

DEATH
ON
WINDMILL
WAY

CARRIE DOYLE



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Prologue

December

“OH, IT’S YOU,” SAID GORDON HASLETT, HIS VOICE tinged with its usual irritation. “You’re always sneaking up on me. Drives me nuts. You just appear like a ghost. Trying to scare the hell out of me?”

Gordon propped the rake against the tree and wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand, leaving a smear of dirt along his face. This small dose of physical labor had intensified his breathing, causing his chest to rise and fall dramatically under his vest. After taking a few gulps from a bottle of water, he examined his visitor critically. “So are you going to help me or what? Don’t just stand there watching me. We both know this isn’t *my* damn job.”

He turned and resumed raking the stack of wet leaves that were blocking the door to the garden shed. They were soggy from the rain and stacked together in sad little clumps. The air smelled moldy, of musty earth. Gordon had apparently been out there for a while, as the brick path leading upward to the shed had already been cleared. He turned gruffly when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“What?” he barked.

His visitor held out a handkerchief, and motioned toward the beading sweat on Gordon’s forehead. Gordon grabbed the cloth.

“Thanks.”

He pressed the handkerchief firmly to his head and aggressively wiped his entire face.

“What the hell?” yelled Gordon, suddenly dropping the handkerchief and taking a step back. “Damn, something stung me!”

Gordon began furiously slapping his face, then stopped and glanced around in confusion. He held one index finger to the side of his face. His skin was burning hot. Suddenly his entire face began to swell, and his eyes were enveloped in clouds of puffiness.

“What the . . .” He couldn’t finish his sentence. Instead, Gordon clutched his throat and dropped to his knees.

“Go get help,” he whispered.

His visitor nodded. And then turned and walked as slowly as possible back to the inn, and waited.

1

October (Ten months later)

IT WAS A GLORIOUS FALL NIGHT IN EAST HAMPTON. The sky was inky black with thin clouds racing past a full moon, and the ancient trees along the village streets cast long shadows in the silver moonlight. In the distance, the ocean waves murmured, providing a romantic background soundtrack. The air outside was crisp, not too chilly, but with just enough kick to necessitate roaring fires in the Windmill Inn's public rooms. It was a cozy Friday evening, just how innkeeper Antonia Bingham had imagined it would be when she dreamed of her move to the East Coast from California. Combined with the medley of delicious smells wafting from the kitchen, the weather and atmosphere gave Antonia a sense of great satisfaction.

The dining room of the Windmill Inn was by no means filled to capacity, but for the first time in the six weeks since Antonia had opened the restaurant, half of the tables were occupied. She had heard, of course, that it takes a while for new restaurants to gain momentum, particularly when they are replacing old restaurants that had reputations for terrible service and inedible food. But still, those first few nights when the seats remained

empty, she had felt completely disheartened. Not to mention embarrassed: the sound of every ice cube clinking in a glass seemed magnified and the busboys were too eager to replace half-eaten rolls, just to have something to do. But gradually—very gradually—reservations had picked up, with locals and weekenders popping by, eager to try a new place, and more guests booking rooms at the inn and venturing down to try Antonia's home-cooked meals.

Finally, in Antonia's mind, the future was beginning to look a little brighter. She hoped she wasn't delusional; she was by nature an optimist who chose to look at the bright side of things. However, Antonia's optimism made her prone to bad judgment calls, resulting in infrequent but spectacular failures. "Older and wiser" was one of her mottos, and with her recent purchase of the inn, Antonia was hoping that she could put some of the knowledge and experience that she had acquired in her thirty-five years (twelve years of catering!) to good use. She just needed to avoid past mistakes.

