

# A Song of Shadows: A Charlie Parker Thriller (13)

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Still recovering from his life-threatening wounds, private detective Charlie Parker investigates a case that has its origins in a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War.

Parker has retreated to the small Maine town of Boreas to regain his strength. There he befriends a widow named Ruth Winter and her young daughter, Amanda. But Ruth has her secrets. Old atrocities are about to be unearthed, and old sinners will kill to hide their sins. Now Parker is about to risk his life to defend a woman he barely knows, one who fears him almost as much as she fears those who are coming for her.

His enemies believe him to be vulnerable. Fearful. Solitary.

But they are wrong. Parker is far from afraid, and far from alone.

For something is emerging from the shadows . . .

John Connolly is the author of the Charlie Parker series of mystery novels, the supernatural collection Nocturnes, the Samuel Johnson Trilogy for younger readers, and (with Jennifer Ridyard) the Chronicles of the Invaders series. He lives in Dublin, Ireland. For more information, see his website at [JohnConnollyBooks.com](http://JohnConnollyBooks.com), or follow him on Twitter @JConnollyBooks. A Song of Shadows CHAPTER

I

Winter dead, spring dying, and summer waiting in the wings.

Slowly, the town of Boreas was changing: seasonal rentals were being opened and cleaned, the ice-cream parlor was ordering supplies, and the stores and restaurants were gearing up for the advent of the tourists. Just six months earlier, their proprietors had been counting the takings to figure out how close they'd have to cut their cloth to survive. Each year seemed to leave them with a little less in their pockets, and brought the same debate at the end of the season: do we go on or do we sell up? Now those who remained standing were returning to the fray, but even the cautious optimism of previous years was not yet palpable, and there were those who whispered that it was gone forever. The economy might be improving, but Boreas was mired in steady decline: a slow, labored mortality, half-life upon half-life. This was a dying town, a failing ecosystem, but still so many stayed, for where else was there to go?

Out on Burgess Road, the Sailmaker Inn remained closed, the first time in over seventy years that the grand old dame of Boreas hotels would not be opening its doors to welcome the summer visitors. The decision to put the Sailmaker on the market had been made only the previous week. The owners—the third generation of the Tabor family to operate the inn—had returned from their Carolina winter refuge to prepare the Sailmaker for guests, and some of their seasonal staff were already occupying the residences at the back of the property. The lawn was being mowed, the dust covers taken off the furniture, and then, just like that, the Tabors had looked at their business, decided that they couldn't

take the strain any longer, and announced they wouldn't be reopening after all. Frank Tabor, a good Catholic, said that making the decision had been akin to going to confession and unburdening himself of his sins. He could now go in peace, and not fret anymore.

The decision to close the Sailmaker sounded another death knell for the town, a further concrete symbol of its dwindling. The tourists had grown fewer and fewer over the years-and older and older, because there was little here to amuse the young-and more summer homes were being put up for sale, their prices pegged optimistically high at first before time and necessity slowly whittled them down to a more realistic level. Even then Bobby Soames, the local Realtor, could name off the top of his head five houses that had been on the market for two years or more. By now their owners had largely given up on them, and they functioned neither as summer retreats nor actual residences. They were kept alive by a slow trickle of heat in winter, and in summer by the flitting and scuttling of bugs.

The town was founded by a family of Greeks back at the start of the nineteenth century, although they were long gone by the beginning of the twentieth. Indeed, nobody was entirely sure how they had ended up in this part of Maine to begin with-and the only remaining clue to its origins lay in its name: Boreas, a northern outpost named after the Greek god of winter and the north wind. Was it any wonder, Soames sometimes thought, that its survival as a vacation destination had always been tenuous? They should have just named it Arctic South and had done with it.

Soames was driving slowly through Boreas on this fine April morning. Everyone drove slowly through Boreas. Its thoroughfares were narrow: even Bay Street, the main drag, was a bitch to negotiate if cars were parked on both curbs, and anyone who'd been in town longer than a wet afternoon learned to push in his side mirrors if he wanted them to be intact when he returned. Meanwhile, the local police liked nothing better than to meet their ticket quotas by pulling over motorists who were even fractionally above the speed limit.

It might also have been something to do with the area's later Germanic heritage, which encouraged a certain sense of order and adherence to the tenets of the law. German Lutherans had first come to Maine in the middle of the eighteenth century, settling in what was now Waldoboro, but was then known as Broad Bay. They had been promised houses, a church, and supplies, none of which materialized, and instead found themselves marooned in a hostile landscape. They resorted to building temporary shelters and hunting local game, and the weakest among them didn't survive that first winter. Later they fought the French and the Indians, and communities were split during the Revolutionary War between those who sided with the Americans in the cause of liberty and those who were reluctant to break their oath of allegiance to the English Crown.

