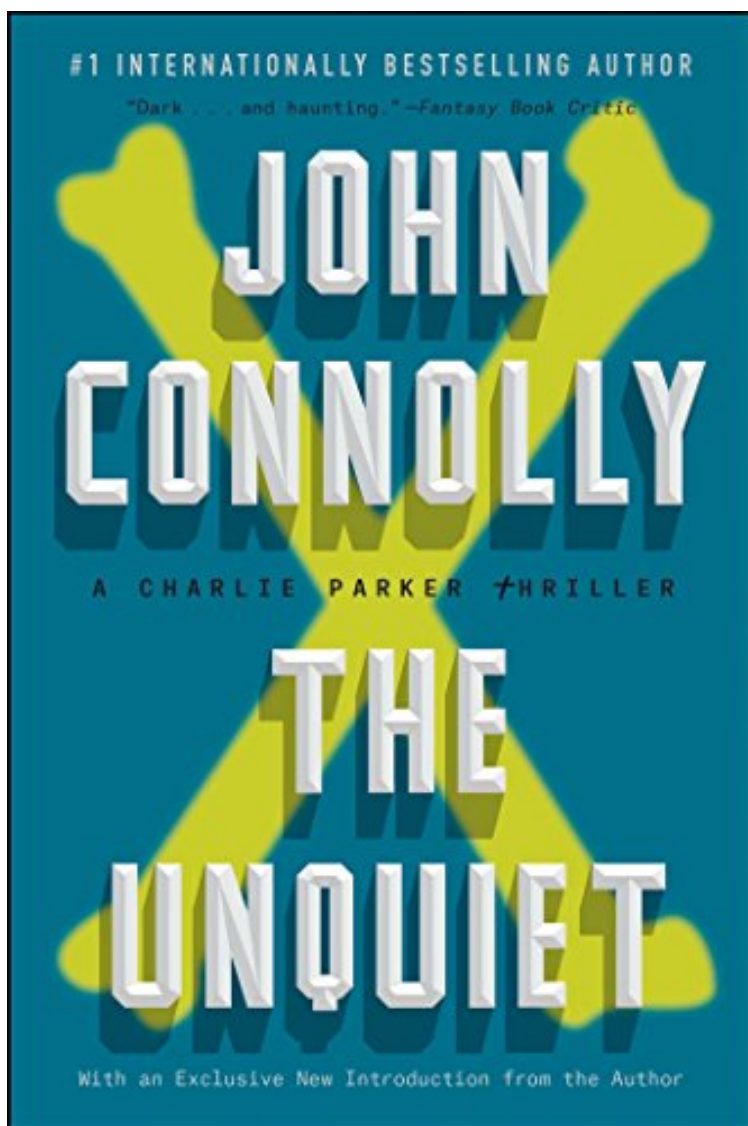


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The Unquiet: A Charlie Parker Thriller



Par John Connolly

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBut that is the nature of revenge. It escalates. It cannot be controlled. One hurt invites another, on and on until the original injury is all but forgotten in the chaos of what follows. John Connolly's originality and talent for storytelling have quickly made him one of today's preeminent thriller writers. Now, in *The Unquiet*, private detective Charlie Parker returns to untangle a horrifying story of betrayal, unclean desires, and murder -- a story of never-ending evil whose conclusion is not yet written. Daniel Clay, a once-respected psychiatrist, has gone missing. His daughter insists that he killed himself after allegations surfaced that he had betrayed his patients to foul and evil men -- but when a killer obsessed with uncovering the truth behind his own daughter's disappearance comes seeking revenge, long-forgotten secrets begin to emerge. Hired by Dr. Clay's daughter to protect her from the predator on the loose, tortured and ingenious private

detective Charlie Parker finds himself trapped between those who want the truth to be revealed and those who will go to any length to keep it hidden. John Connolly masterfully intertwines secret lives and secret sins with the violence that so often lies beneath the surface of the honeycomb world in this gripping page-turner. Fast-paced, hypnotic, and elegantly written, *The Unquiet* is John Connolly at his chilling best.

