

# **WELCOME TO PICKETWIRE**

## **INSTALLMENT 3**

**By Tim Wintermute**

### **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 Theatre Company 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 Theatre Company 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 Muller 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 than turned and looked at Ari. "Of course, I've never seen you before, either."

