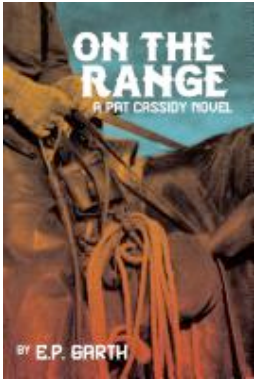




ON THE RANGE

A PAT CASSIDY NOVEL

BY E.P. GARTH



LOYALTY consumes Pat as he attempts to help out his Vietnam War platoon sergeant, Finnegan O'Leary. Now a licensed private investigator, Pat Cassidy enters the roughest part of Texas terrain to uncover the truth behind the bazaar and mysterious attempt to scare O'Leary off his ranch outside Abilene. E.P. Garth is also the author of Off the Air and Out of Touch: Pat Cassidy Novels.

On the Range: A Pat Cassidy Novel

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Also by E.P. Garth

OFF THE AIR
OUT OF TOUCH

Pat Cassidy Novels

On the Range

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Chapter Two

A few days later I was sitting behind my desk admiring Sal's handiwork in whipping the office into shape. Through my office window I could see her at work. She made eye contact and with a disgruntled expression on her face, picked up a stack of folders, cradled them in her arms, and walked into my office. Sal thumbed through the top part of the stack of folders dividing them into two parts placing them side-by-side in front of me.

"The folders on your left represent potential clients who want to procure your services as a private investigator. You have become a hot commodity with all the publicity you have been getting."

"What about these?" I said, tapping the other stack with my right hand.

"Mr. Glasscock sent them over yesterday...cases he wants you to look into as time allows."

I crossed my arms smiling.

"I'll get you a cup of coffee. It appears you'll be busy for a while."

Sal walked to the coffee pot on a table near her desk, poured me a cup, and brought it to me placing the cup near the folders.

"Seems to me," Sal said, "you need help if you're gonna be able to get through this workload in a timely fashion."

“We’ll see,” I said, swiveling my desk chair around to spy on the street below.

Sal closed the door leaving me with the stack of files. Patches of blue in the midmorning sky were giving way to dark clouds. The day’s forecast promised ‘April showers’ eventually bringing ‘May flowers.’ The office space Jeb Glasscock provided was down the hall from WFTW radio on the second floor of his communication center in downtown Fort Worth. Jeb was my boss at the radio station and now as a troubleshooter for Glasscock International. I also planned on working for myself as a private investigator. The suite is located on the west side, or the back of the building, with a good view of the one-way traffic moving in an orderly fashion with each change of the signal light at the corner of Fourth and Throckmorton.

A new Ford pickup truck eased through the signal light, parking across the street. Pickup trucks never appealed to me until Ford introduced the F-150 series. *I’m beginning to think I might look good driving one.* A tall muscular man struggled out of the cab on the passenger side attempting to gain his balance. Once out of the dark green on light green two-tone pickup, someone handed him a cowboy hat through the open window. As he emerged from behind the pickup I could tell he was a real rancher type. His light blue long-sleeved cowboy cut shirt and Wrangler blue jeans were stiffly pressed. He wore a big shiny silver and gold buckle with pointed brown cowboy boots.

The man put his hat on top of his bald head and looked upward toward my window.

Hey, I know him!

A few minutes later he limped through the front door where he was greeted by Sal. I got up and leaned against my office door.

“I’m here to see Pat Cassidy,” he said in a graveled, authoritative voice.

“May I say whose calling?” Sal said.

“Sergeant Finnegan O’Leary,” I said with a huge grin.

Sarge took off his hat and turned around in the direction of my voice, smiling ever so slightly with the right corner of his mouth.

“Cassidy,” he said with a nod.

After a solid handshake I invited him into my office.

“Have a seat, Sarge,” I said, pointing toward a client chair. “Can I offer you a cup of coffee?”

“No thanks. Three cups in the mornin’ is my limit these days.”

Sarge spotted the coat rack in the corner of the room, and before sitting down, hung his Stetson on a bronze hook. He eyed the holstered 9mm, but didn’t saying anything.

“I have to say, Sarge, it’s great to see you. What brings you to Fort Worth?”

Sarge tottered to the chair sitting down erect placing his massive forearms on the arm rests.

“I came here to see *you*, Cassidy. Been hearin’ a lot about you lately.”

“Fame is proof people are gullible.”

“If you say so,” he said.

“My dad’s philosophy of being famous.”

Sarge nodded in agreement.

“It’s also a famous quote of Ralph Waldo Emerson.”

He shifted in his seat obviously uncomfortable.

“How are you, Sarge?” I said. “Your wounds heal O.K.?”

“Not a hundred percent, but I’ve never let it keep me from doing my work around the ranch. As long as I can get up out of bed every day and do a solid day’s work, I thank the Lord for all my blessings.”

I drank from my coffee cup as we studied each other.

“You look different, Cassidy.”

“How, Sarge?”

