

Chapter One

I hate telegrams. Always have. Reckon I always will. Take firinstance this telegram I got in June of 1915:

DEAREST DADDY stop(*which I shoul da right there*) MOMMA
ARRESTED stop SEND FIVE THOUSAND FOR BAIL stop ALSO
NEED FIVE THOUSAND FOR LAWYER IN CARE WESTERN
UNION SAN FRANCISCO stop MOMMA AND ME SEND LOVE
AND REMIND TO FEED OUR HOUSE CATS stop YOUR
LOVING DAUGHTER, ELSIE MAUDE stop

Not one 'please, thank you, or may I' in the whole dang thing.

If you think you're confused, think how I felt. My blood pressure still takes a leap when I think on that summer and that telegram that brought my solitude to a screeching halt.

Okay, I'll take a breath and back me up some.

You know, it's funny how things go along real easy-like for a coupla years and a man gets set in his ways, pretty much knowing what the next day will bring. Some folks call it general day-to-day living, some call it rut-riding, and me, I reckon I call it a dang blessed relief from the hoopla that usually follows ol' Royal Leckner. So when things go the

smooth trail, I generally don't like to stir the dust up too much. For usually, WHOA! outa the blue, without any encouragement from me, life catches up and that smooth trail of mine gets buried in a sandstorm of one fe-as-ko firing hell-bent for election after the other. So, I shoulda taken more notice of the quiet.

Like you know, the year was 1915. Europe was at war with itself, the *Lusitania* got herself sunk by Germans, ol' Woody Wilson was trying like hell to keep us outa war, and some cranked-up Washington politicians had just saddled us hard-working U.S. citizens with a income tax, of all treacheries! All these worldly warnings I chose to ignore. Nope, war, taxes, and politicians I could reckon with. Universal misery was one thing--domestic treason was another.

Hell, I hate making a major confession before you've had a chance to finish off your first drink, but I reckon you'll be more sympathetic to my plight if I just come out and tell you: E.M., my wife of over twenty years, and me was going over some rocky territories. She'd landed me in more'n one rough spot in our long, fascinating relationship, and I reckon ol' E.M. had herself one of the longest teenager-hoods in history. So when she finally commences to pull the corner on mid-life, well you can be damn sure things got rough. She and me had us alota arguments over this'n'that--mostly little things would send her off, like firinstance 'who the hell left the cream pitcher out' and 'why can't you just go out and ride some fence for a coupla days like you used to when you was younger and leave me

some quiet.' Or onct she flew into a flurry 'bout someone, probably her own daughter, leaving her saddle with one stirrup longer'n the other. Sweartagod, just pitched a fit about her not having anything to herownself anymore.

'Course, I pitched me a fit nowanthen, too. You shoulda heard our flare-up when that peddler came through selling kitchen doohickeys. I saw the whole thing from atop the windmill where I used to go to hide'n'spy'n'think on things. This peddler was young and handsome and probably hadn't had hisself a sale all day. You shoulda seen how E.M. was flattered by his talk. Why, from clear acrost the barnyard I could see her eyelashes a-batting and her figure a-swirling and her stack of purchases a-growing. I just sat there agitating whilst my wife flirted, yes *flirted*, with a man young enough to be . . . well, a damn sight younger'n her, that's sure. Onct he'd left and I come down all riled and heated up, E.M. hands me this story, she knew all along I was up there watching and she was just trying to make me jealous and here's the bill, serves me right, Ha! Alota credit she gave my knowledge of women. I saw the whole thing. But she just airs herself with a fan he'd given her, touting some new kinda wash soap, and looks dream-like off into the distance into which he'd disappeared, and instead taking her into my arms and exploiting my own romantical ways, I say probably the stupidest thing to my wife I ever did say: I say, "When you gonna grow up, E.M.?" Then I started to walk away and WANG! that new cast-iron skillet just missed my ear by a inch. I kept walking like I'd just stood down Billy the Kid and halfa the Quantrill boys. 'Course, what I was really telling my wife

was--"Be old." But I can only tell you that because now *I'm* old and all those days past are clear as spring water. Now. But then--hell, was I stupid.