Now, as Antonia roamed the sleek navy and white dining room, she surveyed it critically. It was a large space that seated sixty-five diners and the decor was comfortable, while also streamlined and uncluttered. Whereas Antonia had chosen to make the rest of the inn feel cozy-formal with antiques, lots of prints, and colored fabrics, she had given the restaurant a bright and crisp interior. The walls were painted eggshell white and held large canvases of modern art, mostly bright abstracts, but a few small, individually lit oil paintings as well. The floors had

been stained a dark walnut wood, brushed smoothly and evenly. In the front of the room, by the maître d' station, was a dark-azure lacquered bar. Its eight barstools had button-tufted backs and sides studded with pewter nail-head trim. Beyond that were a dozen freestanding tables set formally with starched white linens, white china, and blue Murano goblets.

When she was decorating the inn, Antonia had sat on dozens of chairs in an effort to find the most comfortable; one that would encourage diners to linger and order more courses. The winners were softly rounded and upholstered in blue, with gently sloping arms and maple-stained legs. In the back of the room, beyond the swinging door to the kitchen, was a nook housing four booths, their banquettes covered in cobalt vinyl with white piping. Antonia had debated whether or not the booths made the place feel too casual, but tonight they had allowed her to successfully accommodate a last-minute party of seven. Smiling benevolently at the happy group, Antonia knew she had made the right decision in adding the booths. They made the restaurant feel complete.

Tonight, Antonia was clad in her best black satin dress, replete with a plunging neckline to both accentuate her ample breasts and move everyone's eyes away from her widening girth. (*Ah, the havoc that working with food wreaks on your waistline*, Antonia often despaired.) She had on the lowest high heels that she could find, as anything even a half an inch higher caused major wobbling in the manner of a drunken streetwalker. It was the last

thing Antonia would have liked to have been wearing—sweats, elastic-waisted ruffled skirts, soft cardigans, and Crocs were more her speed—but her manager had told her that she needed to “sex it up and work the room” in order to encourage first-time customers to become repeat customers. She hardly thought that her looking all dolled up would entice diners, especially in this small town, but with all of her money on the line with the restaurant and inn, she agreed to do whatever had to be done for the bottom line. As a result, Antonia had pulled out all the stops tonight, blowing dry her glossy black hair until it fell in cascading waves down to her shoulders and even applying makeup. Her Cupid’s bow lips were deep red, her porcelain cheeks blushed pink, and her already thick lashes fluttered darkly around her bright-blue eyes.

“Another wonderful dinner, Antonia, thank you,” said Joseph Fowler as he signed his check and flipped the leather-bound cardholder closed. He placed it on the table next to the small pumpkin centerpiece. After finishing the last sip of his sherry, he dabbed his mouth with the cloth napkin.

“Thank you, Joseph. You always make my day!” Antonia beamed at her favorite dinner guest.

Joseph was a renowned writer of historical fiction. He had been recently widowed when his wife of thirty-plus years died after a long bout with cancer. Joseph was Antonia’s first customer at the restaurant, and for that she was eternally grateful, especially as he had turned out to be a tremendous cheerleader for her. An elegant

man, with refined features (aquiline nose, arched eyebrows, chiseled cheekbones, impeccably combed silver hair) he always dressed in custom-fitted monogrammed dress shirts and a bow tie, cords or khakis (depending on the weather), and a beautiful tweed blazer. As he was still only in his early sixties, Antonia fervently hoped he would find romance again. It was too soon for her to play matchmaker but she had already targeted some of the ladies who came to tea at the inn as potential suitors. Should she mind her own business? Probably. But that wasn't really her style.

"Joseph, I'd love your feedback. What did you think of the truffled polenta with Gorgonzola? It's a new recipe I'm trying out. You can tell me honestly."

He smiled. "It was exquisite."

"I'm not fishing for compliments. Are you sure?"

He patted her hand. "My dear, I would have it every night if I could."

"You know how to make a lady happy," she said, wagging her finger at him. "I'll take your word for it, but I still think it needs some tweaking—maybe a different herb. It says rosemary but I have to be honest, I'm not the biggest rosemary fan. It sort of tastes like shampoo, don't you think? I much prefer tarragon or sage. Even chervil. Thyme could work, but it's kind of wimpy. Well, we'll see..."

"My advice to you is don't overthink it. The best thing about your food is that you cook from the heart. And it shows."

“Well, I try.”

