

# THUNDER ROAD

COLIN  
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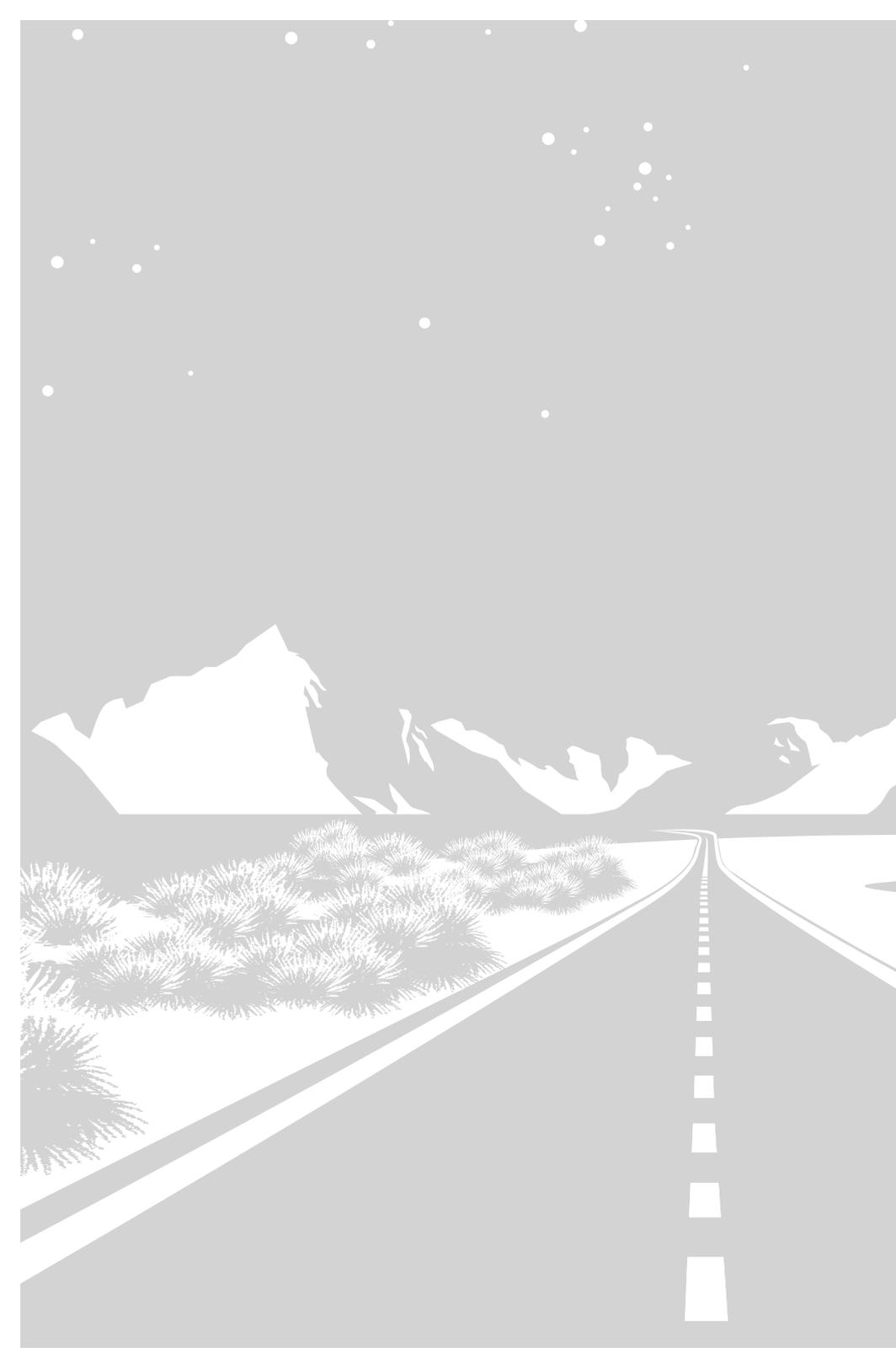


