we could grow the chili peppers on our farm."

"Whoa, pardner," Margaret rasped after swallowing the chili.

"Too hot?" Margaret said with alarm.

"It's definitely a five alarm chili but I can douse the flames with some more of this," Margaret said, holding up her glass of wine.

Margaret sat down at the combination kitchen and dining room table that was a match in wood for the steel Vulcan. Sue ladled chili into two bowls, then sat down opposite Margaret and asked, "Now, what is it you wanted to tell me?"

"You know how Wylie Boone wanted to buy Uncle Arvid's shares in the Picketwire Ditch Company?"

"They're your shares now." Sue reminded Margaret, scooped chili from her bowl and carefully put the spoon into her mouth. It was pretty good. With some tweaks it would be good enough for the Cafe.

Margaret put her own spoon down and said, "Okay, I found out yesterday that the reason he wants to buy MY SHARES is because he's been stealing water from the Ditch." She picked up her glass of wine and took a sip.

"How do you know that?"

"When I was over at Happy Trails having a cocktail with Desmond yesterday evening we ran into these two professors from Picketwire College, Gretl and Ari - Gretl lives in a trailer there. Well, it's actually a sheepherder's hut on wheels - pretty cute."

"I know her. Gretl Johan is a regular at the Cafe," Sue replied then sipped some Malbec. A good pairing.

"Why am I not surprised," Margaret laughed. "Anyway, they told me that this other guy named Will who works with Gretl at this Institute at the College..."

"You mean the Picketwire Institute.."

"That's it. Well, this Will guy discovered that Boone is stealing it directly from the Purgatoire River. I told Gretl and Ari that Boone had tried to buy Uncle Arvid's shares but my Uncle told him no, Gretl said Boone needed Arvid's shares not just for the water, but so he would have controlling interest in the Ditch. If he has controlling interest then if he's accused of stealing water he can claim that since it's part of the Ditch's allocation from the River..."

"He'd be stealing it from himself," Sue interjected then helped herself to another spoonful of chili.

"Right. According to Gretl he'll really need Arvid's, I mean my, water because he's not going to get any from Played Out."

"But Played Out doesn't have any water. That's why it's, well, played out."

Margaret shook her head. "That's what everyone thought but apparently there's this big water aquifer under it that nobody knows about. Except Wylie, that is, and that's why he wants to buy Played Out. He's been renting the land around it but he needs to own the land, including the town, in order to own the water underneath it. But Gretl and Ari told the owner of Played Out..."

"Fergus MacDonald."

"Yeah, him. They told him about the aquifer. This guy Will discovered it. Apparently, he's a hydrologist and knows all about water, especially where it comes from."

"And he's sure that this aquifer exists?"

"He's studied the geology and done seismic tests so he's pretty certain but they still need to do a test well to prove it. MacDonald gave them permission and it should be done in the next few days."

“Why do you think Wylie knows about the aquifer?”

“Because this Will guy spotted some equipment that is used for digging test wells on the land Boone rents from the MacDonald’s. Also, why else would he be interested in buying the town? He can’t graze his cattle on it.”

“This aquifer means that Fergus can up his selling price by quite a bit.”

Margaret shook her head. “No, he won’t sell no matter what the price. Apparently, Fergus’ great grandfather, who ended up owning the town and the land when everyone else left, swore to never sell any land, much less the town, to the Boone’s because they had tried to blackmail him into selling out by threatening to close the only road that provided access. Turned out that the road couldn’t be closed as long as there was a town. The only reason Fergus was even considering it was because he had no choice. Boone was going to stop renting the land from him and the rental income is what kept Played Out going. But if there’s all this water under the town it changes everything. So, you see, without the water from Played Out, Boone needs my shares in the Purgatory Ditch or he’s left completely high and dry.”

“Why does Wylie need so much water?”

“For marijuana. Apparently growing pot requires a whole lot of water.”

“It’s illegal to grow marijuana in this County.”

“That will change as soon as Boone gets the water he needs for his marijuana. Gretl told me that Boone controls the Sheriff and that the reason the Sheriff is opposing legalizing growing of marijuana is to give Boone time to buy up all the water. Once Boone has all the water rights sewed up the Sheriff will drop his opposition and it will be legal to grow marijuana.”

“What’s wrong with growing marijuana?”

“Nothing, except that it uses a massive amount of water. This isn’t the place to waste water, that’s why we’re going to use the Fukuoka method for farming that Mister Takemoto is teaching us. I can feel Uncle Arvid cheering us on. In his own restrained Norwegian bachelor farmer sort of way, of course.” Margaret finished the wine in her glass. “What puzzles me is why Boone wants to grow marijuana so much that he’s willing to go to such lengths to get all this water?”

“He can make a lot more money from the Double B by growing marijuana than he can by raising cattle.”

“But he’s already got a gazillion dollars so why does he care?”

“I can’t get no satisfaction, to quote Mick Jagger,” Sue replied with a laugh.

"A glass is always half empty sort of guy, huh?"

"Speaking of which let's transfer the rest of this half full bottle of wine to our half empty glasses," Sue said, picking up the bottle of wine and topping off their glasses. "Your Uncle Arvid told Boone that he would never sell his shares in the Purgatory Ditch to him, but does Boone know that you feel the same way?"

Margaret took another spoonful of chili and slowly chewed it before answering. "He contacted me through Desmond and said he wanted me to call him."

"Did you?"

"I told Desmond that I wasn't going to call Boone but he could tell him that we would meet with him."

"We?"

"You and me. I mean, we're partners in the farm, right."

"You own the shares in the Purgatory Ditch not me."

"To be honest, Sue, I don't want to meet with him by myself."

Sue put up her hands in surrender. "Alright, you win. Where are we meeting him? It shouldn't be at his ranch."

"I said we'd meet at the Café."

"Good thinking. We can take the corner booth so it's private for a conversation but public enough that he'll think twice before he goes ballistic."

"It wasn't my idea it was something Gretl cooked up."

## CHAPTER 34

### SEEING THE LIGHT

Tony sat on the edge of the leather easy chair in the living room of Hacienda Medrano as he told his parents about the Purple Sage Mystery Tour. His father, Roberto and his mother, Delores, sat on a couch facing him. When he was finished, Roberto spoke, "That was very smart, son, using your tour group to accuse the Boones of stealing our land."

“Not just accused, but tried and convicted and the sentence will be on the Picketwire News front page.”

Roberto scratched his chin. “Yes, the court of public opinion. Still, I think Wylie will retaliate.”

“Your father is right,” Delores added, looking up from her knitting. “He will consider this a matter of honor that can’t go unanswered.”

Tony laughed. “What’s he going to do, Mom, challenge me to a duel?”

Roberto leaned toward Tony and said, “You can laugh, but he will do something.”

“Maybe what he’ll do is admit to it and apologize.”

Roberto sat back and shook his head. “I have never heard a Boone apologize and they have had many, many opportunities. It is something that they seem incapable of doing. For them it is a sign of weakness.”

