

WELCOME TO PICKETWIRE INSTALLMENT 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 your 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.