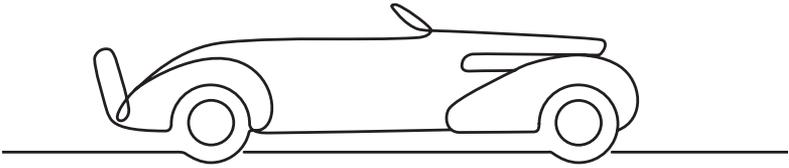
*For Elisa, who may not believe in aliens,  
but she believes in me.*











# CHAPTER ONE

JUNE 1947

A thin flicker of flame licked the blue enamel coffeepot as Jefferson Sharp stirred life into the embers of last night's campfire. He broke his morning stare and cocked his head as a shiver brought him fully awake. The herd was moving, shuffling uneasily through the wooly ground fog. Somewhere off in the predawn darkness, a mechanical whine spooled up, echoing across the ranchlands of the Rafter B. He shot a glance at the small oak where he'd tied Dollar the night before. The buckskin quarter horse flicked his ears and danced at the end of the lead rope, pulling the branch with him.

"Easy, fella." Sharp tried to calm them both, but Dollar pranced and threw his head. To the west, the whine increased in volume,

and the morning mist glowed with enough purple light that Sharp could make out the terrain through the patchy fog. Whatever had the livestock spooked was just beyond a small rise.

Sharp buckled on his gun belt, and his hand found his Colt. Not the six-shooting cowboy revolver of Gentry Ferguson's King of the West movies, but a well-used Army issue .45 automatic that had followed him home from the European theater.

All through that war, Sharp had explained that, yes, he was from Texas, but that didn't make him a cowboy. He'd walked the beat as a cop before the war—didn't own a horse, have a ranch, or ever slept out under the stars or tended cattle. So naturally, here he was two years later, camped out on a ranch with a borrowed horse, guarding cows.

He patted Dollar's shoulder as if that would settle the horse, then hiked up the hill in the low crouch that had been driven into him on too many mornings in the infantry.

When he was two steps up the hill, the earth rumbled with the tremor of aggravated shorthorns thundering away from the noise and light. Sharp had been a special ranger for the Fort Worth and Western Stockmen's Association since the war, but he'd yet to be involved in a stampede.

*Of course, it had to happen now, he thought. Before sunup. In the fog.*

He had no place to hide as dozens of terrified red cattle came bellowing over the rise. He scrambled back to the campsite. He could see the white faces on the lead pair of Herefords when he yanked the Colt off his hip and fired twice into the air. The startled cattle reeled and parted right and left at the gunfire, the herd splitting to flow past the campsite like a stream around a rock. Luck and the good Lord favored the ignorant.

Sharp shooed the last of the stragglers past as the adrenaline drained away. “That,” he said to the nickering quarter horse, “is enough excitement for today.”

The mysterious whine disagreed. Pulsing lights strobing red, purple, and golden orange rose from beyond the hill. The apparition moved over the ridgeline, and the fog glowed. Behind Sharp, Dollar screamed a whinny and reared, trying for all his might to pull the scrubby tree out of the ground. The branch cracked. Sharp dove for the lead rope and dug his heels into the damp earth before Dollar could bolt. Something was out there with the man and horse, and the smarter one of the pair wasn’t sticking around to find out what it was.

But the light show could move as well, and it did. The brilliant colors rotated in concert with the whine as it became a deafening howl. The hovering glow spun together into an intense white circle, levitated high over the hill, and disappeared into the morning fog. Instantly, the noise changed course and roared back over the camp. The lights flashed overhead, then vanished at incredible speed, leaving a dying echo and a breeze that moved the wisps of fog.