Tony threw up his hands and got up, “Well, it’s too late now and, to tell you the truth, I would do it all over again.”

“Don’t misunderstand, we’re both proud of you,” Delores said, putting down her knitting. “We’re just...” her voice trailed off.

“You just need to be on your guard,” Roberto said, patting his wife’s right leg.

“I will,” Tony answered. “How are your guests doing?”

“Ah, Allesandra, Guillermo and Andres are doing well. After all, this is hardly a prison.”

“Convent,” Delores said. “It’s no longer a prison.”

“Yes, of course. In a convent the confinement is voluntary.”

Delores poked Roberto in his left forearm with one of her knitting needles.

Roberto pretended to wince in pain. “The problem now is to keep them out of a real prison.”

“Even though Rigglesman doesn’t have direct jurisdiction in Picketwire it is only a matter of time before he gets his friendly judge to give him a search warrant and I’m pretty sure that Hacienda Medrano is on the top of his list.”

"They need to be moved. Someplace that Riggleman won't suspect. He can't search the whole town."

"It's not right that they are hunted down like they are criminals," Delores said.

Tony sighed. "Until it's safe to get them out of the County past Riggleman we have no choice but to move them around. It's like a shell game. We need to keep Riggleman from guessing which shell they're hiding under."

"If we must move them from here then what shell do they hide under?" Delores asked.

"I'll talk to Sister M's. She'll know." Tony replied then looked at his watch. "But right now I'm late for a date."

"A date," Delores smiled. "With who?"

"Her name is Elise Plumb and we've been friends for some time."

"You're just friends." Delores couldn't hide her disappointment.

"This will be our fourth date so I guess we're more than just friends."

"Then you must invite her to dinner," his Mom said with a finality that could not be disobeyed.

Elise lived in an apartment carved out of an old mansion. It was a mishmash of stone and stucco and considered an exemplar of the early twentieth century "prairie pretentious" architectural style. Her apartment occupied the entire third floor in what had originally been the servant's quarters and nursery. After Tony picked her up they headed out of town for dinner at the nongourmet and proud of it *Dang It All Diner*. As he steered his pickup through the twilight, Tony told Elise about his meeting with his parents and that when he was leaving they had asked him to invite her to dinner. "It was more of a command in my case, but you don't have to accept."

Elise laughed, "Why, is the food going to be terrible?"

"No, my Mom is a great cook. She taught my Dad so he isn't half bad. It's just that they really want me to get married."

"In other words, they'll be sizing me up as a future daughter in law."

"Sort of."

“Hey, my parents want me to get married and would do the same thing. Since I’m an only child it’s one of their favorite topics of conversation. Fortunately for you they live in New Jersey. But look, I’d love to meet your parents.”

“I’ll tell them not to mention marriage.”

“And you think that will work?”

Tony sighed. “Not really. I think the best thing is to stall them.”

“For how long?”

“Until we have an answer if they bring it up.”

*Dang It All’s* “Here’s the beef” burgers were so big that Elise had to dismantle hers before she could eat any of it. While they worked their way through the burgers Tony told Elise about the Mystery Tour. “My folks are worried that Wylie is going to retaliate somehow.”

“I share that worry but you did the right thing,” Elise answered, taking a sip of beer after she’d decided to consign most of her burger to a doggie bag where it would, indeed, be eaten by Ranger, her beagle. “What do you think he’ll try?”

“I’m worried that he’ll get Judge Pothers, who’s in his back pocket, to grant Riggleman a search warrant for my parent’s house and find the undocumented immigrants that are hiding there.”

“Then you need to move them.”

“Right. I’m going to ask Sister M’s to find another place.”

“Did you call her?”

“She told me Riggleman might be tapping her phone so if we need to talk we should do it in person.”

“Shouldn’t you be doing that ASAP!”

“I didn’t want to cancel our date. I’ll go over and see Sister M’s after i drop you off back at your place. Sorry I won’t have time to come inside for a drink or .....

“To hell with that, Tony,” Elise said, reaching out and putting her hand on Tony’s. “We’re both going to see Sister M’s as soon as we pay the bill.”

With no moon there were a million stars sparkling in the black velvet sky and the lights of the pickup seemed like they were cutting a tunnel through a mountain of diamonds as they headed toward Our Lady of Lost Souls convent. Out of the distant darkness the headlights of a car appeared. When the car passed by Tony could make out that it was a Sheriff's Department patrol car. He instinctively slowed. In his rear view mirror Tony saw the brake lights of the patrol car flare and the patrol car turn around. Lights started flashing from the bar on the roof of the patrol car. "What the..." Tony exclaimed, then explained to Elise. "I wasn't going over the speed limit."

"Maybe he just got a call and isn't trying to stop us," Elise said, hopefully, as she looked through the rear window.

"Fat chance," Tony said, stepping on the brake pedal and pulling over. The patrol car pulled up behind him. A spotlight was switched on and lit up the pickup. Tony rolled down the window. He couldn't see clearly in the blinding spotlight that reflected off his rear view mirrors but he heard a door open. A figure silhouetted by the spotlight approached the pickup.

"I wasn't speeding officer," Tony said as soon as the figure was at his window.

"I'll take your word for it since that's not why I pulled you over." It was Sheriff Riggleman. He leaned in toward the driver's side window.

"Then what's the problem, Sheriff?" Elise asked, forcing shifting into demure mode.

"Illegal immigrants."

"What about them?" Tony answered, trying to sound as innocent as possible.

"I know that you've been working with the Sisters to hide them."

Tony's hands were gripping the steering wheel so hard that they were growing numb. "And how do you know that?"

"Because Sister Mary Margaret told me."

"With all due respect, Sheriff, why would she tell you that?"

"She and I just made a deal that I won't go after them or you or anyone involved or any other illegal immigrants."

"Why would you do that?"

"I saw the light. I'll just leave it at that."



"Why did you pull me over, then?"

"So you could tell them that they don't have anything to fear from the Sheriff's Department."

"Sheriff, this is a bit hard to believe. Not that I'm saying that..."

"I'm a liar," Sheriff Riggleman chuckled. "I don't blame you. I'd find it hard to believe if I was in your shoes. I'd suggest you ask Sister Mary Margaret when you see her, which shouldn't be too long from now since you seem to be heading in her direction. Now, I've got to see a judge about cancelling some search warrants."

"Yes, the Sheriff is telling the truth. He made a deal. It wasn't exactly with me but a higher authority. One that even Wylie Boone can't buy off."

"Higher authority?" Elise asked then quickly added, "You mean..." She pointed her right index finger up toward the ceiling.

Sister M's nodded.

"It's hard for me to believe," Tony said. "Not in the higher authority, but that Riggleman would ever go along with him...or her."

"The important thing," Sister M's replied. "Is what Riggleman believes happened to him in that cell."

"Why should we trust that Riggleman won't change his mind?" Tony asked. "You know like those deathbed conversions that are forgotten when the person recovers."

