

# WELCOME TO PICKETWIRE

By Tim Wintermute

## INSTALLMENT 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 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. Riggelman 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 the 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 dreamgirl?"

"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 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. "I've changed my mind about an audience, at least for what I'm going to tell you. 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 told 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. Going out on a date 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 young guy in his 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.

## **END OF INSTALLMENT 23**