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A Game of Ghosts

Written by John Connolly

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John
Connolly

A Game
of Ghosts



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For Lucy Hale

I

Indeed, as things stand for the present, the Land of Spirits is a kind of America . . . filled up with Mountains, Seas, and Monsters.

Joseph Glanvill, *A Blow at Modern Sadducism* (1668)

1

A new fall of snow had settled upon the old, like memories, like the years.

It would freeze too, according to the weathermen, adding another layer to the ice that blanketed the city, and another day or two to the slow thaw that must inevitably come, although any release from the cold seemed distant on this February evening. Still, at least the latest snowfall, the first in more than a week, hid beneath it the filth of earlier accumulations, and the streets of Portland would look fresh and unsullied again, for a time.

Although the air was chill, it held no clarity. A faint mist hung over the streets, creating penumbrae around the street-lights like the halos of saints, and making a dreamscape of the skyline. It lent the city a sense of duplication, as though its ways and buildings had been overlaid imperfectly upon some earlier version of itself, and now that shadow variant was peering through, the people of the present within touching distance of those of the past.

Charlie Parker walked up Exchange Street, his head lowered against the rawness of the dark so that he progressed like a ram between sidewalk drifts. He didn't need NBC to tell him that winter was tightening its grip. Some ancient personification of the season seemed to sense the approach of spring, even if no one else could, and was determined to cling to its white kingdom for as long as it was able. Parker could feel it in his bones, and in his wounds. His left hand was curled into a ball of hurt in his pocket, and the scars on his back felt tight and

uncomfortable. His head ached, and had anyone asked, he could have pointed to the scattering of odd markings in his hair, silver-gray along the lines cut through his scalp by the shotgun pellets, and ascribed a locus of agony to each.

Older injuries troubled him too. Many years before, he had thrown himself into a frigid lake in the far north of the state rather than face the guns that would otherwise surely have ended his life. He had still taken a bullet for his troubles, although the pain of the strike was dulled by the greater shock of immersion in freezing water. He should have died, but he did not. Later, the doctors would throw an array of medical terms in his direction – hypothermia, hypotension, hypovolemia, high blood viscosity – none of which was of any great benefit to the human body, or its prospects of immortality, but all of which applied, at some point, to him.

On top of being shot, he had then violated just about every piece of post-immersion medical management by continuing to fight his tormentors, and that was before someone tried to kick his teeth in. One of the attending physicians, a specialist in maritime medicine, wanted to write a paper on him, but Parker had politely declined the offer of free ongoing treatment and therapy in exchange for his cooperation. It was a decision he sometimes regretted. He often thought that his body had never quite recovered from the trauma it had endured, because he had since felt the cold in winter with an intensity he could not recall from youth or young manhood. Sometimes, even in a warm room, he would be struck by a fit of shivering so violent that it would leave him weak for hours after. Even his teeth would hurt. Once, they chattered so hard that he lost a crown.

But hey, he was still alive, and that was good, right? He thought of the old commonplace about how giving up vices didn't make you live longer, but just made it *feel* as though you were living longer. Nights like these made him feel as though he had been in pain all his life.

It was the first day of February. Parker could recall arguing with his grandfather about the months of winter, shortly after the old man had taken in the boy and his mother, permitting them to escape New York and the ripples from his father's death. For Parker, those winter months were December, January, and February, but his grandfather, who had roots in another continent, always thought in terms of the old Gaelic calendar in which November was the first month of winter, and so for him February meant the start of spring. Even decades spent enduring the grimness of Maine winters, and the icy darkness of February in particular, had not shaken him in his conviction. As time went on, Parker came to suspect that the old man might have been wiser than his grandson realized. By embracing February as the birth of a new season, instead of the slow death of the old, his grandfather was demonstrating a degree of psychological acuity that enabled him to tolerate one of the worst months of the year by regarding it as the harbinger of better times to come.

Parker stopped outside Crooners & Cocktails. The bar was Ross's choice. Parker wasn't sure why. It wasn't as though the FBI man was intimate with Portland's restaurant scene. Then again, Parker had come to accept that Edgar Ross was more attuned to unfamiliar rhythms than might be considered advisable, even for someone directly involved in matters of national security.

Actually, Parker kind of liked Crooners & Cocktails. The name might have been a bit hokey, but the interior was a throwback to another era, and the food and drinks were good. He stared through the glass, fogged by the heat inside, and thought he could make out Ross's figure at the back of the room. The agent had a half-filled glass in front of him, and what looked like a tray of oysters. Parker hated oysters. As for his feelings about Ross, the jury was still out.