Sharp and Dollar stood frozen as whatever the hell it was blasted above them. They shared a look, and then the quarter horse went full rodeo, bucking, jumping, and twisting—anything to get out of this halter, off this rope, away from this tree, and back to the safety of the barn. Any barn.

It took five minutes of profanity and cajoling, but Sharp finally calmed down the panicked gelding. He took a good hold on the halter and led them back to the campsite. “Look, I don’t know what it is either, but I’m pretty damn sure it doesn’t eat horses for breakfast.”

Dollar’s wild eyes and flicking ears suggested that he was not convinced.

Sharp remembered that something else was out there. Sixty-four head of cattle the Stockmen's Association was paying him to keep track of. Now, they were scattered from here to Mingus, and he and Dollar would be all morning rounding them up.

He gathered his blanket, saddle, and tack and put Dollar together. He'd just slid his lariat over the saddle horn when a second set of lights and mechanical noise came crashing from the direction the cattle had headed. A heartbeat later, a Studebaker stake-bed truck followed by a stock trailer busted through the mist.

The truck swerved to miss the tree and scattered Sharp's camp all over hell and back. The left front fender just missed Dollar, but the rusting hulk still managed to roll right over the campfire and crush the coffeepot.

Sharp caught the horse between crowhops and swung onto Dollar's bucking back cussing a blue streak. He found his stirrups and the quarter horse squatted, then took off like he was out to win the Kentucky Derby.

Halfway up the hill, Dollar found his stride and charged into a rising sun rapidly burning its way through the fog. Sharp ducked down behind the buckskin's bobbing head and spurred again. The rustlers tore across the prairie, the trailer bouncing left and right as the cattle trapped inside bawled in terror. Sharp slapped Dollar's rump, and the pair thundered across the ranchland, gaining on the rustlers.

Sharp unlimbered his Colt and shouted for all his worth, "Stockmen's special ranger. Pull over!"

The answer came from the passenger side. A great bearded ox of a man filled the window ledge. The ox bounced along with the truck as he produced a Winchester and leveled the rifle across the roof of the cab, aiming at Sharp. The rifle cracked, and Sharp

yanked Dollar's reins, trying to put the trailer between them and the rifle. The truck swerved, exposing him again, and another round snapped off.

Sharp raised himself in the stirrups and unleashed his anger from the barrel of the Colt. He didn't care that at full gallop, firing between hoofbeats, he stood almost no chance of hitting the gunman, but his second round ricocheted off the cab and drove the ox back inside. The third shot tore the rearview mirror off the driver's side. So much for his expert pistol rating from Uncle Sam's army.

That was enough for the rustlers. The truck and trailer accelerated, the cloud of dust growing as it began to pull away. Sharp took aim at the front tire, and just as he squeezed off the shot, Dollar screamed and the world fell out from under him. The Ranger flew high over the horse's head for what seemed an eternity before slamming back down onto the hardpan prairie, sliding and rolling to a stop through yucca and scrub juniper, coming to rest in a stand of prickly pear.

Sharp lay there on his back, gasping to force air back into his lungs, slowly becoming aware of the pink morning clouds overhead.

It took him a long moment to get around to taking inventory. Both legs moved. He had a pretty good pain in his left shoulder. Might be a collarbone. He tasted blood but waved that off as a bit lip rather than anything internal. Slowly, he sat up. It was possible there was an entire cactus up his ass.

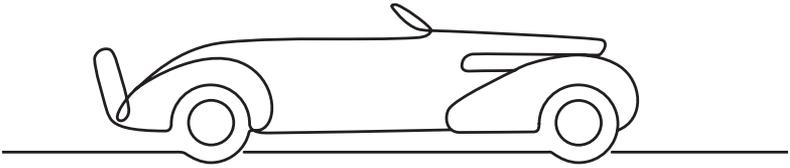
In the dusty distance, brake lights came on as the rustlers found the gap they'd cut in the barbed wire fence. Sharp groaned his way to his feet and shook his head, watching the truck and trailer turn onto the highway and head off toward town. He pulled a paddle of

prickly pear from his backside and retrieved his crushed Resistol. As he slapped the battered hat against his leg, he turned, and a bad situation got worse.

