

## *Chapter 1*

### *The Train East*

He came out of the mist, riding slow on a smoke gray stallion, his yellow slicker moist, its shine dulled with age and dirt that would never wash away. He was a powerful looking man, with that lean, easy look about him that suggested quickness and danger. His face was darkened by hundreds of blistering suns, and his pale blue eyes took in everything with a perpetual squint. His name was Weston Teague.

He wore a cattleman's suit beneath the slicker and his boots were not the usual ones he wore for riding. These were made of the softest of calf skin, darkened and polished to a deep brown. The careful observer would have seen pants with a laundry press and shine to them.

Teague was in St. Louis to begin a journey back East. He was going to New York city on the dare of a beautiful woman, a dare Teague had chosen to consider an invitation, determined that when he left, she would leave with him. No matter that her father considered Teague a "piece of rabble," and no matter that her father was a very rich man. Teague was determined that Abitha Claymore, daughter of Tyrel Claymore the railroad baron, would be the wife of Weston Teague. If her flirtations had been mere playfulness, he'd return and lick his wounds, but he'd not soon forget the yellow haired woman who'd come so suddenly into his life.

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*For the first time in his life, he'd fallen in love.*

The yellow slicker lightened as he nosed his horse near a hanging lantern hanging over the door of an unpainted barn with the words Livery painted in black on one door. Teague swung down with an easy, graceful movement. It is doubtful that anyone, save those few individuals who live on the edge of danger themselves, would have noticed anything out of the ordinary about the way the man dismounted, except to observe perhaps that it was quickly done.

However, some men would have noted with keen interest that Teague's right hand was always free, and the big man's head stayed straight up looking forward, and then moved naturally to his right as he stepped down; and when he reached the ground, he continued his movement towards his right, turning until his back was to the horse.

He'd "looked the compass" without appearing, to the casual observer, to be nervous or especially watchful. It was no accident that the slicker was open at the front clearing the way for his hand to grab the holstered Colt that lay slightly to the left of his stomach. It was a position the man found most comfortable, and offered the quickest response from just about any position in which a man might find himself.

Teague spotted a youngster in a ragged shirt sleeping on a pile of hay in near one stall, in the corner. The boy snored softly, not even stirring as Teague led the horse into the stable. He stripped off his saddle, slung it onto a rail next to several others, then led his horse into a stall. The big man hunted around until he found the feed box, scooped out a bucket full, then dumped it into the box in the stall. Teague walked over to the sleeping boy and nudged him gently with his boot. The boy leaped up, wide-eyed, not fully awake.

He stammered, "Yes sir! Right away, Mr. Kelly!"

"Easy son. I'm just a customer coming in a bit early in the morning."

The boy clawed the hay out of his hair and peered closer at the tall man standing silently before him.

He said huskily, "I'm sorry, mister. Guess you spooked me. You come for your horse?"

Teague said, "No, I'm coming in. Horse over in that stall is mine." Teague pointed at the huge gray stallion. The boy's eyes widened as he took in the stallion, and he whistled low.

Teague continued, "I'll be leaving him with you for a couple weeks, maybe more. This ought to cover his keep, and if not, I'll make up the difference when I get back." He handed the boy a twenty dollar gold piece.

The boy bit one, grinned and said, "Guess it should, at that. You want exercise thrown in? You got it comin' and then some, you know."

Teague said, "Son, you might just lead him out to a fenced pasture and let him romp, but don't go trying to ride him." The boy glanced at the stallion, then nodded knowingly. Some horses were like some men. It just wasn't smart to take too much for granted with them. That was the way the stallion looked to the boy. As he thought about it, the horse's owner had the same look about him.

Teague turned to leave, then stopped and added, "Anyone asks about him, he belongs to Weston Teague, and, no, he isn't for sale at any price." He left the boy still pulling straw off his clothes and admiring the stallion.

The late morning found Teague aboard the train, folded into a rock-hard seat, feeling cramped, and wishing he'd rode his horse farther East. The car was almost entirely full, with several seats occupied by women with children. A stocky, bearded man entered and sat beside him without a word as the train lurched out of the station, and Teague settled back for a long, tiring journey. Sitting idle was close to being torture to him.

At the next stop two men came aboard, and Teague stifled a look of disgust. He knew the men spelled trouble for someone. He hoped it wasn't him. They had that hard look about them, but more than that, they had the look that sug-

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gested recklessness and foolishness. Teague knew a lot of hard men, had rode with some, fought with some, and avoided some.

These two men were hard and tough, but they were also reckless. In Teague's world, reckless men didn't last. Even the careful ones didn't always last in a land where men equated the law with what their fists and their guns could do for them. He tensed as the two men swaggered down the isle, swaying, bumping people roughly, and talking whiskey-loud.

An older man, a cowman by his appearance, was sitting alone in a seat just a few seats forward of Teague. As they passed, one man knocked the rancher's hat off. They both laughed at this, then continued on down the isle. There were no complete seats empty, so they started back up the isle. Teague felt his gut tighten, knowing they were full of whiskey and liable to do anything. Teague always tried to avoid men like these because they were so unpredictable. Riding in the same car with them would be like riding a wagon loaded with nitro.

They reached the man whose hat they'd knocked off, and one man leaned down into the older man's face and said, "Hey mister! Move to another seat. We need a seat together, here."

The man replied, "Try another car. There's another one forward."

Instantly, the speaker reached down and grabbed the man by the lapels and jerked him to his feet. The rancher didn't hesitate, and although he was older than both of them by more than twenty years, the blow the rancher gave to the one that grabbed him, doubled that man over. The other man jerked his gun out and slammed it against the rancher's head. He slumped down with a moan.