Antonia motioned for Glen, the *maitre d'*, to assist Joseph into his scooter. Joseph had suffered a bout of polio as a child and although he could walk with the assistance of crutches, in recent years he had primarily used a scooter to get around.

“There ya go, Mr. Fowler,” said Glen in his strong Long Island accent. “I tell you, I could use one of these things to escape from the ladies.”

Glen was attractive but in an unctuous, hair-gelled way, like Guido the Killer Pimp. A failed actor with an inflated ego, he was a high-maintenance employee but very good at charming women and making customers feel at home.

Joseph chuckled. “Well, I don’t exactly have that problem.”

“All in good time.”

“Have a great night,” said Antonia cheerily.

Joseph winked. “You too, my lady.”

Antonia moved around the room to greet other guests and to solicit any suggestions they might have about the food. She enjoyed meeting people as much as she enjoyed cooking, and it was always an internal debate as to where she should spend more time. It was fun for her to find out where guests were from, and what their story was, but at the same time, she also adored her time in the kitchen, concocting her latest culinary adventure, darting about, plating dishes. If she could slice herself in half and do both she certainly wouldn’t hesitate.

After sending off a cute couple that was visiting from New York City (house-hunting), she stopped off at Len and Sylvia Powers's table. Len headed up security at the Dune Club, a very fancy country club on the ocean, and his wife was a teacher. Tonight, they had brought their son in to celebrate his twenty-fifth birthday.

"You've done an amazing job, Antonia. I tell you, just amazing. The inn looks gorgeous and the food is fabulous," said Sylvia Powers, her big cerulean eyes twinkling. She dabbed her mouth with her napkin, leaving a stain of the hot-pink lipstick that was her trademark, then patted her stomach appreciatively. "I tell you, it is so wonderful that you brought this place back to life. And so quickly. What was it, only six months?" She didn't wait for an answer but continued, "I can't tell you how sad it was to see it fall into disrepair all the years Gordon Haslett owned it. What a mean guy! And that made the place mean. We stopped coming here long ago, didn't we, Len?"

"Well, you didn't really have a choice, Mom," said Matt, giving her a sly smile.

She frowned. "Nonsense. We had a choice. That business was all settled. Right, Len?"

Len Powers glanced up from his apple cheddar crisp, and looked around, dazed by the interruption. He was a large man, with a belly that arrived in a room ten seconds before he did. Everything about him was big and fleshy, from his bulbous nose to his ruddy cheeks and giant ears. "I can't talk! I don't want to tear myself away from this incredible dessert."

Sylvia laughed. "I already inhaled my dessert. I tell you, that chocolate caramel cake with the little dots of sea salt was majestic. This is our third time here and every time I sample some new yummys."

"Thank you." Antonia beamed.

"This may seem like a backhanded compliment, but you cook in a very homey style. The way I like to think I can cook, but actually can't. I like that it's not all that fancy new-wave stuff—foams and edible flowers. That just sounds disgusting to me. Some of those cooking shows, I think, yuck! Foie gras ice cream? Come on. When I have ice cream, I don't want meat in it. But I'm not a food snob. I just prefer food that tastes how it's supposed to. Don't mess with what ain't broke."

"Well, I'm so glad you liked it," replied Antonia. "And thank you for your kind words. I say to everyone I know that the biggest compliment they can give me is to spread the news around. I want everyone to know that there's a new sheriff in town, and the Windmill Inn is back in business."

"Oh, everyone knows that already, Antonia," said Sylvia, chattering on. "East Hampton is a small town. Especially when the summer people are gone. Ah, the summer people! Did you know we call the season 'one hundred days of hell'? Oh, they're not all bad, I'm joking. But it's nice to have the town back to ourselves, where we can get up in everybody's business! Ha, I'm joking again. But of course, everyone knows that the inn changed hands when Gordon Haslett died. In fact, Matt was

there—he's a paramedic." Sylvia gestured proudly at her son.

Antonia was having a hard time following Sylvia's dramatic stream-of-consciousness rambling. She looked to Matt for clarification.