Twenty feet behind him, Dollar was down, blowing air in great heaves. He thrashed, unable to get up. Sharp approached the broad buckskin. He and Dollar had their disagreements, but the big fellow didn't deserve this. His right foreleg had found a hole. Snake, armadillo, prairie dog. Didn't matter.

Sharp knelt. "Settle down, dammit. You're only making it worse." He put a hand to the horse's sweating neck and patted him. Dollar grunted through the pain.

The white cannon bone of the broken leg stabbed clear through the hide. He was a good horse, and he was in agony. Sharp checked his Colt then wrestled with his conscience. He walked a small circle, screwing up his courage and measuring his humanity, then put his last round into the suffering animal.



## CHAPTER TWO

Sharp limped the three miles back to the bunkhouse loaded down with a saddle, tack, bedroll, and busted-up camp gear. He had hiked farther, carrying more, and West Texas was significantly easier going than the Italian Alps had been, but his heaviest load was the guilt of putting down a good horse.

The situation hadn't improved two hours later as he explained events to Howard Estes, the foreman at the Rafter B. The headquarters building had indoor plumbing, so Estes stood on one side of a bathroom door while inside, Sharp twisted around with his pants around his knees, trying to remove the remaining prickly pear needles.

"So, they got away."

“My horse went down, Howard, there wasn’t much I could do.”

“And now I gotta shake loose a couple of hands to go mend the wire.”

“I’d have one or two of ’em keep watch along that northeast stretch. These guys might be back.” Sharp winced as he plucked a particularly deep set barb.

There was a harumph from the far side of the door. “Why exactly am I paying the Association if I’ve got to supply my own men to ride the fence?”

Sharp buckled his belt and opened the door. “The Association is law enforcement and investigation, not a security patrol. You know that, Howard.”

“I know it’s cost me most of a dozen yearlings on top of your too-damn-expensive dues. I aim to give Lavelle a piece of my mind about this.”

He gave Sharp a nod and left him to find his own way out.

Relieved of his duty, Sharp loaded his gear into the trunk of his dusty blue LaSalle coupe. He’d collected enough poker winnings on the troop transport ship home to afford a good used car. Most of the men had gotten back pay before shipping out, and that made for plenty of easy marks if a guy understood the finer points of stud poker.

Sharp still had winnings from that trip stashed in a safe deposit box at the bank. He gingerly lowered himself onto the upholstery, thanking the interior designers at General Motors for the cushion on his abused backside. It was a long, slow drive back to town.

A couple of empty parking spaces waited in front of the brand-new building that housed the Fort Worth and Western Stockmen’s Association. The jazzy architectural style was topped by a flat roof, supported by picture windows that angled down to a knee-high

wainscot of stacked limestone. A pale green color someone told him was called “sage” framed the glass. The new headquarters building was just one more thing Sharp didn’t particularly care for about the Association. In fact, about the only thing he did like was the paycheck.

A small cloud of range dust followed him through the front door and into the cavernous room packed with secretaries and stenographers hammering away at the cattle registrations and auction transactions that oiled the cash machine of the Association. Across the small sea of bobbing bouffants, E. G. Lavelle spotted him from behind the enormous window that overlooked his domain.

“Sharp! Get in here.” Lavelle never left his throne. Sharp doubted the Executive Director of the Association could hoist his bulk out of the worn leather.

The bald, well-fed director stuffed papers into a manila folder and ignored Sharp as he entered. Finally, he dumped an inch of ash off his cigar and stabbed the foul-smelling stogie at the wooden chairs across from his massive desk.

“Sit down.” He stuffed the stogie back under his famous walrus mustache and wallowed it around as he spoke. “I just got my ass chewed by Howard Estes at the Rafter B.” He jerked a thumb at the telephone.