The man who had doubled over, slowly straightened himself, his hands still clutching his stomach. Finally, he managed to speak, his words coming out in spasms, "Soon as...ah, soon as...I'm able to breath good, help...me...help...move him.

That old man....”

Teague’s voice jerked their attention around. “I think you boys need to find a seat elsewhere.”

The man who had hit the rancher squinted at Teague and said with a sneer, “Mister, don’t mix into this. Just you sit right back down and you won’t get hurt. I wont try hitting you over the head. I’ll just shoot it off.” He laughed, obviously enjoying the attention. Every eye in the car was riveted on him. He stood there in his tattered and stained vest, wearing an oil-blackened holster with a large Navy Colt nestled in it. The man stood swaying with the movement of the train and the whiskey. He was waiting for the fear to come to the big man who’d stood and dared question them.

Teague’s eyes narrowed and he chose his words carefully. “Look, there’s women and children present. You hurt one of them, even by accident, and they’ll stop the train and hang you on the spot, son.” Teague moved closer one step, then added, “Just go to another car.”

The man replied sarcastically, “You just go back to your seat mister, and we’ll just finish a little business with the old man here. We want to see how far he can jump.” At this, the two of them began laughing.

The second man, the one who’d been hit and was now recovered, started to speak. Before he could utter a word, a huge fist slammed into his jaw, and he went down like he’d been hit with a sledge hammer. He fell into his partner, who immediately shoved him aside. The man fell loosely to the floor. The other man backed away, careful not to get within range of the big man who’d moved so suddenly against his partner.

He leaned forward, crouching slightly, the anger in him flaring his nostrils and reddening his face. His right hand quivered near the blackened grips of the .44 Navy Colt at his side. He spoke, his voice, cracking with emotion: “Mister, another step and you’re dead.”

Teague’s voice was full of command and heavy with au-

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thority. It was a voice that had spoken similar words in similar circumstances. There was no emotion, just flat, solid authority. “Son, if you make the slightest move towards your gun, I’ll have to kill you. There’s kids in here, and you’re liable to hurt someone. I’ll not chance anything with you.”

He paused a long second, then added in a matter-of-fact tone: “You’ll just be dead.” Teague turned slowly so that his right side was presented to the man. His eyes were locked onto the other man’s eyes.

“Grab your partner there and drag him into the other car and forget it.” Teague paused a moment, then added, “You’re wondering whether I’m running a bluff. No bluff. I’ve met a lot of men like you and I’m still here. Walk away and you live, kid. Reach for that gun, and I’ll kill you.”

The man licked his lips and his eyes widened. Indecision crossed his face and his eyes flickered around the car, then down at the crumpled figure on the floor. The whiskey that had given him the fire in his blood was now a bad taste in his mouth. He was stone sober. He fought an urge to wipe his face. The muscles rippled in his jaw as he stared hard at Teague for a long minute.

Sometimes a man comes to a time in his life when a decision faces him that is life changing, or is of some huge importance. Some men recognize the importance of the decision, some don’t. Teague had faced men like this before. He wasn’t sure how the man would react. He’d had some men smile at him, and walk away, while a few had exploded in a wild frenzy, determined to make their stand, live or die.

He saw the decision register in the man’s eyes first. They tightened and the nostrils flared. The indecision evaporated and the man’s hands quivered with anticipation. He’d shot three men in his life, and it gave him a confidence that was false.

As the man’s hand closed around the black handle of his pistol and he began pulling the weapon up from the holster, he knew that he’d just made the worst decision of his

life. He knew he'd chosen the wrong man, and that he should have heeded the warnings that shouted at him through the whiskey.

Desperately, he jerked at his gun, and as the weapon tipped its way out of his holster, he saw with eyes now wide with the knowledge of impending doom, the gun of the other man snatched in a blur of motion from its resting place at the big man's stomach, and the dark, empty hole of the barrel seemed to take up all of his vision. His thoughts were a flash of realization of his stupidity, and his foolish desire to impress the pretty mother sitting across the isle, huddled in fear with her two children.

Teague's arm whipped down and up, as though it were a steel spring, and within a fraction of a second, he had the Colt lined on the target and a shot fired. The bullet struck the man in the right shoulder, near the chest, slamming him backwards into the small door leading out of the car. The man tried to speak, looked down to the torrent of blood on his chest, then fell forward, crashing heavily to the floor.

Teague moved forward, ready to shoot again to prevent a last feeble effort that might hurt a passenger. It was not necessary. The man lay on the wooden floor, whimpering, begging for someone to help him.

Teague knelt beside the man and whispered, "Son, I'm sorry. God knows I am. But, you left me no choice. You're just fortunate that you were so slow. I was able to place my shot." He ripped away the man's shirt, quickly cut a piece of it and folded it square. He laid it on the wound and then quickly tied a bandage tightly against the wound. It was apparent this was something he'd done enough times to become proficient. Indeed, in the Civil War years, Teague had bandaged a lot of wounded men, including himself.

Some of the smaller children were crying, but most of the older ones were all curiosity, not frightened at all, and suddenly possessed of a complete fascination for the tall stranger. Teague went over to the man he'd hit with his fist, rolled

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him over and stripped him of his gun. Then, he moved to the rancher they'd hit. The man was coming to, trying to sit up. Teague helped him to a sitting position.

He said, "That was a nasty blow you got, friend. You rest easy awhile."

The man groaned his thanks. Teague reached down and grabbed the unconscious figure at his feet and dragged him to the rear of the car. Then, he went and got the wounded man and dragged him out and onto the small platform between cars. As he was propping up the man, the door to the other car opened and a conductor came out carrying a shotgun. A passenger was just behind him, pistol drawn.

