

Mountain Shadows excerpts

Summer, 1925

### Chapter 33

Excitement quivered in the dust motes of Charlie Rauch's barn. Joe was about to make his first booze run in his Cadillac and the Dasset's entire rum-running gang had assembled to see him off.

Over the months Joe had not only repaired the drive shaft but also designed and positioned secret chambers for booze on either side of it. He beefed up the springs and installed truck brakes to handle the heavy loads of illegal booze he would be carrying. Caught up in customizing, he took the loud ah-u-gah horn from a junked truck and installed it. He couldn't resist trying it out in the shop over the bank barn, and when he did, the horses below whinnied shrilly in fear.

It was quite possibly the fastest car about to enter the traffic of sleek, powerful automobiles darting through the mountains in the night. Joe's palms sweated; he was anxious to start and alternated between wanting to test his car in a confrontation with the troopers and hoping he could through unnoticed.

Joe and Armand had loaded the hooch hours ago, and Armand made Joe sit down and go over the route, pointing out a couple of alternates in case he found trouble along the way. His destination was a hotel a few miles north of Albany.

Gaston and Armand pushed open the barn doors and Charlie drove the tractor out into the night. It was like the lead pony bringing his nervous thoroughbred to the post for the Kentucky Derby.

Under the cover of the tractor's noisy engine, the elegant Cadillac purred out of Charlie Rauch's livery stable to begin its maiden race.

Joe fought the urge to speed out of town and guided the big care sedately in the early June night. But after crossing the Chubb River, he couldn't resist testing its climbing power. Topping the hill, he guided his car through the gears and gave it a free rein. The Cadillac flew across the Plains of Abraham. It was a different sight than when he had plodded across the Plains on snowshoes six months ago.

Forty, fifty. Doesn't that beat all—nudging fifty-five miles an hour with a full load of booze!

Joe was so exhilarated with the Cadillac's performance he nearly missed seeing the car parked on the corner of Heart Lake Road, where the Plains met the dense forest wall. He took his foot off the throttle and glanced sharply to the right. Definitely a car, but much too dark to identify.

In moments headlights jabbed at his back. Had the car he glimpsed lurking in the dark been waiting for him? He pressed the throttle and the Cadillac responded easily, increasing Joe's lead. Soon the headlights disappeared for long moments as Joe maneuvered his heavy car down the road snaking its way through the mountains. What a thrill to be in control of the road. To drive the car that couldn't be caught. His car.

He had hoped to gain experience handling the Cadillac around the many bends in the road, without the pressure of being followed. For all his expertise with cars, Joe seldom drove one. Certainly not one the caliber of the Cadillac. And here he was, careening down a mid-night dark road.

It crossed his mind that the automobile tailing him was not just another automobile. Kind of late at night for aimlessly driving in the mountains. Too late for those suppositions now. He'd shown his hand. Now he had to win.

The curves were coming at Joe fast than left-right punches. Tires screeched. Joe heeded their warning and reined in the powerful car knowing the over-inflated tires were badly stressed. His pursuer, obviously someone more familiar with the sharp turns, made significant gains and when the road straightened briefly, Joe heard the distinct crack of a rifle. And another. The second bit into the Cadillac's back window. Joe instinctively hunched over the steering wheel.

He thanked God for the cover of the next bend in the road. But the rifle shots unnerved him and he jerked the Cadillac sharply to the left only to feel it begin to sway. He couldn't be so crude or he'd overturn for sure.

Joe picked up speed again when the road straightened, but before he slammed into the next sharp right curve, the stalking headlight found him once more and another shot rang out, thudding into the car's body. Definitely closing the distance.

Joe longed to get out of the mountain pass. Where the hell was Keene, anyway? If he ever reached the straight valley road south of Keene, he felt confident the Cadillac would outdistance whoever was following him.

A large white building appeared on the left. The church, Joe thought, his car roaring down the hill. The inn and crossroads would be next.

Crossroads! He made an instant decision to take the road to the right if he could reach it before the persistent headlights captured him again. Dasset said the road—he called it Hulls Falls Road—would meet up again with the valley road. Could he slow the car in time?

He stood on the brakes and hauled the wheel to the right. Everything depended on making the turn before his pursuer saw his move. He held his breath as the Cadillac lurched to its outside wheels. He took his foot off the brakes and turned the wheel to the left. Seconds passed before the big car steadied and Joe dared to breathe again. He switched off the lights and slowed to a crawl in the dark, ready to speed off should the headlights turn in after him.