

WELCOME TO PICKETWIRE

INSTALLMENT 24

By Tim Wintermute

THE CONQUISTADOR

It was four in the afternoon and the Conquistador Lounge was empty except for the bartender. Elise had left work early and was still wearing her low couture ranger outfit, although she'd left her Smoky the Bear hat in her jeep. She had never been in the bar before, which was tucked away like an afterthought behind the Picketwire House Hotel's ornate lobby. She noticed immediately that it was quiet with subdued lighting. Instead of the usual big screen television mounted on a wall there was a mural. It was lit with lights recessed in the ceiling and depicted an armor clad conquistador on his horse pointing at the mythical Seven Cities of Gold. They seemed to float on top of a distant mesa. Elise ordered a margarita from Raul the bartender, whose name was embroidered on the red vest he was wearing. She told Raul that she was there to meet someone. He nodded as if a lone woman in the bar in the middle of the afternoon dressed as a ranger needed no explanation. Elise walked over to the middle of three banquettes that faced the mural and sat down at one end of the curved, black leather bench. A minute later Raul placed the margarita as well as a small bowl of chili coated peanuts in front of her and then walked back to the bar.

Elise took a sip of her margarita and looked at the mural that was now directly in front of her. She couldn't help noticing that the conquistador resembled Tony. She wondered if he picked this place to meet so she would have to look at his dead ringer on horseback. Elise smiled and in a low voice started singing the chorus of the Carly Simon song *You're So Vain*. It was a song that described the guy she had dated prior to Tony. So far she hadn't noticed that trait in him and, thankfully, she didn't miss it one bit. Of course, they'd only been out on one date so...Suddenly she was interrupted by Tony's voice. "What are you singing?" Elise looked up. He was standing next to the banquette.

Elise hoped it was dark enough to hide her blush. "I didn't realize I was singing out loud. Just keeping myself company, that's all. She scooted over to make room for him on the bench. There was a moment of awkwardness as they both debated whether to kiss. After all, they had already been on their first date the night before. Still, it was a public place even if the only other person there was the bartender. They settled for pecks on the cheeks instead.

"Sorry I'm late," Tony apologized.

Elise nodded her head at the mural. "It's given me time to admire your conquistador doppelganger."

Tony smiled broadly. "That's my great grandfather, Miguel. I guess there is a family resemblance."

"How did your great grandfather end up on a mural in a bar?"

"Owning the hotel had something to do with it," Tony answered just as Raul set a bottle of Dos Equis and a glass on the table in front of him.

After Raul walked back to the bar, Elise asked. "Your great grandfather owned the Picketwire House?"

"Miguel built it to serve the passengers on the Picketwire Railroad that he also owned. When his son, my grandfather Alejandro, sold the railroad to the Acheson Topeka and Santa Fe he kept the hotel. Our family still owns it."

"Is that why you wanted to meet here, because you can get free drinks?" Elise said, jiggling her margarita.

Tony smiled and shook his head slowly. "The drinks are not free."

"So we're going Dutch?"

"We're going Tony Medrano. Besides, the family business doesn't allow for family freebies. If we want something from the business then we have to work for it. In this case, I'd probably have to wash dishes or something like that."

"Why didn't you go into the family business?" Elise asked.

"That's better told over a long dinner than a couple of drinks."

"Why not come over to my place for dinner. I'll cook."

"I'll wash the dishes."

They clicked their glasses. After sipping her drink, Elise asked, "Why did your great grandfather want to be painted as a conquistador?"

"There's a story behind it, obviously. It seems that Miguel caught polio when he was in his twenties and although he was lucky to survive apparently he didn't see it that way. He'd have to use crutches to walk for the rest of his life and as far as he was concerned being crippled was worse than being dead. Apparently, he felt that someone who had to use crutches could never be a real man. As a good Catholic...maybe good is an overstatement, but he was a Catholic, he believed that if he committed suicide he'd go to hell. So, as my Dad

puts it, he started riding horses as if he was hell-bent for leather. I mean, he didn't have to worry about being crippled if he was thrown and he wouldn't be damned to hell if he was killed. Anyway, what he discovered was you not only don't use crutches when you're riding a horse, you can be as good a rider as anyone with two good legs. It turned out that he was not only as good as, he was better than most. He became one of the best horseback riders in the County, which is saying a lot. In fact, he competed in the Mexican charro competitions that are part of the Picketwire Rodeo and won a lot of them. He even had a portrait painted of him on his horse, Esperanza dressed in his charro outfit with the big sombrero and vest."

"Why isn't that one of your great grandfather hanging in the hotel instead of this mural of him dressed as a conquistador?"

