

ALWAYS STANDING BY

by
J. Burnett Smith

Chapter 1

All I really wanted was to get the hell out of town without a lot of explanations. I had taken a leave of absence from my job as deputy sheriff, and the rest was nobody's business.

It was sweltering in that small aluminum shed and I was barely aware of the familiar "horsey smell" my fiancée Cheryl always complained about. I buckled my loose spurs together, tossed in a small Durham bag of resin and rolled it all together inside the rough-side-out chaps. Two wraps around the bundle with my buck rein left a couple of feet of frazzled end for a carrying handle. I automatically checked off the main items I might need. Saddle. Bedroll. A small suitcase and a garment bag, already in the truck. Compaq laptop computer and cellular phone. No gun. I turned it in with my deputy badge. As usual, I would travel light.

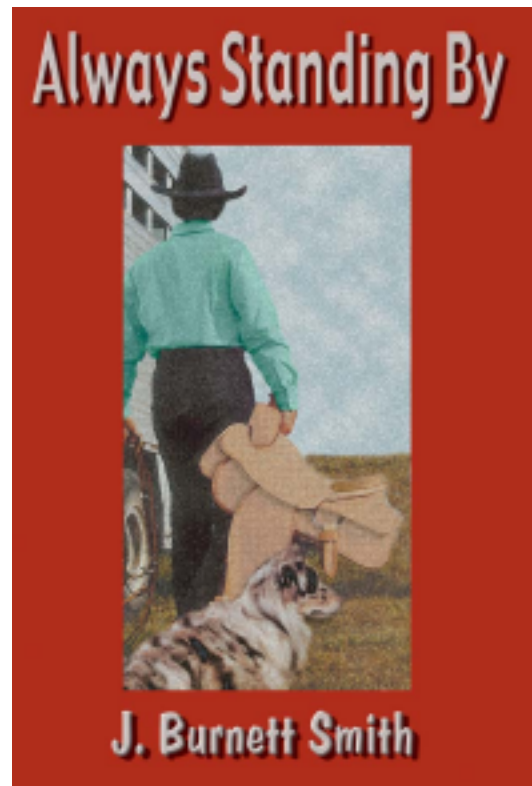
Smoky followed me with his gaze. In the hot desert heat it apparently required too much effort for him to raise his head. Unlike most Australian Shepherds that are extremely active, Smoky had a tendency toward laziness until something special goaded him into action. His pale eyes studied my movements while I checked the oil, battery and tires, but he made no effort to leave the shade of the porch. Then, as if on a hidden signal, when I appeared at the corner of the house carrying all my gear, he suddenly came alive. He raced to the truck and jumped through the open door onto the front seat. I never could figure how that speckled dog was able to sense that just packing rodeo gear was different from everyday routine, or that it was somehow tied to a change of location.

I peered in at Smoky. "Don't worry, you mangy mutt, I'm not leaving you behind."

His only response was a slight wagging of his stubby tail. It had to be hot inside the pickup, not a breath of air, but Smoky had settled in with his head on the carrying case of the laptop and nobody was about to move him.

My dad, Doug Hastings, always made fun of me for driving a "calico truck" spotted with assorted layers of orange, white, and black paint plus patches of gray primer. Some day I'll splurge and have it painted in just one color. He said if I'd quit spending my money on "gadgets", like my computer and cell phone, I'd be able to afford a decent car. I guess he didn't realize my main concern was that the truck was mechanically sound, mostly, and that was all I cared about. Besides, I like gadgets.

Smoky must have heard George Samuel's old truck



before I did. He sat up, abruptly, and glanced toward the north. Seconds later the clatter of a flapping tailgate reached my ears; I recalled George saying he had fastened it with bailing wire one time, but it still banged against the rear bumper.

I tossed my saddle and chaps into the camper shell, shoving the suitcase forward. It was then I realized George's truck was slowing down when he approached my driveway. George is an old-timer in our area who owns a small horse ranch about fifteen miles north of me. He always stops to chat on his way into town but I sincerely hoped just this once he would drive on by. We had already discussed his taking care of my horse while I was away, and I was in no mood to chat or answer any other questions. Not today.

Reluctantly, I glanced over my shoulder toward George's weather-beaten truck. He stopped and leaned out of the window on the passenger side, sweat-stained straw hat pulled down to shade his wrinkled face.

"Hey there, Brad! Where'd you say you're headed?" he called out.

I fumbled with the latch on the camper shell. This gave me a chance to choose just the right words without disclosing too much information.