Sharp tried not to wince in front of his father-in-law as he eased his butt onto the hard Ranch Oak chair.

“They got away. There’s two of ’em. They’re using a truck and trailer and hitting before dawn. I think it’s a Studebaker and—”

“You think? You’re not getting paid to think. You’re getting paid to stop cattle thieves.” Lavelle’s volume increased, and he punched the smoky air with his cigar. “Why can’t you do that? Stop them! Act, man! Don’t just think.”

“Well, there was something else, a light . . .”

“Did it steal any cattle? No? What the hell are you worried about it for?” The ladies in the typing pool tried hard to look like they weren’t looking.

“This was unusual—”

Lavelle held up a chubby hand to stop him.

“Unusual. People have been stealing cattle for centuries, and you manage to find something unusual about it? You know, Sharp, I told Evelyn that I wasn’t sure you were cut out for this. I told her you ought to go back to being a cop. That sitting around the Blackstone eating Spudnuts probably suited you more than the real, genuine work involved in being a livestock detective.” Lavelle’s words were even and slow now. Explaining the obvious to a child.

Sharp set his jaw. “E. G., I’ve had a reasonably shitty day. I’ve been in a stampede, hiked three miles, and had to put a horse down. I—”

“A horse? Dollar?”

“We were after the truck—”

“My Dollar?”

An unsettling silence followed. Lavelle finally leaned back and took a long draw on his cheap Tampa cigar. He released a cloud of disappointment into the air and spit an offending particle of tobacco at the wall.

“I’m giving your cases to Smitty. He gets arrests.”

“Of course he does!” Sharp threw up his hands. “But how many of those arrests end up in convictions? Arrests are easy. Getting them to stick and put people away is hard.”

Lavelle studied his cigar. “That’s what you don’t understand about this business. An arrest takes these guys off the streets. Puts up good, visible numbers. That’s what our membership wants.

They don't care about convictions. They just don't want these sons of bitches stealing cattle. You don't get that."

"I want to put them away."

"That's not the game." Lavelle heaved his bulk to one side and dug out his wallet, then threw a ten-dollar bill on the desk. "Go home. Take Evelyn to a nice dinner. We'll talk about this tomorrow."

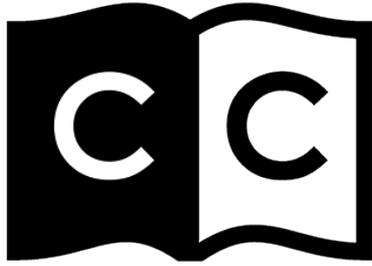
Sharp glared at the cash. "Let's talk about it today. What is it you aren't saying?"

Lavelle dumped another load of cigar ash and smoothed the enormous mustache. "Cattle get stolen right out from under your nose. I can't have that. The membership can't have that."

Sharp pulled a battered pack of Lucky Strikes from his shirt pocket and thumbed his Zippo, his hands trembling at the insult.

"Now, I have to figure out what to do with you. And I don't have time to do that right now." Lavelle reached for the next ever-present folder to dismiss his son-in-law.

Sharp took a drag of his Lucky and blew the smoke over his head to fight the cigar. He lost. He stood to walk out and stopped. Then turned with a glare and snatched the ten-spot off the desk.



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When an Army Air Force major vanishes from his Top Secret job at the Fort Worth airbase in the summer of 1947, down-on-his-luck former Ranger Jefferson Sharp is hired to find him, because the major owes a sizable gambling debt to a local mobster. The search takes Sharp from the hideaway poker rooms of Fort Worth's Thunder Road, to the barren ranch lands of New Mexico, to secret facilities under construction in the Nevada desert.

Lethal operatives and an opaque military bureaucracy stand in his way, but when he finds an otherworldly clue, Sharp begins to connect the dots. And those dots draw a straight line to a conspiracy aiming to cover up a secret that is out of this world—literally so.



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