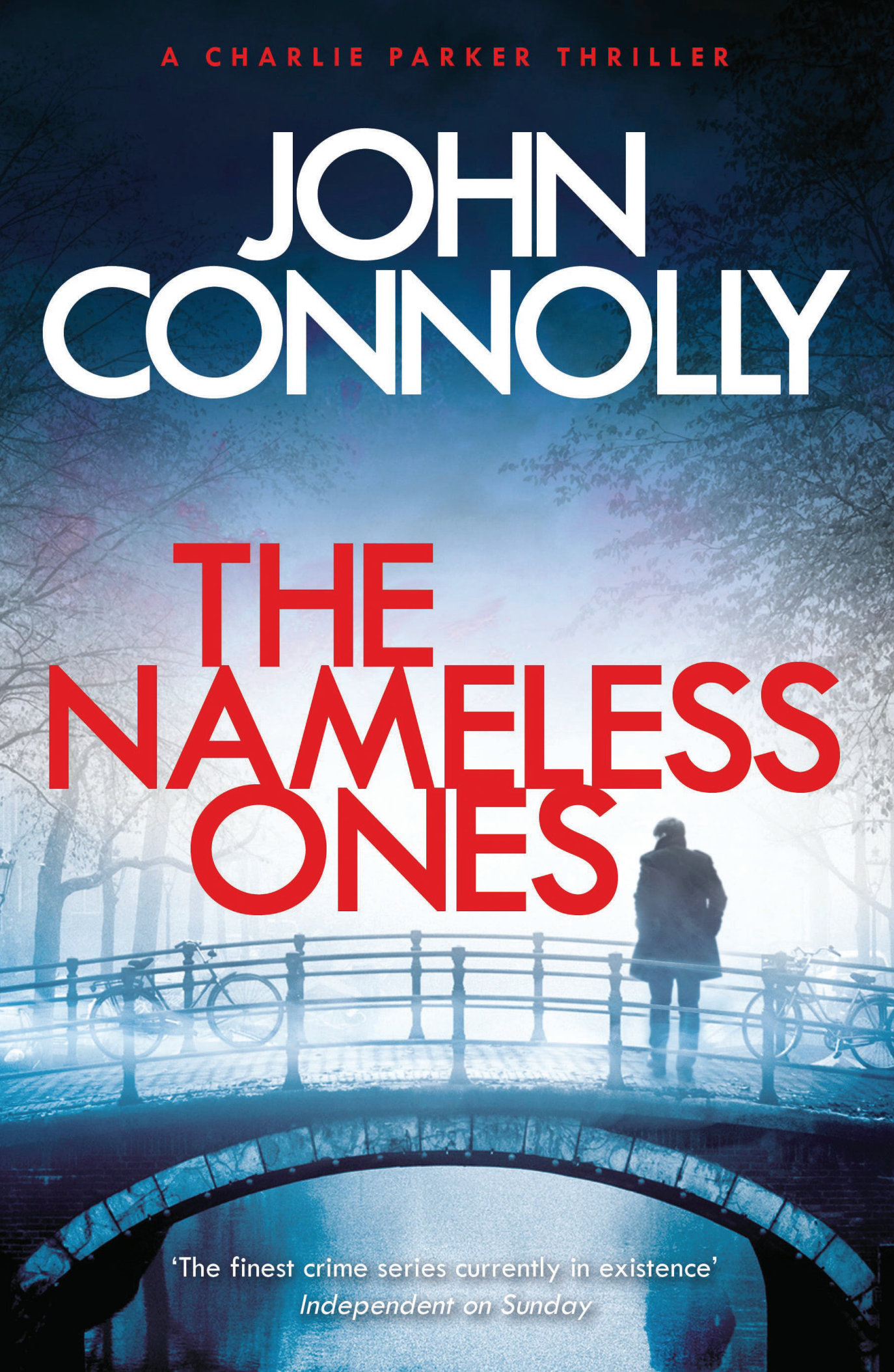
A CHARLIE PARKER THRILLER

JOHN CONNOLLY

THE NAMELESS ONES



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John Connolly

The Nameless Ones

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For Jack Dennison

Author's Note

For those who may be too young to remember, or who have chosen to forget, a series of conflicts took place in the Balkans between 1991 and 1999 following the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. That communist state was an uneasy federation of six republics, comprising Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims (known as Bosniaks), Slovenes, Albanians, and other smaller ethnic groupings, all held together by the will of Yugoslavia's ruler, Josip Broz Tito.

Following Tito's death in 1980, the old tensions – some of them dating back to World War II, when the Catholic Croatian Ustasha had sided with the Nazis – began to manifest themselves once again, exacerbated by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism. Croatia and Slovenia declared independence in 1991, and immediately found themselves under attack by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) – which was dominated by Serbs – and Serbian paramilitary groups, leading to the death and displacement of thousands before a cease-fire was brokered by the United Nations in 1992.

