

The
Wolf
in
Winter

Also by John Connolly

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John
Connolly

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For Swati Gamble

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HUNTING

He fled in fear and reached the silent fields
And howled his heart out, trying in vain to speak.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

1

The house was studiously anonymous: not too large or too small, and neither particularly well kept nor in any sense dilapidated. Situated on a small patch of land not far from the outskirts of the city of Newark, Delaware, in the densely populated county of New Castle, the town had taken a hit when the Chrysler Newark assembly plant closed in 2008, along with the nearby Mopar distribution center. However, it was still the home of the University of Delaware, and 20,000 students can spend a lot of money if they put their minds to it.

Newark was an unsurprising choice of location for the man we were hunting. It was close to the borders of three states – Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maryland – and only two hours from New York City by car. Then again, it was just one of any number of rat's nests that he had established for himself, acquired over the years by the lawyer who protected him. The only distinguishing feature of this property lay in the degree of power consumption: the utility bills were steeper than for the others we had discovered. This one looked like it was used regularly. It was more than a storehouse for elements of his collection. It was a base of sorts.

He called himself Kushiell, but we knew him as the Collector. He had killed a friend of ours named Jackie Garner at the end of the previous year. The Collector would have called it an eye for an eye in his version of justice, and it was true that Jackie had made an appalling error, one that resulted in the death of a woman close to the Collector. In revenge, the Collector had shot Jackie down without mercy while he was

unarmed and on his knees, but he had also made it clear that we were all under his gun now. We might have been hunting the Collector for what he had done to one of ours, but we also knew that it was only a matter of time before he decided we might be less of a threat to him with six feet of earth above our heads. We intended to corner and kill him long before it came to that.

A light burned in one room of the house. The others were all dark. A car stood in the driveway, and its arrival had alerted us to the possibility of the Collector's presence. We had placed a dual wireless break-beam alert system in the undergrowth halfway up the drive. The system was timer-based, so an alert would only be sent to our phones if the two beams were not broken twice within a ten-minute period. In other words, it allowed for deliveries, but a vehicle that entered the property and remained on it for any length of time would trigger the alarm.

Of course, this assumed that the Collector would not arrive on foot, or by cab, but we figured he had too many enemies to leave his escape routes to chance, and he would keep at least one well-maintained vehicle. A windowless garage stood to the right of the house, but we had not risked breaking into it when we first discovered the existence of the property. Even planting the little wireless infrared transmitters was a calculated gamble, and had only been undertaken after a sweep of the yard revealed no similar alarm system beyond whatever was used to secure the house itself.

'What do you think?' said Louis.

His dark skin caught something of the moonlight, making him seem even more a creature of the night than usual. He wore dark cotton trousers cinched at the ankles, and a black waxed cotton Belstaff jacket from which all of the buckles and buttons had been removed and replaced by non-reflective equivalents. He looked cool, but then he always looked cool.

'My legs are cramping up, is what I think,' said Angel. 'If

we don't make a move soon, you'll have to carry me in there on a sedan chair.'

Angel didn't care about cool. His clothing was functional and unlabeled. He just preferred things that way. His gray hair was hidden beneath a black beanie. Without the cap, he looked his years. He was older than Louis and I, and had grown quieter and more cautious in recent times. Mortality shadowed him like a falcon mantling its wings over dying prey.

We squatted in the grass by the side of the road, Angel to my left and Louis to my right, each of us armed with a suppressed Glock 9mm loaded with subsonic ammunition. We'd lose something in velocity, but if we found the Collector we'd be working at close range. There were properties to the east and west of the house, and the area was quiet. We didn't want to bring local law enforcement down on our heads by replicating the sound of the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral. All three of us also carried Russian-made anti-fog gas masks. They had cost less than Louis's boots, but they hadn't let us down yet.

'You two take the back,' I said. 'I'll cover the front.'

Louis reached into the pocket of his jacket and produced a tear gas grenade. Angel had a second, and I had two more.

'Try not to get shot before you've thrown them,' Angel told me.