“Well...for one thing you’re skinnier than you were in ‘Nam and I almost didn’t recognize you without the mustache.”

“When you knew me back in ’68-69, I was still packing my fighting weight,” I said. “I lost the mustache a few years back. Girlfriend at the time had a facial hair fetish, but she’s not around anymore. I might grow it back.”

“You should,” he said, “some people naturally look good in a mustache.”

I bumped into Sarge and his wife a couple of years ago at a restaurant in Abilene, but I guess he didn't remember.

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, I've been readin' how good you've become at solvin' mysteries."

"I've been lucky."

"I know better," he said. "You were the best soldier in our company."

"No one was a better soldier than you, Sarge. You were a great leader and the bravest man I've ever known."

"Thanks, but I'm not here to swap war stories with you, Cassidy. I've got some serious problems at my ranch and I want you to help me out."

"What kind of problems?"

Sarge grinned rubbing the top of his bald head.

"Weird shit's happenin' on my place and we can't figure out why."

"The 'weird shit' being...?"

"Livestock burned to a crisp, cattle missing, some found mutilated, and I don't just mean butchered, but internal organs surgically removed. And what's downright eerie, Cassidy, are the tall rock structures made with big slabs extracted directly out of my foothills. Sheriff's department has been out to investigate, but hell...they can't even figure it out."

"Do you have any photographs?"

“Yeah I do,” Sarge said with a face as long as a fiddle, “but damn if I didn’t go off and forget ’em at the house. I’ve been a little preoccupied lately with all these outlandish things a goin’ on.”

“Hmmm,” I said.

By the look on Sarge’s face I could tell he was expecting more out of me than, “Hmmm.” But he always demanded a lot out of his troopers.

“Sometimes at night strange lights appear up on Moonrise Mountain. It’s not a mountain, but a big foothill...the highest elevation in the county. It’s out on the west side of my ranch. We figure it must be the fires breakin’ out and toastin’ the livestock.”

“What’s causing the fires?”

“We don’t know, Cassidy.”

“Do you think they are deliberately set?”

“I don’t think so, but my ranch foreman, Carlos, does.”

“Is he the man sitting in the cab of your pickup?”

“Yeah,” Sarge said, “he’s also my brother-in-law. I’d say you guessed lucky, but I remember how things played out in ‘Nam. You always sensed things the rest of us couldn’t see comin’.”

“What does Carlos think about all this?”

“Carlos says it’s on the order of the ‘Twilight Zone’.”

“Are other ranches in the area reporting similar occurrences?”

“Sheriff’s department says no other ranch in the county has reported anything of the sort.”

“How big is your place these days?” I said, leaning my elbows on the desk.

“Morton Creek Ranch is up to thirty-seven hundred and fifty-seven acres,” Sarge said with pride. “I inherited a thousand acres when my grandfather passed away several years ago. It’s the best pasture land within a hundred miles. In fact, we’ve got the best pasture land, period, of any ranch in Taylor County.”

“You must have one of the largest spreads in your area.”

“Naw...Cassidy, Bill Casselman’s ranch wraps around three-quarters of my place.”

“You get along with Casselman?” I asked, sensing a connection.

“Don’t have a problem with Casselman...just his foreman, Brick Taylor.”

“What kind of problems do you have with him?”

“Nothing worth talking about...he’s just a real prick.”

“Maybe you need S.E.T.I. more than you need a private investigator.”

“What’n the hell is S.E.T.I.?” Sarge barked.

“Search for Extra-Terrestrial Institute.”

“Private First Class Pat Cassidy, *you* know better!”

“I know, Sarge, but I couldn’t resist the opportunity to kid around with you a little. I remember your aversion to certain things of the occult, and the fact ghosts spook the hell out of you.”

“Still do,” he said. “You don’t believe in aliens, do ya?”

“Never given it much thought.”

“Well, I have, and *aliens* ain’t comin’ on my ranch settin’ fires and carvin’ up my cattle. Hell, we raise cattle at Morton Creek. All we’ve ever done...all we’ll ever do.”

“There has to be a reasonable explanation for what’s going on.”

“You gonna come out and look around?” Sarge asked, slowly standing up with a grunt.

I stood up and shook his hand.

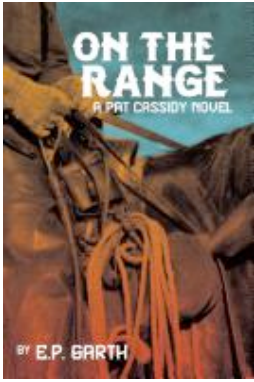
“I’ll see you this weekend. If there is anything to it I’ll stick around and help you figure it out.”

“Carmen and I will put you up while you’re in town. We’d enjoy havin’ you in our home.”

“I’ll bring my gun,” I said, pointing at the Browning hanging next to his hat. “Just in case the aliens shoot at us with their ray guns.”

Sarge made his way to the coat rack grabbing his hat. He shoved it on top of his head.

“I’d forgotten how much of a smartass you can be!”



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