Extrait

CHAPTER I

It was an overcast late November morning, the grass splintered by hoarfrost, and winter grinning through the gaps in the clouds like a bad clown peering through the curtains before the show begins. The city was slowing down. Soon the cold would hit hard, and, like an animal, Portland had stored its fat for the long months ahead. There were tourist dollars in the bank; enough, it was hoped, to tide everyone over until Memorial Day. The streets were quieter than they once were. The locals, who coexisted sometimes uneasily with the leaf peepers and outlet shoppers, now had their home almost to themselves once more. They claimed their regular tables in diners and coffee shops, in restaurants and bars. There was time to pass idle conversation with waitresses and chefs, the professionals no longer run ragged by the demands of customers whose names they did not know. At this time of year, it was possible to feel the true rhythm of the small city, the slow beating of its heart untroubled by the false stimulus of those who came from far away. I was sitting at a corner table in the Porthole, eating bacon and fried potatoes and not watching Kathleen Kennedy and Stephen Frazier talking about the secretary of states surprise visit to Iraq. There was no sound from the TV, which made ignoring it a whole lot easier. A stove fire burned next to the window overlooking the water, the masts of the fishing boats bobbed and swayed in the morning breeze, and a handful of people occupied the other tables, just enough to create the kind of welcoming ambience that a breakfast venue required, for such things rely on a subtle balance. The Porthole still looked like it did when I was growing up, perhaps even as it had since it first opened in 1929. There were green-marbled linoleum tiles on the floor, cracked here and there but spotlessly clean. A long, wooden counter, topped with copper, stretched almost the entire length of the room, its black-cushioned metal stools anchored to the floor, the counter dotted with glasses, condiments, and two glass plates of freshly baked muffins. The walls were painted light green, and if you stood up, you could peer into the kitchen through the twin serving hatches divided by a painted Scallops sign. A chalkboard announced the days specials, and there were five beer taps serving Guinness, a few Allagash and Shipyard ales, and, for those who didnt know any better, or who did and just didnt give a rats ass, Coors Light. There were buoys hanging from the walls, which in any other dining establishment in the Old Port might have come across as kitsch but here were simply a reflection of the fact that this was a place frequented by locals who fished. One wall was almost entirely glass, so even on the dullest of mornings the Porthole appeared to be flooded with light. In the Porthole you were always aware of the comforting buzz of conversation, but you could never quite hear all of what anyone nearby was saying, not clearly. This morning about twenty people were eating, drinking, and easing themselves into the day the way Mainers will do. Five workers from the Harbor Fish Market sat in a row at the bar, all dressed identically in blue jeans, hooded tops, and baseball caps, laughing and stretching in the warmth, their faces bitten red by the elements. Beside me, four businessmen had cell phones and notepads interspersed with their white coffee mugs, making out as if they were working but, from the occasional snatches that drifted over to me and could be understood, seemingly more interested in singing the praises of Pirates coach Kevin Dineen. Across from them, two women, a mother and daughter, were having one of those discussions that required a lot of hand gestures and shocked expressions. They looked as if they were having a ball. I liked the Porthole. The tourists dont come here much, certainly not in winter, and even in summer they hadnt tended to disturb the balance much until someone strung a banner over Wharf Street advertising the fact that there was more to this seemingly unpromising stretch of waterfront than met the eye: Boones Seafood Restaurant, the Harbor Fish Market, the Comedy Connection, and the Porthole itself. Even that hadnt exactly led to an onslaught. Banner or no banner, the Porthole didnt scream the fact of its existence, and a battered soda sign and a fluttering flag were the only actual indication of its presence visible from the main drag of Commercial. In a sense, you kind of needed to know that it was there to see it in the first place, especially on dark winter mornings, and any lingering tourists walking along Commercial at the start of a bitter Maine winters day needed to have a pretty good idea of where they were headed if they were going to make it to spring with their health intact. Faced with a bracing noreaster, few had the time or the inclination to explore the hidden corners of the city. Still, off-season travelers sometimes made their way past the fish market and the comedy club, their feet echoing solidly on the old wood of the boardwalk that bordered the wharf to the left, and found themselves at the Portholes door, and it was a good bet that the next time they came to Portland, they would head straight for the Porthole again, but maybe they wouldnt tell too many of their