Meanwhile, Bosnia was also seeking independence, but the Serbian minority in the territory resisted. Once again, elements of the Yugoslav army – operating as the Army of Republika Srpska, or VRS, commonly referred to as the Bosnian Serb Army – intervened, commencing a program of ethnic cleansing against Muslims and Croats in an effort to create a Serbian stronghold. UN intervention failed, and the death toll rose, most infamously at Srebrenica, where more than eight thousand Muslim men and boys were tortured and executed after the town surrendered to Serbian forces led by General Ratko Mladić. Finally, NATO resorted to bombing the Bosnian Serbs, enabling Muslim and

Croat forces to mount a counteroffensive. A peace agreement resulted in an independence referendum in 1992, and the subsequent international recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina as an independent state. (The Bosnian Serbs, meanwhile, also declared their own version of independence, calling their region the Republika Srpska.)

But conflicts in the former Yugoslavia continued. In 1995, Croatian forces took control of previously Serb-dominated areas of Croatia, and in 1999 ethnic Albanians in Kosovo won a bloody war against Serb forces to obtain their independence. By then Slovenia, Macedonia, and Montenegro had also either severed ties with Belgrade or declared independence, and Serbian ambitions of creating a new Balkan empire from the ruins of the former Yugoslavia lay in tatters.

At least 130,000 people died in the wars, more than a million were displaced by ethnic cleansing, and up to fifty thousand women and children, mainly Bosniaks, were raped, with Serbian armed forces and militias bearing overwhelming responsibility for these atrocities. As one Serb put it during my research, 'A lot of bad things happened, and most of them were our fault. Most,' he emphasized, 'but not all.'

I

Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Requiem'

Chapter I

The two figures were by now a familiar sight, if only to a select few, for even ones such as these, who guarded their privacy so assiduously, must inevitably become known to some of their neighbors. For a time, they had not been seen out together, and only the black man, generally believed to be the younger, was noticeable on the street and the surrounding blocks. It was rumored that the other, the older (marginally) and less elegant (by a more considerable degree), was ill, or perhaps recovering from illness, although questions directed, however discreetly, to Mrs Evelyn Bondarchuk, the woman who occupied the first floor apartment in their building, were met with a stony silence from the lady herself, and the disapproving yaps of her assorted Pomeranians.

According to local lore, it was Mrs Bondarchuk herself who owned the property, although she carefully concealed her interest through the use of shelf companies, a series of lawyers at least as tight-lipped as she, and a Dickensian amount of paperwork – not that anyone was unduly troubled by this minor act of deception, which had long ago mutated from suspicion into fact. After all, this was New York City, and more specifically Manhattan, where various levels of eccentricity, reinvention, and even downright criminality were, if not a given, then at least quotidian.

But the truth of the matter was that Mrs Bondarchuk was merely a tenant, albeit one who functioned also as a watchdog, since her chair by the bay window of her apartment offered a clear view of the street in two directions. (Mrs Bondarchuk's bark, it might have been said, was probably worse than her Pomeranians' bite, although it was a close-run thing, and none of the neighbors were in any hurry to test the hypothesis. The Pomeranians were

nippy little beasts when the mood took them, but Mrs Bondarchuk possessed an undeniable solidity, and all her own teeth.)

A few years earlier, there had been some unpleasantness at the property involving a man with a gun, but it, and he, had been taken care of. Since then, Mrs Bondarchuk had committed with even greater acuity to her role as first line of defense. She now understood it was more than a sop from her landlords, a pointless task offered out of pity to an old woman, or a well-intended effort to endow her twilight years with a sense of purpose. No, Mrs Bondarchuk was essential to them, and she loved them for making her so. She had even inquired about the possibility of being given a gun, although this suggestion was politely rebuffed. Mrs Bondarchuk's feelings were not hurt, though. She had asked more out of interest than actual desire. She did not wish to own a gun. In her youth, her father had retained a seven-shot Nagant M1895 revolver from his period of service in the Soviet military. He had kept it clean, well-oiled, and concealed beneath a floorboard in the bedroom. Mrs Bondarchuk had used it only once, when a vagrant entered the house and attempted to rape her mother. Mrs Bondarchuk – or Elena Tikhonov as she was formerly known, before the changes to her name wrought by emigration, anglicization, and marriage – shot him in the chest, and later helped her father and mother to bury the remains in the forest. She was twelve years old.

Then, as now, she was untroubled by what she had done. The vagrant was bad, and had she not acted as she did, he would undoubtedly have hurt or murdered her mother, and possibly Elena, too, before going on to commit further degenerate acts. And, yes, the sixth commandment declared 'Thou shalt not kill', but Mrs Bondarchuk had always believed that Moses, in returning from Mount Sinai, had neglected to bring with him a final tablet, the one containing all the fine print, possibly because his arms were already full.

Mrs Bondarchuk had never shared with another soul outside her immediate family the details of the killing: not with her late husband, whom she had loved dearly, and not even with the two men who owned the building in which she lived, although she was certain that they, at least, would have understood. There was,

she felt, no particular benefit to be gained from raising the subject. The vagrant, after all, was dead, and a confession was unlikely to alter that fact. Mrs Bondarchuk was also in possession of a clear conscience on the matter, and while she might, in the years that followed, have occasionally contemplated shooting someone else – certain politicians, for example, or particularly patronizing shopgirls – she had managed to resist the temptation, helped in large part by not being in possession of a suitable weapon. All in all, it was probably for the best that her landlords had not agreed to provide her with a gun. Shooting someone in extremis might be forgivable, but one shouldn't make a habit of it, regardless of provocation.

