

WELCOME TO PICKETWIRE

By Tim Wintermute

INSTALLMENT 15

FIRST EDITIONS

Even if all it was ever going to be was the one night with Pam that was sure more than Harry had hoped for if, in fact, he'd hoped for anything, which he hadn't. But, when he said goodbye on the front porch the next morning after breakfast Pam's reply was. "I hope it's not."

"You hope it's not what?"

"Goodbye."

"You mean?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

Pam walked up to him until they were almost touching and looked up, straight into his eyes. "Do I need to paint a picture for you?"

"No," Harry fumbled.

"Good, because I'm a sculptor not a painter."

"It's just that I'm still finding it hard to believe that...you know..."

"I'm not asking you to believe anything, Harry, I'm telling you that I want to see you again."

As Harry stood there speechless with a dopey grin on his face Pam pulled an envelope from the back pocket of her jeans and handed it to him. "Here's the answer to Howdy's question. I was afraid that I might wake you up when I got out of bed to write it, but you were sleeping like a log."

Harry hoped he hadn't been snoring like a saw. He looked at the envelope in his hand. "I'd forgotten all about it."

"Wasn't this the reason why you came to see me?"

"It was," he said. "But not anymore."

"Does that mean you don't want it?"

“Howdy’s the one who wants it, not me, I’m just the delivery man.”

Pam laughed. “Well, you’ve got some delivery, Harry.”

Hours later after he’d driven down the mountain and had almost, but not quite, returned to earth, Harry sat at the desk in what he considered his private office. Not in the bookstore or his home that he now shared with Carlotta but in an old, adobe ranch house several miles from Picketwire. It had also been a stagecoach stop for Francisco Medrano’s Picketwire Stagecoach Line. Although Harry had bought it as a storage library for his private collection of books because its adobe walls helped maintain the inside temperature at the optimum level for preservation, it had since become a place where he could retreat and reflect. There was even a cot where he could take a nap surrounded by books.

Harry stared at the envelope with Howdy’s name on it. Pam hadn’t sealed it. Did she forget, or did she want him to read it or did she trust him not to? This wouldn’t have been the first time Harry had stared at an unsealed envelope addressed to someone else, but they had all been ones found between the pages of used books that he’d acquired. Some letters were to people he’d never heard of in places he’d never been, but others were addressed to people in Picketwire. When he found one that belonged to someone he recognized he would return if they were still alive but the ones to people who were no longer living he kept. He did this after deciding that if the person had wanted members of their family to read the letter they wouldn’t have hidden it in a book. Of course, Harry could have destroyed the letters but since they’d been hidden instead of destroyed he felt that he had a fiduciary responsibility to preserve them. There were now hundreds of them stored in banker’s boxes in a section of the library and Harry felt like the caretaker of a cemetery for dead letters. There was a rapping on the front door. Harry picked up the envelope, pulled back the open flap and sealed it with his lips, then walked to the door.

“I see you found the place,” Harry said to Howdy.

“Thanks to your directions.” Howdy replied stepping through the open doorway. “If I’d followed Google Maps I would have ended up in the middle of nowhere,”

“And where do you think this is?”

“Beyond nowhere,”

“I wanted a hideaway.”

“I’d say it’s a hideout,” Howdy said as he stood with his hands on his hips looking at the shelves of books. “Is this where you stash all the overdue library books that you checked out and never returned?”

Harry laughed. “Actually, these all come from private owners.”

“You don’t have enough used books in your bookstore?”

“This is my private collection and I prefer to call them pre read not used. Many of them are rare books and a lot of them belonged to people from around here, including some from Picketwire’s founders.”

“Including the Boone’s?”

“Indirectly.”

“Indirectly?”

“I didn’t buy them from the Boone’s but they all have the Double B brand stamped inside on the back of the cover.”

“Ain’t that a hoot,” Howdy said, slapping his right thigh. “The Boone’s even branded their books,”

“Maybe they were afraid of book rustlers.”

“You didn’t rustle them did you?”

