

## **Prologue**

### ***Manhattan, February 1893***

Though he was desperate to complete his mission before he lost his nerve, Knox forced himself to take only small, careful steps as he made his way slowly along Fifth Avenue.

There was good reason for this caution. The weak sun had struggled to bring a little cheer into the shivering city during the day, but the second it had been vanquished over the horizon, the pitiless winter had returned with a vengeance.

Now, the sun's pale warmth seemed no more than a distant memory – a rumour that, once, times had been better. Now, frost clung mockingly to the lamp posts and patches of black ice began to form across the sidewalk.

Black ice!

Damn it to hell.

You couldn't see it, because it was almost transparent.

You couldn't guess where it might be, since it did not spread itself evenly, but instead chose to lurk in isolated spots, waiting with malevolent patience for the unsuspecting foot to fall on it.

And there was black ice lurking, too, on the journey that is our lives, Knox thought bitterly. Take a wrong step on that journey – make just one little misjudgement – and instead of advancing, you were lying on the ground, bruised and battered.

He had stepped on black ice, and that particular sheet of it had been called William Holt, who hadn't looked dangerous and had given no warning of what he might do.

It just didn't seem fair!

Knox reached into his overcoat pocket, and felt the reassuring handle of the revolver he had bought earlier that day.

'It's going to happen,' he reassured himself. 'I'm going to do it!'

But he mustn't slip and fall, because, if he did, he knew that it would probably be enough to shake his resolve – to convince him that men like him simply did not take their revenge in this way.

He was still finding it hard to believe that everything had collapsed so quickly around him.

Only two months earlier – as recently as Christmas! - he had been regarded by almost everyone who mattered in New York as one of the city's great success stories.

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He had noticed people pointing him out in expensive restaurants, and had found it easy enough to imagine what they were saying.

‘That’s Edward Knox. You’d never think it, to look at him, but he’s worth millions of dollars.’

And now?

Now, it was all over. His house had been foreclosed. He could no longer afford to pay for his sons to attend their expensive college. His wife had left him.

He was finished.

He was resigned to that.

He accepted he would never be able to dredge up the energy to start again from scratch, and though he was still walking – albeit timidly - he was already as good as dead.

But before he finally lay down, he’d promised himself, he would make one last attempt to see that justice was done.

He had reached his destination, a large house close to St Patrick’s Cathedral, which – like all the other houses around it – was in complete darkness. He walked around the side of the building, to the tradesman’s entrance, and tapped softly on the door.

Though the Holt mansion had electric light throughout, unlike most of the private dwellings in the city, the woman who opened the door was carrying a small kerosene lantern in her hand.

‘It’s safer this way,’ she whispered.

She led him into the kitchen, and placed the lantern on the table.

He examined her in the flickering light. She was in her late twenties – he knew that for a fact – and a few years earlier, she had been a very pretty little thing. But time had not been kind to her. Now she could have been taken for at least ten years older than her actual age.

‘Have you got the money?’ she hissed urgently.

He nodded. ‘Right here,’ he said, reaching into his pocket and taking out a brown envelope.

She grabbed the envelope from him, ripped it open without ceremony, and began counting the bills on the table.

‘It’s all there,’ he promised her.

And so it was. Some people might have considered him foolish to hand the last of his savings over to this woman, but he had no doubts on the matter. As far as he was concerned, it was the best thousand dollars he had ever spent.

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The woman had finished counting.

‘I’m not doing this for the money,’ she said.

‘Then give it back to me!’ he said harshly – and instantly felt guilty.

‘I can’t give it back,’ the woman said. ‘I need it to get away from here – *but that’s not why I’m doing this.*’

‘I know, Margaret,’ he told her.

‘I was only supposed to be his secretary,’ the woman said. ‘I was supposed to do no more than take shorthand and typewrite his letters for him. I was good at it. That should have been enough for him. But it wasn’t.’

‘I know,’ Knox said for a second time.

‘He didn’t use physical force to make me into his bed ...’ Margaret Wilkins continued.