"Apparently that was the original idea, but the story is that when he saw a sketch for this mural that had been commissioned for the hotel he changed his mind. Instead he asked the muralist, Manuel Vargas from Mexico City, to make some changes including putting his face on the conquistador." Tony waved at the mural. "I forgot to mention that this wasn't a bar then. It was part of the Hotel's lobby so everyone who came in the front door immediately saw the mural. In the nineteen fifties they decided they needed a bar and they walled this off from the lobby to create this space. Naturally, they named it the Conquistador Lounge because of the mural. By that time all the people who would have recognized the conquistador as my great grandfather were long dead. The charro portrait ended up in our family home, Hacienda Medrano."

"I can imagine the impression this mural must have made when it was in the lobby. If he didn't want to be seen as a crippled person this certainly does that."

"Yes, and that's the story that was passed down, but now..."

"But now what?"

"But now I think there's more to the story and that's why I wanted to meet here." Tony got up and walked over to the mural and stood there like a teacher in front of a blackboard. "I didn't notice this until yesterday when I came here for a beer after meeting with my Dad." He extended his right hand toward the conquistador's outstretched arm. "You think the conquistador is pointing at the seven cities of gold, right?"

"Yes."

"But as we know the Seven Cities of Gold didn't really exist." Tony moved his arm and pointed his hand at the cities. "They were a mirage."

"A mirage of mud would be a better way of putting it since all the conquistadors found were pueblos made of adobe, not gold."

“Exactly. No cities of gold exist,” Tony said, then lowered his hand to the mesa on which the seven cities rested. “But this mesa does.”

“It’s Mesa del Oro on the Double B Ranch,” Elise answered. “Oro means gold in Spanish so it makes sense that the painter used that mesa like a pedestal for the mythical seven cities of gold.”

Tony sat back down beside Elise and said. “That does make sense and that’s why everyone thinks that’s the reason. But what if it’s been positioned on top of the mesa for another reason and that’s because the mesa is what the conquistador, my great grandfather, is really pointing at?”

Elise looked at the mural, then sipped her margarita and turned to Tony. “Okay, I give up, why is he pointing at the mesa?”

“The Mesa del Oro is on the Double B Ranch, right?”

“Right,” Elise replied.

“And that means it’s also part of the land that was originally included in the Medrano land grant according to the map that my great, great grandfather, Don Francisco claimed was stolen.”

“So what you’re saying is that Miguel isn’t just physically pointing he’s also pointing this out?”

“Your got it,” Tony said as if she’d found the prize in a box of Cracker Jacks. “You know, I’ve probably looked at this mural hundreds of time but didn’t see what Miguel was really doing but now it’s obvious.”

Elise nodded her head in agreement. “But why did your great grandfather want to point this out in a mural that was prominently displayed in the lobby of this hotel?”

“Because he wanted someone to see it.”

“Who?” Elise asked.

“The people who stole the map and, as a result, the Medrano land.”

“And you know who they are or were?” Elise pressed Tony.

Tony looked at Elise and explained, “I learned from Sister Beatrice that the cell where they found the map had been occupied by a convict named Rufus Ryder. He called himself Ruf Ryder, I kid you not. Anyway, it turns out that Ryder was convicted of stealing from the Double B Ranch.”

“You think he stole the map from the Double B? Couldn’t this convict just as well have stolen it from Don Francisco and just kept it?”

Tony shook his head. “Don Francisco said the map was stolen in 1850 and the convict wasn’t even born until 1860 so he would have had to have stolen it from the Double B. Not that it would have been listed among the items stolen. The last thing the Boones would want to claim is that this map was part of the property that was stolen from them, because they would be admitting that they stole it. Of course, all of that is just circumstantial because there’s no direct evidence that Ryder stole the map or that it was Ryder who even hid the map and not some other convict who occupied that cell.”

“If this mural is Miguel’s way of accusing the Boones of stealing the map and, as a result, the land did he somehow know that the map had been stolen from the Double B by this Ryder character and was hidden in a cell at Purgatory Penitentiary?”

“No, I don’t see how he could have known that,” Tony let out a sigh. “But he did have some other evidence that his father, Don Francisco, passed on to him. Only he couldn’t make it public. I only found out about it yesterday from my Dad when I told him what I’d found out about the map.”

“What is it?” Elise asked.

“I can’t tell you. In fact, no Medrano can tell anyone.”

“Why not?”

