

WELCOME TO PICKETWIRE

By Tim Wintermute

INSTALLMENT 22

THE LONG GOODBYE

Not a creature was stirring in the Last Ditch although Shep, the bartender, was reading a book. That it was empty wasn't a surprise to Harry since it was two o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon. He couldn't remember the last time he had been there, or in any bar, for a drink this early on a weekday. He'd often had the urge to walk out of Bunch of Books and into the Last Ditch for a pint of beer instead of a cup of coffee at The Pretty Good but Harry wasn't one to give into his urges. Maybe he was only giving into a semi-urge since he was going to meet Howdy there. Still, as he left behind the bright sunlight and entered the cool twilight of the bar he felt like he was breaking some invisible barrier and he didn't regret it.

"Meeting Howdy Hanks here," Harry announced, feeling the need to explain his presence to Shep, as he sat down on a bar stool. Shep closed the dog eared paperback he'd been reading and picked up an empty pint glass as if Harry's appearance at that hour wasn't anything unusual. As he reached for the handle of the Hoppy Trails tap, which was Harry's usual beer, Harry cut him off by saying firmly, "I think I'll have a gin gimlet instead."

Shep's hand froze and he gave Harry a look of genuine surprise. "A gin gimlet? Where did that come from?"

"I've never had one before," Harry answered, less firmly.

Shep released his hand from the tap handle. "I've never made one before so I sure hope you know what goes in them other than gin."

"Half gin and half lime juice. At least that's what Phillip Marlowe says in The Long Goodbye."

"Who is this Marlowe guy and why is he saying goodbye?"

"He's a private detective and The Long Goodbye is a book by Raymond Chandler."

"No wonder I've never heard of him. I only read westerns," Shep said and held up the paperback. It didn't surprise Harry that it was Louis L'Amour's Hondo.

"I know, I sell them to you." Not only did Shep buy his westerns from Bunch of Books he was also the major contributor to their pre-read stock of more than eighty Louis L'Amour westerns.

In fact, Shep had bought and sold the same book more than once. It was as if he was engaged in some sort of Louis L'Amour arbitrage. "Anyway, ever since I read *The Long Goodbye* I wanted to try a gin gimlet. I just never had the guts. You know, real cowboys don't drink cocktails."

Shep's face erupted in a wide grin. "Don't worry about having the guts, Harry, because you're not a real cowboy." Shep poured the gin into a cocktail glass then sliced a lime in half and squeezed its juice into the glass. "Good thing I've got these limes for making margaritas." He stirred it and handed it to Harry. He watched Harry take a sip. "Well, what do you think?"

"It tasted better in the book."

"Well, you're also not a real detective, Harry, so maybe that's why."

"Marlowe wasn't real, either."

"Trust me, if you drink enough gin gimlets he will be."

Harry took another sip, pursed his lips and put the glass down on the bar. "He'll have to remain a fictional character, then, because I can't even finish this one."

"Your usual?" Shep asked as he took the glass and dumped the remaining gimlet in the sink.

Harry nodded and with an I told you so grin, Shep filled a pint glass from the Hoppy Trails tap and slid it across the bar. In one smooth motion Harry grabbed the pint, toasted Shep with it and took a drink. "I guess I'll have to settle for being a beer drinking bookseller."

"What's wrong with drinking beer?" Howdy said as he sidled onto the stool next to Harry.

"Harry just tried a gin gimlet because this detective he read about named Marlowe drank them."

"Phillip Marlowe in *The Long Goodbye*," Harry added.

"*The Long Goodbye*," Howdy motioned to Shep that he wanted the same beer that Harry was drinking. "If it wasn't already taken that's what I'd call my new play."

"People drink gin gimlets in your new play?" Shep asked handing Howdy a pint of Hoppy Trails.

"I leave gimlets and martinis and that sort of stuff to Noel Coward," Howdy said, taking off his Stetson and placing it on the bar.

"Who's no coward?"

"N O E L Coward," Howdy said, spelling out the first name. "He was an English playwright."

"Definitely not a cowboy. He's also dead," Harry said and then nudging Howdy in the ribs added. "Unlike Howdy here."

