

FATAL  
TRUST

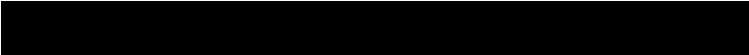
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JOHNSON**

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# Prologue



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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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 good-bye 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.

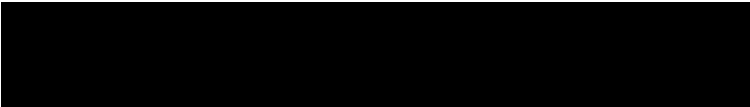
"*What do we think we heard?*" he asked more insistently.

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?"

## 2

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Ian Wells's eyes opened wide. The sheets wound a tight grip around his legs. The pillow was lost somewhere in the darkness.

He'd had the nightmare again. It had been a couple of years since the last time. The dream always seemed to surface around this time of year—his birthday dream, he called it—though he could seldom recall the details once



awake. A funeral. Rain. Palm trees. A large man calling him “little Master.” Vivid images that quickly slid out of memory, although not all were leaving so quickly this morning. The outline of a casket with men at its side lingered in his mind like shadows against closed eyelids.

Rolling to his stomach, he waited for the last vestiges of distress the dream always brought to disappear.

Slowly it slipped away.

He turned to the bedside clock—and groaned. Nine-fifteen. He was due at the bank in half an hour, which meant no time for a shower or shave. Which also meant he’d be working at the law office less than his best, then showing up at Mom’s house for his early birthday dinner the same way.

He sat up, suddenly angry. Adrienne should be here for the coming bank meeting to face the music with him. Mom’s money woes weren’t only his responsibility. Maybe his younger sister had moved to Seattle before Mom got sick, but after graduation she could have come back to help, couldn’t she?

Ian looked around his shadowed apartment bedroom, decorated with only a single bookshelf and his bike propped against the wall. His gaze shifted to the shuttered window. Half a mile away was the Minnesota State Fairgrounds, still a ghost town for a few more months. If he wasn’t dealing with this problem, he could blow out his frustration with a run past the empty vendor sheds and pavilions and silent arcades. Or take the bike west to the Mississippi and down the bluffs near the Stone Arch Bridge. An hour or two just for himself. Was that too much to ask?

None of that was happening today.

Another surge of self-pity arrived as he pushed to his feet. This one he held off. “*Wallowing is for pigs*,” his best friend, Brook, used to say when Ian would show up for class in law school complaining about the workload. Today was coming at him whether he liked it or not, whether his sister was here or not, and whether he got any exercise or not.

He rose from bed, straightened his shoulders, and in defiance of his mood started whistling the first tune that came to mind as he grabbed his clothes and trundled toward the bathroom.

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“What I’m telling you, Mr. Wells, is that there’s not enough equity left in your mother’s house to support an extension of the loan. I’m very sorry.”

Ian nodded, even though the twentysomething banker didn’t sound particularly sorry. He thought of asking whether that sorrow extended to reaching into his own wallet for a personal loan, but the sarcasm would have been lost on a guy who was only delivering his underwriter’s verdict anyway.

“What about my application for an unsecured loan?” Ian asked. “My law-practice income has gone up every year of the past five since I took on my dad’s practice. Could be faster, I admit, but like I explained on the forms, I’ve been transitioning out of his trusts-and-estates work into criminal defense.”

Ian would have gone on but stopped as he gauged the banker's expression. He'd argued before enough judges to know when not a word he could utter would affect a decision already reached.

"Again, I'm very sorry, Mr. Wells," the banker said, his pained smile unwavering, like it had been stapled there. "But Pinnacle Bank doesn't make personal loans based on service businesses without a longer track record. I'm afraid things have changed since the Great Recession."

*Which you experienced while in elementary school*, Ian wanted to say. Except that remark would have sounded hollow to a banker only five or six years younger than Ian himself.

"Thanks," Ian muttered, standing to leave. Third strike. Three banks in a row. He shook the banker's outstretched hand.

In the parking lot, his mood hadn't lightened. Once he started the engine, the speakers kicked in with a loud ring via the car's Bluetooth. Ian turned down the volume, then tapped a button on the steering wheel to answer the call. "Yeah," he said.

"Getting a late start, hon?" It was Katie from the office, her church-choir voice resonating with annoying morning energy.

"Had a personal appointment," Ian grumbled at the sarcasm. "If this is a wake-up call, I'd prefer a text. I'm sure you've heard of that technology."

"Heard of it," his legal assistant said, still relentlessly cheerful. "Rejected it. I know how to use an alarm clock, though. Be happy to train you in that technology sometime."

He was too low to win the exchange. “What’s the crisis?”

“Well, first, don’t forget you’ve got Willy Dryer scheduled for later this morning.”

