

An extract

COWBOY JUSTICE

On the border

Chapter 3

Have you ever been to those little scrub towns around Sonoita and Elgin, southeast of Tucson? Not like the Saguaro Cacti-littered desert landscape you might see in other parts of the southern Arizona landscape. No! This is Arizona wine country. Rolling hills, lush, high grass, good soil – and yes, vineyards – love it!

And no, I'm not a wino, but I do especially enjoy a nice, rich red with low tannin, and a little stronger blend. This growing area seems to respond even better than the soils of California for Tempranillo and Grenache, and the blend is quite delightful in the hands of a skilled vintner.

Ahh, but I digress, as the saying goes. I live here, that's why I brought up Elgin. I own 160 acres of grazing land outside – well, hell, I guess it could be inside Elgin. The population of the whole town can't be more than one hundred fifty, and that includes me, my hired hand, Jack, his wife, Julie and probably – for voting purposes, my dog, Skyler [Skye for short – except when it's census and voting time].

Why the hired hand, you ask? I'm only here on days off, and certainly not while I'm here in the hospital in Tucson. Someone has to look after the place in my absence. My plan was to turn my land into a paying opportunity. I bought a tractor, a mower, and a hay baler – going to sell hay to the local cattle ranchers. I lined up a few ranchers who promised to take all I could deliver, so that's where Jack comes in.

Jack is a war vet. He was down on his luck after Iraq and needed a place to stay. By this time I realized I needed a hired hand to help run my new business. That was nine years ago. Jack's the best business decision I

have ever made. I pay him well; he's worth every penny. He and Julie are the backbone of my little enterprise which Julie named the minute she laid eyes on it four years ago, when she and Jack started courting. She called it "*Thistledeew*".

Chapter 4

I sat in the Tucson District Hospital and Medical Center visitors' area for probably over an hour waiting for Jack. It was a pleasant enough wait. I meandered through the gift shop, picked up a book, and had it half-read by the time Julie walked through the door and spotted me.

"You've lost weight, Frank!" she said, hugging me. "I'll need to fatten you up with some home-cooked meals!"

"Hell, Julie, three weeks ago I was dead!" I smiled. "But I am ready for a real meal. I've basically been living on whatever I could suck up through a straw. Did you bring my clothes? I'm wearing some whites from the laundry room. I told the gal I'd return them as I found them – obviously creased on a mangle."

Julie laughed and handed me a shopping bag from a Walmart. "Everything you asked for except your brown Florsheim Oxfords, Frank."

"I know, I know. I was told they're in Forensics. So, Jack decided to let you out of the house?"

"Jack is remodeling the chicken coop. We lost two hens last night. Not sure if it was coyotes or illegals coming across. Skye set up a ruckus this morning and was going to track the culprit, but Jack made him get in the van just in case. Can't have you and your dog killed within the same month."

Skye was in the Econoline when we started for the parking lot; he saw me and started singing his strange baying yodel from the time we walked through the hospital doors, but at least he stayed in the vehicle, even though the window was rolled halfway down.

He was only a four year old mixed breed mutt, but in dog years he was of legal age to vote, and he kept the

coyotes and foxes from the chickens ... mostly. I waved off the keys that Julie offered and walked around to the passenger side.

"You're a good boy, Skye!" I greeted him through the window, "now scoot over! You sit in the middle, remember? You don't ever get shotgun. And no slobbering and no face kissing! How many times do I have to tell you?" I continued as the 75 pounder squirmed, trying to get my complete attention and sit in my lap.

Dogs, and I suppose, all critters are meant to bring smiles and a bit of happiness to folks, especially to those folks without mates or family, lonely people, shut-ins, folks maybe in a hospital or old folks' home without even so much as a two or three-sentence conversation with a fellow inmate. I made a mental note to do some visiting in such places... Hell, I only had Grog, come to think about it. Should have had a cat!

After several minutes driving southeast down I-10, Julie leaned over to take a look at the book I was reading. "What's that book called again?" she asked.

"You keep your eyes on the road, Missy! The book is good, but not 'to die for' as they say. It's a western called *A Ranger's Tale*. It's sort of a romance, sort of a shoot-em up, takes a few twists and turns. I'd recommend it. And, by the way," I grinned as I turned to Julie, "there ain't no *again*, because you didn't ask until now. [a pet peeve: what's your name *again*? what's it called *again*? -- but that's just me --*again*]

We had just turned off I-10, and were now on Arizona State Highway 83. "Yes, Boss. I'll read it when you're through," she said.

As we approached the ranch, a small herd of Pronghorn raised their heads and paralleled us along a barbed wire fence. Interesting species, Pronghorn -- an entirely unique breed, unrelated to what we common folk call an antelope. It's the second fastest land animal on earth -- only the Cheetah being faster.

In the 1800's this beautiful animal numbered into the

millions throughout the southwest – outnumbered only by the American bison. It now ranges in far fewer numbers all the way from Saskatchewan in Canada to Mexico and goes by various names. We have a subspecies here in this part of Arizona called the Sonora Pronghorn. Perhaps fewer than three hundred Sonora are left of the herds, and fewer than a hundred thousand Pronghorn, all totaled.

When I bought the 160 acres in Elgin after moving here from the bay area of California, I made a short study on the Pronghorn as I had a few on my ranch. They cannot leap as other members of the deer family, so are in essence penned in by barbed wire fences.

I shared the information with Julie as we continued the trip home. I suppose I could simply have kept quiet and continued reading, but my eyes needed a rest; my driver was still awake so I don't think I bored her to death. I was just finishing my dissertation when she pulled into our drive. "Hey! We're home!"

