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**Opening Extract from...**

# Wrath of Angels

Written by John Connolly

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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# THE WRATH OF ANGELS

HODDER &
STOUGHTON

For Professor Ian Campbell Ross

First published in Great Britain in 2012 Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 75644 9
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 75645 6
ebook ISBN 978 1 444 75646 3

Typeset in Sabon LT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

# I

I prefer winter and fall, when you feel the bone structure of the landscape – the loneliness of it, the dead feeling of winter. Something waits beneath it, the whole story doesn't show.

Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009)

# 1

At the time of his dying, at the day and the hour of it, Harlan Vetters summoned his son and his daughter to his bedside. The old man's long gray hair was splayed against the pillow on which he lay, glazed by the lamplight, so that it seemed like the emanations of his departing spirit. His breathing was shallow; longer and longer were the pauses between each intake and exhalation, and soon they would cease entirely. The evening gloaming was slowly descending, but the trees were still visible through the bedroom window, the sentinels of the Great North Woods, for old Harlan had always said that he lived at the very edge of the frontier, that his home was the last place before the forest held sway.

It seemed to him now that, as his strength failed him, so too his power to keep nature at bay was ebbing. There were weeds in his yard, and brambles among his rose bushes. The grass was patchy and unkempt: it needed one final mow before the coming of winter, just as the stubble on his own chin rasped uncomfortably against his fingers, for the girl could not shave him as well as he had once shaved himself. Fallen leaves lay uncollected like the flakes of dry skin that peeled from his hands, his lips, and his face, scattering themselves upon his sheets. He saw decline through his window, and decline in his mirror, but in only one was there the promise of rebirth.

The girl claimed that she had enough to do without worrying about bushes and trees, and his boy was still too angry to perform even this simple service for his dying father,

but to Harlan these things were important. There was a battle to be fought, an ongoing war against nature's attritional impulse. If everyone thought as his daughter did then houses would be overrun by root and ivy, and towns would vanish beneath seas of brown and green. A man had only to open his eyes in this county to see the ruins of old dwellings suffocated in green, or open his ears to hear the names of settlements that no longer existed, lost somewhere in the depths of the forest.

So nature needed to be held back, and the trees had to be kept to their domain.

The trees, and what dwelled among them.

Harlan was not a particularly religious man, and had always poured scorn on those whom he termed 'God-botherers' – Christian, Jew or Muslim, he had no time for any of them – but he was, in his way, a deeply spiritual being, worshipping a god whose name was whispered by leaves and praised in birdsong. He had been a warden with the Maine Forest Service for forty years, and even after his retirement his knowledge and expertise had often been sought by his successors, for few knew these woods as well as he. It was Harlan who had found twelve-year-old Barney Shore after the boy's father collapsed while hunting, his heart exploding so quickly in his chest that he was dead within seconds of hitting the ground. The boy, in shock and unused to the woods, had wandered north, and when the snow began to descend he had hidden himself beneath a fallen tree, and would surely have died there had Harlan not been following his tracks, so that the boy heard the old man calling his name just as the snow covered the traces of his passing.

It was to Harlan, and to Harlan alone, that Barney Shore told the tale of the girl in the woods, a girl with sunken eyes, and wearing a black dress, who had come to him with the first touch of snow, inviting him to follow her deeper into the woods, calling on him to play with her in the northern darkness.

'But I hid from her, and I didn't go with her,' Barney told Harlan, as the old man carried him south upon his back.

'Why not, son?' said Harlan.

'Because she wasn't a little girl, not really. She just looked like one. I think she was very old. I think she'd been there for a long, long time.'

And Harlan had nodded and said, 'I think you're right,' for he had heard tales of the lost girl in the woods, although he had never seen her himself, unless dreams counted, and he prayed to his god of air and tree and leaf that he might always be spared the sight of her. There was a time, though, when he had felt her presence, and he had known as he was searching for the boy that he was once again drawing close to her territory.

He shuddered, and thought carefully before he spoke.

'If I were you, son, I wouldn't mention the girl to anyone else,' he said at last, and he felt the boy nod against him.

'I know,' he said. 'They wouldn't believe me anyway, would they?'

'No. I reckon they'd think you were suffering from shock and exposure, and they'd put it down to that, most of them.'

'But you believe me, don't you?'

'Oh yes, I believe you.'

'She was real, wasn't she?'

'I don't know if that's the word I'd use for her. I don't reckon that you could touch her, or smell her, or feel her breath upon your face. I don't know that you could see her footprints indented in the snow, or discern the stain of sap and leaf upon her skin. But if you'd followed her like she asked then I'd never have found you, and I'm certain that nobody else would ever have found you either, alive or dead. You did well to keep away from her. You're a good boy, a brave boy. Your daddy would be proud.'

Against his back began the convulsions of the boy's sobs. It was the first time he had cried since Harlan had discovered

him. Good, thought Harlan. The longer it takes for the tears to come, the worse the pain.

'Will you find my daddy too?' said the boy. 'Will you bring him home? I don't want him to stay in the woods. I don't want the girl to have him.'

'Yes,' said Harlan. 'I'll find him, and you can say goodbye to him.'

And he did.

Harlan was already in his seventies by then, and he had a few more years left in him, but he was no longer the man he once had been, even though he, and he alone, had found Barney Shore. Age was part of it, that was for sure, but so too were the losses he had endured. His wife, Angeline, had been taken from him by a cruel alliance of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's one year before Barney Shore spoke to him of predatory girls. He had loved her as much as a man can love his wife, and so nothing more need be said.

The loss of his wife was the second such blow that Harlan would receive in less than a year. Shortly after she passed away, Paul Scollay, Harlan's oldest and closest friend, had sat on a bucket in the little woodshed at the back of his cabin, put his shotgun in his mouth, and pulled the trigger. The cancer had been nibbling at him for a while, and now had got a taste for him. He put an end to its feeding, as he had always told his friend that he would. They had shared a drink earlier in the day: just a beer or two at the pine table beside that very woodshed with the sun setting behind the trees, as beautiful an evening as Harlan had seen in many a year. They had reminisced some, and Paul had seemed relaxed and at peace with himself, which was how Harlan had known that the end was near. He did not remark upon it, though. They had simply shaken hands and Harlan had said that he would see Paul around, and Paul had replied, 'Ayuh. I guess so,' and that was the end of it.

And though they spoke of many things in those final hours,

there was one subject upon which they did not touch, one memory that was not disinterred. They had agreed years before that they would not talk of it unless absolutely necessary, but it hung between them in the last of their time together as the sun bathed them in its radiance, like the promise of forgiveness from a god in whom neither of them believed.

And so it was that at the time of his dying, at the day and the hour of it, Harlan Vetters summoned his son and his daughter to his bedside, the woods waiting beyond, the god of tree and leaf moving through them, coming at last to claim the old man, and he said to them:

'Once upon a time, Paul Scollay and I found an airplane in the Great North Woods . . .'