Parker turned away from the window. He could hear music drifting up the street from Sonny's, and across from him

figures moved in the bar of the Press Hotel, a building that had housed the *Portland Press Herald* until the newspaper relocated to One City Center back in 2010. He'd only been in the hotel once to take a look around and meet Angel and Louis for a drink. He thought it might be an okay place to stay, even if, like Crooners & Cocktails, it was a carefully cultivated exercise in nostalgia. Then again, maybe nostalgia was an understandable response to a world that appeared to be going all to hell, as long as everyone remembered that the past was a nice place to visit but nobody should want to settle in it.

One of the cars parked opposite was a black Lexus. Two men sat in the front. To avoid conflict, they would be listening to something neutral, Parker guessed: Classic Vinyl or Deep Tracks on Sirius. Both would be armed. He had informed them that Ross was coming. They were curious, just as Parker was. Ross rarely ventured so far north.

Parker's cell phone rang. He answered, and Angel spoke.

'He arrived in a limousine,' said Angel, 'but not one with government plates. The car dropped him off at this place, then left. I stayed with Ross, and Louis followed the car. It's parked down on Middle Street. Private hire, but nothing flashy. The driver's in Starbucks, playing games on his cell phone.'

Parker hung up and adjusted the pin on his tie. He hated wearing ties.

'You still hearing me?' he asked.

From the passenger seat of the car, Angel showed him an upraised thumb. At least, Parker hoped it was a thumb. With Angel, one could never be sure.

With that, Parker entered the bar.

It struck him, as he was escorted to the table, that he knew almost nothing about Ross. Was he married? He didn't wear a ring, but Parker was aware of men and women in risky professions who chose not to advertise their marital ties. He

could be separated, or divorced. Given his work, that would make sense. Did he have children? Parker thought not, but he'd been wrong about such matters before. Children mellowed some men, but made no difference at all to others beyond adding to their burdens. He'd read an interview with a novelist whose estranged daughter traveled thousands of miles to somewhere in Africa in order to mend their broken relationship, only to have the door slammed in her face. The novelist justified his actions on the grounds that he was not trained to deal with 'problem children', but Parker didn't know of any parent who was trained to deal with children, problematic or not. Actually, that wasn't entirely true: he knew a couple of child psychologists – one in particular – and they were terrible parents.

Ross stood to shake Parker's hand. He had spilled Tabasco sauce on his shirt; just a speck, like a pinprick of blood. Parker didn't comment on it, but he would find his eye drifting repeatedly toward it over the course of the evening, as though it represented an aspect profound that otherwise refused to reveal itself.

Parker handed his coat to the hostess but kept his jacket on.

'I figured you wouldn't mind if I ordered some oysters before you arrived,' said Ross, once they were both seated. 'I know how you feel about seafood.'

'That's gracious of you,' said Parker. His general distaste for shellfish and seafood had, he realized, hardened into a phobia. He might have been tempted to see a therapist about it, were he not afraid of what a distrust of bivalves could suggest about his personality.

'What are you drinking?' he asked Ross.

'A Dewar's and Disaronno. It's called a Godfather.'

'I hope you're being ironic.'

Parker glanced at the cocktail menu, found a drink he wasn't too embarrassed to order – a Journalist, mainly Bombay

Original and vermouth – and set the list aside. He barely sipped the cocktail once it was in front of him. He still had an aversion to hard liquor, but he'd learned long ago that when in the company of just one other person who was drinking, it paid to have something similar in turn, even if not a drop of it passed one's lips. Coffee, beer, wine, Scotch, it didn't matter: the act of ordering relaxed the other party, and that relaxation was important for the eliciting of information. Then again, Ross probably knew this already. If he didn't, he shouldn't have been working for the FBI.

He and Ross made small talk for a time – politics, the weather, Parker's health – before ordering entrees: monkfish for Ross, steak for Parker, with glasses of Riesling and Malbec, respectively, to go with them. The waitress left them. Music played low, a counterpoint to the hum of conversation.

'So,' said Parker, 'why are you here?'

2

They were surrounded by people having a good time, cocooned against the cold beyond the glass. Portland eateries were adept at making customers feel cozy in winter. After all, they had a lot of practice.

Ross sipped his drink.

‘Have you ever crossed paths with a private investigator named Jaycob Eklund?’ he asked. ‘That’s Jaycob with a “y”.’

‘Out of where?’

‘Providence.’