"Are you saying I'm an undead cowboy? You know, undead is what they call a zombie."

"A zombie cowboy," Harry laughed. "You should write a play about that."

"Probably make a better movie than a play," Howdy said. "I've been thinking of writing a screenplay. Shoot out at the zombie corral or maybe undead riders of the purple sage."

"Now that's something I'd go see," Shep piped up.

"Of course, I wouldn't put my own name on it."

"How about Louis LeMort," Harry said, pronouncing in French without the t. "It means the dead in French."

"Now, wait a second, Howdy," Shep said. "You shouldn't make fun of Louis L'Amour's name."

"Louis changed his name to L'Amour," Harry replied. "And L'Amour means lover in French."

Dejected, Shep looked down at his copy of Hondo and rifled the pages with a thick thumb.

"Here's to Louis L'Amour," Howdy said raising his pint in a toast. "A hell of a writer by whatever name."

"Damn straight," Shep answered, looking up. "And I bet he was also a damn good lover." Shep added with a smile and then walked back to the end of the bar where he resumed his reading.

After each of them took a drink of Hoppy Trails, Harry broke the silence by saying. "It's funny that you said the title of your play should be The Long Goodbye because you never said goodbye when you left Picketwire. You just rode out of town on your motorcycle without any explanation. None of us understood why you left like that."

"Neither did I. That's why I never said goodbye."

"And you came back because you've figured it out and this play is your way of saying goodbye."

Howdy shook his head and cradling the pint in his two hands, in the mirror behind the bar two old men looked back. "I write all my plays as a way to figure out something for myself. It's always amazed me that people also find them entertaining. I thought that by writing this play and having it premier here in Picketwire I'd figure it all out..."

"But you haven't."

"Not yet and time is running out."

"You said after you read Pam's note that the plot was thickening but that it might become quicksand."

"Yep," Howdy said then took another sip of beer.

"Do you feel you're in quicksand?"

"Yep."

"So what do you do now?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"They say that the way to keep from going under in quicksand is to lean back and relax your body and that you'll float just like you were in water." Howdy said.

"And that works?"

"I don't know. I've never been in quicksand. Hell, I've never floated in the water. Never learned how to swim."

"I mean does it work for you as a playwright?"

"When I get writers block that's what I do. Instead of forcing things, thinking too much, I try to relax, free my mind." Howdy said then raised his glass. "Beer helps." He took a drink and added. "Also talking about something else."

"Like what?"

"Like when are you going to see Pam again?"

"I won't see her here, she made that clear," Harry said. "The closest she'll come to Picketwire is to look at it through a telescope from her mountain."

"So if the mountain won't come to Harry then Harry goes to the mountain, to paraphrase Muhammed."

"Yep," Harry answered. "To paraphrase you."

They sat there in silence for a minute then Harry put down his beer, turned on his stool and looked at Howdy. "Funny how you and Pam both left Picketwire right after graduation."

Howdy didn't look at Harry but rested his right elbow on the bar, curled his right hand around the pint glass and looked into the brown brew. If Rodin had sculpted the drinker instead of the thinker Howdy could have been the model. Finally he took a drink, straightened up and looked at Harry. "I never thought about that. No big mystery, though, I just wanted to get out of town and get to Fort Collins. Spend some time there before classes started at State."

"Anyway, you came back for a while after college and Pam never came back and still won't. That just seems to confirm the rumors about why she left."

"That she was pregnant with Wylie's child and he told her to take a hike instead of marrying her."

Harry nodded. "It seems to be the only explanation. Except the way she responded when I told her that was what people thought makes me wonder if there isn't some other reason."

"I guess you didn't read the note that she wrote?"

"That note was to you not me."

Howdy laughed. "If you had read the note you would have seen that she wrote that it was okay for you to read the note. That she didn't want to keep it a secret from you. If I'd known you didn't read it I would have brought it with me."

"What did she write?"

"She wrote that she didn't leave because she was pregnant, like we all thought. Notice, I said we because I include myself."

Harry felt both relief at being wrong followed by guilt at having believed it in the first place.

"Then why did she leave?"