friends about it because it was the kind of place that you liked to keep to yourself. There was a deck outside overlooking the water, where people could sit and eat in summer, but in winter they removed the tables and left the deck empty. I think I liked it better in winter. I could take a cup of coffee in hand and head out, safe in the knowledge that most folks preferred to drink their coffee inside where it was warm, and that I wasn't likely to be disturbed by anyone. I would smell the salt and feel the sea breeze on my skin, and if the wind and the weather were right, the scent would remain with me for the rest of the morning. Mostly, I liked that scent. Sometimes, if I was feeling bad, I didn't care so much for it, because the taste of the salt on my lips reminded me of tears, as if I had recently tried to kiss away another's pain. When that happened, I thought of Rachel, and of Sam, my daughter. Often, too, I thought of the wife and daughter who had gone before them.

Days like that were silent days. But today I was inside, and I was wearing a jacket and tie. The tie was a deep red Hugo Boss, the jacket Armani, yet nobody in Maine ever paid much attention to labels. Everyone figured that if you were wearing it, then you'd bought it at a discount, and if you hadn't and had paid full price instead, then you were an idiot. I hadn't paid full price. The front door opened, and a woman entered. She was wearing a black pantsuit and a coat that had probably cost her a lot when she bought it but was now showing its age. Her hair was black, but colored with something that lent it a hint of red. She looked a little surprised by her surroundings, as though, having made her way down past the battered exteriors of the wharf buildings, she had expected to be mugged by pirates. Her eyes alighted on me and her head tilted quizzically.

I raised a finger, and she made her way through the tables to where I sat. I rose to meet her, and we shook hands. Mr. Parker? she said. Ms. Clay. I'm sorry I'm late. There was an accident on the bridge. The traffic was backed up a ways. Rebecca Clay had called me the day before, asking if I might be able to help her with a problem she was having. She was being stalked, and, not surprisingly, she didn't much care for it. The cops had been able to do nothing. The man, she said, seemed almost to sense their coming, because he was always gone by the time they arrived, no matter how stealthily they approached the vicinity of her house when she reported his presence. I had been doing as much general work as I could get, in part to keep my mind off the absence of Rachel and Sam. We had been apart, on and off, for about nine months. I'm not even sure how things had deteriorated so badly, and so quickly. It seemed like one minute they were there, filling the house with their scents and their sounds, and the next they were leaving for Rachel's parents' house, but, of course, it wasn't like that at all. Looking back, I could see every turn in the road, every dip and curve, that had led us to where we now were. It was supposed to be a temporary thing, a chance for both of us to consider, to take a little time out from each other and try to recall what it was about the other person with whom we shared our life that was so important to us we could not live without it. But such arrangements are never temporary, not really. There is a sundering, a rift that occurs, and even if an accommodation is reached, and a decision made to try again, the fact that one person left the other is never really forgotten, or forgiven. That makes it sound like it was her fault, but it wasn't. I'm not sure that it was mine either, not entirely. She had to make a choice, and so did I, but her choice was dependent upon the one that I made. In the end, I let them both go, but in the hope that they would return. We still talked, and I could see Sam whenever I wanted to, but the fact that they were over in Vermont made that a little difficult. Distances notwithstanding, I was careful about visiting, and not just because I didn't want to complicate an already difficult situation. I took care because I still believed that there were those who would hurt them to get at me. I think that was why I let them leave. It's so hard to remember now. The last year had been... difficult. I missed them a great deal, but I did not know either how to bring them back into my life, or how to live with their absence. They had left a void in my existence, and

