

Early's Fall
By Jerry Peterson

Chapter 2

AUGUST 15 – MONDAY LATE
THE ROCKING HORSE

Early slapped the paint's haunch, and the horse hunched up. "See that brand? The Rocking Horse E."

"Yeah, Walter Estes' place over by Leonardville," Tolliver said. "Not the old man."

"No, his boy, Sonny. Wiry little guy. Does that Audie Murphy bit with that whispering voice."

"You're sure?"

"Hutch, it all fits. If it weren't for that stocking over his face, I'd of known him right off."

Rance Dalby came roaring out the door of the bank, Mavis Anderson a half-stride behind.

"Well, you catch him?"

Early let off with a weak laugh. "No. . . . How'd you get out of the vault?"

"Mavis let me out."

The sheriff turned to Dalby's teller. "I thought you told the bandit the vault was on a time lock."

"I lied."

Early leaned an arm on Dalby's shoulder. "You wouldn't happen to be holding a mortgage on the Estes place?"

"Yeah, I got the paper."

"There isn't anything about it I should know, is there?"

"Well, old Walter's two years in arrears. Called on him the other day and said we had to work something out or I was going to have to foreclose."

Early winked at Tolliver.

"What's this got to do with anything?" the banker asked.

"The bandit's Sonny."

Dalby's jaw went slack.

"Uh-huh, Hutchy's got his horse. Look, if Walter's got troubles, they've just doubled. How about you find it in that shriveled-up, old cold heart of yours to let him skate a while?"

Dalby swung around, nose-to-nose with Early. "After his boy tried to rob me?"

"Come on, Rance."

"I don't like this."

"There's a lot of things you don't like."

"I s'pose," Dalby said, shrugging.

"Good enough. You got your horse trailer parked around back?"

"Yeah, why?"

"We gotta haul Sonny's beast home to the Rocking Horse."

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Early sent Tolliver west on Sixteen, then south while he hauled Dalby's trailer and the bandit's paint toward the southern climes, then west on County Nine. The lawmen drove the perimeter of a block of farm and ranch land five miles square on the off-chance Sonny Estes might try to thumb his way home. Over their radios, they filled the air with idle talk as they rolled along, hardly anyone other than themselves out on the county roads as the sun dipped to the west, forming itself into a fireball that grew in size the closer the sun came to the horizon, shimmering the evening air.

A quarter of the sun had slipped below before Early drove into the lane that led to the Rocking Horse E, Tolliver's Jeep parked beside a gate twenty yards up.

Early keyed his microphone. "Been here long?"

Couple minutes. I'll get the gate.

Tolliver killed his Jeep's motor and hopped out. After he opened the ranch gate, he held it while Early drove his Jeep and the horse trailer through, then hitched the gate closed and slid his long frame into Early's passenger seat. "How you want to handle this with old Walter?" Hutch asked.

Early got the Jeep and trailer rolling while he thought about that. "Oh, I guess I'll dance a little," he said, clawing at his mustache.

The lane dipped through a dry wash that ran full in the spring, during the snow melt, and at other times when a stray thunderstorm parked itself close by and dumped a load of water. On the far side of the rise lay a corral and a rough collection of outbuildings. In a grove of cottonwoods beyond stood a low-slung house, its roof swayed from age.

Early followed the track around the buildings and the corral smelling of dust and dried cow flop. On the backside, the biggest, blackest Newfoundland dog the sheriff had ever seen loped out as a greeting committee of one. He turned parallel to the Jeep and continued along, just beyond Early's reach. When the sheriff stopped in front of the house, the dog parked himself, and his tail stirred the dust.

"The boss home?" Early asked the dog, his hand out. The dog sworped it with his raspy tongue.

"Just what I need, a handful of dog spit." Early rubbed the dog's ears, then went on toward the house. "Walter? Nadine? You home?"

The screen door squalled open. Out stepped a slightly stooped man and behind him a woman who, from her heft, appeared to enjoy her own cooking. While worry tended to cloud Walter Estes's face, smile lines marked his wife's. She wiped her hands on her apron as she came on down the porch, her arms coming out to embrace the world. "Jimmy, so good to see you," she said, and hugged him hard.

Early struggled for breath, forcing a smile. "Nadine, before you say it, I know I should come by more than I do."