‘I don’t really need to know the details,’ Knox said, uncomfortably.

‘... but if it wasn’t rape, it was certainly as good as.’

‘There’s no point in dwelling on the past,’ said Knox, who found himself doing little else now.

‘But even though I didn’t ever want him to sleep with me, it still hurt that he’d only make use of me when there wasn’t some other woman within easy reach.’

‘He’s a bastard,’ Knox said, though he never usually swore in the presence of ladies. ‘We both know that. That’s why I’m here and why you’re letting me into the house.’

‘Yes, that’s why you’re here and why I’m letting you into the house,’ Margaret Wilkins said dully.

‘Where is he?’

‘In his study. He always works late into the night.’

‘And is there anyone else around?’

‘No, the rest of them went to bed at least an hour ago.’

‘Then let’s get it over with,’ Knox suggested.

Carrying her lantern in front of her, Margaret Wilkins led him through a maze of corridors to the servants’ stairs, and then up to the first floor. Here, the corridors – designed for use by family and friends, rather than just a passageway for mere domestics - were wider and more impressive.

The woman came to a stop in front of a solid teak door.

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‘He’s in there,’ she whispered.

‘Will the door be locked?’

‘No, it’s never locked. He wouldn’t even dream that anyone would dare to enter without his permission.’

Knox let his fingers brush against the butt of his revolver.

‘You’d better go now.’

Margaret Wilkins shook her head. ‘I want to stay. I want to see it happen.’

‘Don’t be a fool,’ Knox hissed back. ‘Go now, and you can say you knew nothing of what went on. Stay, and you’ll be as guilty as I am.’

‘I don’t care,’ the woman said stubbornly.

‘Take the money I’ve given you, and start a new life,’ he urged her.

For a second, it looked as she would refuse again. Then she gave a brief nod, turned, and hurried down the corridor. Soon, she was no more than a faint island of retreating light, and he was left in the darkness.

With one hand, he reached into his pocket and grasped his revolver. With the other, he groped for the door handle, and - once he had found it - gave it a sharp turn and pushed the door open.

The electric light inside the room blinded him, but only for a moment, then his eyes adjusted and he saw Big Bill Holt, sitting at his desk. Holt was still wearing the tuxedo he must have put on for dinner, and there was a faraway - almost ecstatic - look in his eyes. At first, he did not even seem to notice that someone had entered the room, but when that fact registered, the eyes blazed with anger.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’ he demanded.

Knox advanced further into centre of the room. ‘You cheated me,’ he said. ‘You took all my money - and you *cheated* me.’

Holt shrugged his massive shoulders. ‘Nobody cheated you. You went into a business where you could either have made or lost money - and you lost it.’

‘But *you* didn’t lose, did you?’ Knox demanded, aware that a hysterical note was creeping into his voice.

‘No, I didn’t lose,’ Holt agreed. ‘I had the sense to get out in time.’

‘And you didn’t tell me.’

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Another shrug. ‘Since when have I been your nursemaid?’

This was something very wrong about all this, Knox thought worried. When he had played out the scene in his mind – and he must have done that a hundred times – things had been quite different.

In the Knox mind-version, Holt jumps to his feet and rushes around the desk. And this is what Knox wants. Because it is not enough that the other man must die – he must know humiliation before that death.

Holt’s anger has swollen him to almost twice his normal size. He is like a raging bull that has sighted the red cape – like a ravenous lion springing at its prey. He knows that he can snap the puny intruder in two – as if he were no more than a twig – and that is just what he intends to do.

Knox waits until his enemy is half-way across the room - then produces the gun from his pocket.

Holt sees the revolver, and comes to an abrupt stop.

He is still like a raging bull, but now one that has the smell of its own death in its nostrils – still the ravaging lion, but now a lion which realises it is no match for its intended victim. His arms drop uselessly to his sides, and his eyes are suddenly filled with fear.

‘What’s that?’ this fantasy-Holt says in a trembling voice, as his eyes fixed on the gun.