“It’s got to do with our family honor: About keeping our word. I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you anything more than that. My Dad made it clear that as far as we Medrano’s are concerned the case is closed.” Tony leaned forward toward the mural. “Miguel up there could only accuse them indirectly in a mural because our Medrano family honor wouldn’t allow him to say what happened between Don Francisco and C.W. Boone. Anyone looking at the mural today wouldn’t even know that’s Miguel Medrano, my great grandfather in that conquistador outfit, much less what he’s really pointing at and why. It’s just some background decoration, like wallpaper.”

“It’s hardly wallpaper,” Elise said. “You know, it reminds me of the pictographs drawn on the rock walls in the Park. They were also intended to communicate a message. The prehistoric people the message was intended for understood it but for the people who visit the park today, they’re just ancient decorations.”

“Unless they hear your talk. I know the people on my tours tell me that they see the pictographs differently after hearing you.”

“They also want me to translate what the pictographs are saying. Of course, we don’t know for sure because there’s no Rosetta Stone that we can use to decipher them.”

"I really like the way you turn the tables and ask them what they think the pictographs are saying. Especially, when you tell them it's their opportunity to solve a mystery."

"Some of the things that visitors suggest are quite plausible based on what we know from research so who knows? It's sort of like crowd sourcing. Although in the case of your tour groups it would be tour sourcing."

"Tour sourcing," Tony repeated. "I like it."

"You know," Elise said laughed. "I can see you up there instead of your great grandfather only you're leading one of your tours. It would be called the Mystery of Mesa del Oro or something."

"That's it, Elise" Tony suddenly said, slamming the glass down, sending a wave of Dos Equis onto the tabletop.

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you over dinner."

DRIVE-IN

Jemma Lu took a sip of the Chamomile tea and placed the cup back on the Formica tabletop of the booth in Sue's Pretty Good Cafe. She had ordered Chamomile because it was supposed to have a calming effect, but she was beginning to think that she should have gone to the Last Ditch for a martini instead. When she saw Howdy at Taneyhill's Drug Store Jemma Lu was relieved that he didn't say anything in front of Milli that she'd ridden on the back of his motorcycle one other time. Relieved because she'd never told Milli the whole story about her breakup with Wylie, in particular the part about riding off with Howdy. The whole story was so, so surreal that Jemma Lu couldn't explain it to herself much less her best friend. Seeing no point in dwelling on the inexplicable. Jemma Lu had decided to push the entire episode out of her mind. And she had succeeded...until both Wylie and Howdy returned to Picketwire. Running into Howdy a couple of days ago at Taneyhill's and then meeting with Wylie at Tuttle Mansion yesterday was like having a carpet pulled back. Jemma Lu couldn't avoid facing what she'd swept under the rug three decades before.

"Ready?"

Startled out of her rug reverie, Jemma Lu looked up at Howdy. He had slipped unnoticed into the seat across from her. She took a deep breath and replied, "For what?"

"Ready for our ride. Remember what you said when I saw you at Taneyhill's the other day and asked you if you wanted to take a ride?"

"I remember that I said not now."

“Exactly,” Howdy grinned. “Well this is not that now, it’s the now that’s later.”

“What?”

“Look, Jemma Lu, my bike is right outside and I’ve got a helmet for you.”

“I asked if you’d meet me here.”

“And I met you here so now we can go for that ride.”

“But I asked if we could meet because we need to talk, Howdy.”

“I know, Jemma Lu. We can take a ride and we can talk.”

“We can’t talk while riding on a motorcycle.”

“We can talk to each other. We just won’t be able to hear each other.” Howdy laughed and then leaned forward over the table. “I’ve got just the place where we can talk.”

Jemma Lu put the helmet on, then wrapped her arms around Howdy’s back as he kick started the old Indian. The engine coughed then caught and she felt her entire body vibrate. Then they took off. She was glad she was wearing a helmet. Not because it might save her life but because it might save her the embarrassment of people recognizing her as they sped down Carson Street. In a few minutes they were out of town heading south on County Road 12, a two lane blacktop that was bleached gray by sun. Five minutes later they turned at the roadside marquee for the Star Dust Drive-In then slowly followed the gravel drive past the closed box office toward the theater’s large white screen before coming to a stop in front of the concrete concession stand.

“The drive-in?” Jemma Lu said after they dismounted and removed their helmets. Howdy opened one of the saddlebags on the motorcycle and pulled out a paper bag then pointed at a picnic table next to the shuttered take out window. “Just take a seat and I’ll explain.”

They sat down, side by side, on the picnic table bench facing the screen. Howdy opened the paper bag. Jemma Lu could smell the popcorn. “You brought popcorn.”

“What’s a movie without popcorn.”

“What movie?”

“Why, the one we’re going to watch, Jemma Lu.” Howdy tilted the open bag toward her. “Go ahead and have some.”