Matt put down his fork and nodded. He had a pretty boy face composed of dainty features: a small straight nose, plump red lips, and thickly lashed eyes. There was also something morose and gloomy about his temperament that Antonia was certain thrilled girls who were attracted to the dark, broody types. Looking at his jolly, big-boned parents, it was hard to tell where Matt had come from.

"Yes, I was the first responder to the scene," he said solemnly and with an air of authority. "I arrived less than oh-five minutes after the call. But there was nothing I could do. He was already DOA."

"Well, I've no doubt you would have done everything you could have," said Antonia sympathetically. She patted his shoulder warmly. "But obviously there's not a whole lot you *can* do when someone suffers a massive heart attack and dies before you get there."

"Right," said Matt, nodding, his face oddly empty of emotion.

"If it was a heart attack," said Sylvia. She nudged her spoon into her husband's crisp and took a huge bite for herself.

"Mom," warned Matt, rolling his eyes. "Let's not go there." Sylvia shrugged and put her hand to her lips to block the view of food while she talked with her mouth

full. "Didn't you say, sweetie, that you thought he died of a bee sting?"

Matt squirmed uncomfortably. "Official cause of death was a heart attack."

"Yes, but one that was brought on by a bee sting," prompted Sylvia. She dove into her husband's dessert for another bite.

"Yes, I did suspect that," said Matt officiously. "He had a red welt on his cheek at the two o'clock position, and his face was inflamed concurrent with an allergic reaction. But that idea wasn't pursued."

"Why not?" asked Antonia, vaguely intrigued by this new information, gossip or not. She motioned for a busboy to refill the Powers' water glasses.

Matt rolled his eyes. "The family didn't want to. Didn't want an autopsy. But it was December, and who gets stung by a bee in December?" He was indignant.

Antonia nodded. "I guess that is strange."

"They thought I was an alarmist, being swayed by the whole reputation of the inn..." he continued.

"Um, Matthew..." his mother interrupted. She widened her eyes and shook her head.

Admonished, Matt abruptly stopped speaking. Sylvia shifted uncomfortably in her chair, and Len shoved a large bite of crisp into his mouth. Antonia glanced at each of them quizzically.

"What is the reputation of the inn?" she asked finally.

Matt looked past her at the wall. "Um, nothing, just an old superstition."

“What’s the superstition?” pressed Antonia.

Sylvia sighed. “It’s nothing, just a silly thing. And we all know that old stories like that are nothing more than stories. Someone wanted to concoct a ghost story and that’s all it was.”

“But what was it?” asked Antonia again.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, dear,” said Sylvia in a cool, reassuring voice (one that she probably used on her third graders at the John Marshall School). “I tell you, it’s nothing.”

“You can’t leave me hanging!” Antonia said in a light voice, although underneath, her heart was racing. “Come on, now, help me out. I bought this place sight unseen eight months ago on the advice of my friend Genevieve. I moved all the way from Petaluma to East Hampton, a town that I had never stepped foot in. Then I poured every last penny I could to get it up and running. I have eight guest rooms and a restaurant, and a dozen full-time employees. I need to know every facet of the inn’s reputation so I know what I’m up against.”

Antonia blinked her long lashes several times and smiled brightly, in an effort to alleviate the panic she was feeling. Ever since she’d bought the inn, she had been experiencing moments of extreme nervousness and self-doubt, basically questioning her impulsivity. Had she made a mistake? Perhaps she should have been more suspicious of how quickly the sister of the deceased had accepted her low-ball offer. She had congratulated herself on a steal, but maybe she had been the one who

was swindled? She wished she would have done more research, but she always became completely restless whenever she was in front of a computer. Honestly, she found the internet to be a colossal waste of time in regard to everything excluding searching for recipes or antiques. But perhaps if she had taken time to Google Gordon Haslett's death, she wouldn't be having this conversation.

The Powers family all glanced at each other uneasily. Finally, Len spoke. He held his fork in the air, indicating he would be brief so that he could return to his dessert.