"I asked him to immediately give a full confession to Father Padilla, which he did. Father Padilla, with the Sheriff's consent, told me that his confession included details of criminal and other unscrupulous activity."

"But a Priest can't divulge what took place in a confessional," Tony said.

"No, but with Father Padilla's permission Riggleman recorded his own confession. He just dropped it off. I agreed not to listen to it and make it public unless he reneged on his deal." She smiled, and added. "Trust but verify."

## **C'EST ROMANTIQUE**

Maybe he was a newspaper man after all. Tom sat at the roll top desk, looking at a mock-up of the front page of the Sunday edition of the Picketwire Press. Sunday

was the edition that had the most subscribers. For this one he had not just one but three major front page stories. There was his story on Wylie Boone's father, Charles, secretly burying the Japanese-Americans who died while working on his ranch during WWII and the story by Gloria on Tony Medrano's mystery tour that accused C.W. Boone of stealing land that had been granted to the Medrano family. The final story would cover the Saturday night premier Howdy Hank's new play. That would also have Gloria's byline since he was acting in the play. A review of the play by Eleanor Perceval would be in the entertainment and arts section. He had to decide which story would get the coveted spot on the top right hand corner of the paper. Modesty suggested that it shouldn't be the one with his byline. And as for the story on the premier of Howdy's play that was known in the parlance of journalism as soft news and hard news always trumped soft news. Fortunately, because they had their own printing press in back he could wait until Saturday midnight to decide the final layout and still get the paper printed by Sunday morning. He moved the cursor around on the screen and shifted Gloria's story into the coveted spot. He looked at his story and created a box where he would place the opinion piece that he asked Jane to write. She had reluctantly agreed to his request but said she wouldn't be able to get it to him until Saturday.

"Where are you going to run my stories?" Gloria asked, her head barely clearing the high top of the roll top desk. Fortunately, she couldn't see his computer screen from where she stood.

Tom closed the window on the mock-up. "Front page, of course. Both the print and the online edition. I have no doubt that other media outlets are going to pick up one or both of them. You're going to have to fight off the job offers."

"The only one I'm interested is right here."

"You'd really consider staying on here in Picketwire after your?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Although the desk top hid everything but her head, he knew she had both arms on her hips. "And what makes you think I didn't have other offers before I decided to come here in the first place? You think I took this job out of desperation. I did my research like any good investigative reporter before I applied."

Tom sat back his chair. "I'm not badmouthing my own paper but we're a small town newspaper. A lot of people consider us in the same category as the dinosaurs who left their tracks in the Picketwire Canyonland."

"That's what's nice about being a small town paper. You don't have to consider what a lot of people think. As for being a dinosaur, who knows maybe people will be looking at the tracks the Picketwire Press leaves behind in print a million years from now."

Tom nodded his head. "You do have a way with words."

"I better have," Gloria laughed.

"You do know that I can't pay you all that much."

"You're hardly paying me anything now."

"In that case compared to what you're getting now it will be significant along with a promotion to Assistant Editor" He took out a sheet of paper and wrote down Gloria's name, the date, a salary amount and the new title.

"Look," Gloria said. "I could sure use the extra money and the title is nice but what I'd really like is an assurance from you that I can have freedom and time to do investigative reporting."

"Freedom and time," Tom repeated as he wrote them down. "Anything else?"

"Since you asked, not having to take photos at high school football and basketball games."

Tom made a crude drawing of a camera with a slash mark through it then gave a mock grimace. "You sure do drive a hard bargain." He looked at the sheet then signed his name with a date and handed it to Gloria. She looked at it, smiled then walked over to her desk.

Carlotta was arranging the books on the display table when Tom walked in. She put down the book in her hand and not waiting until he decided between a handshake, hug or kiss she gave him a peck on the cheek. "Taking a break?" She asked.

"Actually, I came over to ask if you were free Saturday night?"

"I'll be busy acting in the premier of Howdy Hank's play – as will you, unless you've gotten cold feet?"

"No, of course not," Tom said, wriggling his toes. "I was thinking about afterwards. Maybe a late dinner?"

"You're not going to eat before the play?"

"I'll have so many butterflies in my stomach there won't be room for anything else. I'm not a pro like you are."

"I still get nervous before a performance. I eat half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich so my stomach doesn't growl when I'm on stage."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"You can have half of my PB and J. Maybe the peanut butter can muffle the wings of those butterflies in your stomach."

"Thanks," Tom said.

"If all we have is half a PB and J it seems like we'll both be hungry after the play so dinner sounds great. We'll just pop into the cast party and then we can go somewhere afterwards."

"What cast party?"

"There's always a cast party," Carlotta said. "It's a Bard Wire Players tradition. But there isn't much to eat at them other than chips and dip and the drink is a couple of bottles of cheap wine served in dixie cups. Although, since this is a premier, maybe it will be in plastic glasses. Most people leave after a few minutes and go somewhere where they can really celebrate, which always seems to be the Last Ditch. That's not where you were thinking of going for dinner, is it?"

"No, I was thinking of that French place that just opened, Maison La Plage. I think it means home on the range."

"Qui, c'est exact." Carlotta said. "Dinner at a French Restaurant. How romantic."

Tom shuffled his feet. "Well, I don't know about that. I've never been there..."

"You just have a hankering for French cuisine."

"Hankering? I don't think I've even been to a real French Restaurant before. I just thought it would be...you know..."

"I do know, because I just said it - Romantic."

"Yeah," Tom replied, wishing that he could direct the flush in his face to his feet. "But, look, we can go to the Last Ditch if you want."

"And pass on a romantic French dinner," Carlotta said, gripping Tom's right arm and looked at him squarely in the eyes. "Seriously, though, if you're interested in only being friends than we should just have burgers and beer at the Last Ditch with the rest of the cast, because I'm not going to waste my time on something that is never going to go anywhere."

"No, I mean yes," Tom stammered. "I mean I don't want to pass on it."

Carlotta smiled at him and said, “Que c’est romantique.”

## **FAMILY BUSINESS**

Things were quiet in the Pretty Good when Gretl and Ari entered. The early morning breakfast crowd had cleared out and there was a lull before the lunch crowd filled the place. Now, there were only a couple of diehard customers at the counter lingering over coffee as they kibbitzed with Sue and Bonnie, the morning waitress. Sue nodded to Gretl and Ari then spoke to Bonnie, who came over and guided Gretl and Ari to an empty booth with a reserved card on it, gave them menus and poured them coffee from the pot she held. After looking at the menus that Bonnie handed them, Gretl ordered a western omelet and Ari the Ranch Hand Special.

As Bonnie walked back to put their orders in, Ari asked Gretl, “Do you think that Boone will recognize us?”

“I don’t see how. I’ve never met him in person, have you?” Gretl replied as she poured cream into her coffee.

Ari’s cup of black coffee, or heavy on the noir as he put it, hovered just below his lips as he answered, “Well no...”

“In any case he has no reason to suspect that we know what he’s up to and why we’re here.”