And here they came now, Mr Louis and Mr Angel, these two men whom she adored like errant sons, the first tall and black, the second short and, well, white*ish*. He had lately been so ill, her Mr Angel, and he had already suffered so much; this, Mrs Bondarchuk had always intuited from his face and eyes. He was recovering, though, even if he was now slower than before. His partner, too, regarded him differently, as if the sickness had reminded him that, in no time at all, one of them must inevitably be parted from the other, and whatever days remained to them were better spent in accord.

But at least they were not alone. They had friends. There was the private detective, Mr Parker, who brought her candy from Maine; and the two brothers, Tony and Paulie Fulci, who were so gentle for such big men, and whom she could not imagine hurting a fly – other people possibly, perhaps even probably, but not a fly.

And they in turn had Mrs Bondarchuk, who prayed for Mr Louis and Mr Angel every night. She prayed that they might have a good death, one marked by ritual and a proper burial, and therefore the salvation of the soul; and not a bad death, an interment in some pit without a blessing or a marker, in the manner of a wandering rapist. Death was the inescapable path. One's thoughts were over the mountains, but death was always behind one's shoulder. Death was an old woman who slept in hell, and

took her instructions from God. She was inevitable, but not implacable. She could be spoken to, and negotiated with. Amuse her, interest her, and she might move on.

Mr Louis and Mr Angel, Mrs Bondarchuk believed, greatly amused Death.

Angel waved to Mrs Bondarchuk as they approached the stairs leading to the door of their building.

'Do you think Mrs Bondarchuk has ever killed anyone?' he said.

'Definitely,' said Louis.

'No doubt in your mind?'

'None at all.'

'I thought it was just me.'

'No, she's killed someone for sure. Shot them, is my guess. Remember that time she suggested we give her a gun?'

'Yeah,' said Angel. 'She was kind of matter-of-fact about it.'

'Maybe we should have let her have one.'

'We could always give her one for Christmas, if her heart is still set on it.'

'She's Orthodox. We'd have to wait until January.'

'On the other hand,' said Angel, 'might be best to stick with candy and a Macy's gift card.'

'Still, it's something to keep in reserve in case she gets bored of candy.'

Angel paused to watch a crow alight on a nearby tree.

'That's sorrow, right?' he said. 'One for sorrow, like in the rhyme.'

'I don't think it counts where we're concerned,' said Louis.

'No,' said Angel, 'I guess not.'

Mrs Bondarchuk had also noticed the crow. She crossed herself before offering up a brief prayer of protection. She remained constantly heedful of auguries – the appearance of owls, ravens, and crows, the births of twins and triplets – and kept note of her dreams, waking up in the night to add the details of them to the little writing pad by her bedside, leery always of visions of

bread and bees, of teeth falling from gums, of church processions. She had yet to give a watch as a gift, eat from a knife, or mark a fortieth anniversary. She sat down before going on a journey, even if only to the store, in order to confuse any evil spirits that might be lurking, and never put out the garbage after sunset. On the wall by her front door hung a cross of aspen, the cursed wood, which possessed a talismanic power against evil, just as the potency of a vaccine relies upon the element it contains of its target disease.

But perhaps more than any of this, Mrs Bondarchuk believed that death, rather than marking an end, represented only an alteration, if a fundamental one, in the nature of existence. The dead and the living coexisted, each world feeding into the other, and the next realm was a mirror of this one. The dead remained in contact with the living, and spoke to them through dreams and portents.

One had to learn to listen.

And one had to be prepared.

Angel fumbled for his keys. Louis appeared distracted, even weary.

'You look tired,' said Angel.

'You say.'

'I have an excuse. Cancer beats all hands.'

'I didn't sleep so well last night,' said Louis. 'Comes with getting old.'

'You're sure that's all it is?'

'Yes,' Louis lied.

He had been dreaming again, the same dream. It had been coming to him more often in recent months. In his dream he stood by a lake and watched the dead immerse themselves in its waters, wading deeper and deeper, farther and farther, until finally they were lost to the great sea. Beside him stood a little girl: Jennifer, the dead child of the detective Charlie Parker, whom Louis had watched being buried. She held his hand. Her touch was warm against the coldness of his skin. In life, he had known her only from a distance. Now death had made intimates of them.

why are we here?

His voice seemed no longer his own. He heard it as a faded

whisper. Only the girl spoke without distortion, for this was her dominion.

'We're waiting,' she said.

for what?

'For the others to join us.'

and then?

She laughed.

'We shall set black flags in the firmament.'

And he would wake to the memory of her touch.

None of this he chose to share with Angel. They had few secrets from each other, but those they had, they kept close. Had Louis spoken of his dream to Mrs Bondarchuk, she might have advised him to be very wary, and gifted him a cross of aspen. But he had no intention of discussing his recurring dream with her, just as he had elected not to mention it to Angel.

Which was unfortunate, because Angel had been having a very similar dream.