others had tried to take their place, the ones who waited in the shadows. The first wife, and the first daughter. I ordered coffee for Rebecca Clay. A beam of morning sunlight shone mercilessly upon her, exposing the lines in her face, the gray seeping into her hair despite the color job, the dark patches beneath her eyes. Some of that was probably due to the man she claimed was bothering her, but it was clear that much of it had deeper origins. The troubles of her life had aged her prematurely. From the way her makeup had been applied, hurriedly and heavily, it was possible to guess that here was a woman who didn't like looking in the mirror for too long, and who didn't like what she saw staring back at her when she did. I don't think I've ever been here before, she said. Portland has changed so much these last few years, it's a wonder that this place has survived. She was right, I supposed. The city was changing, but older, quirkier remnants of its past somehow contrived to remain: used bookstores, and barbershops, and bars where the menu never changed because the food had always been good, right from the start. That was why the Porthole had survived. Those who knew about it valued it, and made sure to pass a little business its way whenever they could. Her coffee arrived. She added sugar, then stirred it for too long. What can I do for you, Ms. Clay? She

stopped stirring, content to begin speaking now that the conversation had been started for her. Its like I told you on the phone. A man has been bothering me. Bothering you how? He hangs around outside my house. I live out by Willard Beach. Ive seen him in Freeport too, or when Ive been shopping at the mall. Was he in a car, or on foot? On foot. Has he entered your property? No. Has he threatened you, or physically assaulted you in any way? No. How long has this been going on? Just over a week. Has he spoken to you? Only once, two days ago. What did he say? He told me that he was looking for my father. My daughter and I live in my fathers old house now. He said he had some business with him. How did you respond to that? I told him that

I hadnt seen my father in years. I told him that, as far as I was aware, my father was dead. In fact, since earlier this year hes been legally dead. I went through all the paperwork. I didnt want to, but I suppose it was

important to me, and to my daughter, that we finally achieved some kind of closure. Tell me about your father. He was a child psychiatrist, a good one. He worked with adults too, sometimes, but they had usually suffered some kind of trauma in childhood and felt that he could help them with it. Then things started to change for him. There was a difficult case: a man was accused of abuse by his son in the course of a custody dispute. My father felt that the allegations had substance, and his findings led to custody being granted to the mother, but the son subsequently retracted his accusations and said that his mother had convinced him to say those things. By then it was too late for the father. Word had leaked out about the allegations, probably from

the mother. He lost his job and got beaten up pretty badly by some men in a bar. He ended up shooting himself dead in his bedroom. My father took it badly, and there were complaints filed about his conduct of the original interviews with the boy. The Board of Licensure dismissed them, but after that my father wasnt asked to conduct any further evaluations in abuse cases. It shook his confidence, I think. When was this?

About six years ago, maybe a little more. It got worse after that. She shook her head in apparent disbelief at the memory. Even talking about it, I realize how crazy it all sounds. It was just a mess. She looked around to reassure herself that nobody was listening, then lowered her voice a little. It emerged that some of my fathers

patients were sexually abused by a group of men, and there were questions asked again about my fathers methods and his reliability. My father blamed himself for what happened. Other people did too. The Board of Licensure summoned him to appear for an intial informal meeting to discuss what had happened, but he never made it. He drove out to the edge of the North Woods, abandoned his car, and that was the last anyone ever saw or heard of him. The police looked for him, but they never found any trace. That was in late

September 1999. Clay. Rebecca Clay. Youre Daniel Clays daughter? She nodded. Something flashed across her face. It was an involuntary spasm, a kind of wince. I knew a little about Daniel Clay. Portland is a small place, a city in name only. Stories like Daniel Clays tended to linger in the collective memory. I didnt know

too many of the details, but like everyone else Id heard the rumors. Rebecca Clay had summarized the circumstances of her fathers disappearance in the most general terms, and I didnt blame her for leaving out the rest: the whispers that Dr. Daniel Clay might have known about what was happening to some of the

children with whom he was dealing, the possibility that he might have colluded in it, might even have engaged in abuse himself. There had been an investigation of sorts, but there were records missing from his office, and the confidential nature of his vocation made it difficult to follow up leads. There was also the