Harry laughed. “The only thing about them that’s been rustled are their pages. They were part of a larger collection of books that I acquired and inside one of them was a note from Wylie Boone’s father that makes it clear that he was giving them to the person I bought them from.”

“Can you tell me their titles? I’m curious what a Boone would read.”

“Sure. The note was in a copy of The Wind In The Willows and the other books are Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Peter Pan, The Jungle Book, Peter Rabbit and The Wizard of Oz. All of them are first editions.”

“I guess even the Boones were children once.”

“Except for Wylie. I think he skipped childhood and went directly to adolescence.”

“Where he’s been ever since. His development wasn’t just arrested it was incarcerated,” Howdy said, taking a book from one of the shelves. He looked at the cover then opened it. “How did you ever get your hands on a first edition of James Joyce’s Ulysses?”

“From Miss Bennet.”

“You mean our first grade teacher?”

“I see you remember her name.”

“How could I forget. In fact, I still remember how she invited all of us in the class to her house for some of her homemade cookies. She lived right across Fremont Street from the grade school.”

“Coronado Elementary. They tore it down three years ago after they built the new one over on Mesa View. Miss Bennet still lived in the same house and passed away just a few months after that. She was ninety two.”

“Hard to believe that our first grade teacher was reading Joyce’s Ulysses while baking cookies.”

“Not only that, it was a banned book when she bought it.”

“How do you know?”

“She told me.”

“And she gave it to you?”

“I bought it from her estate. She invited me to her house a year before she died. She was over ninety and still lived in the same place.”

“Did she serve you her homemade cookies?”

“As a matter of fact, she did and they were as good as I remembered. She also served martinis and they were the best ones I’ve ever had. Not that I’m a martini sort of guy. Anyway, Rosalind...”

“Wait, who’s Rosalind?”

“That was Miss Bennet’s first name.”

“I never thought of her as having a first name,” Howdy said. “And if I had, I certainly wouldn’t have guessed it would be Rosalind.”

Harry shrugged. “After a couple of martinis she told me I could call her by her first name. Her parents named her after Rosalind in Shakespeare’s As You Like It. She said she’d always called me Harry so now that I was a grown up she’d reciprocate.”

“Reciprocate?”

“That’s the word she used. she must have figured that I was old enough to understand a four syllable word. Anyway, she, Rosalind, asked me if I would buy all of her books when she died. Actually, it wasn’t so much a request as a command. She told me that her will called for everything she had to be sold and the proceeds to be divided equally between the Picketwire Public Library and the Picketwire League of Independent Women.”

“Miss Bennet was a member of the PLIW?”

“Not just a member, she was a founding member. To tell you the truth, Howdy, that didn’t surprise me. What surprised me was the amount she wanted for her book collection. Until she she showed me what was in it. In addition to that first edition of Ulysses you’re holding it included first editions of Lady Chatterley’s Lover, the edition that DH Lawrence had privately printed in Italy in 1928, and Women in Love, both of which were banned at one time. In fact, there were quite a few books in her collection that were

banned when she acquired them. She told me that a big reason why she was such a supporter of the Picketwire Public Library was because they never banned a book.”

Howdy shook his head and smiled. “And I always thought Miss Bennet was just a spinster school marm who made cookies.”

“I don’t have any homemade cookies but I can offer you a beer.” Harry said, walking over to an ancient refrigerator and taking out two long neck bottles of beer. He popped the caps and handed one to Howdy then pointed the neck of his bottle at an old easy chair and told him to have a seat.

After carefully returning Ulysses to its spot on the bookshelf, Howdy approached the chair. Bending down he pulled at some of the stuffing that was sprouting from the cracks in the leather. “It appears that this chair of yours has a bad case of mange.”

“I’d have a vet check it out but I don’t think upholstery is covered in veterinary science,” Harry said as he sat down in the old metal office chair by his desk. “Maybe I should just shoot it and put it out of its misery.”

“Well, don’t do it while I’m in it,” Howdy said.

I’ll have to get some special furniture firearm to do the job properly, anyway.”

Howdy sat down in the chair and took a sip of beer then asked. “How did it go with Pam?”

“Fine.”

“Just fine?”