‘I don’t believe so. Does he have a specialization?’

‘Not officially. He does whatever it takes to make ends meet: errant husbands and wives, bail skips, process serving – a little like you did, before the federal government began contributing to your finances.’

Only a few months had passed since the retainer had started to appear in Parker’s account, but it was already making a difference to his standard of living and the kind of cases he accepted. The paperwork, though, had taken a while to complete. Parker’s lawyer, Aimee Price, refused to have anything to do with the arrangement, regarding it as an error in judgment on his part, and quite possibly on the part of the FBI as well. Also, Price had finally tied the knot during the summer, after an engagement that had gone on for so long that the ring, although bought new, now practically counted as an antique. She was pregnant with twins, and intended to cut back on her workload, or so she said, but Parker knew that she was more concerned with putting some

distance between herself and her most notorious client. As a mother-to-be, she wanted to take no risks with her safety or that of her nascent family. Parker couldn't blame her, and had transferred his business to Moxie Castin, who had no such qualms.

Moxie gave the consultancy agreement with the FBI such a reworking that it now bore more resemblance to a monthly charitable donation from the government than any payment for services, current or future. But the words on the page weren't the issue, and their true meaning lay hidden behind the legalese. Parker understood that he was tied to Ross, and Ross to him. Any favors asked or granted would always come with a price. Now, Parker sensed, he was about to begin earning some of that money.

'And unofficially?'

'Eklund was an occasional recipient of our – of *my* – largesse,' said Ross.

'In return for what?'

'Watching. Listening.' Ross finished his cocktail, washed his mouth out with water, and moved on to wine. 'Did you think you were the only one?'

'You're making me feel less special,' said Parker.

'I suspect that may be beyond my skill range.'

Parker managed a smile.

'Eklund has gone missing,' Ross continued. 'I want him found.'

'You're the FBI. That's a little like a miner asking me to help him find coal.'

Ross didn't answer. He just sipped his wine and waited. Their food came. It looked good, but neither man touched it, not yet.

'Unless you can't get the feds to do it,' said Parker at last, once it became clear that they wouldn't be able to eat, or move the conversation along, until he demonstrated to Ross his understanding of the situation. 'You don't know for certain

what Eklund was looking into when he disappeared. If you put him into the system, and he was on your dime, you risk drawing attention both to him and to whatever it is you might currently be cooking up in that cauldron brain of yours.'

'Very good.'

'It's sad that you don't have faith in your fellow agents. I mean, if we can't trust those who spy on their own citizens for a living, who can we trust?'

'You,' said Ross. He carved a slice of fish, carefully added some lobster and spinach risotto, and forked the combination into his mouth. He nodded his approval. 'That's a very fine piece of fish. You really don't know what you're missing.'

Parker ate some steak. It was perfect, but Ross's presence at the table – in fact, in the state of Maine – was inhibiting his enjoyment of the dish.

'You could just have called and asked me to look into this,' said Parker. 'You didn't have to come all the way up here to do it.'

'I look upon you as an investment. I wanted to see how it was maturing.'

'And Eklund is just some small-time investigator who's dropped off the radar, leaving you mildly concerned.'

'You have it.'

Lies, all lies. Eklund was important. Ross wouldn't have been here in person if he were not.

But then, this was all a game. Parker had in his possession a list of names retrieved from a plane in the Great North Woods. The list contained details of men and women who had been compromised in ways large and small, individuals who had made a pact, either knowingly or not, with the servants of an old evil. Parker was drip-feeding some of those names to Ross, and Ross would occasionally complain about the pace at which this information was being shared, but Parker felt certain that Ross was doing little more with it than memorizing those identified, and

perhaps moving discreetly against them when the opportunity presented itself.

Mostly, Ross was waiting.

In theory, Parker could have handed over the list in its entirety, enabling Ross to run it through some massive computer in the FBI's basement, at the end of which process a name would be spat out, for they were both convinced that hidden in this directory of human failings were clues to the identity of a single individual. That person, male or female, was leading a search for the Buried God, the God of Wasps, the One Who Waits Behind the Glass. If God existed, then this was the Not-God, but the names ascribed to it were irrelevant. Even whether or not such an entity might actually exist was relatively unimportant. What mattered was that those who believed in it, or simply professed to do so, used it to justify acts of immense depravity. Yet if the one who manipulated them all could be neutralized, that search would be set back for generations, perhaps forever.