The conductor said, "Just raise them hands, mister. Don't make any sudden moves."

Teague said wearily, "You'd better get inside there and make sure the other man doesn't wake up and try to shoot some of your passengers like his partner tried to do." He ignored their request to raise his hands, but stepped around them and went back into the car.

Inside, the conductor rolled the unconscious man over and peered closely at his face. He muttered, "That'd be Rolly Ebert. That other one was his brother Eli." The portly man scratched absently at his cheek with the sight of the shotgun, looked down at the unconscious man and added, "I always knew them boys would tangle with the wrong man one day. It ain't the first time they give trouble on my run."

Teague asked, "They ride regular?"

"Oh, they go on a tear now and again when they got some coin in their pockets. They head for one of the towns not far from here and stay until their money runs out. They busted up a passenger on the last run pretty bad, then threw him off when we was runnin' full out. We didn't know it until we come into the station. They sent someone back for him in a buckboard. He was busted up some, and cut from the rocks."

He paused, glanced back at the wounded man through the open door, and said, "That one won't be ridin' anything



real soon, that's certain."

The passenger who'd come with the conductor said, "Looks like their luck run out on this trip."

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The rest of the trip was worse than torture for Teague. He was beset with children peering intently at him for the duration of their trip, with women sneaking long, thoughtful looks at him, and with some of the men trying to pump him, asking about men he'd fought, and going away disappointed when he refused to talk.

He moved over to join the rancher who'd been hit, and they talked many long hours, discovering they knew some of the same people, and had once ridden for the same ranch, though at different times. After the rancher dozed off, Teague lapsed into a silent reflection of his life, of his future, and most of all, of Abitha Claymore.

Weston Teague was a tough man, and in his earlier years, a very sudden kind of man. Over the years, he'd mellowed. In his younger days he'd never have tried to talk those men out of a fight. He'd have pushed them to fight. In his early days, Weston Teague never walked around trouble. He never hunted it on purpose, unless he was tracking a man, something he'd done several times in his days with the Texas Rangers, and during his time as a marshal, but he didn't walk around it, either. Inwardly, he'd come to admit to admit that he enjoyed the danger, the thrill of the hunt, and the combat. But, he understood the danger of that lure. As the train rolled on across the land, he recalled those early years.

He recalled the men who died by his hand in the little town of Del Rey, down near the Mexican border in the New Mexico Territory. He'd taken a job as marshal there, just a few years after New Mexico had become a Territory. It was a tough little town, with men coming through on the run, often. The men who rode through the town were a loud, mean

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bunch mostly, arrogant with their knowledge that most of the Mexican people feared them. But the *gringos* living in the town and the surrounding area lived in just as much fear as the Mexicans.

In desperation, they had turned to Teague, who'd visited town several times from the ranch nearby where he worked chasing cows out of the brush for thirty and found. The people in town saw that he was left alone, not bothered by those they feared. When Teague shot one of the worst of the men who terrorized them, after the man attempted to rob Teague, they knew why those men usually left him alone. That was when they begged him to become their marshal. He'd accepted, less for the fifty a month than for the excitement and challenge the job offered. He'd been bored with the long, empty days, weary of chasing steers for someone else, and was ready to move on anywhere, just to get away from the job.

He remembered the two men he'd tracked down and brought back across their saddles shortly after he'd taken the job. They'd shot a local rancher, and then, as they raced their horses out of the yard, they'd run over the man's little five year old daughter, breaking her arm and bruising her chest. Teague remembered the disgust he'd felt when one of the men who'd begged him to be Marshal remarked that it was "a good thing she was only a greaser." He'd decided then that when he brought back those men, he was through with the job.

He thought of the three men he'd trailed in the Dakota Territory, in that part now called Wyoming, where Teague now had his ranch. They'd stolen his entire herd and wiped him out clean. Teague had tracked them down with two of his men, one Mexican rider and an Indian. They'd hung the three on the spot. It was harsh justice, but they'd come near to ruining him, and taking everything he'd worked for. There were too many scars on his hands, and cuts on his legs from chasing mossy backs through brush that cut like a razor, to view rustling lightly. He'd left them hanging as a sign for anyone else who thought to strip him of his cattle.

Wes Teague had grown up fast the day he watched his father crawling in the dust, blood running down his chest, trying to reach young Wes who was standing on the porch, wide-eyed, confused and as afraid as he'd ever been in his life. Marshal William Teague had died before he reached his son, but Weston Teague remembered. He remembered that his father had tried to have peace with a man determined to harm him. The man had threatened to kill Bill Teague, and he'd made good his threat.

Teague had decided then and there that if any man ever threatened to kill him, he'd always take such threats seriously, and would deal with such a man immediately. They'd have an end to the matter right then on the spot, even if Teague had to push the man into a fight. He'd vowed never to ignore an enemy as his father had done. Over the years, he'd stayed true to his promise.

Teague turned his thoughts to the woman who had suddenly intruded into his life. Abitha Claymore had been almost constantly on his mind since the day he'd met her on her father's Colorado ranch. Although it had been a cattle buying trip, it had turned into much more. It had been almost as though everyone else on the ranch had ceased to exist for Teague.

She'd ridden up to the corral where he'd stood talking with an older cattleman named Jesse, who was in charge of all the cattle sales for the ranch. He remembered that her face was flushed with the excitement of her vigorous ride, and a strand of hair had fallen over her face. He recalled her futile attempts to blow the strand out of her face as she rode up. His pulse had quickened the moment he'd seen her, and when she'd stopped her horse nearby, he could not resist walking over and introducing himself. Even after his business was concluded, he'd stayed over three extra days, merely because he wanted to see more of her.