'I'll try not to get shot after I've thrown them as well,' I said.

It wasn't an ideal situation. We'd need to break glass to get the grenades into the house, and hope that we didn't take fire in the process. If the Collector was cornered, and chose to take his chances inside, then Angel and Louis would have to go in and get him, or flush him out to where I would be waiting. Grenade launchers might have been more effective, but your average grenade launcher tended to attract a certain amount of attention in the suburbs, and was hard to hide under a jacket, even one as expensive as Louis's. The other option might have been to try and break down

the doors and come in shooting like gangbusters, but we risked looking kind of stupid – and kind of dead – if the doors were reinforced or booby-trapped in any way. The Collector was very protective of his health.

This was the third of the Collector's nests that we had targeted, and we were becoming almost accomplished by this point. We went in fast, and hit both sides of the house simultaneously, the panes of three windows shattering as one. The grenades delivered a combination of military-grade pepper spray and tear gas, and could cover a range of over 20,000 cubic feet in under a minute. Anyone who was in those rooms when they exploded wouldn't be staying there for long.

I was edgy before the first grenade went in, but I was doubly so as I prepared to toss the second. If shots were going to come, they would come now, but there was no reaction from inside the house. After a minute I heard more glass breaking. Angel and Louis were going in through a window, not through the door. It was a calculated risk: expose yourself while climbing in through the busted frame, or try the door and hope that it wasn't wired. They'd opted for the former. I pulled back from the front of the house and took cover behind the car in the drive. It was a midsize Chevy sedan, the kind that an accountant might drive. The interior was pristine, and the seats were bare.

Nothing happened. There were no shouts, and no gunshots. I could hear doors banging open in the house, but no more than that. After three minutes, my cell phone rang. It was Louis. He was breathing heavily. Behind him I could hear Angel coughing.

'He's gone,' said Louis.

We allowed the gas to disperse before heading back inside. This house was better furnished than the others we had seen. There were books on the shelves – political biographies and modern histories for the most part – and an effort had been made to decorate the rooms. The wood floors were

partly covered by cheap but tasteful rugs, and abstract prints hung on some of the walls. The kitchen closets contained canned goods, rice, pasta, a couple of jars of instant coffee, and a bottle of Martell XO cognac. A small portable refrigerator hummed on the floor. Inside were candy bars, fresh milk and a six-pack of diet soda. A TV in the living room was hooked up to a DVD player, but there was no cable connection. A copy of that day's *Washington Post* lay on the floor by the single armchair. Beside it was a mug of coffee, still warm. We must have missed him by minutes, seconds.

My eye caught an object hanging from the reading lamp by the chair. It was a bear claw necklace. The Collector had taken it from Jackie's truck either before or after he killed him. It had once hung from Jackie's rearview mirror. It was his good-luck token, but his luck had still run out. In the end, everyone's luck does.

The Collector always kept souvenirs of his kills. He had not abandoned this one lightly. It was a message for us: a taunt, or perhaps a gesture of recompense, depending upon how one chose to take it.

I stepped carefully to the window and risked a glance at the small backyard. Two houses backed on to this one, and in the distance I saw the lights of Newark. I could feel him out there. He was watching us. He knew that we wouldn't come after him on foot over unfamiliar ground, and at night. He was waiting to see what we would do next.

'We got more trinkets,' I heard Angel say.

He joined me at the window, his back to the wall. Even in the darkness, he didn't want to make a target of himself. In his gloved hand he held a gold charm bracelet, a photograph of a young woman in an ornate silver frame, and a baby shoe that had been cast in bronze, each a token of a life taken.

'How did he get out?' I asked.

'Through the back door?'

'It's still locked from the inside,' I said. 'The front door

was the same way. And you had to break a window to get in. They only open at the top, and a child could barely fit through the gap.'

'In here,' said Louis from the main bedroom.