So that very same year, 1915, when E.M. announced to me she was taking our daughter, 16-year-old Elsie Maude of the telegram, to San Francisco on an extended annual shopping spree, I said, "You go on ahead, E.M. The change'll do us both good. We been needing some time from each other anyhow." Hell, I just as well mighta said, "Go ahead. Leave me. I don't care less, E.M."

'Course, with the wisdom all these years and this here brandy is providing, I can tell you this is what I shoulda said: "You know, E.M., let's just you and me do the spree together this time. You and me been needing some time together--no horses, no wild-cat children, no books to balance, no peddlers." Then I shoulda swept her up in my arms, which was still pretty dang strong if I say so myownself, and took her away to that San Francisco town and wined her and dined her and lavished love and gifts and attention on her and not come back till we was our old selfs onct again.

But contrary to what you mighta heard, I ain't perfect, so oft I sends 'em both, my wife and my daughter, to San Francisco on what *was* to be a business trip and shopping spree.

Now, stop your cringing, son. I know the words women, business, and spree shouldn't oughta be uttered in the

same breath. I can see as how they might be enough to scare the spurs offa some men. But there ain't nothing wrong with two women doing a little trading and a little shopping. It's just I wisht they'd kept their spending on clothes, gifts, household dofunnys, and vineyards like they was supposed to. But I told you how E.M. was getting herself distracted again, which she was then famous for -- whether it was campaigning for new ear bobs or squawking about hen's rights or flirting with young peddlers, you could always rely on E.M. getting distracted about something two, three times a year.

Like firinstance back in ought-8, E.M. got herself real lathered up 'bout politics and voting and women's rights and all, and well, dang it! I'll just come out with it plain and simple: E.M. didn't much care for the way our home state of Oregon was handling things, so she got real insistent we move up to Washington State, where it looked like they was taking women a whole lot more serious. Looked like they was gonna give women the vote a mite sooner'n Oregon was, and that was all E.M. needed to pack her bags. Sweartagod, picked up our two baby boys under her arms and daughter Elsie in tow and announced we was moving. We had lotsa money, so I couldn't stand too tall on the we-cain't-afford-it platform. And since I'd been me too long off the range, too long in the 'companiment of streetcars, too long listed in big city phone directories, and too long away from the sweet smella cattle, I quickly agreed.

Oh, I know what you're thinking, but it wasn't *me* handed women all them rights. All I did was move a few miles northwards. Hell, the land she found outside Walla Walla Wash she damn near stole. (Come to think of it, I don't recollect ever seeing a billa sale.)

Well, if there's one thing I'm famous for it's I just wanna keep folks happy, and moving to Washington so's E.M. could do her suffer-aging didn't seem like too much in the way of a sacrifice for me. Hell, since she always told me who to vote for anyhow, I reckoned she might as well be doing it for herownself. E.M.'s pushed, pulled, and convoluted me real hard over the years, but my manhood's always been intact. Yep.

So, off to Walla Walla Wash goes us five Leckners --me to my first-owned spread, three younguns to the good life, and E.M. to her latest distraction.

'Course, E.M. was right about Washington, for that very year, 1909 it was, she got her wish when we men finally saw the light or caved in (whichever reason you prefer) and gave women the right to vote in Washington. Oregon held out till '12, but like I said, none of it was *my* doing.

So you see, ol' E.M., never too far offa the intellectual altar, was a mighty proud and savvy woman-voter. And just so long she didn't get distracted again and take that temper-ance thing too serious, we got along real good. I told her, time and time over, "E.M., suffer-aging's one thing, temper-ancing's another. Stay the hell outa my drinking

rights." But I reckon it wasn't E.M.'s fault that our Washington State was working real hard to take away those drinking rights.