"Being in my play opened her eyes because her role was completely different than who everyone thought she was. People couldn't believe that she could play someone like that. Neither could she and that's when she started to see things differently, including herself."

Harry nodded. "She told me something like that."

"She realized," Howdy continued. "That she had been acting a part her whole life and playing that role in my play showed her there were other parts she could play: That there were other possibilities in her life. She didn't know what they were but she knew they didn't include playing Wylie Boone's Barbie doll."

"She said Wylie Boone's Barbie doll," Harry repeated, shaking his head in amazement.

"Actually, those are my words. I believe her words were Wylie Boone's girl. Playwrights can't resist alliteration. But, getting back to Pam's story, on graduation night she and Wylie were supposed to go to a party. She was going to tell him it was over after the party. Instead of driving to the party, though, Wylie drove them out to Sunset Ridge. You know, the place we called rendezvous ridge back in high school because it was where kids went to park and fool around. Wylie was driving the candy apple red 57 Chevy of his that he was so proud of."

"He still has it, according to the interview with him they just ran in the Picketwire Press."

"Some guys get overly attached to their first set of wheels. You could call it a form of auto-eroticism."

"What do you call the attachment you have to that motorcycle you've been riding since high school?"

"Maybe I should get myself cycle analyzed and find out," Howdy deadpanned.

"I think you should just get on with what Pam wrote in her note," Harry said.

Howdy took a drink of beer and then continued. "So Wylie parked the Chevy up on the ridge. Since it was graduation night everyone was out partying so no one was parked there but them. Before Pam could say anything about breaking up, Wylie told her that he expected her to still be his girl and be faithful while he was away at college. I believe he went to some party school in California..."

"USC," Harry interrupted. "Pam was going to go to Picketwire College, which is where I went but, of course, she never showed."

Howdy nodded and continued. "Pam wrote that before she could respond to what Wylie told he pulled her closer and tried to take off her clothes. She told him to stop but he kept going. Finally, she screamed at him to take his damn hands off her." Howdy paused for a moment to let the words sink in. "Then Wylie told her that he could put his damned hands wherever he wanted because she belonged to him. Well, Pam didn't take that lying down-those are my words in case you're wondering, and she told him that she didn't have the Double B brand on her and never would and that she not only didn't belong to him she didn't love him. In fact, she didn't even like him."

Harry shook his head in amazement. "Those were Pam's words about not having the Double B brand on her?"

"Yep, I couldn't have written them better myself."

Harry shook his head. "So Pam wasn't pregnant and she dumped Wylie rather than the other way around. Boy, were we wrong..."

"There's more, Harry."

"More?" Harry slapped both of his hands on the bar. "He didn't, you know?"

"No, but you remember how guys would give the girl they were going steady with their senior ring and the girl would put it on a chain and wear it as a necklace?"

"I never had a girl to give it to. I don't even know where my ring is now."

"I never bought a ring," Howdy replied.

"Go on. Pam gave Wylie back his ring."

"Pam was starting to take it off the necklace chain but before she could finish Wylie tore the necklace right off, took the ring and put it on his finger. She told him to take her home. Instead, he opened the driver side door, walked over to the passenger side and dragged her out. She fought back, kicking and screaming, but he punched her in the face, threw her to the ground and kicked her in the ribs. Then he told her since she didn't want to be with him she could be with the coyotes while she walked home. Pam told him she'd report him to the police but he just laughed and said they were outside Picketwire's city limit and in the Sheriff's jurisdiction. If she reported it he'd just tell the Sheriff that he was the one who broke it off and she was so angry she got out of the car and walked back to town. She must have fallen in the dark while she was walking back to town and that's how she got hurt. The Sheriff wasn't going to take her word over a Boone's. He might even lock her up for making a false accusation. And, if she told her family or any of her friends what happened he'd have the Boone's attorneys sue her and her family and anyone else she told for defamation of character. Then he got back in his car and drove off."

"The bastard," Harry said, clenching both of his hands into fists. "After attacking her and beating her up he just leaves her there to walk back to town."

"Yep, but..."

"But, what?" Harry blurted loudly. Shep looked up from his book and Harry waved his hand that it was okay.