“In other words, to quote Alfred E. Neuman, what me worry.”

“A philosopher quoting a character in Mad Magazine,” Gretl said after sipping her coffee and putting her cup down.

“Why not? It sums up the stoic philosophy although not quite as eloquently as Seneca who said that ‘True happiness is to enjoy the present without anxious dependence upon the future, not to amuse ourselves with either hopes or fears but to rest satisfied, for he that is wants nothing’.”

Gretl laughed. “You’re saying that Alfred E. Neuman was a Stoic.”

Ari placed his cup of coffee on the table and in all seriousness replied, “Of course not, he’s only a character in a comic book, but I use his cartoon and that quote when I teach the Stoics in my history of philosophy class.”

“I’ve never associated philosophy with humor.”

“Then you should sit in on one of my classes.”

“I’d prefer a one on one session with the professor.”

"I believe I can fit you into my schedule."

Gretl smiled and they sat in silence until Bonnie returned with their breakfast orders. As Ari contemplated where to begin with his heaping plate of eggs, bacon, hash browns and toast. Gretl interrupted, "Margaret just walked in and she and Sue are both coming this way. Ari looked up as Margaret and Sue walked past and settled in the corner booth next to theirs.

Sue, who's back was to Gretl's, turned her head and whispered to them. "All set for the showdown at the Pretty Good Cafe?"

"Can you hear us okay?" Margaret chirped from her seat on the bench facing Sue.

"Loud and clear," Gretl replied.

"It's acoustically perfect for eavesdropping if you're seated in the booth next to it," Sue said.

"Looks like Wylie has arrived," Sue said. "His Fifty Seven Chevy just pulled up with a black Suburban trailing it."

Ari started to turn his head only to be stopped by Gretl. "Don't look. We're not supposed to know that he's coming here."

"Right," Ari answered, snapping off the end of a crisp piece of bacon with his teeth.

A minute later Wylie entered with two muscular men in black jeans and T shirts.

"Wylie's gang doesn't seem to be packing anything more than six pack abs," Margaret said.

"They probably know that everyone has to check their guns when they come in," Sue replied.

"Here comes the leader of the pack," Margaret said as Bonnie led Wylie over to the booth where Sue and Gretl were seated. After exchanging hellos, Sue slid over on the bench, closer to the window and Wylie sat down next to her across from Margaret. Bonnie poured them all coffee and Sue asked if they wanted anything else. "It's on the house," she added.

"I already had my usual steak and eggs breakfast," Wylie said. "That keeps me going until I have my usual steak and potatoes for dinner."

"I see you're a man of habits," Margaret said.

"I like to save my surprises for other people. But you two ladies go ahead."

"I had a bowl of oatmeal before we opened at six," Sue said.

"Why would a gourmet chef eat oatmeal for breakfast?" Wylie asked.

"To surprise you."

"I decided a week ago to not break my fast until lunch," Margaret interjected. "So far I've surprised myself by sticking to it."

"Here's to sticking to it," Wylie said, raising his cup of coffee in a toast. He looked around and said, "You know, we're sitting where I used to get my haircut when I was growing up."

"When it was Floyd's Four Star Barbershop," Sue said.

"Did Floyd cut your hair?" Margaret asked.

Wylie looked at Margaret. "There was no other option since all of the barbers were Floyds. Art Floyd was the father and the other three stars in the haircut constellation were his sons. That's when barbershops were for men and beauty parlors for women and you didn't mix the two. Instead of paying a stylist a hundred bucks for a trim you paid two bucks and got your hair mowed. No offence concerning your Café but I miss Floyd's even though I've been doing my own hair since I got back here."

"It closed because none of Art's grandsons wanted to take it over," Sue said.

"That's sad," Wylie slowly shook his head. "To see a family business close because none of the kids would take it over."

"The family business did continue, just not the way that Art thought it would. He had two daughters who opened a hair salon and it's still in business. They passed the ownership on to their daughters. It's the Super Nova Hair Salon across the street."

"Really," Margaret said. "I've been there and they did a better job than the place I went to back in Minneapolis."

Sue looked at Wylie and said, "It's unisex so you could try it out as an alternative to ..." She formed the fingers of her right hand to resemble a pair of scissors. "They'll even come to your home, or in your case, your ranch."

Wylie ran his right hand over his hair and said, "What the hell, I should probably just shave all of it off. Wouldn't be much shorter than the crew cuts that I got here when this was Floyd's." He took another look around. "I have to admit that sitting here

brings back some memories. The way Art and his three sons talked and joke. I remember my Dad telling me that the Double B was also a family business just like Floyds and that the only thing you can trust is family. I didn't fully appreciate at the time what I was saying." Wylie took a sip of coffee, looked at Margaret and said, "But I'm not here to talk about my childhood memories. We've got some business to do."

"You mean buying Uncle Arvid's shares in the Picketwire Ditch Company. Apparently he had controlling interest."

"They're your shares now," Wylie said.

"I still think of them as belonging to my Uncle. In fact, I believe he left me the farm for a reason."

Wylie's untrimmed eyebrows arched. "And what reason is that?"

"To keep it in the family."

"I just want your shares in the ditch, not your family farm. I already got plenty of land. I'll agree that you can keep your water allotment in case you're worried that the farm won't have any value without water rights."

"It's not about water for the farm. Uncle Arvid was planning to reduce the amount of water he used and I intend to follow his wishes."

"Then I'll pay you for what you don't use."

Margaret leaned forward. "The reason for reducing the amount of water is to conserve it for the environment not to make money."

Wylie leaned back. "That's why I want control of the Ditch so I can stop all the waste. Conservation means using a finite resource for the highest and best use."

"And that means using it to grow cannabis?" a voice announced. "A crop that soaks up water like a sponge."

Startled, Wylie looked up over his left shoulder. Gretl was standing and was looking down at him. She held an iPad in her hands facing Wylie on which his cannabis farm was displayed. "Here's your conservation." She swiped the screen showing photos of the ditch that carried water from the Purgatoire River to the site.

"What is this?"

"This is the water you are illegally diverting from the Purgatoire River to your illegal cannabis farm," Gretl answered.



“Are you against marijuana?”

“Not at all, it just shouldn’t be grown in places with a limited water supply like here.”

“And a lot of that water that you’ve been stealing to grow cannabis belongs to the Picketwire Ditch Company,” Margaret added. “I guess you weren’t waiting to see if I’d accept your offer for my shares.”

“Is this your way of asking for more money?” Wylie asked Margaret.

“More money? Do you seriously think I’d sell my shares to someone who’s stealing my water.”

“Look,” Wylie said, holding up both of his hands. “I’m just trying to keep my family business going and cannabis is a hell of a better business to be in than cattle.”

“You won’t be doing it with my water.”

“That’s what Fergus MacDonald told me yesterday,” Wylie said, his eyes narrowing. “Are you and him working together? Trying to put the squeeze on me to get a better deal?”

“We’re together on not playing your game.”