"But you got your work." She turned back to her husband. "Don't he look good, Walter? I tell you, him gettin' married to that little Thelma Nelson was the best thing that ever happened to him."

Walter nodded his agreement, his gnarled hand coming out to shake with his company.

"So you going to have a mess of children now?" Nadine asked.

Early blushed through his tan. "Got one on the way."

"Oh Walter, you hear that? Jimmy and Thelma got a baby coming. . . . When's it due, Jimmy?"

"A little after Thanksgiving Sonny around?" Early asked, shifting the subject.

Nadine's face shifted, too. Her smile fled. "Oh, you don't know, do you? I'm afraid he's left us."

"When this happen?"

"This morning. Said he was going to go some south in the Flint Hills, get on with a bigger ranch. Said he'd send his pay home, his way of helping out after that barn fire last year." Nadine put a hand on Early's arm. She looked up in his face. "Why you askin' about Sonny?"

Early motioned to Tolliver.

Tolliver opened the gate on the back of the trailer. He squeezed in past the horse, then pushed him back out.

"That's Sonny's," Nadine said.

"Kinda thought so." Early glanced at Walter, the worry lines visibly deepening in the old rancher's sun-crisped face. "Can we set here on the edge of the porch?"

Tolliver led the horse away, toward the corral while Nadine sat down, Walter beside her. It took him longer than she. He hung onto a porch post and eased himself down, grimacing as his knees and hips bent.

After Early sat down, the Newfoundland plopped himself in front of the sheriff's boots. He put his head on Early's knees, his tongue lolling from the side of his mouth.

Early stroked the big dog's muzzle. "Walter, Nadine, Sonny didn't go south."

"How do you know?" Nadine asked.

"We found his horse in Randolph. Sonny stuck up the bank."

What joy remained in the old couple's souls fled. They turned to one another, Nadine reaching for her husband's hand. She squeezed it hard. "Where's our boy?" she asked, a quiver in her voice.

"He got away."

"Anybody hurt?"

"No. No, not really. . . . If Sonny's smart, he won't come home. Now I know you don't have a telephone out here, but if he does come home, I want you two to promise you'll get word to me. Sonny's got that Forty-Five pistol and, if someone else was to try to catch him, it could go all wrong."

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Early sat in his Jeep for the longest time when he got home that night – home, a little shotgun house on the edge of Keats. The yard backed up against Wildcat Creek, and the neighbors had warned him away from the house. "You'll get flooded out in the spring," they said. "Happens about every year."

But that made the place cheap, all he could afford when he lost his own small ranch after two bad years.

It hadn't flooded this year, and Early and his wife counted themselves lucky, but luck wasn't what kept him from going inside. He watched the lightning bug show around the mulberry bushes and the trumpet vines, the air sweet with the smell of the flowers' nectar. Some fireflies

even rose up with their winking lights to the lower reaches of a catalpa tree.

A hand reached out. It tipped his hat forward. “’Scuse me, big boy,” a husky female voice said.

Without even looking, Early reached over for Thelma’s hand. “Didn’t hear you come out.”

“Hon, I gave up on you coming in. It’s been twenty minutes.”

“I didn’t know.”

“You and clocks don’t have a sympathy for one another, do you?”

Early went silent. His wife of a year joined in that silence. She was a sprite of a person, the way Early imagined Nadine Estes must have been when she was young. They both had a joy for living that he found remarkable. Nadine had dragooned Early into going to the picnic at the Leonardville Christian Church. He wouldn’t have gone on his own for he’d grown up a Baptist over on Troublesome Creek. But there at the picnic he met Thelma – Thelma Nelson, one of the new teachers at the Leonardville school, fresh out of K-State and more than a decade younger than he.

She massaged his hand. “What are you thinking about, handsome?”

“The baby. . . . Thel, I don’t know nothing about taking care of babies. Worse, I don’t know how you grow ’em to keep them out of trouble.”

“We just do the best we can.” She leaned in to Early, kissed him on the ear, her warm breath melting his heart.

Thelma came forward and turned quarter. She looked into his face, though his gaze was still somewhere off on the purple-black bluffs on the other side of the creek. “Where’s this coming from?” she asked.

“Remember Sonny?”

“Sonny Estes?”

“The damn fool did a poor job of robbing a bank today. I got to run him down and put him in jail.”