We joined him there. Like all of the other rooms in the house, it had a low ceiling. A hole for an A/C unit had been cut in the wall by the main window, but there was no unit in place, and the hole appeared to have been boarded up. A chair stood beneath. Louis climbed on it and tested the board. It was hinged at the top, and moved like a pet door with the pressure of his hand. The hole looked small, but then Louis flipped up the frame surrounding it, and suddenly the space was big enough to allow an average-sized man to squeeze through.

'Bet the board on the other side is hinged too,' said Louis. 'He crawled out of here like the bug he is.'

He stepped down from the chair. The night was clear. No clouds obscured the moon.

'He's out there, isn't he?' he said.

'Probably.'

'Can't go on like this. Eventually he's going to get tired of running.'

'Maybe. Who knows how many of these bolt-holes he has? But somewhere there's one that matters more than the others, more even than this one. That's where he's keeping the lawyer.'

The lawyer Eldritch steered the Collector in the direction of those who had, in his eyes, forfeited the right to life – perhaps even the right to their immortal souls. He presented the case for the prosecution, and the Collector took care of the punishment. But Eldritch was injured in the same incident that had killed the woman and brought the Collector down on Jackie, and the Collector had spirited the old lawyer away. Who knew, Eldritch might even be dead. If that were the case, then the Collector would be off the leash entirely. If nothing else, Eldritch held his hunting dog in some form of check.

'We going to keep looking for this refuge?' asked Louis.

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‘He killed Jackie.’

‘Maybe Jackie brought it on himself.’

‘If you believe that, then we all bring it on ourselves.’

‘That might just be true.’

Angel joined us.

‘Why hasn’t he hit back? Why hasn’t he tried to take us out?’

I thought that I had the answer.

‘Because he believes that he violated his own code when he killed Jackie. Jackie’s life wasn’t his to take, whatever mistakes he might have made. Somewhere in what passes for his conscience, the Collector suspects that we may have earned the right to come after him. It’s like Louis said: maybe we all bring it on ourselves.’

‘And then, like us, the Collector is just a pawn in a greater game. He might know more about the rules of it than we do, but he has no idea of the state of play, or how close anyone is to winning or losing. He’s afraid to kill us in case it tips the balance against him, although who knows how long that situation will continue.’

‘What about us?’ said Angel. ‘If we kill him, will there be blowback?’

‘The difference is that we don’t care,’ I said.

‘Oh,’ said Angel. ‘I must have missed that memo.’

‘Basically it said “Fuck ’em if they ain’t on our side”,’ Louis explained.

‘Yeah, I would have remembered seeing that one,’ said Angel. ‘So we keep hunting him until we corner him, or until he just rolls over and dies?’

‘We hunt him until he tires, or we tire,’ I said. ‘Then we’ll see how it plays out. You got anything better to do?’

‘Not lately. Not ever, to be honest. So what now?’

I looked again into the darkness beyond the house.

‘If he’s out there, let’s give him something to watch.’

* * *

While Angel went to retrieve our car, Louis and I broke into the Chevy and pushed it against the door of the house. I could already smell the gas from the stove in the kitchen as Louis doused the interior of the Chevy with the Collector's cognac, saving about one third of it. He stuck a kitchen rag in the neck of the bottle, and shook it to soak the material. When he was sure that the road was clear, Angel signaled Louis with his headlights, and Louis lit the rag, tossed the bottle into the car and ran.

The Chevy was already burning as we drove away, but the two explosions – the first from the car, the second from the house itself – came sooner than anticipated and occurred almost simultaneously, catching us by surprise. We didn't stop to watch the fireball rise above the trees. We just kept driving, taking Telegraph Road into Maryland as far as the intersection with Route 213, then headed north into Pennsylvania. We handed the car over to a woman in Landenberg, took possession of our own vehicles and separated without another word, Louis and Angel heading for Philly while I drove north to the Turnpike.

On the outskirts of Newark, a man in a dark coat watched fire trucks pass. The sleeve of his coat was torn, and he limped slightly as he walked, favoring his right leg. The lights of the trucks briefly illuminated his thin face, his dark, slicked-back hair and the thin trickle of blood that ran from his scalp. They had come close to catching him this time, so very close . . .

The Collector lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply as his house burned.