“I know,” he replied, seeing his unshaven face in the rearview mirror again. “I’m on my way in now.”

“Great. Next, I sent you an email on Sunday about a new client who left a voicemail Saturday night. Needs to see you right away—as in today.”

Ian recalled the email and perked up. “I saw that. That’s good news. What’s the name again?”

“Callahan. Sean Callahan.”

It sounded familiar. “What’s he been charged with?”

“It’s not a criminal case. He’s got a crisis with some kind of family trust.”

Ian rubbed his eyes, trying to recall where he’d heard the name. It’d been over a year since the last estate work he’d done cleaning up his dad’s practice. “You sure this guy asked for me and not Dennis?”

“Yep. Could be he doesn’t know you’re a criminal defense lawyer now, or maybe he’s mixing you up with your dad. My theory is he heard you may be representing Willy Dryer again and thought you could use a client who actually pays his bills.”

Ian shook his head. When she got on a roll, Katie was unstoppable. “Nice. Hope you’ve set up Willy’s new file. Same billable rate as last time.”

“Got it. Zero.”

He ignored her this round. “Did this Callahan actually say it was a *crisis*?”

“His word was ‘critical,’” Katie responded. “I caught it exactly, because in all the years working with your dad, I never heard *anybody* use that word in the same sentence as ‘family trust.’ So, you want Dennis to call him back?”

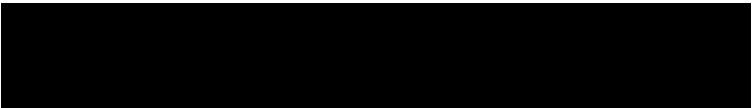
The banker’s meeting he’d just left came to mind. “No. I need the cash flow, and you know Dennis is hardly coming in now—especially on Mondays. If I see it’s too complicated, I’ll get his advice. When did Callahan say he wanted to talk to me?”

“I haven’t called him back yet.”

“Alright. Set him up for a phone meeting later this morning. After I meet with Willy.”

## 3

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Rory Doyle walked up the sidewalk to the sputtering *Larry’s Bar* neon sign and gave it a blow with the heel of his hand. It settled into solid blue fluorescence—before instantly sliding back into a stutter. With a shake of his head, Rory reached into his pocket.

No cigarettes. He’d forgotten: he’d quit this morning and had tossed every trace of tobacco he knew of. What was part of a fresh start at eight was bad timing at eleven,

but there was nothing he could do now. Feeling shaky, he pulled open the glass door and went in.

For a late Monday morning, the place was hopping by Larry's Bar standards. Two guys in booths. A woman at the bar. Two more guys at the pool table. One of those gave Rory a nod, and he returned it.

His usual booth was open. He tossed his jacket there, then stepped up to the bar. "Larry, I'm expecting a call. That a problem?"

The big-shouldered bartender shrugged. "Nope. Things are slow enough."

"Good. I'll be at my booth."

He slid onto the bench and looked around. Hard to believe this day was finally arriving. He'd thought about it for so long it was like hitting a lottery ticket he'd always known would make things right someday.

That thought made his throat burn for a cigarette again. He twisted the ring on his index finger to take his mind off it, glancing around the bar to see if he could bum one from another patron.

"Rory," a voice called. Larry was gesturing from the bar with a phone in one hand. "It's for you."

He kept twisting the ring until he'd taken the phone and pulled it down to the empty end of the bar. Clearing his throat, he put it to his ear.

"Yeah," he said.

"Rory. So did ya think about what I suggested?"

Rory cleared his throat again. "The answer's no."

A pause, followed by, "That's not good thinkin'."

"I've done what the trust said. I deserve my share."

The caller made a clucking sound. "Well, you'd better

hope so. 'Cause if the lawyer finds otherwise, you're done. You know that, right?"

"The trust rules apply to you and Ed, same as me."

"Aye, you're right, Rory. The trust rules apply to all three of us. It's just that neither Ed nor me has done a thing to be worried about. We'll get our share."

"I'm entitled to my share too."

"Entitled. Okay. So you're not interested in a deal. Well, I'm still going to offer one, and you'd be stupid not to take it. If you back away—admit you don't qualify for the trust cash—I'll still give ya three hundred thousand from my own share. A hundred to you, and a hundred for each of your kids. It's a one-time deal, and it goes away once I meet with the lawyer."

"That's not my share." Rory gripped the phone like a knife. "And what's this about *you* offering *me* a deal? I'm Jimmy Doyle's son, not you."

"I wouldn't go down that road, boyo. It's *me* your dad put in charge of the trust; it's *me* who's executor of his estate. But I hear ya. I'm settin' up a meetin' with the lawyer later today."

Rory felt his heart pounding. "Good. Let's get this done."

"Sure, Rory. Let's get this done."

The line went dead. Rory reached over the bar and set the phone back on its cradle, his hand wet with sweat. He wiped it on his jeans.