“I take it that’s a no,” Wylie said, slapping the palms of his hands on the table so hard a bottle of catsup fell over and spilled its contents onto the formica. He slid from the booth as Margaret tried to staunch the spread of the thick red sauce with napkins.

Gretl blocked Wylie and said, “We want you to stop diverting water immediately or...”

“Or what?” Wylie replied, putting his hands on his hips and staring at Gretl. “I don’t know who you are but if you know who I am than you know I don’t like to be told what I can and can’t do.”

“That’s bullshit ethics,” Ari said. He’d scooted up from his seat in the booth and was standing next to Gretl. “It’s bullshit.”

“Bull...And who are you?”

“I teach Philosophy at Picketwire College,” Ari stammered, then realized how ridiculous it must have sounded.

“Philosophy,” Wylie grimaced. “Are you trying to threaten me with your towering intellect. Jeez, just get out of my way.” The two muscle bound bodyguards started

toward them, Ari quickly pivoted to stand in front of Gretl, facing the men. He felt like Alfred E. Neuman in a show down with the Wild Bunch.

"This is my cafe not the OK corral, Wylie," Sue blurted out.

Wylie waved off his men with his right hand. "Don't worry, we won't be shedding any more catsup over this." Then he took out his wallet, "How much do I owe you for the coffee?"

"I said it was free," Sue answered.

Wylie pulled out a twenty dollar bill and threw it on the table. "Nothing is for free. Keep the change."

Gretl and Ari joined Margaret and Sue in their booth. "So, what do you think he's going to do now?" Ari asked.

Margaret, who had pushed the pile of catsup soaked napkins out of the way, replied. "I hope he and his gang are going to ride off into the sunset."

"I wouldn't count on him staying back at the ranch," Gretl said. "By the way I thought your bullshit ethics was right on target, Ari."

"He seems to have the ethics of a Mafia boss," Margaret added.

"Remember what Wylie said his father told him when he was getting his hair cu?" Sue asked.

"That the Double B was a family business and that the only thing you can trust is family," Margaret said.

Sue nodded, "But also that at the time he didn't fully appreciate what his Dad said."

"What do you think it was that he didn't fully appreciate?" Ari asked.

"That he is an only child," Sue replied, then added. "And he doesn't have any kids."

## CHAPTER 35

### PREMIERE

Max was relieved, which was as close to happy as he allowed himself to be when he was directing a play. The premiere performance of Howdy Hank's new play had gone like a dream rather than the nightmare he dreaded. Everyone remembered their lines and some of the actors, especially Zelda Zenn, were as good as some of the actor's he'd directed in New York. Granted, those plays were so far off Broadway they were almost in New Jersey. Now, he held his breath for the reaction of the audience. Howdy had expressly forbidden him to employ the old standby of seeding the audience with shills who would prime the pumping of hands by standing up and applauding vigorously no matter what they'd just sat through. The theater was completely quiet as if the audience was absorbing what they'd just seen. Then the applause started, beginning from the back row of the balcony and spreading like a tidal wave until it crashed against the stage in a thunderous, standing ovation.

"Looks like we got a hit on our hands," Fred Dobbs, the Tumbleweed Theater's Manager, said slapping Max on the back.

"I have to say I was worried there for a moment. I've never seen a delayed reaction quite like that."

"It might have started slow," Fred replied. But once it got started it was like a prairie wildfire. I better get the curtain up so the cast can take their bows before people's arms fall off from clapping."

After the first fifteen minutes of the play, Jemma Lu knew that Howdy had drawn on events that occurred during their senior year in high school and that the main characters were based on real people. It was strange to watch someone playing her up on the stage. The lines Carlotta Bunch spoke could have come straight from her own teenage mouth and probably had. Not just the lines she'd spoken when she was performing in Howdy's high school play, which was the play within the play, but the other ones as well. She was watching Carlotta play her but also playing her playing someone else. It almost made her dizzy thinking about it. She had to admit that Howdy had been pretty clever. If she'd been any younger, she'd have also been mad as hell at him. It was like Howdy had written a documentary of what happened their senior year in High School. At the end, was that what really happened between Wylie and Pam Martindale or artistic license and if it had really taken place, how did Howdy know? Pam had disappeared and Wylie sure as hell wouldn't have told anyone. Still, why would Howdy have made something like that up when everything else from what she could tell, was based on things that really happened?

She looked at Wylie from her seat, which gave her a vantage point without him being able to see her. Howdy must have planned it that way when he sent her the ticket. She was surprised that Wylie hadn't walked out. Why on earth had he even come, much less taken a seat in the middle of the front row? Was she feeling

sympathetic toward him because there was a fifty fifty chance that he was the father of her son? She thought of the unopened envelope in her purse with the results of the analysis of the DNA she and Foster had secretly obtained. It would prove whether Will's father was Wylie or Howdy. Foster had given it to her several hours ago, assuring her that he didn't know what the results of the paternity test were and it was up to her if she wanted to open the envelope and find out. If she did should she tell Will? He had told her that it would be easier for him to forgive her for putting him up for adoption if he knew his natural father was Howdy and not Wylie. She could tell Will the results of the paternity test if it turned out it was Howdy and not say anything if it was Wylie, but was that her decision to make?

The curtain rose with Zelda standing in the center of the line of fellow cast members between Carlotta Bunch and Mike Arnold. The applause shook the room and now that the house lights were on she could see all the way up to the last row of the balcony where she knew Donny was seated only she could see that he wasn't seated but standing with his arms raised over his head and clapping wildly. Then she felt Carlotta tug on her hand and realized that everyone in the line was starting to bow.

After several more bows everyone but Zelda and Mike left the stage and they both took bows. At that point Mike was supposed to let go of her hand and applaud her as she took a solo bow, just like they'd rehearsed it, but he wouldn't let go. She looked at him and whispered, "Let go, damn it."

"I'm the leading man," he whispered back.

"You may be the leading man, but I'm the star," Zelda replied. She turned back to the audience, smiled broadly, then quickly raised both of her arms over her head with such force that she broke Mike's grip. She took two steps forward and then bowed deeply. As she gracefully lowered her arms just the way she'd practiced in front of her bedroom mirror, her eyes met those of the man seated in the center of the front row. He wasn't standing or applauding and he looked like he'd just seen a ghost.

Wylie's hands gripped the arms of his seat. He had wanted to stand up, but only so he could walk out, even though he and his two bodyguards, who were sitting on either side of him, would have had to run a gauntlet of clapping hands not to mention the eyes of everyone in the Tumbleweed Theater. Wylie had wondered if he'd been set up when the usher directed him and his two bodyguards to the seats in the middle of the front row instead of the ones in the back row of the balcony that he'd bought. When he'd objected the usher told him that he'd been given an upgrade and that the seats in the balcony had already been given to people on the waiting list. Still, he would have run the gauntlet if it wasn't for the note in the Emily Post book on Marriage Etiquette that Harry Bunch had sent him. Wylie had to know if Howdy was going to propose to Jemma Lu from the stage. He seemed to be in a no win situation, which was the same as losing, which was something that never happened to Wylie Boone.