"Thought I'd run over to Mesquite for a few days."

"Texas?"

"Mesquite, Arizona. Small town twenty-five miles northeast of Prescott. They hold a big stampede there around the end of August every year and this time it's just one week before Phoenix puts on a rodeo in their new indoor arena. I can spend some time with Doug and drop in on my cousin Gary in Phoenix. Haven't seen either of them for awhile."

"How is your old man, Brad? Doing any riding, or just roping steers these days?"

"From what I hear, Doug's okay. Mostly just team roping and staying out of trouble for a change. Want me to give him a message?" Everyone who knew us was accustomed to me referring to my dad as "Doug." They always said he was more like the kid in the family than I was.

"No, just tell him I said 'Hi!', I guess." George must have sensed that I was unusually preoccupied. He slid back under the steering wheel, and put the truck into gear. "Tell your old man I'd still like to work out a deal to sell him my spread if he ever retires. Forty years of ranching is enough for me." He drove away.

With one last look at the house, I climbed into the pickup. The fading adobe-colored paint was starting to peel around the front door and along the base of the house. I had planned to paint it this summer. The roses needed pruning, too. Funny, just the faint smell of those six scattered bushes made me feel almost like the last time I cracked a couple of ribs. That same tight chest pain. Too many hours went into babying those tiny sprigs through the hot New Mexico summers and unreceptive sandy soil. I knew I was going to miss the house, but that was about the size of it. The way I felt at this point, I would not miss Cheryl.

"Well, hell," I said to Smoky, "let's get on with it." I rubbed the soft fur on his neck. He cocked his head as if questioning the angry tone of my voice. I slammed the truck door, jammed the Ford into reverse, and backed out of the driveway.

I headed south toward Lordsburg without looking back. It was good that I had a full tank of gas so I could avoid any more encounters.

Route 464 was like an old familiar friend. I had headed out of Los Gatos hundreds of times on my way to a rodeo, or when I was checking out a lead for the sheriff's department, so by now I knew where each bend in the road would take me.

As usual, my radio was tuned to KMVR in Las Cruces. "Stand by me, stand by me..." blared out, pounding the words into my consciousness. Silly. Aren't there any other words? Just "stand by me" over and over and over. Ironic. Great words, but how many people really live by them? Not Cheryl, anyway.

At least I had escaped without any further explanation. One thing about a small town, by tomorrow most of my friends would know what had happened between Cheryl and me, but whatever was going on with Doug was nobody's business. It was just a coincidence that I had already taken a one-year leave of absence from my job when my cousin Gary Hastings sent me an e-mail from Phoenix saying I'd better take some time off and head north. The message read, "It's possible Doug's got hisself in a jam again. You'd best be here just in case. I'll explain when I see you..." I headed west out of Lordsburg on I-10. There is nothing more boring than driving miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles, so Smoky and

I periodically took "wake up" stops among the cholla, prickly pear and the tall saguaro sentinels guarding their own private expanse of desert. We chased each other around in the sand and played with his favorite toy, the Frisbee. This gave both of us a brief burst of much-needed exercise. It also broke the monotony of the long drive, but I had to be careful to find open areas where Smoky could fly through the air for his "catch" without impaling himself on tiny bayonets protruding from the thorny soldiers surrounding us. Smoky chased a few small green lizards that darted among the bushes. The air was hot and still. Our play sessions were short.

Somewhere along the line I switched the radio to KNIX in Phoenix. Just before we pulled into McDonalds' drive-up lane in Casa Grande, a news broadcast caught my attention. The droning voice mentioned that someone named "Mancuso", part owner of the Walsh-Mancuso bucking stock at the rodeo in Mesquite, Arizona, had been badly beaten the night before, and was in "critical condition." Doug was in Mesquite.

I rubbed the scar on my right cheek, a habit I have when I'm uneasy about something.

I picked up our order at the window and drove to a spot on the edge of town where Smoky could eat his share of the hamburgers before going for a run. I poured some water into his dish and settled back to sip my own Coke and thought about the news bulletin. Doug had not been in serious trouble lately, as far as I knew. Since serving two years of his three-to-five in the Arizona state penitentiary for killing a man in a fist fight, his behavior had been relatively good, despite the fact that he still drank too much.

"Suppose that man in the hospital is the trouble Gary's talking about, Smoky? Still no cause to assume Doug's responsible. Right?"

Smoky wagged his stubby tail. I hoped that implied an encouraging answer.