She'd been taken with him, he knew. But, he wasn't sure exactly why. At first, he supposed it might be curiosity, and the

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fact that Teague was a stranger. Then, he wondered if it wasn't coquettish playfulness on her part. He'd caught her staring at him intently several times, and he'd assumed that it was merely the innocent stare of one curious about a strange, wild creature. He couldn't blame her for that. He recalled how, as a boy, he'd stared intently at the first Indian he'd seen, drinking in the strangeness of the man, his imagination running wild, seeing the Indian lifting scalps, screaming wildly and leading others arrayed like himself into battle.

She had flirted with him with her eyes and her words. She'd invited him to go with her on some horseback rides on the ranch. Once, after a long ride, on a hill overlooking the ranch, he'd leaned over on a sudden impulse and caressed her silken hair, turning his hand to run the backs of his fingers across her cheek. She'd appeared startled, but he could see she'd been pleased. He'd commented on how beautiful she was, and surprising himself, and her, had suddenly blurted out that he wanted to court her, if she'd permit it.

She'd laughed at his outburst, but it was a laugh of pleasure, not disdain. She'd said she was leaving for New York City soon, and that courting might be rather difficult, but that if he was determined, she'd be more than happy to see him in New York City.

His mind formed her features again, and as the train clattered along, he imagined his conversation with her when he arrived, and imagined the proposal he would make. Teague wasn't sure about her at all. He only knew he was bound to try and win her hand. It would torment him not to try. Even if he failed, he had to try.

Unconsciously, he rubbed his hands against his legs nervously as he contemplated his first words to Abitha.

## *CHAPTER 2*

### *New York City*

Teague found New York City to be a very unusual place, strange in its vastness, and with an excitement in the air he could not explain. He was not fond of big cities, and had found them to be disagreeable to him in many ways. The water tasted bad, often smelled bad, the people were constantly in motion, barely cordial, and the noise was extremely distracting. Quiet and solitude was one of the assets of the West, and no one prized it greater than Wes Teague.

This city seemed different, somehow, than all the others he'd seen. Oh, it was dirty, loud, and smelled, just like some of the other cities he'd been in, such as Chicago and New Orleans, but there seemed to be more of everything here. Huge buildings loomed everywhere, people were everywhere he looked, and shops of every kind abounded. There was a kind of magnificence to this city, as though it were possessed of a life all its own.

Teague entered the hotel and signed his name in the large, red register, then turned to go up the long, winding, carpeted stairs. He had to take his suitcase back from a young man who tried to insist that he carry Teague's luggage up to the room. He thanked the man, but made him understand that he would carry his own suitcase. The man had looked over to the clerk, shrugged and walked away.

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In his room, he unpacked, throwing the one change of clothes into a drawer. He'd packed his gun away just before leaving the train, and now he looked at it, wondering if he should leave it in his bag. He wasn't sure that one could openly carry a gun around in New York City as was done in the West. He wondered if it really was necessary. In the western towns, guns were worn openly by some, usually the ranchers and cowhands.

The men who lived in town usually didn't wear a gun. In the early years of some of the cow towns, there'd been efforts to ban the carrying of weapons in town because of the propensity of the cowboys to shoot up the saloons and some of the citizenry, and in many of those early cow towns, that ban continued by consensus, if not law. But, in a lot of other western towns, there was no such ban. He was fairly certain that New York probably had a law on the books about the wearing of a weapon. Getting arrested would not be a great way to start his courtship.

Wes Teague had carried a gun since he was a boy of fourteen. Then, it was more out of wanting to be seen as a man. Later, he wore a weapon out of need. It was a part of him, a tool that he used. The men he mingled with all carried guns, and if a man would walk among them and refuse to be intimidated, he had to carry a gun, and he had better be prepared to use it. Teague looked forward to the day when the law made it possible for a man to go about unarmed, but until that day came in the West, Weston Teague would wear his gun, and use it, if necessary.

Finally, he shoved the gun back under his slicker in the suitcase, then removed a knife encased in a soft sheath of deer skin. He withdrew the knife from the sheath and examined the edge, flicking his thumb across the edge. It was a fine old knife, handmade for him, balanced for throwing, honed for cutting, and with a sturdy, but small guard. It was a fighting man's knife.

Except for certain parts of East Texas and California,

men Teague had known in the West, in general, had little use for a knife except for utilitarian purposes, such as skinning, cutting up leather, and such. Knife fighting with them was out.

They scorned it, leaving it for the “greasers”, the Indians, and many of the “hill people,” those strange souls who left the hills of Tennessee and Kentucky, were clannish, and could cut a man in seven pieces before he had time to blink twice. Most men Teague had rode with preferred the gun or the fist to resolve his differences with another.

Weston Teague was different. He’d learned the art of knife fighting, that art practiced long by most of the Southern men and mountain men of years before, and had learned it well. Some might call it pride or arrogance, but Teague felt there was not a man alive he couldn’t cut bad in a stand up, face-to-face fight, with cold steel. For him, it was merely a fact he accepted about himself. He knew what he could do with a knife. He’d had masters of the art teach him, men who had proven their ability the hard way. Teague had taken their philosophy, their methods, and applied them and learned to improve on what he’d learned, and eventually, to teach his teachers.

He recalled the day he’d hired the Apache Wa-nasay, a stout, fierce, Indian who had been a U.S. Army scout. The Apache had deserted, then found that he could not stand reservation life, and did not care to die in the desert fighting the soldiers. He’d seen their power close up, and saw the end coming for the Indian.