“I just see a blank screen up there, Howdy,” Jemma Lu replied, involuntarily reaching into the bag and pulling out a handful of popcorn.

“Perfect for projecting our thoughts,” Howdy said, helping himself to some popcorn. “We’ll both just look at the silver screen and tell each other what we see up there. Ladies first.”

“Okay, Howdy.” Jemma Lu looked hard at the screen. “Do you remember what happened between us thirty years ago?”

“After I picked you up at Wylie’s. How could I ever forget.”

“Yes, but also the week before that at the Picketwire Day Parade.”

“When you hopped on my bike: Surprised the hell out of me.”

“I was surprised myself. I was just standing there with Milli watching and I started thinking about all the Picketwire Day parades I’d seen. I was thirty then and the first one I can remember was when I was four. I realized that there was nothing that surprised me anymore. It was all predictable. Then it seemed like I was watching my life pass by and it was all predictable as well. That’s when I saw you at the end of the parade, riding on your motorcycle, this very motorcycle.” Jemma Lu pointed at the bike. “And that was a surprise so I just did something unpredictable. Something that no one would expect of Jemma Lu Tuttle, especially myself.”

Howdy laughed, “So you ran out into the street and asked if you could get on the back of my bike.”

“Then after the parade ended I told you not to stop and we kept going and ended up at that little place you were renting on Swink Street.”

“I invited you in for a drink.”

“We talked.”

“You did most of the talking.”

“There was some crying.”

“You did all of that.”

“Then we made love. We both did that.”

“If that memory wasn’t X rated I’d project it up there on the screen.” Jemma Lu poked Howdy in the ribs with her elbow, then leaned against him. Howdy continued. “I didn’t hear from you for several days until you called and asked if I could pick you up at Wylie’s.”

“You came over on your motorcycle.”

“We rode off into the sunset.”

“Happily.”

“Until you told me to get lost.”

“I did not,” Jemma Lu said, pulling away from Howdy and looking at him.

“When we got to your house you gave me a peck on the cheek and said you’d call. I waited a couple of weeks but you never called. I got the message and it was to get lost. So I left town.”

“Something came up that made everything more complicated. I needed some time to sort things out. I owe you an apology, Howdy.”

“I didn’t come back after thirty years for an apology, Jemma Lu.”

“Why did you come back?”

“I was thinking that there could be a sequel with a different ending.”

PICKETPEDIA

Jane walked quietly through the sleepy wood paneled reading room of the Picketwire Public Library, past the oak reading tables, illuminated by green shaded lamps, and took the elevator to the third floor, which was as far as it went. When she got off she walked down the center aisle between rows of bookcases that branched off left and right like narrow side canyons until she reached a gray metal door. Opening the door Jane climbed a set of stairs up to the library’s attic. Massive roof trusses crisscrossed the ceiling and crowding the space below were filing cabinets and metal shelves laden with boxes. Jane felt like she’d just climbed a mountain to meet a guru only this guru was in an attic instead of a cave and sitting at a desk instead of squatting on the ground in a lotus position. Jane made her way to the far end where Drexel Herbert, the Editor and Chief of Picketpedia, was sitting at a large desk back lit by a crescent window.

Jane stepped on a loose floorboard that let out a groan. It echoed in the cavernous like space and Drexel looked up, his thin face peering at her through the thick lenses of round wire rim glasses. He smiled, then pressed his hands against the desk-top, pushed down, and unwound his eighty five year old body until he was fully erect. Unlike a guru in a white robe, he was attired in a black suit, starched white shirt and black bow tie. He walked around to the front of the desk and greeted Jane.

“Jane Takamoto, what a surprise,” he said, shaking her hand.

“Mr. Herbert.”

“You can call me Drexel. I’m not your high school history teacher anymore.”

“I’m sorry if I’m disturbing you...Drexel.” It felt strange using his first name, especially since it was a strange name to begin with.

“Not at all. I needed to get up and stretch. At my age a stiff body can easily lead to rigor mortis. I usually do some Tai Chi rather than a stroll around my desk.” He took a clean, crisply folded, white handkerchief from the inside pocket of his coat, bent slightly and wiped the dust off the chair facing the desk. Folding the handkerchief, tucked it back into his coat pocket and waited as Jane sat down before returning to his side of the desk. “I heard that you had come back to town and that you are a minister at Picketwire Community Church.”

“You know, I have to admit when you went out east to college I never expected you to return, much less as a minister.”

“Neither did I. I guess that’s why it’s referred to as a calling not a career choice.”