By then, the Germans were firmly established in Maine. Sometime in the late nineteenth century, a bunch of them made their way to Boreas, usurped the Greeks, and had been there ever since. The town's register of voters boasted Ackermans, Baumgartners, Huebers, Kusters, Vogels, and Wexlers. Farther down the coast, in the town of Pirna-named after the town in Saxony from which its homesick founders hailed-were more Germans.

and even a small number of German Jews: a scattering of Arnsteins, Bingens, Lewens, Rossmans, and Wachsmanns. Soames, who was English on his great-grandfather's side and Welsh on his great-grandmother's (although for some reason nobody in his family liked to talk about the Welsh side), regarded them all in the same light—everyone was a potential client—although he could recall his grandfather's strong opinions on the Germans, a consequence of his great-grandfather's experiences during World War I, and his grandfather's own memories of World War II. Being shot at for years by men of a particular nationality will tend to impact negatively upon one's view of them.

Soames left Bay Street behind and turned onto Burgess Road. He paused outside the Sailmaker. The doors were closed, and he could see no signs of life. He had already made his pitch to the Tabors to act as Realtor for the property, and Frank had promised to call him later that day. Soames would miss the Sailmaker. It had boasted a pretty good bar, and he enjoyed shooting the breeze with Donna Burton, who bartended there on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and weekends. She was the kind of flirtatious divorcee who kept customers returning, or male customers anyway, female customers being less susceptible to her charms, and also strangely reluctant to let their husbands or boyfriends spend significant amounts of unsupervised time in her presence.

Soames didn't know what Donna would do now that the Sailmaker was closing. She lived down in Pirna, where she worked as a secretary, and her part-time summer hours at the Sailmaker had made the difference between a comfortable winter and one in which the thermostat was kept a couple of degrees lower than ideal. Maybe Fred Amsel at the Blackbird Bar & Grill would give her a few hours, if his wife, Erika, allowed him. Donna would bring her Sailmaker customers with her, and Fred would be competing with the Brickhouse for their business. Maybe Soames would have a word with Fred about it, and Fred could then broach the subject with Erika. Mrs. Amsel might have looked like someone who had repeatedly had a door slammed shut on her face, with the temperament to match, but she was no fool when it came to money.

Who knows, thought Soames, but when Donna heard about his efforts on her behalf, she might even be willing to reward him with some carnal delights. Soames had given a great deal of thought to just how carnally delightful a night with Donna Burton might be. Those fantasies had sustained him through the dying years of his marriage. Now that he was single again, he had laid siege to her over two summers with a stubbornness that would have shamed the Greek army at Troy. He hadn't yet managed to breach her defenses, but Fred Amsel might just be the man to boost him over the parapet. If that didn't work, Soames would have to figure out how to hide himself inside a wooden horse and pay someone to leave him on her doorstep.

Soames drove on until the houses started to thin out, and the line began to blur between Boreas's town limits and those of tiny, neighboring Gratton to the north. The two towns shared resources, including a police force, mainly because Gratton made Boreas look like Vegas, so any lines on a map were for informational purposes only. The Boreas PD also had contracts for Pirna to the south, and Hamble and Tuniss to the west, the latter two being townships that consisted of little more than scattered houses and dilapidated barns.

Most everyone from the surrounding area went to Boreas or Pirna to do business, and the five towns had come together to form a single council, on which Soames sat. The bimonthly meetings, held every first and third Wednesday, tended to be fractious affairs: property taxes were higher in Boreas than elsewhere, and those in the town who resented seeing their dollars going to service sewers in Hamble, or road maintenance in Tuniss, whispered darkly of socialism.

Soames turned right off Burgess Road onto Toland's Lane, which wound its way down to Green Heron Bay, the most obscure of the inlets on the peninsula. It was long, and sheltered by high dunes, and something about its orientation made it particularly susceptible to winds from the sea, so that facing into even a comparatively mild breeze from a house along the shore felt like standing on the prow of a ship during a storm. It was always a couple of degrees cooler in its environs than elsewhere around Boreas, as though winter had chosen this place to leave a reminder of its eventual return. Tourists generally didn't bother using it, the occasional bird-watchers excepted, and they were usually disappointed by the absence of any herons, green or otherwise.