Wa-nasay was pragmatic about it all, knowing there was little the Indian could do to change the course of events. He was not afraid of death, but he would not throw himself away without reason, without accomplishing some purpose. It was his cold, emotionless approach to life that had endeared him to Wes Teague.

Wa-nasay had drifted around, stealing what he could, living off the land. Teague had caught him butchering one of

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his beef one blustery winter day, and instead of the expected fight, the Indian had received an invitation to work as a rider on Teague's ranch. He remembered how the man had stood there, no fear, no signs of nervousness, and no shame for what he'd been doing. He was waiting for the white man to make a move, and was ready for peace or war.

Teague smiled as he remembered. Wa-nasay had become a top hand in a short time. He had no peer when it came to riding and taming horses, and Teague had put him in charge of the remuda.

They'd spent many hours together hunting, and many days, Wa-nasay had spent teaching him how to track, how to survive on the land, supported only by that harsh place, and eventually, how to fight with a knife the Indian way. It was a way far different than the approach taken by Juan, Teague's Mexican vaquero, who used the knife as most men use their hands.

The Indian way had none of the subtleness or the trickery of the Mexican's way with the knife. Wa-nasay explained to Teague that the Indian way took great courage, and that only a real man could fight as the Apache fights. Teague learned that the Apache way meant that one had to expect to receive a wound from the enemy, that one had to be ready to die, if need be, in order to slay his enemy. The Indian expected a short fight, and an attack would be quick, vicious, and with almost complete abandon. There was little time wasted with feints and clever moves. The Apache way was to intimidate and overwhelm the enemy with a terrorizing, brutal attack.

Teague mastered Wa-nasay's way with a knife, although he did not accept all of the warrior's philosophy. Perhaps it was the white man's blood in him that looked upon a knife wound not as a scar to be proud of, but a disfigurement, and as something that would tell everyone he was not fast enough. In this, he was in agreement with Juan and his way with the knife.

He worked long hours with both men, using sticks with



charcoal on the ends to indicate “wounds,” and the day came when Wa-nasay could not stand up to Teague. The only time the Indian could score a victory or inflict a serious wound was when he threw himself away, willing to die in order to “kill” his “enemy,” in this case his boss, Weston Teague.

It was not so easy to master the Mexican’s way with a knife. The lithe, brown man was so artful, so quick, and so full of tricks that Teague found himself often with heavy streaks of black running across his belly or his face and Juan standing to one side with his flashing smile, showing to Teague and those ranch hands watching that he knew he was good, and that he was enjoying the moment.

However, Weston Teague was different from most men. Perhaps the trickery of the Mexican would be enough for a foe of equal speed, and even equal cunning, but Weston Teague had something even he had never quite understood. Some would call it intuition, others instinct.

Whatever it was, Teague made moves when he was fighting that placed both of his teachers in awe. He would somehow sense a move, and counter it before the move was hardly begun, or would make an attack that was the perfect defense against his enemy’s attack. They were moves without thought. That, coupled with a cat-like grace and speed, eventually proved to be too much for his teachers. Teague finally reached the point where he simply would not lose to either man, excepting the times Wa-nasay would “kill” Teague at the cost of his own life.

He liked using the knife. It was silent, efficient, extremely economical, and in the hands of an expert, deadly. He’d practiced long hours throwing, until he could hit a small target on a tree, and countless were the hours he’d spent in those sweaty, vigorous mock battles with Juan and Wa-nasay, at times individually, and now and then, both at the same time.

Teague took the sheathed knife and slipped it into his pants top at the small of his back. He would at least have a

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weapon, one he doubted even the laws of New York would frown upon him carrying. He threw his valise under the bed, looked quickly around, then left. He wanted food, and although the hour was late, he hoped the dining room was still serving.

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Miles away, in a darker corner of the city three men sat around discussing the prospects for their income in the coming days. There was little sentiment in two of the three, survival being their chief purpose in life. They made their living robbing those foolish enough to venture about certain parts of city at the wrong hour of the night, and sometimes, the day. Now and then they sneaked across that invisible line that separated their world from that of the more civilized, and more prosperous, citizens of the city. Such a move was being contemplated now.

The leader was a quiet, brooding man, rib-lean, with clothes that looked as though they had never seen the touch of water. Walter “Fish” Johnson was twenty-seven, but his eyes said he was older—much older. He was sitting on his throne at the moment, a small orange crate, cleaning his fingernails with a slender, wicked-looking knife, long, and with a needle-sharp point.

Johnson said, “Ain’t much been coming through, Willy. Sure you been keeping a sharp eye out?”

Willy, a short, dried up little man with a perpetual squint to his right eye, and a scraggly beard covering pale skin, protested, “Honest Fish, I been over near the Park every day. I even got the kid, that paper kid, watching out for anything. He gets sumpthin’ for what he spots, but he ain’t spottin’ a thing.”

Johnson smirked and replied, the sarcasm dripping from his words, “Yeah, and the last three he spotted was broke. That kid is as worthless as them papers he sells.”

Johnson looked at the other man who was leaning up

against the building, staring down the dark tunnel of the alley. “Kid, what about you? I know the docks ain’t clear of people. Them sailors never give a whoop and a holler where they go, long as they get a woman and a bottle.”

The young man had been staring into the night, and his attention jerked back to the speaker. Arnold McIntosh was a big, red-headed Irishman, just twenty, and had been with Johnson and Willy for just three weeks. In his eyes there was an intelligence not seen in the other two. He’d taken up with them out of desperation, unable to find work, starving, and finally willing to steal in order to survive. He didn’t like it, but it kept body and soul together.

He replied, his voice a trifle high-pitched with fear, “Hector spotted me, Fish. Said if he caught me hanging around he was going to send his boys around for me, you and Willy. Said he’d been getting too many complaints, and that we’re bad for business.”