Wylie knew after the first scene that he was Rick and that Howdy was basing the play on what happened forty years ago. When the last scene ended with Jolene slapping Rick's hands away telling him that he wasn't going to put his brand on her and that she never loved him and never would and then Rick pushing her out of the plywood prop car painted candy apple red Wylie knew that Howdy had found Pam Martindale. She was the only person who knew what had happened between them on Rendezvous Ridge graduation night. Did the actress playing Jolene know that she was a real person named Pam Martindale and that the guy who shoved her out of the car was sitting directly in front of her just beyond the footlights? One thing Wylie knew was that it was Howdy who had arranged for him to be seated there.

Howdy was glad he'd cut Jolene's soliloquy from the final scene. The play now ended with the stage in darkness except for a spotlight on Jolene sprawled on the ground after being pushed from Rick's car. Without saying a word she slowly rose to her feet and stood for a minute in silence then smiled and walked off. That was pretty much how Pam had described it in her note to Harry except for the smiling part although she did draw a happy face at the end next to her signature. Still, it didn't end with the bang that Zelda would have preferred. She'd made it clear to Howdy that Jolene should have fought back. If Zelda had her way, Jolene's soliloquy would have been a tirade and she would have slapped Rick so hard it would have left a red palm print branded on his face. Instead of Jolene being pushed out of the car, Rick would have fled the car to escape and the curtain would have come down on a Rick reduced to tears as he watched Jolene drive off in his car. Truth be told, Howdy and Max weren't entirely sure if Zelda wouldn't ad lib that ending instead of the one he'd written, but fortunately she'd turned out to be an actor after all and followed the script.

Max walked out on stage and took several bows then joined the cast in applauding the playwright as he ambled onto the stage. Howdy thanked Max and the cast, being sure to call out the names of the leads ending with Zelda, prompting another round of applause. Then he asked the audience to sit down and stop clapping so he could say a few words.

"I started this play forty years ago but I didn't have an ending until a week ago. Some of you out there might wonder if it's based on real events and real people? There are a few of you who know the answer to that question, but I hope you'll keep it to yourself. Now, there is one other person in the audience that I'd like to thank. You see, the reason I finally finished the damn play was so I could come back here to Picketwire and see her again. I'll thank her even more if she agrees that I should stay here until death do us part."

"Then she sure as hell better say yes," someone shouted from the audience. That was followed by whistles and stamping of feet. Then everyone stood up started clapping again. Wylie stood up as well, but he didn't join in the applause. Instead, he and his two bodyguards scooted past the other people in the front row and strode up the aisle toward the exit. With all the hullabaloo the only person who noticed him leaving was Jemma Lu.

After the applause ended Jemma Lu picked up her purse and turned to leave. Will was standing in the aisle. "You saw the play?"

"I came with Gretl and Ari. Our seats were just a few rows back from here." Before Jemma Lu could reply, Will asked. "You're the one Howdy was thanking, aren't you?"

Jemma Lu nodded.

"It also seems like he just asked you to marry him."

Jemma Lu nodded again.

"Will you?"

Jemma Lu reached in her purse and pulled out the envelope and handed it to him. "Before I decide you have a right to know whether Howdy is your birth father or it's Wylie. In this envelope is the result of a DNA analysis that will tell you. I haven't opened it so I don't know what the results are and neither Howdy nor Wylie know that I had a child much less that it would be their's."

"You mean you got samples of their DNA without them knowing?"

Jemma Lu nodded. "I only needed to get Howdy's DNA to match with yours and I got it from a glass he drank out of that I slipped in my purse without him knowing. Foster was able to get a sample of your DNA from a bottle of beer you had at his place."

"Funny what a single beer can do," Will said taking the envelope and turning it in his hands. "So, if the results in this don't match with Howdy than that means it's Wylie?"

Jemma Lu nodded. "If you open that envelope you'll know who your real father is."

"Then I guess that means I get to choose my Dad," Will said tearing the envelope into shreds.

## **GETAWAY**

As Wylie's Fifty Seven Chevy parked outside, it seemed to Jemma Lu that its candy apple red paint had lost some of its lustre. Wylie got out of the car without waiting

for the black Suburban with his bodyguards to pull in behind him. Maybe it was her imagination, but Wylie seemed to be ten years older and a hundred years slower as he climbed the steps of the Tuttle Mansion where she stood in the open doorway.

He followed her into the parlor where one antique chair and one sturdy oak armchair were positioned around an antique table. On the table was a teapot covered by an embroidered cosy and one delicate, China blue porcelain teacup in a matching saucer and a larger plain cup. "I thought that this time you'd prefer a sturdier chair and a cup with a handle you could get your fingers through," Jemma Lu said after Wylie sat down in the armchair. She removed the cosy and poured tea into their cups.

"I hope you didn't invite me here because you feel sorry for me," Wylie said as he took a sip of tea.

"I invited you here for tea not sympathy," Jemma Lu said.

"Good, because you know I hate feeling sorry about anything."

Jemma Lu laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Your hating to feel sorry just reminded me of the time we went on a Valentine's Day date to the Star Dust Drive-In to see their special triple feature of classic romantic movies and one of them was Love Story."

"First and last time I saw it."

"You said that you couldn't believe that it starred the same Ally McGraw who was in the Getaway with Steve McQueen."

"The Getaway was one of my favorite Sam Peckinpah movies."

"I know, because you insisted that we leave right after Love Story and go back to your place so we could watch it on your VCR. Watching a movie in which Ally McGraw and Steve McQueen robbed and killed people wrecked whatever Valentine's Day feelings I might have had."

"You were mad as hell and told me to drive you home as soon as it ended."

"And you said you'd apologize, but that love means never having to say you're sorry."

Wylie nodded with a smile.

“And I said that just because you won’t say you’re sorry doesn’t mean we love each other.”

Wylie’s smile disappeared. “If you invited me here to tell me again that you didn’t love me you could have saved your time and...”. Wylie set his cup down. “The tea, because I got that message loud and clear thirty years ago.”

“If that was the only thing that happened between us thirty years ago I wouldn’t have asked you here.”

“What else happened? You broke off our engagement and left. You did your own getaway with Howdy Hanks on his motorcycle”

Jemma Lu peered into her teacup. There weren’t any leaves to read even if she knew how. She looked up at Wylie and said, “You might have a son.”

Wylie sat back in his chair and gripped its arms. “We’ve got a son?”

“I have a son and you might be his father.”

“But we only did it once.”

“It only takes one time, Wylie.”

“You said I might be his father so you’re not sure?”

“There is one other person. It also happened only once with him and it was after you and I broke up.”

“How did you raise him and keep it a secret all these years?”

“I didn’t raise him,” Jemma Lu replied. “I went to Europe and gave birth to him over there.”

“And all this time I thought you took off for Europe to get as far away from me as possible.”

