

# **WELCOME TO PICKETWIRE**

## **INSTALLMENT 1**

**By Tim Wintermute**

### **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 flat bed 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 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. They 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, Lyle 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 Atchison, 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?”

“Its 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 I Pad 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's 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."