Johnson grunted. “He knows we never hurt nobody bad, ‘cept those that try and make a fight out of it.”

“What about that old bos’un? You didn’t have to stick him like you did.”

Johnson rose instantly, sensing a challenge from the man, and knowing that he had to quell it now or it would bring trouble later. He stepped close to the young man, grabbed him roughly by the coat front and said with a rasp, “Kid, I kept you alive these weeks. Don’t go getting soft on me now. I did what I had to with that old man. If he hadn’t tried to swing on me, he’d still be guzzlin’ whiskey and tellin’ lies. You let me worry about things like that, hear?”

McIntosh took a deep breath, wanting desperately to slam Johnson in the gut. However, the naked blade in the man’s hand and the instinctive fear he felt for Johnson stopped him. There was something soulless and desperate, something deadly about Johnson, and McIntosh felt it now. He shivered in spite of himself.

Johnson released the man and walked back to his crate,

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adjusted it in order to lean back against the wall, then said, “Boys, we’re going to lay off the docks awhile anyhow, at least until things blow over, and the park is getting too risky. It’s full of brass buttons, and besides, pickings are getting lean there.”

He closed his knife, stuffed it into his pocket and said, “I got us a new spot located. We got to go out of our territory some, but there ain’t nuthin’ but money walking around there.”

Willy asked, “If it’s so good, how come we ain’t heard of it before? And how come Hector and his boys ain’t been there?”

Johnson grinned. “Hector likes to play politics. He can’t afford to get caught in this place, or have word get out that he was involved there. We ain’t got no palms to grease, and no rich friends to tell us to back off.”

He leaned forward suddenly, his voice dropping to a whisper, and said “We’re going up by the Astor House!”

“What? You can’t go in there! We’d get beat to a bloody pulp if we got spotted even close to that place.” Willy was frowning, genuinely concerned. He knew the area well, had once stayed in some of the fancy hotels near there in better days, and had even worked at one, once. He remembered how they dealt with drifters and such as himself. There was little words wasted. Anyone who didn’t seem to belong around there, and caught by the police, could expect a beating at best. True, it was where the rich walked about, but it was also where there were more police than usual. There, police even rode around on horses. He wanted no part of that area of town.

Johnson said, “Aw, you’re a little weasel.”

Willy argued, “Look, you know Boss Tweed’s got everything locked up in this town. They don’t let guys like us in on the take. Put a suit on us like Hector and his boys, and give us all a moniker like the kid there, and maybe we could get away with it. You’re asking for Tweed and his brass buttons to fall on us hard, Fish.”

He paused, then added with genuine emotion, "Maybe they don't scare you, but they scare me real bad, and I ain't ashamed to admit it."

Johnson replied, "We don't actually go right into the streets, fool! We go in at night, and we stay in the alleys. In fact, we don't go in until near two in the morning. Things are peaceful, then."

McIntosh asked, "What good is that going to do? Everyone with any money will be in bed."

Johnson said wearily, "We look for those gentlemen who have gone out for a night on the town and are coming back to their hotels in their carriages. We wait along a good spot and jump in the carriage as it goes along. I stick Ginger..." he fumbled in his pocket and brought out his knife, "alongside his neck and his wallet will pop right out. I guarantee it."

"You sure that we won't have to go any closer??" Willie was not totally convinced.

Johnson smiled. "Certain. Oh, we might have to find us a dark side street close by, but that's the closest we come. We'll hit the carriage, grab his coin and be out in a flash. The kid here will take one side, and I'll take the other. We go in together at the same time. You be ready to jump the driver and haul him up."

He leaned back, clearly pleased with himself, then grinned and said, "It's almost the same as we did with the young bloods in the park, trotting around in their fancy rigs. This'll be all the easier, 'cause these carriages won't be trying to see how fast they can go, like those crazies in the park do."

Willy chuckled, "Yeah, they beat all I ever did see, running likkity-split like they do. Them young ladies don't seem to mind it, either. Women weren't like that in my day."

Johnson sneered. "You ain't never seen the day when you knew what a woman was like."

Willie started to protest, sighed deeply and squatted down on his haunches. Johnson was right. His face, in fact, everything about him, was repulsive, and he knew it. It had

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always been so. He stared at McIntosh, suddenly jealous at the youth's clean features, and his mannerly ways.

Johnson, sensing Willie's inward turn said gruffly, "Gather round and let's work this out. We got to plan this thing."

McIntosh walked over near the two and squatted beside the tilted crate on which Johnson perched precariously. Willie scooted closer. Their voices became whispers in the night as they worked out the details. Later, they even rehearsed parts until they were completely sure of what to do.

McIntosh wondered idly at the uneasiness that rested in the pit of his stomach. He brushed it off, dismissing his fears as apprehension at a new job.

## *CHAPTER 3*

### *A New York Welcome*

Teague ate well. He was weary of the meals he'd been forced to take along the way. Now, he was making up for the tasteless fare he'd endured on the trip. At the moment, he had just eaten a large steak on a much larger plate, broiled until the pink was barely visible. A pile of mashed potatoes with a rich brown gravy, and a mound of green beans came with the steak. He finished everything off with a huge slice of apple pie and several cups of the best coffee he'd ever had. It didn't taste like Arbuckle's, for sure. Not that Arbuckle's was bad coffee, but this coffee was different. Maybe it was the fact that it wasn't coffee brewed in a tin pot that made it taste better.

After dinner he decided to take a walk. The night was cool, and Teague was not a man to sit around. Eating made some men drowsy, but a good meal always made him restless, like he had an overdose of energy to throw off. So, he walked into the New York night, hands in his pockets, and thinking of beautiful Abitha Claymore, rehearsing in his mind the words he'd say to her when they met again.