So up we went to Walla Walla Wash, and oh was we high-arrival! I thought we had more money'n God, maybe even the Pope, what with E.M.'s inheritance and good accounting sense and a few lucky turns I myownself made. And E.M., well she knew just what to do with all that money. And now's as good a time as any to tell you something. No laughing, cause sweartagod it's true. First off, I was always attracted to E.M.'s nose. It was long and fine and seemed to work real good. And it had, well, a special feature. Seems it would start a ferocious sorta itching when E.M. got 'round what looked like a good investment. You know how some folks say their palms itch when they're 'bout to get some money? Well, E.M. always claimed her nose would itch, and maybe even get a little sniffly, when a good investment was at hand. 'Course, I'd usually just humor her onaccounta she was quite a money-handler. I mostly kept outa things, and it didn't bother me much she was more mystical at times than logical.

So, she invested our money here and there. Additional to her itchy nose, she was a damn good accountant, onct she conquered long division and decimal points. I knew she followed the who's-sick-and-who's-visiting-onaccounta-who's-sick-columns of the local papers. That way she had a bead on who was being measured for a funeral sermon a few days before the obituary column came out, and that way she got herself a jump on estate windfalls. Looking

back, I guess I hafta admit that bean-counting nose of hers did more'n charm the daylights outa me and hold up her pinch specs.

But all the money in the world can't buy a smooth trail if you're married to a rocky woman like E.M., especially when one of her distractions set in. Oh, you can buy graders and pavers and the smoothest crushed gravel available to build a easy road, but E.M., she'd barrel through a mountain nose-first instead a taking the easy road 'round. To make matters worst, we had us a daughter cast in her momma's exact image. Looking so much alike I reckon can't be helped, not that E.M.'s qualities wasn't worth duplicating. It's just looking, acting, and thinking so much alike is downright scary, and I always did wonder where God's head was that day He handed us our Elsie Maude.

But hell, since I had me two spunky sons to play with, I mostly just gave E.M. and Elsie their imperial-like heads. You know, my cackles still salute on instinct when I look back at how them two women was together. Then I have to grin when I think how I was, more bewildered by 'em both than a hog-tied calf.

So now that you get the picture of who we was, I guess I can get on with where I was, which was a-setting on the front porch of my Royal Bar-L ranch house that slapbang, slickery summer of 1915.

We had us a swing-like affair hanging from our porch. I can hear it now, creaking back and forth whilst I rocked. I was trying not to get too dozy, but you know how porch swings is. It was a warm morning in late of June and I'd been just feather-bedding around, cleaning my newest Winchester, looking out over my spread. Anyhow, I remember thinking on how good things was going and how quiet things was, since E.M. and Elsie was off on their Annual Spree in Frisco. Hell, I'd even forgot all about the peddler-man.

My sons, Charles (but we called him Chick) and Brian (but we called him Tad, making 'em both together the teama Chick'n'Tad) was never more All-American than they was that summer. Even though they was two years' worth of second thoughts apart, they was almost as alike as was their momma and sister, making me the only spare part. They was fair-faced and had brick-toppish hair, and all you ever heard 'bout redheads is true: give 'em their heads or they'll take yours. They freckled up real good and their eyebrows got all white in the summer sun, and with their blue eyes, well, I just gotta say they was red, white, and blue as the Fourth July.

Chick'n'Tad spent their summer like all boys should: barefoot, half-naked, tan as allgetout, and riding the shoes offa their horses. Oh sure, they had chores and all, but mostly I let 'em run wild from the moment E.M. left to when she got home. Yessir, the Annual Spree was a vacation for alla us menfolk too.

So things couldn'ta been more peaceful that morning -- which shoulda been my first warning. Like I said, when things is that tranquil-like, I'm sure to be heading for a big she-bang. (Ever notice the word ain't *he*-bang?) But even when I saw the dust a-rising off the winding road and I heard the put-pouie of the motorcar, I reckoned I was safe, what with the ladies being so far away and all.

Chick'n'Tad was riding bareback, escorting the automobile, a-whooping and a-hollering like they was Indians a-raiding a chuck wagon. "Pa! Pa! Company!" they shouts, like I was deaf and blind. It would look good to say that I rose careful-like and snapped my Winchester closed like I was ready for a showdown. But hell, we hadn't had us anything in the way of a rustler for nigh onto six years, and even then rustlers hardly ever drove a Model T with "Western Union" written on the door.