“Mighty fine, actually. She even said she wanted to see me again.”

“And you feel the same way?”

“You bet, and if you saw her again, yourself, you’d know how stupid a question that was.”

“She didn’t want to see me, remember? You should be thanking me for asking you to be my messenger.”

“And the message was delivered,” Harry said. After taking a sip of beer, he put the bottle on the desk, took the sealed envelope and tossed it like a frisbee into Howdy’s lap. “And that’s her answer.”

Howdy picked it up. “Did she tell you what she wrote?”

Harry shook his head. “You’re the one who asked her.”

Howdy opened the envelope, pulled a single sheet out and slowly read. His eyebrows flared a couple of times before he carefully folded it and put it back in the envelope.

Then he took a long swig of beer as he tapped the envelope on one of the mangy arms of the chair.

“Answer your question?”

“It answers the question I asked.”

“Then you have the ending for your play.”

Howdy shook his head. “More like it thickens the plot.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“As long as it doesn’t become quicksand.”

EVER EVER LAND

Desmond hadn’t been on a date for a long time and he wasn’t sure if this even qualified. He’d suggested meeting Margaret again for a drink when they had met earlier that day in FRED’s and she had agreed. It was only a drink he kept telling himself as he sat looking out the window of the Last Ditch. He had arrived early so that he would be sure to get a table. That had raised the eyebrows of Shep Woolsey since Desmond usually sat at the bar where all the other lonely men hung out.

“I’m meeting a woman for a drink,” Desmond explained before Shep could ask. Then, realizing that it sounded like a boast, he added. “She’s new in town and I offered to help orient her to Picketwire.”

“And you picked the Last Ditch for your orientation session. That’ll be a change from the usual disorientation session that most of our patrons engage in.”

“She was the one who suggested it as a matter of fact. I was surprised that she knew about the Last Ditch.”

“You’d be surprised at how many newcomers we get here. We’re sort of a welcome wagon for people who aren’t on the wagon.”

“Here she is now,” Desmond said. Margaret stood just inside the door. Desmond rose from his chair and waved his hand and she walked over to the table with, to his relief, a smile on her face.

Desmond introduced Margaret to Shep who immediately asked. “Are you related to Arvid Knutson?”

“His niece.”

“Arvid used to come in here.”

“I gathered that from the Last Ditch trivia coupons I found.”

“He was a regular at our Tuesday night trivia contest. Winners get coupons that give them a fifty percent discount on drinks.”

“He had quite a stack.”

“Arvid took his Trivia seriously. He won a lot but didn’t drink much so I’m sure he had quite a stash.”

“I noticed that his name is written on the coupons. Does that mean he was the only person who could use them?”

“Sorry, they’re not transferable,” Shep said holding his hands out palms up.

“On the bright side, I won’t have to pay any inheritance tax on them.”

“Look, in memory of Arvid, your drink is on the house. Same for you, Desmond.”

Margaret didn’t order a glass of wine or something with an umbrella or an olive in it, but a long neck bottle of Sodbuster IPA. Desmond decided to skip his usual gin and tonic and order the same thing. After Shep dropped off the beers, Desmond asked. “How long are you planning on staying in Picketwire?”

“Uncle Arvid put a condition in his will that I had to live here for one year before I could sell the farm.”

“Why did he do that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I have to stay a year to find out,” Margaret said with shrug of her shoulders. “I quit my job so I really don’t have anything that prevents me from leaving Minnesota and coming here for a year.”

“You quit your job to come here?”

“Not exactly. I was working at a high tech start-up with a bunch of boys in tee shirts and hoodies and I was starting to feel like Wendy in Never Never Land and my co-workers were the Lost Boys with Peter Pan as the founder and CEO.”

“Reminds me of a lot of the start-ups I worked with in Silicon Valley.”