He came to the end of the light, hesitated, then decided to continue. There was enough moon out, and he wanted a long walk. He strolled ahead leisurely, relaxed, but alert. A man like Wes Teague never let down his guard, never completely relaxed. It was a habit he'd gotten into many years ago.

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Instinctively, his mind noted the sounds of the night, enjoying the constant chatter of the crickets, marking the clip clop of a nearby buggy, and absorbing the clink and clatter of a city that seemed never to completely sleep. The air was pungent with the smell of fresh manure, a smell familiar and somewhat reassuring to him. Horse were in abundance here.

Just ahead McIntosh whispered, "Hey, somebody's walking our way!"

Johnson asked, "What's he look like?"

"Tall, wearing a black coat and a hat like those cattlemen wear."

Johnson said, "We take him!"

Willy exclaimed, "What about a carriage? We'd get a better haul, there."

"Shut your face, Willy. If he's one of those cattlemen, he's wearing a money belt. Men like that always got a wad on 'em. He's probably got a snootfull and is lost. We'll show him the way back." Johnson laughed low, smiling at the thought of the drunken cowman walking back to the hotel in his drawers.

They crept slowly ahead, three darkened shapes leaning forward, keeping low. Their prey walked steadily towards them. It was not the walk of a man who'd had too much to drink, and McIntosh felt that familiar chill of unease sweep over him again.

Teague sensed them before they walked out of the small stand of trees. It was not a thing he could explain. He just suddenly knew there was someone nearby, and that there was danger. His entire being filled with that familiar rush of eagerness and alertness. He stopped, his eyes focusing on the darkness ahead. His mind ran free as it always did in such instances. It was as though he were another person. He appeared to be relaxed, but his entire being was taut and eager, like a bent piece of spring steel, waiting only to be released. He already had slipped his knife out of its resting place, and cradled it in one hand that hung loosely by his side.



Suddenly, two men walked out of the darkness, not in a hurry, acting casual. One spoke, "You lost, mister?" Teague saw a third shape move hesitantly from a nearby bush.

Teague replied, "No. Just out for a walk. I guess I'm just tired of sitting."

Johnson saw their mark was stone sober, and knew also that the man would resist any attempt to be robbed. He'd been at this enough years to tell the ones that would resist. Everything about this man said he'd fight back. He had robbed too many men not to know the signs. Some men will be docile, while others will take wild chances rather than submit.

He remembered the old bo'sun McIntosh had mentioned. Johnson had known he would put up a fight, too. He had that proud look, that shine in his eye that said he'd not yield to any man. While Johnson could not see this man's face clearly, he could feel it in the man's voice, the clear, unafraid timbre, and the loose, easy way the man stood and faced them. Yes, this man would resist. Johnson tingled with anticipation.

In a voice quivering somewhat with the flush of adrenalin, Johnson said to McIntosh, "Kid, you stand over on that side of him." He waved to Willy, "You get behind him." Johnson held his knife beside his leg in the darkness.

Teague said, "Figured this might be your play. I'm willing to stand you boys to a meal. Don't be hoping for anything more, though. It'll cost some blood. Maybe some of mine, but for sure, some of yours." He stood there waiting, legs spread, balanced perfectly, the knife held, ready to cut, or ready to throw. He hoped they didn't have a gun. If so, he knew he had to make sure his knife hit the target perfectly, then he had to make sure he was able to reach the one with the weapon before any of the others could use their weapon effectively.

Johnson said, "Kid, you go in high and take his head off with your club. Willy, you go in low and cut his legs out. I'll take him straight ahead." His eyes never left Teague.

He moved ahead just a few more feet, then said, "Mis-

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ter, toss your money bag to us, and you live. Otherwise, you're going to grow flowers right here."

Teague ignored Johnson, and waited there in the moonlight, anxious, but unafraid, and suddenly cold. He was completely calm as he always was in a fight, and already, he had let his mind go, not thinking about what he would do. When a man is in a fight, to think is to lose. A man had to move instinctively, had to react to the other man immediately. He'd already determined some things he could do, but most of his moves would just come to him. He'd do whatever he needed to do, and it wouldn't be a thing that required conscious, logical reasoning.

He hoped the one called "kid" would swing his club first. If so, he had a chance of coming out of this without a scratch, since it did not seem that any of them had a gun. If not, things would depend upon how good the man facing him was with that knife he held at his side. No matter what, at least two of the men would probably die, and he thought he had a good chance to cut the other bad. They'd have to be a lot better than Juan and Wa-nasay were together, and he didn't think all three of them could match those two. Few men could.

McIntosh said softly, "I won't do it."

Johnson spat out his words, "Kid, you better jump him now. You don't move, I'll cut your heart out!"

Teague saw the kid shiver, then he simply stepped back into the night. He called back to Johnson out of the darkness, "I'll be waiting for you, Fish."

Teague called out, "Hey kid! You want a job?"

There was a moment of silence, then "What do you have in mind?"

"Come back here and wait until I'm done with your former associates."

Willy shouted, "What's goin' on here!" He looked over at Johnson, not liking any of this, bothered with the big man's indifference to his plight. Willy did not like jobs that were complicated, and even less, jobs that didn't go as planned. All

the times he'd been arrested were on jobs that didn't go right, that for one reason or another went bust. Johnson just stared at the big man.

Willy said, "It's busted hand, Fish. Let's forget it."