"The story about the Windmill Inn is that the owners die under suspicious circumstances. Now, it's just a story, makes the place more dramatic."

"I actually think one of the previous owners conjured it up just to attract some business," added Sylvia quickly. "I mean, I taught some of the kids of one of the owners, there was nothing there. Oh dear, now wait..."

She stopped speaking, as if remembering something.

"Well, is it true?" Antonia asked. "I mean, before Gordon Haslett, did the other owners die of suspicious circumstances?"

Sylvia and Len exchanged a look.

"Well..." began Sylvia. But she didn't finish her sentence.

Len cocked his head to the side, as if he was thinking, and finally shrugged.

"It's kind of true," said Matt finally.

“Kind of?” asked Antonia. “What does that mean?”

“I guess it means yes. Some of the owners of the inn have died under suspicious circumstances.”

“Great,” said Antonia weakly. She needed a drink.

2

THE WINDMILL INN WAS FINALLY QUIET AT MIDNIGHT. The diners had almost all left by ten thirty, except for a last lingering couple who, judging from their body language, appeared to be on their third or fourth date. They stayed until eleven, after working out whether or not they would be retreating to their own homes or having a sleepover. Only three of the guest rooms at the inn were occupied and when Connie, the front desk receptionist, confirmed that everyone had retired for the evening, Antonia had locked all of the doors to the inn with the exception of the two in the kitchen.

It was Glen's responsibility to shut down the restaurant for the night, but Antonia usually helped him out, since it was still early days. It was important for her to establish a hands-on approach from the get-go so the staff would know that she was firmly in control. And it was always important to keep track of the money. Other restaurateurs had told her that it was crucial to watch out for skimming, no matter how much you trusted your employees. They advised her to get a sense of how much was coming in so that she could sense if anything was going out that should not be.

Antonia and Glen went over the books, locked up the bar, and looked at the reservations for the following evening. While he ducked in to the office to print out the

next day's menu, Antonia went into the kitchen. Juan and Albert, the busboy/dishwashers, were just finishing up when Antonia went into the staff changing room to switch out of her high heels and into her Crocs. When she returned, they were leaving and she shut the back door behind them, pressing firmly to confirm the click of the latch. The staff had been having trouble with that door closing all the way; it was still warped from the summer heat. Often, it would blow wide open and bang loudly against the wall, startling anyone who was standing next to it.

When Antonia went back to the dining room, Glen had returned with a stack of printed menus, which he placed on the maître d' stand. He turned off the lights and shrugged into his soft leather jacket. She walked with him back into the kitchen so he could exit from the side door. When he opened the door, a gust of wind came flooding in.

"Wow, it's picking up out there," said Antonia.

"Yeah. You're lucky you don't have anywhere to drive to get to your bed."

"I know. Living at work does have its plusses."

"Oh, I forgot to mention, Antonia. This guy from a local microbrewery came by tonight. I told him to come during the day since we don't order during dinner hour."

"Good idea. I'll let Marty handle it. Goodnight, now."

Marty was Antonia's sous chef and he was a lot tougher than she; she liked to let him deal with the vendors. Antonia firmly shut the door behind Glen and

twisted the lock. She turned and glanced around the kitchen to make sure everything was in place. The glasses were drying on racks on the counter and all of the prep stations were wiped down. The pots and pans were hung neatly on their pegs. It was difficult to believe that just an hour ago this place had been buzzing. Antonia flicked off the big overhead lights and walked toward the pantry to do the same. It was quiet now, with only the hum of the two industrial dishwashers making a fuss. Antonia heard Glen start his car, then watched as his headlights flicked across the darkened ceiling when he drove away.

Antonia walked back through the dimmed dining room for one last proprietary glance. She thought of all of the people who had come through the door of the inn over the last hundred and fifty years. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the Windmill Inn had housed a tannery in the barn out back; guests stayed in the main building while their saddles were treated. Were any of their ghosts lurking there now? Antonia shuddered. All she needed was a headless horseman! She glanced around at the shadowed tables. Antonia had always thought that empty restaurants looked a little eerie, as if the ghosts of the people who had just dined there somehow dissipated into thin air. She wondered if she was particularly on edge tonight having just heard the news that Gordon Haslett's death was somehow suspicious. Had previous innkeepers really met untimely fates? She pushed the thought out of her mind.