absence of any solid evidence against him, but that didnt stop people from talking and drawing their own conclusions. I looked closer at Rebecca Clay. Her fathers identity made her appearance a little easier to understand. I imagined that she kept herself to herself. There would be friends, but not many. Daniel Clay

had cast a shadow upon his daughters life, and she had wilted under its influence. So you told this man, the one whos been stalking you, that you hadnt seen your father for a long time. How did he react? He tapped the side of his nose and winked. She replicated the gesture for me. Then he said, Liar, liar, pants on fire. He

told me that hed give me some time to think about what I was saying. After that, he just walked away. Why would he call you a liar? Did he give any indication that he might know something more about your fathers disappearance? No. And the police havent been able to trace him? He melts away. I think they believe Im

making up stories to get attention, but Im not. I wouldnt do that. I I waited. You know about my father. There are those who believe that he did something wrong. I think the police believe it too, and sometimes I wonder if they think I know more than I do about what happened, and that Ive been protecting my father for

all this time. When they came to the house, I knew what was on their minds: that I did know where he was, and somehow Ive been in contact with him over the years. And have you? She blinked hard, but she held my

gaze. No. But now it seems like the police arent the only ones who doubt your story. What does this man look like? Hes in his sixties, I think. His hair is black. It looks dyed, and its in kind of a quiff, the way those fifties rock stars used to wear their hair. He has brown eyes, and theres scarring here. She pointed to her

forehead, just below her hairline. There are three parallel marks, like someone dug a fork into his skin and dragged it down. Hes short, maybe five-five or so, but stocky. His arms are real big, and there are folds of muscle at the back of his neck. He mostly wears the same clothes: blue jeans and a T-shirt, sometimes with a black suit jacket, other times with an old black leather jacket. He has a paunch, but hes not fat, not really. His nails are very short, and he keeps himself real clean, except She stopped. I didnt disturb her as she tried to figure out the best way of formulating what she wanted to say. He wears some kind of cologne. Its wicked strong, but when he was speaking to me, it was like I caught a hint of whatever it was masking. It was a bad smell, a kind of animal stench. It made me want to run away from him. Did he tell you his name? No. He just said that he had business with my father. I kept telling him my father was dead, but he shook his head and smiled at me. He said he wouldnt believe any man was dead until he could smell the body. Have you any idea why this man should have turned up now, so many years after your fathers disappearance? He didnt say. It could be that he heard news of the legal declaration of my fathers death. For probate purposes, under Maine law, a person was presumed dead after a continuous absence of five years during which time he had not been heard from and his absence had not been satisfactorily explained. In some cases, the court could order a reasonably diligent search, the notification of law enforcement and public welfare officials about the details of the case, and require that a request for information be posted in the newspapers. According to Rebecca Clay, she had complied with all the conditions that the court had set, but no further information about her father had emerged as a result. There was also a piece about my father in an art magazine earlier this year, after I sold a couple of his paintings. I needed the money. My father was a pretty talented artist. He spent a lot of time in the woods, painting and sketching. His work doesnt go for much by modern standards the most I ever got for one was a thousand dollars but Ive been able to sell some from time to time when money was scarce. My father didnt exhibit, and he produced only a relatively small body of work. He sold by word of mouth, and his paintings were always sought after by those collectors familiar with him. By the end of his life he was receiving offers to buy work that didnt even exist yet. What kind of paintings are we talking about? Landscapes, mostly. I can probably show you some photographs if youre interested. Ive sold them all now, apart from one. I knew some people in Portlands art scene. I thought I might ask them about Daniel Clay. In the meantime, there was the matter of the man who was bothering his daughter. Im not just concerned for my own sake, she said. My daughter, Jenna, shes just eleven. Im afraid to let her out of the house alone now. Ive tried to explain to her a little of whats been happening, but I dont want to frighten her too much either. What do you want me to do about this man? I said. It seemed like a strange question to ask, I knew, but it was necessary. Rebecca Clay had to understand what she was getting herself into. I want you to talk to him. I want you to make him go away. Thats two different things. What? Talking to him and making him go away. She looked puzzled. Youll have to excuse me, she said. Im not following you. We need to be clear on some things before we begin. I can approach him on your behalf, and we can try to clear all this up without trouble. It could be that hell see reason and go about his business, but from what youve told me it sounds like hes got some notions fixed in his head, which means that he might not go without a fight. If thats the case, either we can try to get the cops to take him in, and look for a court order preventing him from approaching you, which can be hard to get and even harder to enforce, or we can find some other way to convince him that he should leave you alone. You mean threaten him, or hurt him? She seemed to quite like the idea. I didnt blame her. I had met people who had endured years of harassment from individuals, and had seen them worn down by tension and distress. Some of them had resorted to violence in the end, but it usually just led to an escalation of the problem. One couple I knew had even ended up being sued by the wifes stalker after the husband threw a punch in frustration, further entangling their lives with his. Theyre options, I said, but they leave us open to charges of assault, or threatening behavior. Worse, if the situation is not handled carefully, then this whole affair could get much worse. Right now, he hasnt done more than make you uneasy, which is bad enough. If we strike at him, he may decide to strike back. It could put you in real danger. She almost slumped with frustration. So what can I do? Look, I said, Im not trying to make out that theres no hope of resolving this painlessly. I just want you to understand that if he decides to stick around, then there are no quick fixes. She perked up slightly. So youll take the job? I told her my rates. I informed her that, as a one-man agency, I wouldnt take on other jobs that might conflict with my work on her behalf. If it became necessary to call on outside help, I would advise her of any additional costs that might arise. At any point, she could call a halt to our arrangement, and I would try to help her find some other way of handling her problem before I left the job. She seemed content with that. I took payment up front for the first week. I didnt exactly need the money for myself my lifestyle was pretty simple but I made a