Only two houses stood on the bay, both of which were former summer homes, one bought in haste and repented at leisure, and the other a family bequest that had remained unloved and unused following the reading of the will. In truth, Soames had despaired of ever selling, or even renting, either of them, and it had come as a surprise and a relief when both attracted occupants within weeks of each other, even if the pleasure in finally securing some income for his clients—and a monthly percentage for himself—was tempered slightly by the identity of one of the renters.

Soames had read about the private detective named Charlie Parker, of course, even before the shooting and convalescence that had brought him at last to Boreas. Soames had some friends and former clients in both the Bangor PD and the Maine State Police, and was privy to barroom details of the man's life that had never made it into any newspaper. If Parker wasn't quite trouble, he was closely related to it.

Initially, though, the approach about renting the house came from a lawyer named Aimee Price down in South Freeport, who told Soames that she had a client who needed privacy and quiet, in order to recover from a recent trauma. She came up to Boreas to view the house, decided that it met her client's needs, and signed a lease, all in the space of a single morning. Yet negotiations over the rent made the meetings of the town council seem somnolent by comparison, and Soames had come out of the whole business bruised, battered, and checking to make sure that Price hadn't stolen his watch as well. Only when the lease agreement was signed did Price mention the name of her client: Charlie Parker.

"The private detective?" said Soames, as he watched the ink dry on the lease. "The one who got shot up?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

Soames thought about the question. It would only be a problem if the people who had

tried to kill Parker came back for another attempt. The house had been hard enough to rent as things stood. The owners would be better off burning it to the ground if it became the scene of a massacre. It would also be likely to cost him his seat on the council. He wouldn't be popular if his lax standards led to Boreas becoming famous for something other than Forrest's Ice Cream Parlor and the shrimp  $\pi$  touff $\pi$  e at Crawley's Cajun Citchen. ("The Best Cajun Food in These Parts," which, all things considered, wasn't a slogan to set the heart alight, even if Crawley's did serve damned fine food, although that cutesy misspelling of "kitchen" caused Soames to twitch involuntarily every time he saw it in print.)

He decided that honesty might be the best policy.

"Look, a man like that has enemies," he said, "and nobody has ever been shot in Boreas. I mean, ever."

"Maybe you could put it on your sign," said Price. "You know: 'Boreas: 75,000 days without a shooting,' like building sites do for workplace accidents."

Soames tried to figure out if she was being facetious, and decided that she probably was. It had seemed like a good idea, too, if only for a moment.

"Unhelpful suggestions about signage aside," said Soames, "his reputation might be a matter of concern."

"There's no risk of a repeat of the incident that led to his injuries."

"You seem very certain of that."

"I am."

She stared at him, as if inviting him to ask the question that danced on his lips and tongue. Soames swallowed. His office suddenly felt very warm. He thought about the rental income.

"Given the unusual circumstances, perhaps we could-"

"No."

"-look again at-"

"I don't think so."

"-the amount to be-"

"You're wasting your breath."

"Right."

"That house hasn't had a tenant in almost two years."

"We've had offers."

"No, you haven't."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do."

"Okay."

"Any further questions?"

"Will he be armed?"

"I don't know. You can ask him when you see him, if you like."

Soames thought about what he knew of the detective.

"I guess he'll be armed," he said, as much to himself as to Price. "If he isn't, he probably should be."

"That's the spirit," said Price. "And the fewer people who know about this for now, the better. Even when he gets here, it'll be up to him how he deals with folks. Some may recognize his name or face, some may not."

"We mind our own business in Boreas," said Soames. "As far as I'm concerned, you're the one renting the house, and if I'm asked who's going to be living in it I'll just say that I have no idea."

Price stood and extended her hand. Soames shook it.

"It's been a pleasure," she said.

"Uh, likewise. I think."

He walked her to her car.

"One last thing," she said, and Soames felt his heart sink. He hated "one last things."

"Some men from New York will be coming to look at the house. They're, well, kind of security consultants. They may want to make some slight alterations, just to ensure that the house is up and running in every way. They won't damage it. In fact, I imagine that any changes they make will only enhance its value."

The promise of enhanced value made Soames feel better about everything.

"I don't think that will be a problem."

"Good. They don't like problems."

Something in her tone made him want to reach for a stiff drink, which, when she was gone, was exactly what he did. His secretary saw him sipping from the glass.

"Are you celebrating?" she asked.

"You know," he replied, "I'm really not sure."

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