Instead of heading straight across the dining room to

the small staff hallway that led to her apartment, Antonia made a right and walked toward the front door. While she had taken special care to sand down the floors in the dining room, the floors in the rest of the inn had been left more or less in their original state. Over the years they had buckled under the extreme seasonal oscillation between temperatures, and they were squeaky and uneven. Antonia had placed a few Oriental carpet runners along the way, but they did nothing to contain the noise, and tonight it seemed as if the floorboards creaked particularly loudly under her feet. The chandelier in the front hall was lit, but dimly. Its light was the only one that seeped through the other public rooms.

Antonia turned left into the parlor to make sure that the staff had straightened up before they departed. A few glowing embers amid the ashes were all that was left of the fire that had been roaring earlier. Her eyes darted around the room, straining to identify objects in the shadows. Although she knew that there was a seating arrangement with a sofa and two club chairs in the forefront of the room, they looked different in the darkness. Antonia walked over to the backgammon table against the wall and clicked on the bouillotte lamp. There was no need to completely shut down all of the light in the building. What if a guest was restless and came down to read? These things had to be thought through! Being a novice inn owner was challenging and Antonia was going on instinct. She just hoped that she would do a good enough job that the guests would return and would

recommend the inn to friends. That was one reason she always solicited advice and impressions from her guests. She pulled the cord to light the bright bulb and all of the furniture in the room came into clear focus. *There*, she thought. *Much better.*

Antonia moved toward the chairs and picked up various pillows to re-fluff them. They didn't really need it, but something was compelling her to remain in the room. She noticed that a book on Hamptons style had been left on the coffee table so she returned it to its place, sliding it into the shelf next to the fireplace. Antonia then straightened the side chairs that leaned against the wall and bent down to touch the soil in the potted plant to make sure that it was damp. They were all minor adjustments, ones that no one but a perfectionist would notice, but that's what made Antonia a natural innkeeper.

Suddenly Antonia stiffened. What was that noise? She thought she heard something scratching. She paused and listened. There it was again! It sounded like fingernails scraping a blackboard. She strained her ear to find which direction it was coming from and waited. Her head jerked toward the back of the room, from where the sound was emanating. Taking a deep breath, she proceeded to the back, where there was another cluster of upholstered furniture with plush cushions that you could sink into underneath the bay windows. Antonia hesitated for a moment when she reached it, her knees bumping into the low coffee table. She glanced around apprehensively. She waited for the sound. Once again, there was

the noise. Antonia paused. An image of swarming bees attacking flashed in her mind. Her stomach turned with nervous anticipation. She slowly turned her head, but to her relief, she realized that the noise she was hearing was only the wind slapping a branch from the birch tree against the window. She exhaled, suddenly realizing that she had been holding her breath.

This was so silly, she told herself. *Why am I psyching myself up?* Before she had heard the suspicious deaths rumor, she had been fine. In fact, she had been sleeping in this inn for six months and never felt frightened. She wasn't a scaredy-cat; that wasn't her thing. Hell, she had survived an ex-husband who'd used all of his energy to scare and harass her for years. So why was she freaking herself out *now*? Just because the Powers family had told her that the previous innkeepers had died suspiciously? It was absurd.

Antonia stood up straight and strode firmly out of the parlor. This was her inn. She was the boss! She walked toward reception and gave it a cursory once-over, and also glanced briskly inside the deserted library. No one was awake in the inn. There was nothing to give her pause. She made her way back down the hall toward her apartment, refusing to be disturbed by the shadows along the wall. She walked past the small antique elevator that was used to transport luggage or guests who needed assistance and peered through the glass. No one was hiding there. Antonia promised herself that she would not let this ghost story about the inn haunt her. She would not succumb to hysteria.