point of sending some money to Rachel every month even though she said it wasn't necessary. I agreed to start the following day. I would stay close to Rebecca Clay when she headed out to work in the mornings. She would inform me when she was leaving her office for lunch, for meetings, or to go home in the evening. Her house was fitted with an alarm, but I arranged to have someone check it out, just in case, and to fit extra bolts and chains if necessary. I would be outside before she left in the morning, and I would remain within sight of the house until she went to bed. At any time she could contact me, and I would be with her within twenty minutes. I asked her if, by any chance, she might have a photograph of her father that she could give me. She had anticipated the request although she appeared slightly reluctant to hand it over after she had taken it from her bag. It showed a thin, gangly man wearing a green tweed suit. His hair was snow-white, his eyebrows bushy. He wore a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles, and he had a stern, old-fashioned air of academia about him. He looked like a man who belonged amid clay pipes and leather-bound volumes. Ill have some copies made and get it back to you, I said. I have others, she replied. Hold on to it for as long as you need to. She asked me if I would keep an eye on her while she was in town that day. She worked in real estate and had some business to attend to for a couple of hours. She was worried that the man might approach her while she was in the city. She offered to pay me extra, but I declined. I had nothing better to do anyway. So I followed her for the rest of the day. Nothing happened, and there was no sign of the man with the dated quiff and the scars on his face. It was tedious and tiring, but at least it meant that I did not have to return to my house, my not-quite-empty house. I shadowed her so that my own ghosts could not shadow me. From Publishers Weekly Starred . In this scary, cerebral thriller from bestseller Connolly, his fifth to feature world-weary Maine PI Charlie Parker (after 2005's *The Black Angel*), Parker is haunted by the ghosts of his wife and daughter, who died under mysterious circumstances that left him guilt-ridden. Parker is drawn again into the darkest recesses of human nature when a new client, Rebecca Clay, retains him to protect her against a menacing stalker, Frank Merrick, who believes Rebecca knows the whereabouts of her father, Daniel, a child psychiatrist who vanished years before. Merrick suspects Daniel knows the truth about the fate of his own young daughter, whom Daniel treated and who disappeared without a trace while Merrick was incarcerated. Connolly is a master of suggestion, creating mood and suspense with ease, and unflinchingly presents a hard-eyed look at the horrors that can lurk in quiet, rustic settings. 12-city author tour. (May) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.