It was good advice, perhaps the best Johnson ever received, but he was enraged. He wanted blood, especially the kid's. He wanted to leave the big man clutching his stomach, and then slice the kid up and leave him bleeding his life away on the street. Johnson, drifter, failure at everything in his life, including his eleven year career as a thug, decided he had enough failure, that this was his turning point. It suddenly became important not to fail at this job.

He looked at Willy briefly and said, "He ain't armed or he'd have pulled his gun by now, We stay with the plan. I'll deal with the kid after. ."

McIntosh said, "You'll deal with me now, Fish. Since I'm working for the man here, I suppose I'd be a fool to let my meal ticket get cut up, now wouldn't I?"

"You got a lot of spunk all of a sudden, kid. You been drinking?"

McIntosh stepped into view and smiled. "No, just thinking. Guess I realized finally what a little rat you really are, and how stupid I've been to ever hook up with the likes of you two."

Teague said, "Son, you stay out of this. Whatever you do, when they move in, you stay away. That's my first order to you."

McIntosh hesitated, then replied, "Yes sir."

Johnson had a moment of indecision. Something was screaming in him to leave this place, to run as fast as he ever did in his life, but something else was saying no, that he'd see it though. This big man smelled like money—lots of it. There was no way that man could avoid his knife. He moved closer, waving one hand at Willy to move closer with him. Willy complied, but did not move as close as his companion. He was getting more nervous and a cold, icy dread filled his being.

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Fish's eyes were now focused intently on Teague. His voice was a hoarse whisper. "Get ready, Willy."

Suddenly, Johnson shouted, "Now!" He leaped at Teague, his knife a flashing arc, aimed at the big man's belly, his head and body dipping low as he whirled. It was a move that had disemboweled many a victim because it was so sudden. Performed in the night, it was even more deadly because the absence of light gave him a fraction of a second's advantage.

Willy stood frozen. Nothing about this night suited him, and the longer he was around the big man in the cowman's hat the less he liked it. He watched with total fascination as Johnson leaped in to attack. He saw the big man leap forward instead of backwards, moving with speed equal to Johnson's. It was the perfect counter to Johnson's move.

The big man grabbed Johnson's arm as it came sweeping around and suddenly, Johnson was being whirled by one arm as easily as a man might swing a bag of feathers. Even if Willy had leaped in, he'd have had Johnson's back as a target and he realized that Johnson's whirling body would have sent him crashing to the ground.

And suddenly, the big stranger with the Stetson was facing him now, a knife held low. Johnson was lying on the ground at the man's feet moaning softly in pain. Willy glanced at him and could see blood on Fish's face.

The little man stared for a long moment at Teague as the big man standing silently, waiting, the knife held carelessly in one hand at his side. Willy took one last look at Johnson, then leaped into the darkness and was gone.

He heard steps behind him, then the big man's voice called out: "Let him go, kid!"

Willy disappeared into the New York night, realizing as he ran that probably, if everything had gone as planned, even with the kid in the game, that man would have taken them all to hell in a hurry. He broke into a sweat, but it was not from his running. The night was too cool for that. He hurried his

pace. Death had come too close to him that night.

Teague felt no remorse over the man lying on the grass moaning that his arm was broke. Life was a series of choices. A man chose his path, no matter what territory life had placed in him. Teague believed that men like the one he'd slain were like the vultures of the West. They circled humanity, looking for the weak, preying on the dying.

This man had made a serious error, letting passion interfere with good sense. Doing something without considering the possibilities was a fool's play, and usually ended bad. This one would probably live, but the deep cut Teague gave to the man's knife arm just under the arm pit, would likely turn him into a beggar for life instead of thief.

As he thought of it, he realized with chagrin that he was in a strange city about to embark on a mission that was in many ways, as foolish as the one undertaken by the dead man. He was not on his own ground, and he knew that Abitha's father would spare no costs and use all the power at his command to stop him from marrying his daughter.

He wondered if it included killing him, then grinned as he remembered her father: stout, eyes as black as coal and just as hard, with a shrewdness shining there that told Teague that here was a man as hard as himself, in his way. He decided that old Claymore would indeed, if it was the only way, kill him, or at least have him killed. It was disturbing to him, but he didn't resent it. It was just the way some men were. However, it wasn't going to stop him from trying.

The silence was finally broken by McIntosh. "Sir, do you want me to take him down by the hotel?"

"What's your name, kid?"

"McIntosh, sir. Arnold McIntosh."

Teague asked, "You live in this city long?"

"No sir. I...I, uh....?"

"Speak up, son. I'm not a lawman."

"Well sir, I got into some trouble at home. My folks have a farm in the western part of the state. I left and give my

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share of the place to my older brother.”

Teague didn't ask what the trouble was about. He really didn't want to know, and it was none of his business. He despised men who had to know every little thing about a person, who kept prying, digging, and trying to extract every morsel of information possible. He stared at the young man a moment, smiled, and stuck out his hand. “I'm Weston Teague. Call me Wes or Boss, as you like.”

McIntosh took his hand and shook it. “Pleased to meet you, sir.”

Teague laughed. “You say sir to everyone?”

“No sir, I guess it's just a habit my ma got me into. I only use it with important people.”

Teague laughed again. “All right, McIntosh. You bind up the cut on his arm. Then leave him here, and then come over to the hotel. I'll have a room there waiting for you. And then you'll get the law to look after our friend here, if he's still around when they come for him.”

He hesitated, then added, “Uh, I wouldn't mention your association with the gentleman. Just be a witness to the attack, if they ask.”

McIntosh laughed and said, “Fish Johnson is a man I never wanted to know, wish I hadn't known, and never shall again, sir, uh...Boss.”

“Good! Now let's get some rest. I have a lady to meet in the morning and you have some police to talk to and a surrey to hire.”