

# FATAL TRUST

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*For my Ian*

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# Prologue

**JUNE 2018**  
**MINNEAPOLIS**

In the still night air, Ian stood with his back to the Mississippi River on the Guthrie Theater's outdoor patio, his fingertips tingling and the strong beat of his heart filling his chest.

He'd stood here on other nights—during intermission or after a play had ended inside the theater. But no drama he'd ever witnessed could have conjured a scene like this. Three men stood behind him, two with dark guns in their fists. Another sat on a step beside him, calmly typing bank account information into a laptop. A young woman stood at his elbow, holding a stolen painting rolled under one arm.

Ian did a slow blink. It was as though the theater's evening play had been transplanted from an indoor stage to this small space under a waning moon for the entertainment of an invisible crowd. And now it was winding its way to an ending that hadn't yet been written.

“Seems like a family reunion,” one of the men holding a gun had mocked minutes before in an Irish tone. “Everyone here?”

If Ian had answered yes, he would have been wrong. Because just now another figure was pushing through the door above them. It was a woman. She stepped onto the patio and began walking slowly, ethereally, down the stairs toward them.

It took seconds for Ian to register the identity of the new arrival. It took a moment longer to realize she also held a gun in her hand.

He stiffened, crying out, “*What are you doing here? Drop the gun!*”

She didn’t answer or obey.

Even if this final scene was still a work in process, Ian had come with a plan. Hastily devised, maybe, but a plan. And it didn’t involve a cross fire of bullets on this tiny space near the river’s edge.

Except now, over the rising thunder in his chest, Ian knew his plan for this moment had been discarded. And when the Act was shortly over, people Ian cared for were very likely to be dead.

# 1

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**JUNE 8, 1998**  
**PORT ST. LUCIE, FLORIDA**

Tight as a tendon, the boxer stood under a dark sky on a carpet of closely cropped grass leading to a coffin. With his black umbrella overhead, he shuffled his feet and stewed.

The casket, dark and shiny, was propped over an open hole lined by a knot of people on the far side. Flower wreaths decorated one end of the hole. Palm branches twisted overhead in a warm breeze, loosing raindrops from the recent shower. The refreshed air smelled of orange blossoms and grass clippings and carried the low words of the priest and a mockingbird's call from a distant tree.

It wasn't an unpleasant view, the boxer thought—Christina would have appreciated it. But it still was rotten. Rotten that his boss had lost his wife to cancer. Rotten how few people were here to pay their respects to Christina, who'd always been good to him and as much a second mother as the boss had been a second father. Even ten years ago, the boxer mused, this place would've been packed and the flowers could've filled a moving van.

He shook his head and rolled his shoulders to loosen muscles tight from his punching-bag workout that morning. But that's how life worked, didn't it? People remembered you so long as you had something they needed. When that ended, they moved on without so much as a glance over their shoulder. It was all wrong. Wrong and rotten.

The boxer looked past the coffin. A young man in a well-tailored suit held an umbrella over his prim, equally well-dressed wife. A boy in a suit and a little girl in a black dress—twelve years old, he guessed—were fidgeting restlessly at the wife's side.

At least *they'd* shown up, the boxer thought. He didn't think they would. That was something anyway.

The boxer sensed nervous movement at his side as a voice muttered sadly, "Where'd he get the cash for that Rolex?"

The boxer glanced to where his boss stood under the protection of his umbrella. A fedora was pulled low on the smaller man's head; his lips were pursed tight, his eyes locked on the same young family the boxer had been watching.

"How about those diamonds hanging from the wife's ears?" his boss went on bitterly. "Or the clothes that make the kids look like English royalty?" He thrust his chin toward the parking lot, his voice deepening with disgust. "And how'd he pay for that Mercedes they drove all the way down from Minnesota?"

The boxer raised a hand to signal his boss to quiet.

The gesture was ignored. "I told him we'd give it time to cool," the older man said. "Go back to *real* work. The inheritance will come. Don't do anything to bring attention to you." He paused, shook his head. "Now look at 'em. We're supposed to say goodbye to our Christina today, and I've got to worry about what my own son's doing to earn that kinda cash."

The dresses of women mourners rustled in a gust of breeze. The priest raised his right hand to make the sign of the cross. Like a conductor ending a symphony, the motion released everyone to trickle away from the grave toward the parking lot.

But his boss didn't move, so the boxer didn't either. Car doors were shutting and engines coming to life when the boss removed his hat and walked to the coffin to place a hand on its sleek surface, dotted with droplets like a black Cadillac in the rain.

"If he gets caught doing something illegal, it'll all lead back to us," the boss said. "We'll all pay the price. *But what can I do?*"

The boxer winced at the open confession. He swiveled his head to see if anyone was near enough to have heard.

The grass on either side of the grave was empty. From the corner of his eye, he caught a shape on the hill at his back.

A small boy stood there—nine or ten maybe. Near enough to fall under the umbrella's shadow as the sun left the clouds. The boxer fixed his attention on the boy, who looked back with a bright stare.

*I know that boy*, the boxer thought, startled. *What is he doing here?*

Fury fired his muscles, replacing the anger at his boss's son and his graveside show of money. This boy shouldn't be here, on this day of all days, and he shouldn't have heard every careless word his boss had spoken.

Lowering the umbrella, the boxer bowed and reached out for the boy's shoulder.

"What do we think we heard, little Master?" the boxer asked, tightening to a firm grip.

The boy stayed mute. The boxer leaned further down. Fear appeared in the bright eyes.

*“What do we think we heard?”* he asked more insistently.

The fear went deeper. “Just what the man with the hat said,” the boy responded, his voice trembling.

The boxer nodded his head. “Aye. And what exactly does the little Master think he understands?”