“Getting away from you was only a side benefit to my going,” Jemma Lu said. “After I had my child I gave him up for adoption when I came back to the States but before I returned to Picketwire. On the adoption papers I said the father was unknown and that I didn’t want the child to know that I was his birth mother.”

“How did he find out you’re his real mother?”

“I’m his birth mother, his real mother is the woman who raised him. But, to answer your question, he found out because I told him.”



"You tracked him down?"

Jemma Lu shook her head. "We ran into each other here in Picketwire by chance. I discovered that he was my son, but I'm not going to get into how, and I felt that I had to tell him. I also told him that there were two men who could be his biological father and neither of them knew they might have a son."

"Did you tell him that I might be his father?"

"Yes. I told him who the two men were."

Wylie slapped the arms of his chair, and said, "Let's do a paternity test and settle the matter."

Jemma Lu shook her head. "He told me that he didn't want to know who his biological father was and he didn't want anyone else to know either."

"Including you?"

"Including me. It's his decision to make." Jemma Lu poured some more tea into her cup and offered to pour some for Wylie.

"I don't suppose you have anything stronger."

"I thought you might need something," Jemma Lu said and reached into her purse, pulled out a pint of whiskey and handed it to him. Wylie broke the seal, unscrewed the cap and poured some into his cup. He gestured with the bottle toward Jemma Lu, who said, "No, this tea is enough for me."

Wylie took a swig from the cup. "Does the other guy also know he might have a son?"

"Yes. My son..." Jemma Lu stopped for a second. "It still feels strange to call him that, but he said I could. He said the other man should know and I told him yesterday...we both did."

"You're telling me that this other guy got to meet this kid who might be my son but I can't."

"He's not a kid, he's thirty years old. He said I could tell you that you might have a son but he doesn't want to meet you or have anything to do with you."

"Does this guy know that I'm the other guy?"

Jemma Lu nodded and then sipped her tea.

Wylie took another swig and asked, "Are you going to tell me who this other guy is or do I have to hire some private detectives to find out, because you know damn well that's what I'll do."

"If you really want to know I'll tell you. In fact, he told me that he wanted you to know."

"Hell, yes I really want to know!"

"The other guy is Howdy Hanks."

"Howdy Hanks," Wylie repeated the name, the cup in his hand shaking so much that the whiskey sloshed over the lip.

"I hope you aren't going to drop that cup on the oriental carpet, because it's a family heirloom."

Wylie put the cup on the table and said, "I really shouldn't be surprised it's Howdy since you rode off on his motorcycle after you broke up with me. First he steals you then steals my son..."

"He didn't steal me and as for stealing your son, like I just told you, it's just as possible that he's Howdy's son."

"Yeah, well, but he knows who his possible son is and I don't and possession is nine tenths of the law..."

"Howdy doesn't see people as possessions."

"And I do, right. That's what his damn play accused me of. He might have changed the names but it's pretty clear who everyone is and that I treated Pam like my personal property. Then he fixes it so I have to sit in the middle of the front row and watch the whole damn thing without being able to...to..." Wylie stammered.

"Make your getaway."

"Very funny, Jemma Lu," Wylie replied as he picked up the cup. He finished the whiskey, pushed the armchair back and stood up. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do now and that's to find Howdy...and he'll sure as hell wish he could get away."

## **SHOW DOWN AT SUE'S PRETTY GOOD CAFE**

It was past the peak for lunch hour rush at the Pretty Good, a half dozen customers were finishing their coffees or ice teas with maybe a piece of rhubarb pie that they really didn't have room for but couldn't resist. Tom Tiddings walked in and sat

down at a booth. It was nice to be able to sit down without a wait and also that you didn't feel the stares of people waiting in line, their eyes following every bite you took as if you were stealing it out of their own mouths. It was nice, but that wasn't the reason he came in late. This being Monday he held off because he knew he'd be constantly interrupted by people with an opinion on Sunday's front page stories about Wylie Boone as well as the premiere of Howdy Hank's new play. Tom had already spent the morning answering phone calls and emails about them although he'd managed to avoid looking at the Picketwire Press' Facebook page and Twitter. It was hard enough keeping his head above the water that had been stirred up without being sucked into the social media quicksand. Instead, he'd informed Gloria that he had added oversight of their social media to her job description as the new Assistant Editor of the Picketwire Press.

Now, finally, Tom had some time to think or, even better, not think and just enjoy the steak sandwich and coffee that Bea Trujillo had placed before him. He was about to take his first bite when Howdy Hanks and Harry Bunch walked into the Cafe. After exchanging some words with Sue Cohen who was behind the counter next to the cash register, they walked over to the corner booth. On the way Howdy spotted Tom and sidetracked over to his booth with Harry trailing behind. "Thanks for the review," he said to Tom.

"You should thank Eleanor Perceval, she wrote it. It would be a conflict of interest for me to have anything to do with reviewing the play since I'm acting in it."

"Carlotta corralled him into it," Harry laughed.

"Well, you were pretty damn good," Howdy said to Tom.

"This is only my second time acting in a play," Tom answered. "The first time was when I was ten years old and played a shepherd in our Church's Christmas pageant."

"What derailed your budding thespian career?" Howdy asked, cracking a smile.

"I forgot my lines and I swore I'd never act in anything again."

"All actors forget their lines now and then," Howdy said in a consoling voice that he'd used a hundred times with novice actors.

"Yeah, but my only line was 'Hark, look yonder at that bright star in the sky'. Instead, I just stood and stood with all those people looking at me until finally I just sort of blurted out, 'Just look at that sucker.' At least I had a big fake beard on so no one could see how red my face was."

"Well, I'm glad you agreed to give it another try and without a beard."

"We'll leave you to your lunch," Harry said and he steered Howdy to the booth in the far corner next to the front window.

"I guess I should thank your daughter for getting Tom to join the cast," Howdy said to Harry after they sat down.

"You don't need to thank her," Harry replied. "She didn't do it for you, or the play for that matter."

"You're saying she had an ulterior motive?"

"I'll just say that when Carlotta sees something she wants she doesn't sit on her posterior..."

"Are you two having anything else besides coffee?" Sue asked, holding up a pot of coffee. "Bea's on a break so you'll have to put up with my service."

"Sure Sue," Harry said then with a wink added, "I guess since you're the owner we don't have to tip you. I'll have a slice of rhubarb pie. Make it two. If Howdy doesn't like it I'll have his piece as well."

"No way," Howdy replied. "Now's my chance to try your rhubarb pie that I've heard so much about."

"It's your fat chance," Harry patted his stomach and chuckled. "As you can see."

They turned over the coffee cups that were sitting upside down on saucers and Sue filled them. She was back in a minute with the two pies. "You're lucky, these are the last pieces we have. Seems like we can never make enough."

"I wish I was that popular," Howdy said digging into his piece with a fork.

"What do you mean?" Sue asked. "It seems like everyone who comes in here has seen your play and they all liked it, including me and I'm more a movie person. Must be the Hollywood in me." Sue looked around the dining room. "I better get to our other customers before they all start shouting for Bea."