"But," Howdy said. "Pam yelled at Wylie before he drove off that she'd rather crawl home through a pack of coyotes than get back in his car. That he was the rotten core of his candy apple red Chevy."

“Rotten core of his candy apple red Chevy? Is that Pam or the playwright speaking?”

Howdy raised both of his hands in surrender. “Alright, she said she’d rather crawl home than get back in the car with him.” Howdy answered. “But, she did write that when she finally made it home she didn’t tell her family what really happened. Instead, she told them Wylie’s version. She hated lying to them but was afraid that Wylie would carry through with his threat. She didn’t want to have to lie to her friends or anyone else about how she got the black eye and bruises so she packed up and snuck out of town.”

“That’s why she didn’t tell anyone what happened and left without saying goodbye.”

“She also said I could use what she wrote in my play. Maybe that’s her way of saying goodbye after all these years.” Howdy paused and then added. “A long goodbye.”

“Maybe it is, but what Wylie did to Pam is a hell of a lot harder to swallow than a gin gimlet,” Harry said, then downed the last of his beer.

DOWN ON THE FARM

Sue recognized Desmond’s SUV as it parked in front of the Pretty Good. For one thing it was a Range Rover and for another she had noticed it before. Who hadn’t. To be fair it didn’t look like it had just been washed and waxed unlike the ones that cruised Rodeo Drive back in LA. When she got in the back seat, after greeting Desmond and Margaret, she couldn’t help commenting on his choice of wheels.

Embarrassed, Desmond quickly explained. “This belongs to the company. My father insisted that I use it. Personally, I would rather drive something else.”

“Like a Subaru Forester,” Margaret cracked from the front passenger seat.

“Or a Toyota RAV,” Desmond said. “The hybrid, of course.”

Sue laughed and said. “As long as it’s not a Hummer, Desmond. But seriously, I didn’t mean to embarrass you, some of my best friends own Range Rovers.”

“They do?” Desmond sighed in relief. “It’s nice to know that this isn’t the only one in Picketwire.”

“Not here, but back in LA.” Sue didn’t add that they were ex-friends.

“Oh,” Desmond said, crestfallen.

"Anyway, I'm pretty sure it rides better than my Prius on country roads so thanks for picking me up."

Margaret turned and looked back at Sue. "I'm so happy that you agreed to see the farm, Sue. When you mentioned that you were interested in farming I couldn't help asking you if you wanted to see Uncle Arvid's farm. I mean mine."

After a half hour drive they arrived at the farm. Desmond parked the Range Rover in front of the farmhouse. They got out and walked up the steps of the front porch. Standing there looking out at the farmyard and the fields beyond, Sue asked Margaret, "Are you really thinking of farming this, yourself?"

Margaret pushed up the brow of the straw hat she wore. It had a broad brim that tended to droop, but it at least provided some protection from the sun. She'd found it hanging on a peg and was the only piece of Uncle Arvid's clothing that she kept. Not because the clothes didn't fit but because they weren't fit to wear even if they did. She said, "My uncle gave it to me in his will on the condition that I had to farm it for a year."

"I'm sure you wouldn't have a problem getting someone to farm it if the rent was reasonable."

Margaret seemed to weigh the idea and then reject it with a sigh. "My uncle's wording in the will was pretty specific. I have to be actively involved in farming."

"There may be some legal way around it," Desmond offered.

"Maybe, but I don't think that would be right. If I want to have the farm then I have to agree to be a farmer... for at least a year."

Sue asked Margaret "How many acres does your Uncle Arvid, I mean, do you, own?"

Margaret replied, "Four hundred and thirty five acres, but it seems that Uncle Arvid only farmed some of it. It looks like nothing has been planted on at least half of it for a long time."

"That will make it easier for you," Desmond said. "You've already cut your problem in half."

"Two hundred acres still seems a big problem to me."

Sue nodded and said. "Yes, Margaret, I'd say you've still got quite a row to hoe."