“Except the one I worked for was in Golden Valley, which is a Minneapolis suburb. There were only five people working there when I started and I was the only female. I took the job because I wanted to work in a start-up. After I graduated from college in St. Paul I needed to pay off my student loans so I went to work for large corporation for five years. As soon as I made my last loan payment I started looking for a different job. A friend told me about this new start-up that was developing a new Internet based product and I contacted them. Next thing I knew I was meeting with the CEO, who also founded the business and was offered a job. At first it was a really cool place to work at a start-up but after a while it began to feel like it wasn’t just a start-up but a place that never wanted to grow up. Its offices were even in a building that had once been an elementary school. Peter, which was the actual first name of the founder/CEO if you can believe it, thought

that if you were creating the next big thing you could ignore all the little things. He was able to convince investors that with just a little more time and money the big idea would take off, like they were Tinker Bell who could sprinkle the pixie dust that would make it fly.”

“Sounds like you got out of there just in time.”

“Actually, they announced they were going public last month and I would have made several million dollars from the initial public offering if I’d stayed.”

“Too bad you didn’t know.”

“I did know.”

“You did?”

Margaret nodded. “But, in order to cash in my stock options I would have had to agree to stay on at the company for another year and I had just found out that Uncle Arvid left me the farm but, as I said, there was one condition.”

“That you had to come here to live for a year.”

“Peter and all the Lost Boys thought I was crazy to leave and walk away from all that money. After all, if I agreed to stay on for another year in Never Never Land and I wanted a farm I could buy any one I wanted...except for one.”

“Your Uncle Arvid’s.”

Margaret sighed. “So here I am.”

“No regrets?”

“Not yet but, then, I only just arrived. Maybe I’ll stay here forever.” Margaret drained the rest of her beer, placed the empty bottle on table and said. “Gee, what if Picketwire is ever ever land.”

“Can I buy you another beer?” Desmond asked.

“You didn’t buy the first one, it was on Uncle Arvid, remember?” Margaret smiled.

Your teeth are as white as your eyes are blue, Desmond wanted to say, but said. “Okay, but the next round is on me.”

Margaret leaned toward him across the table. “You know what I’d really like instead of another beer?”

Desmond felt like his heart was doing cartwheels against his rib cage. “What?”

“Take a hot bath and wash my hair,” Margaret said, tugging at her blond hair.

“Huh?”

“You did say that your trailers have bathrooms and hot water when we met at FRED’s, didn’t you?”

“Yes, of course they do, with bathtubs and, it goes without saying that they are very clean. We also provide soap and shampoo. Premium brands made of all natural products.”

“I have my own shampoo.”

“You carry it in your purse?”

“No,” she laughed. “It’s in my suitcase in the car. When I heard about your trailer motel or whatever you call it...”

“Happy Trails RV and Trailer Park.”

“Happy Trails, right. Anyway, I went back to the farm and got my suitcase so I’m ready to check in.”

TWO RIDERS

“Two riders were approaching and the wind began to howl,” Sister M’s listened to the last verse of Bob Dylan’s All Along The Watchtower trail off into silence. She loved the song, and for many years she listened to the Jimi Hendrix version with his soaring guitar riffs. However, that version had been replaced by the one Sister Rosalie and Sister Wendy performed under the name The Lost Souls Sisters. Sister Rosalie’s voice transformed the lyrics into a soulful prayer and Sister Wendy’s fiddle solo at the end was a veritable transubstantiation. Sister M’s turned off the ancient Sony Walkman, removed the earbuds and placed them in the backpack that served as the briefcase. This was followed by the legal pad that she’d been scribbling on. Then she turned off the computer that she’d been using for the last several hours, engaged in one of her least favorite activities - legal research. At least with free online sites like Google Scholar she didn’t have to wade through volumes of law books. She looked around at the room she was in. It had once been the prison library. When they took over the prison it was filled with books and the largest section was devoted to the law. In fact, when she had examined the books it was apparent that they had been some of the most popular volumes in the library. She couldn’t help wondering how many jailhouse lawyers had sat where she was scouring the dusty pages of legal statutes, criminal code and case law for something that would get them out.

“Tony Medrano is here to see you,” Sister Sylvia announced. She looked at Sister M’s from her seat at the Librarian’s desk, cradling the receiver of the old black rotary phone that served as an intercom.

“Tell him I’m on my way,” Sister M’s answered, getting up from the library table.