But Ross was unable to carry out such an operation alone, no matter how quietly, because he couldn't be sure that his search would remain a secret. Some of those being hunted occupied positions of power and authority. They were wary, and vigilant. They listened. For now, these people believed the list remained lost. If they knew it had been retrieved, they would act to secure it.

So for all Ross's concerns about Parker, he acknowledged that Parker's continued possession of the list, and his investigation of those on it, might be their best chance for success. That was why Parker's retainer was so generous. Through it, Ross was funding a search in which his own agency could not be trusted to engage.

And now here he was, spearing fish with his fork and speaking of a missing investigator while Tony Bennett played in the background.

'How long has Eklund been missing?' Parker asked.

‘He was scheduled to get in touch four days ago. I let it go to five before I contacted you.’

‘Don’t you know about the importance of the first forty-eight hours in any investigation?’

‘I tend to eschew alarmism.’ He gestured at Parker’s plate. ‘You’ve barely touched your steak.’

‘I think I’ll ask them to bag it for me. I may have it with eggs in the morning.’

Ross’s own plate was already just a scattering of greens interspersed with fragments of white flesh. He dabbed his mouth with a napkin, finished off his wine, and called for the check. There was no suggestion of dessert or coffee. His business in Portland was almost done.

‘What makes you think Eklund isn’t just taking some time to himself?’ Parker asked.

‘Because that’s not the arrangement I have with him. The conditions of our agreement are very clear.’

‘I wish I could say the same.’

‘I don’t think you’d care much for the kind of errands Eklund runs.’

Another lie. Ross had put just a little too much effort into being dismissive.

‘I’ve placed the relevant information on Eklund in a drop box,’ he told Parker. ‘You’ll find a series of e-mail links to it when you check your in-box.’

The check came. Ross paid it in cash. When he had finished counting out the bills, he wrote down a cell phone number on a piece of blank paper that he took from his wallet.

‘If you need to contact me, use this number,’ he said. ‘You’ll be reimbursed for any expenses. I don’t need receipts, just an estimate. I’ll also make an ex gratia payment to your account to cover any incidentals. If you could avoid drawing too much attention to yourself, I’d be most grateful.’

He stood, but told Parker not to get up.

‘Stay. Finish your wine.’ His hand rested uncomfortably

heavily on Parker's left shoulder as he leaned down and spoke his next words very softly.

'And if you ever try to record one of our conversations again, I'll set the dogs on you and your psychotic friends, and let them tear you all apart.'

He patted Parker on the shoulder, then left.

A few minutes went by before Angel and Louis joined Parker.

'Where did he go?' asked Parker.

'The car was waiting for him,' said Louis. 'He obviously had the pleasure of your company timed to the minute. We didn't figure he was worth following. You want to talk to him, you can always knock on the door of Federal Plaza and ask if he can come out and play.'

'And we didn't hear a word either of you said after something about oysters,' Angel added. 'All we got was dead air.'

Parker reached for his tie and detached the pinhead microphone before removing the tie as well. Recording Parker's interactions with Ross had been Moxie Castin's idea. Even in its amended form, Moxie regarded Parker's contractor's agreement with Ross as being as close to toxic as it was possible for a document to come without requiring the addition of a biohazard symbol. Federal law permitted the recording of telephone or in-person conversations as long as one of the parties consented, which in this case Parker, as one of the parties, did, although Ross clearly held dissenting views.

'He knew, or suspected,' said Parker. 'He jammed me shortly after I arrived.'

'I think he has issues with trust,' said Angel. 'And charm, although we always figured about the charm part.'

'He called you and Louis psychotic, by the way.'

Louis scowled, or at least his permanent scowl deepened slightly.

'I'm hurt,' he said. 'I'm not psychotic. I'm sociopathic.'

Angel, who didn't seem bothered either way, pointed at Parker's steak.

'You eating that?'

'I—'

Before Parker could reply, Angel took Ross's seat, drew the plate toward him, and commenced feeding. Louis borrowed a chair from the nearest table and began scanning the wine list, 'since we're here.' A couple of the other diners glanced at them in mild alarm. Angel in particular looked like he might have been called to fix the boiler and become distracted by patrons' unfinished meals. One woman nearby was now huddled protectively over her lobster thermidor.

Louis ordered a glass of the Malbec and some bar snacks: bruschetta, meatballs.

'So,' he said, once he was done, 'what did Ross want from you?'

'To find a private investigator named Eklund who's gone off the reservation.'

'You going to do it?' asked Angel through a mouthful of steak.

'You know,' said Parker, 'I don't think I've been given a choice.'