After Sue left, Harry said to Howdy, "I bet the only negative review you're going to get is from Wylie Boone."

"If he's not mad as hell I'll consider it the worse review I've ever received."

"Speaking of the devil..." Harry said nodding toward the window. "He just pulled up outside."

Wylie got out of his car after parking in front of the Pretty Good and walked over to the Suburban where he told his bodyguards to wait outside then entered the Cafe. It only took a minute for him to spot Howdy and swagger over to where they were sitting. When he reached the booth he said, "Howdy Hanks and Harry Bunch, two of my least favorite people."

Howdy looked up at Wylie and replied, "I consider it an honor, although I'm pretty sure it's a lengthy list. Whereas you're the only person on mine."

"You really didn't need to walk all the way over here just to compliment us on making your least favorite list," Harry added.

"Wylie's here because he didn't like his upgrade to a front row seat," Howdy said to Harry before turning to Wylie and said, "I thought you'd appreciate it so you could watch the play up close and personal."

"You mean that ambush of yours."

"I'll take that as a compliment coming from a bushwacker like you," Howdy replied.

"I didn't come here because of that. I just spoke with Jemma Lu."

"And she told you everything."

"Not everything. She left out who this son of mine is."

"Son!" Harry spat out the coffee he'd just ingested.

"He might be my son not yours," Howdy replied, calmly.

"Just tell me who he is and we'll find out."

"Didn't Jemma Lu tell you that he doesn't want to know which one of us is his father?"

"Yeah," Wylie nodded. "But she also said that you knew who he was."

"Only because he wanted me to know."

"That's not fair, Howdy."

"Since when has being fair been important to you, Wylie?" Harry interrupted.

Wylie looked at Harry and said sharply, "Mind your own business Bunch and stop butting in."

"You're the ass who butted in on our lunch," Harry muttered in reply over the lip of his coffee cup.

"Look Wylie," Howdy said. "Instead of asking me who he is shouldn't you be asking yourself why he doesn't want you to know who he is?"

"How do I know that he doesn't want me to know? I'm just supposed to take your word for it?"

"Nope, but I expect you to take Jemma Lu's."

"In fact, you can ask her yourself," Harry blurted out.

"What?"

"She just walked in."

Both Howdy and Wylie turned to the front of the Cafe where Jemma Lu was standing. Next to her was Will. As they started walking toward the booth, Wylie walked toward them, followed by Howdy. They met in the middle of the dining room.

"Leave Howdy alone, Wylie," Jemma Lu said. "This is between you and me."

"No, it's not," Will said, inserting himself between Wylie and Jemma Lu.

"And who the hell are you?" Wylie demanded.

"I'm the guy who kept you from getting the water you wanted..."

"This isn't about water," Wylie spat out. "Now get out of the way so I can talk to Jemma Lu."

"I also drive a minivan."

"What the hell..." Wylie shouted, balled his fists and lunged toward Will. Howdy grabbed his shoulders to restrain him.

Sue, who along with everyone else had been watching everything unfold, sprinted from behind the counter and stepped between Will and Wylie like a referee without a whistle. "This isn't some Wild West saloon," she declared. "So, either sit down and talk quietly or go outside and have your show down."

"More like a shout down," Harry cracked from behind Howdy.

"Sue's right," Jemma Lu said. "Let's all sit down and discuss this like adults and not high school teenagers."

Everyone but Harry followed Jemma Lu to the booth where he and Howdy had been sitting. Harry figured this was something he shouldn't be butting in on so he asked Tom if he could join him at his booth. "Sure, Tom said. Can you tell me what's going on? Like who's this guy that's got Wylie Boone all riled up?"

"Search me, Tom. I've only seen him once and that was at the Last Ditch. I was having a drink with Ari Nakos, who's a new professor of philosophy at the College, and this guy was sitting at the bar next to us and claimed that Wylie was after all of Picketwire's water."

"Guess he was right," Tom said.

"Now," Jemma Lu said as calmly as she could once they were seated. "Let's discuss this."

"What's to discuss," Wylie said. He was perched on the outside edge of the bench opposite Will, who was sitting next to Jemma Lu. "This guy," Wylie pointed to Will. "Just said he tried to kill me with his minivan."

"He said he owned a minivan," Howdy, who was sitting on the inside of the same bench as Wylie. "He didn't say it was the same minivan and even if it was someone else could have been driving it."

"It was me," Will declared looking squarely at Wylie. "But I wasn't trying to kill you. I just wanted to give you a scare so that you would back off your plan to get control of all the water around here. I only discovered later that you were also stealing water and illegally growing cannabis."

"Maybe you were just trying to scare me off, which only shows that you don't know that I don't scare, but you're heading straight to jail anyway as soon as I tell the Sheriff."

"Do you really want to send your son to jail, Wylie?" Jemma Lu said to Wylie, then grabbed Will's forearm and turned to him, "I know I promised, Will, but...well... I am your mother and I'm not going to have you thrown into jail."

Stunned, Wylie said, "You're my son."

"I might be, as much as I hate to say it. But there's an even chance that Howdy is my father," Will said, nodding toward Howdy. "You'll never have a chance of knowing because I'm not going to take a DNA test."

"I don't need to know for sure. I made my fortune on a lot worse odds."

Will slapped the table with both of his hands and got up. He looked down at Wylie and said, "One thing you can be sure of is that I don't want a damn thing to do with you." Then he turned and walked out of the Pretty Good without looking back.

Wylie held up both of his hands and said to Jemma Lu. "Here I find out that I might have a son who can continue the Boone line, and he doesn't want a thing to do with me."

"You left out damn," Howdy said, repressing a chuckle.

"You wanted to meet him and you have," Jemma Lu said quickly.

"I think he looks more like me than you," Wylie said to Howdy.

"In that case every time you look in the mirror you'll be reminded of the son who doesn't want to have a damn thing to do with his father," Howdy replied... "Unlike me."

"He may not want a damn thing from me but that doesn't mean he's not getting something."

"I don't understand, Wylie," Jemma Lu said. "What on earth would he be getting from you since he made it clear that he won't take anything?"

"He's not getting it from me," Wylie answered. "My great grand dad, C.W. put the ranch in a Boone family trust before he died. My Dad told me it was the family legacy and I'd get it when he died whether I like it or not. That means if Will is my son than I'm not the last of the Boones. It's what you call an offer you can't refuse because he can't give it away or sell it, so you see ..."

"He'll get the ranch whether he likes it or not," Jemma Lu said.

"Unless you can prove that he's Howdy's son, because he's mine as far as I'm concerned and I'm the sole Trustee so my decision is final." Wylie got up and looked down at Jemma Lu. "And I've got a whole gang of lawyers to back me up. So, you see, he and I are connected even if he doesn't want to have a thing to do with me." Wylie started walking away then turned and said to Jemma Lu. "And since he's your son you and I are too."

**THE END**