After conveying the message and hanging up, sister Sylvia asked. “Have you chosen the book you are going to read?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“You don’t have much time.”

I would if you hadn’t picked a novella to read, Sister M’s was tempted to respond. “I suppose you wouldn’t consider stretching out Heart of Darkness a bit, would you? I mean, it’s such a great work that it’s a shame not to allow every word to sink in.”

“Well, I suppose I could go a bit slower to allow everyone to fully reflect on what Conrad has written.”

“Yes, it is a work that cries out for meditation.”

“Thank you, Sister M’s. I chose it because I thought we might benefit from something a bit deeper.”

“I agree. Although I think that Sister Rachel did a very good job with her reading of Bridget Jones’ Diary.”

“It was entertaining, I’ll grant you that,” Sister Sylvia replied then turned her attention back to the papers on her desk, a bemused smile on her face.

When Sister M’s entered the Welcome Center she found Tony Medrano standing next to a map on one of the walls. “Good afternoon, Sister I was just looking at this old map of the area that you have on display. I guess I hadn’t really noticed it before.”

“That’s because I just put it up this morning,” Sister Louise chirped from behind the counter. “Sister Beatrice spent some time studying the original. As you know, she’s an archeologist and supervises all the restoration and preservation work here. Anyway, Sister Beatrice was very excited about the discovery. She said it was in excellent shape considering its age so not much preservation work was required. Of course, this is a copy that we made. The original is safely stored in the archives.”

“Where did you find it?”

“If you can believe it, we discovered it in one of the cells hidden under the floor. It’s undergoing restoration work and when Sister Beatrice and Sister Melody, who is also a carpenter, pulled up the old plank floors, they found it. Fortunately, it had been wrapped in cowhide and with the dry air it somehow survived.”

“How do you think it got there?”

“Considering who occupied the cells, we think it’s highly likely that it was some inmates ill gotten gain, although who they stole it from and why they thought it was so valuable they would risk smuggling it into prison with them is anyone’s guess,” Sister Louise said, walking over to where Tony and Sister M’s were standing. “Whoever stole it smuggled it in with them and hid it in the mattress. Something must have prevented them from smuggling it out after they served their time.”

“Do you mind if I take a photo of it?”

“Go ahead, but you can buy your own copy.” Sister Louise pointed to the price sticker for \$4.99 affixed to the frame. “That price is without the frame, of course.”

Tony took out his wallet and handed Sister Louise a five dollar bill. “Keep the change,” he said.

Sister Louise reached under the counter and took out a copy of the map, rolled it up and then inserted it into cardboard tube that she handed to Tony.

“Thanks. This could be helpful with some research I’m doing.” Tony said then turned to Sister M’s. “Sorry that I kept you waiting but this could be really helpful in some research I’m doing.”

“As a matter of fact I need an excuse to get away from the research I’m doing.”

“In that case, I think this will be a pretty good excuse: Sheriff Riggelman brought Donny Buford in for questioning,”

“Who’s Donny Buford?”

“He’s the kid who picked up Zelda and our visitors in his pick-up after they escaped from the train.”

“Oh, that Donny. Zelda didn’t tell me his last name. Did he tell the Sheriff that he dropped them off here? I mean, I wouldn’t want him to lie.”

“He refused to answer the Sheriff’s questions.”

“How do you know?”

“Zelda told me. She said that Donny called her when the Sheriff pulled up in front of his house. She told him not to say anything without his lawyer present.”

“Who’s his lawyer?”

“Zelda told him that you were her lawyer so she didn’t think you’d mind being his as well.”

“Where’s Donny now?”

“At the Sheriff’s Department. That’s where they took him for questioning. When he told them he wouldn’t talk without his lawyer present they told him he could make one call. The problem is, Zelda didn’t give him your name so he doesn’t know that you are his lawyer. So Donny called Zelda and told her he needed his lawyer so she called me and asked me if I could pick you up and take you to the Sheriff’s Department and, well...”

“Here you are.”

“Right. We can both ride in my pick-up.”

“Well, I suppose we should get going so I can meet my client.”

END OF INSTALLMENT 15