"At least I have a hoe. I've also got a pitchfork, a shovel and a whole bunch of things in that barn over there, none of which I can name much less know how to use. Wait, there is also a tractor. It's big and green. I don't even know how to start it, which is probably good because I wouldn't know how to stop it."

Desmond said. "If you can tell me what make it is I can do a Google search for operating instructions.."

"It's called a Farmall."

Desmond typed the name into his smartphone then announced. "They stopped making them in the 1980's so there aren't any operating manuals online."

Margaret sighed. "So it's a farmnothing."

"You could get a new tractor. Rich says that the ones they make now can even operate autonomously using gps guidance systems. The farmer just sits back and relaxes in the air conditioned cab as the tractor plows the fields."

"This one doesn't even have a cab," Margaret said. "Just a metal seat, a big wheel and a bunch of levers."

Sue looked at Desmond. "Rich probably didn't mention that a new tractor can cost between a hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand dollars. Even used ones can cost a hundred thousand."

"That's more than my Range Rover," Desmond said, shaking his head.

"Maybe we could hitch a plow to it and convert it into a range hoer," Margaret said, pulling Desmond's sleeve.

"Do you have water?" Sue asked.

"If you're thirsty I can get some from the house. It's from a well and there's no water softener so it's pretty hard. Apparently, Uncle Arvid liked his drinks on the rocks."

"Sorry, but I meant do you have water for irrigation? I know that a lot of the water rights around here have been sold."

"Oh that water," Margaret laughed. "When I looked through the documents that came with the title for the farm there were shares in something called the Purgatory Ditch Company."

Sue answered. "The ditch company owns a certain amount of water and a share entitles the shareholder to that water. Depending on the value of the shares the more water they're entitled to. The Purgatory Ditch Company has the rights to water coming from the Purgatoire River. I heard that the Boones have bought up a lot of the shares of ditches companies that get water from the Purgatoire. I can't imagine that they didn't know about this farm so your uncle must have refused to sell."

"I'm not surprised because from what I can tell Uncle Arvid never sold anything except what he grew. Just look at all the junk around here," Margaret waved her right hand in an arc. "And there's so much stuff in the house you can hardly move around. I've spent a week digging through it and I've barely made a dent. It's not like it's piles of garbage or trash, though. Everything is neatly packed together in its own area according to some system that only he understood. I feel like I'm an archeologist. Fortunately, he kept all his legal documents in a safe deposit box at the bank."

Desmond said. "You should probably find out how much water your shares entitle you to. It would be hard to do much farming around here without irrigation."

Margaret nodded. "I guess I've come from the land of sky blue waters to the land of blue sky no water. It really is complicated." She turned to Sue. "Sue, didn't you say that if you wanted your restaurant to be a real farm to table then you needed to learn a lot more about farming"

"Yes, I think I said that I've got the table part covered but not the farm part."

"Would that learning include actually working on a farm?"

"I don't think there is any other way to learn farming."

"I bet they have computerized farm simulators," Desmond said. "I can Google and find out."

Sue put her hand on top of Desmond's smartphone to stop him. "That's okay, Desmond. I'd rather get my hands dirty and learn on a real farm, not a virtual one."

"In that case, what about this farm?" Margaret said, planting both hands on her hips and looking at Sue. "I've got plenty of dirt. We could learn together."

"I don't know if two heads are better than one if neither of them know anything," Sue laughed.

"But you knew about the water for irrigation and you know people who have the expertise. I mean, the only person I really know is Desmond." She reached out and touched his left arm. "I don't mean that you don't know anything, Desmond."

"That's okay, Margaret," Desmond replied, putting his right hand over hers. "The only farms I know about are server farms where computers harvest data."

"I do know a farmer who practices organic farming using a method that is suited for the arid land we have around here and he's agreed to teach me his method of farming."

"You could practice what he teaches you here."

"No."

“Why not?” Margaret said, taking off her floppy hat so that Sue could not miss the look of disappointment on her face.

“I mean, no, he should teach both of us.”

Margaret broke into a broad smile and put the straw hat back on her head. “Then we could practice together here on the farm. When I was in school I always did better on tests when I studied with someone else.”

“The difference is we’ll have to eat our final exam.”

END OF INSTALLMENT 22