‘You know what it is,’ the fantasy-Knox replies, his own voice as firm and steady as the hand in which he is holding the weapon.

Holt sinks to his knees, his hands clenched in prayer.

‘Please don’t kill me!’ he sobs. ‘Please!’

And that is the moment at which Knox pulls the trigger.

That was what *should* have happened – but it *hadn’t*!

Holt was continuing to sit behind his desk.

Angry – yes.

Frightened – possibly.

*But still sitting there!*

Knox pulled out the revolver, and pointed it at his enemy.

‘Put the gun away, before you hurt yourself,’ Holt said.

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But the fear was in his eyes now – just as Knox had dreamed it would be.

‘Stand up!’ the man with the revolver said.

‘Why should I?’ Holt demanded.

Why indeed, Knox wondered.

Because, he supposed, that was how he had scripted it to be – how it was *meant* to be.

‘Stand up, and you may just live,’ he said. ‘Stay where you are, and I’ll kill you right now.’

Holt still made no move. ‘I’ll pay you back all the money you lost. I’ll pay you back *double* what you lost.’

For an instant, Knox almost gave way.

But *only* for an instant – because he knew that the moment he lost the upper hand, Holt would crush him.

‘I’m going to count to three, and if you’re not standing up by ‘three’, I *will* kill you!’

Slowly and reluctantly, Holt rose to his feet – to reveal that he was naked from the waist down.

‘What the ...’ Knox gasped.

And then he understood.

‘You got a *whore* under your desk,’ he said. ‘You’ve spent the money you stole from me on a *whore*!’

Holt forced a smile to his face.

‘Oh, not all of it,’ he said. ‘Even the best prostitutes are nowhere near as expensive as that.’

He was trying to make a joke of the whole situation, Knox realised. Because he knew it would make him seem more human – make him more difficult to kill.

But that wouldn’t work. In fact, only made matters worse, because only a monster would rob two fine young men of their college education and then squander the money on a common prostitute.

‘If you still believe in God, then pray to him now,’ Knox said, his finger already tightening on the trigger.

It was the woman’s scream which made his hand jerk – made the bullet he fired strike Holt not in his black heart, but only in the shoulder.

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And then the woman herself appeared – rising up suddenly from behind the desk and burying her head in Holt’s massive chest.

As if that would protect her!

As if she would have been worse off staying where she was!

Knox looked down at the gun in his hand, almost as if he were wondering how it had ever got there.

He couldn’t shoot again, he told himself, because the woman was in the way.

But even if she hadn’t been, he understood – deep down – he would not have fired a second time, because he had only been brave enough to loose off one shot, and that shot had already gone.

Despite his wound, Holt was struggling to get from behind the desk – to come at him just as he had done in the fantasy – but the woman was clinging on to him with all the strength that her fear had given her.

And suddenly, there was a fourth person in the room – a stocky young man in a nightshirt.

‘That’s George, Holt’s eldest son,’ Knox thought in the detached way of someone who has withdrawn from the drama and is now only part of the audience.

George Holt looked at his father and the woman, then at Knox, then at his father and the woman again.

‘Oh my God!’ he said in a voice which was almost a moan. ‘Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God ...’

‘For Christ’s sake, be a man for once!’ his father said harshly. ‘You see what the problem is. Deal with it.’

But George stood rooted to the spot – as if he couldn’t have moved even if he wanted to.

‘Deal with it!’ his father repeated.

And slowly – almost like a sleepwalker – George Holt turned to face the man with the gun.

There were still five bullets left in the chamber of the revolver, Knox thought. And at this range, even *he* couldn’t miss. But he had no argument with *George* Holt. Besides, he was feeling very, very tired, and pulling the trigger seemed like just too much of an effort.

And so he stood there.

Watching as George crossed the room towards him.

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Watching as George came to a stop and bent his elbow back to give the blow he was about to deliver more force.

Watching as the big fist came towards him – growing ever larger until it filled his whole world.

And then everything went black.