“A calling, yes,” Drexel nodded. “That’s exactly what happened to me when I took this position several years ago. I was called to it. Only in my case I wasn’t called by God but by Paul Strand. He telephoned and told me he was finally stepping down as Editor in Chief after thirty years and had chosen me to be his successor. That was that. You can say no to God, but there’s no exercising free will as far as Paul was concerned.”

“So how is the work going?” Jane asked.

Drexel swept his hands in the air over the sheets of paper on the desktop. “The work is never ending. An encyclopedia is like a garden of knowledge that requires constant tending or it will be overcome by the weeds of ignorance. Somehow we’ve managed to keep Picketpedia blooming for over a hundred years.”

“And you’re the chief gardener, I mean editor in chief.”

“Yes, but we depend on our many volunteers, our Picketpedes, who, if you will indulge me in continuing with the garden metaphor, plant, water and fertilize. Of course, I have to prune with my editorial shears here and there. In some cases such as this one,” Drexel tapped the sheets of paper on his desk. “It’s more a winnowing the kernels of fact from the chaff of circumlocution.” He pushed the paper aside and looked at Jane. “I daresay, Jane, you did not come to visit me just to ask how my work is going.”

“No, it isn’t the only reason. I’m trying to find out more about a particular place and I thought if anyone knew about it, you would.”

“What place?”

“It was an internment camp for Japanese Americans.”

“You mean Camp Amache.”

“Not Camp Amache, but another camp.

“The only entry in Picketpedia is for Camp Amache.”

“I know, I looked, and I can’t find anything about it in the library or online, but there must be something on it somewhere. I know it existed because Bruce, that’s my husband, and I saw it. Well, what’s left of it. It’s on the Double B Ranch, close to Dinosaur Tracks.”

“I love a good mystery, Jane. Just let me contemplate this for a minute,” Drexel said. He placed his elbows on top of the ink blotter, pressed the fingertips of both of his hands together and closed his eyes. It seemed to Jane like he was praying. He opened his eyes, slapped his hands on the blotter and announced. “It is possible that we have something on this mysterious place.”

“You might?”

“Picketpedia gets many submissions that don’t meet our rigorous standards. You would be amazed at what we get.” Drexel laughed. “Based on the reports of paranormal activities and UFO sightings that are submitted to us every year we are completely overrun with ghosts and little green men. But, there are other submissions that would be accepted except that it just misses the bar because it lacks sufficient supporting evidence. Those we retain in case such evidence is discovered.”

“You’re saying that you think that something has been submitted on the camp?”

“It’s only a theory but one we can test by looking in purgatory. That’s what we call the files where we keep submissions that are awaiting final judgement. If we get the supporting evidence they are freed from purgatory and published in Picketpedia. If we get evidence that shows they are false they are cast into the flames of the incinerator. They used to be, anyway, but now they’re shredded and recycled. Instead of burning in hell they are reincarnated as a roll of toilet paper.” Drexel opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a flashlight and held it up. “It’s not the most enlightened place so we’ll need this for illumination. Now, let’s go see what we can find. If there is something it should be under confining spaces.

Jane got up from her chair and followed Drexel. After winding their way through rows of files and shelves, Drexel stopped at the beginning of a row of olive colored metal filing cabinets. He used the flashlight to read the small cards attached to the front of each of the filing cabinet’s four drawers. “Ah, here we are. Now if you hold the flashlight I’ll see if we can find what we are looking for.” Drexel rummaged through the files before pulling out one. “Eureka.”

“You found something?”

“The file is labeled Internment Camp.” Drexel pulled out a sheet of paper and an envelope. He opened the sheet of paper and said, “It’s a note from my predecessor, Paul Strand that says the enclosed envelope contains an anonymous submission received by Picketpedia on March 12, 1986 and should not be opened unless evidence is submitted that a camp existed on the Double B Ranch where persons of Japanese descent were interned during World War Two.” He turned to Jane and said. “I think this qualifies. Let’s go back to my desk so we can see what’s in the mysterious envelope.”

After returning to his desk, Drexel sat down, took a letter opener from the top drawer and deftly sliced the envelope open. He extracted several sheets of paper, gently unfolded them and read them. After reading each page he placed it on the desktop. Jane tried to read his face as he read but it was indecipherable. When he was finished he took off his glasses, wiped them, and put them back on.

“Well?” Jane asked.

“You know, Paul told me that being Picketpedia’s Editor in Chief is like playing god because you have to make the final judgement. I always assumed that it was an observation on our power to accept or reject what is to be included. However, in this case the judgement goes beyond the pages of Picketpedia. I imagine he was relieved he didn’t have to make the final decision in this case.” Drexel sighed and handed Jane the sheets of paper. “You can read it for yourself since the indictment is now unsealed.”

END OF INSTALLMENT 24