

WELCOME TO PICKETWIRE

By **Tim Wintermute**

INSTALLMENT 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. Still, he felt a twinge of gear stick envy as he watched Gretl's gloved hand grip the knob as she deftly shifted while they bounced along. Fortunately the feeling was fleeting, swept away as the Jeep came to a sudden 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 Riggleman puts it.” She looked at Will and added. “It’s the only thing Will and Riggleman 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 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 Basque’s 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 Shelah 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 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.

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