"You okay?" It was Larry, filling a mug from the tap.

"Yeah. . . . Thanks for the phone."

Rory retrieved his jacket and headed toward the exit. As he passed one of the men he'd been eyeing for a

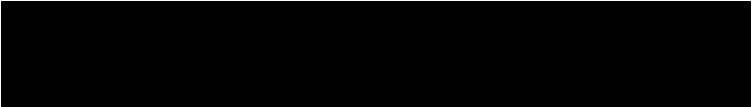
cigarette, he realized the hunger for one was gone. At least for now.

So it was really happening. A little more than a week and this would be over. The trust was finally getting passed out. The long wait was ending.

It was about time. And when it was over—when he and his kids had what they deserved—then it really would be a whole new start. For all of them. He was sure of it.

## 4

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Ian put his Camry into park in the dark underground garage. From a distance, he saw the elevator sign that read *Out of Order*.

Perfect start for the workday, he thought, renewing his defiant whistling as he grabbed his briefcase and walked to the stairwell for the slog to the fifth floor.

Willy Dryer was slouched in front of the cedar door stenciled with *Wells & Hoy Law Office*. He looked up with relief as Ian approached. Afraid to go in and face Katie's stare alone, are you? Ian thought. He gave the client a nod and led him through the door.

Katie glanced up from behind the reception desk. Ian



gave her a wide smile and a nod as they passed, headed for the library. He was confident Willy was avoiding her eyes entirely.

Neither spoke until they were seated at the library table. Ian set his case on the floor, stretched, and looked across at Wet Willy, thinking how little the man had changed in the five years since walking into this office as Ian's first criminal-law client out of law school. Amazing, he thought. A few lines beginning to rim his puppy-dog eyes maybe, but so little else had changed.

"Now tell me, Willy," Ian began, "why I get the pleasure of your company again this morning."

Willy ran a hand through a flopping mass of uncombed red hair. "Sorry, man. But I *didn't* do it. I swear. They arrested me a couple of weeks ago, but I had not a thing to do with it. And they really put me through it. I barely made *bail*, man."

Ian nodded, surprised. "Why'd you wait so long to come in? And what exactly *didn't* you do?"

Willy shook his head again, his lips set firm. "I didn't want to bother you with this one. See, there's just nothing to it. 'Cause I didn't break into that house on Madison in Columbia Heights. I heard some guy from the north side's trying to fence the swag. They oughta be looking for *him*."

"You tell the police who the real thief is?"

Willy looked like he'd been slapped. "What do you *think*, man?"

No tears yet. From experience, Ian was ready to retrieve his legal assistant's box of tissues—though Willy usually reserved the water for trial. Cloudbursts on the stand while describing a life of misery were part of Willy's

trademark. That and always insisting his case be tried *and* declining Ian's advice not to testify.

But then who could argue with success? Willy had never been convicted, although the acquittals likely had less to do with the performances than late alibi witnesses they'd managed to find for each of the last two trials. Katie, who'd coined the nickname Wet Willy, insisted the client enjoyed testifying even more than the State enjoyed prosecuting him, someone who saw trials as just another chance to put on a show. "*You're such a sentimentalist,*" Katie had scolded Ian when he tore up Wet Willy's last bill a year before. "*You just can't turn away the first guy who showed up at your office door and called you 'counselor.'*"

"Got an alibi this time?" Ian asked.

"I surely do," Willy said firmly. "But the police don't believe her."

Ian nodded sympathetically, wondering how many hours of free work this representation would take.

"Alright, Willy." He pulled a yellow legal pad and a pen from his briefcase and slid them across the table. "You write down the details of what you didn't do and how I can prove you didn't do it and where I can reach you. I'll also need your charging papers. You know the drill."

Willy nodded gratefully, winked, and smiled. "I surely do. You know I keep getting in trouble just to see you again, don't you? You're a *good man*. And hey, I'm gonna get you paid this time too. I am. I've started working. Get this: I've got an *acting* gig."

"Um-hm," Ian said, not for a moment believing that representing Willy made him a good man. He was, however, certain he wouldn't see a dime in attorney's fees and

only mildly surprised Willy had taken up acting. The bigger surprise was for easygoing Willy to be excited about a solid job of any kind. "I'll be in my office when you're done," Ian finished.

He headed into the hall toward his office. Katie looked up, peering over her glasses, the disapproving look making her appear older than her forty-six years.

"Another day, another free client," she said, smiling sweetly. "I thought you already did enough pro bono work at the homeless shelter."

"Sarcasm's not on the menu," Ian answered. "For at least a month."

"Like that's gonna happen," Katie said with an ironic shrug. "Now, don't forget your birthday dinner tonight at your mom's. Livia called to remind me again."

"Got it."