

DEATHWINDOW

GRACE CHETWIN

FERAL PRESS, INC. NEW YORK

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ISBN 1-930094-04-3

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Flat Rock, NC 28731
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The body of text in this book is set in 10 pt. Amphin,
titles in Pegasus.

Cover graphics were created by Grace Chetwin in pencil
and developed in Adobe Photoshop.

The text was printed with an HP LaserJet 6L;
the cover with an HP DeskJet 895 Cxi.

for Claire
with love

This ae nighte, this ae nighte,
—*Every nighte and alle,*
Fire and fleet and candle-lighte,
And Christe receive thy saule.

From "A Lyke-Wake Dirge"

Anon

ONE

Friday, January 10th, 8.30 a.m.

Damn the doorbell!

Helen glanced up at the clock then went on packing. At that hour of the morning it could only be Neil. *Please, no.*

She heard Margaret at the door, a snatch of Knightsbridge traffic, a murmur of voices.

Neil.

The door closed on a ponderous scraping of feet and a moment later he was crowding the bedroom doorway.

"I got your note, Helen."

She stayed bent over the case, stuffing in the black boots. Maybe she should put them on, it would be snowing over there. . . .

"What is this? What's going on?" He took a few paces in.

She looked up now, brushing back a lock of hair "Isn't it clear?"

"Not really."

She sighed, stood up, and handed him the letter off her dressing table.

He looked down, slight frown—the cabinet minister confronting the junior aide. Such an expressive face when he so wished it. She could tell exactly where he was at, every line.

Dear Mrs. Clayton, Your father-in-law came home nine days ago. He's told everybody he's taking a break but he has cancer real bad and hasn't much longer to go. Harold and me are living in though we were right in the middle of remodeling, but what can we do? He needs somebody and I guess we're the only ones. I keep at him to write you but he won't. You know how stubborn the Claytons are! Harold and me think you should know seeing as you and Tim are all he has left. . . .

*If you do decide to come, call **our** home number and leave a message so Harold can meet you in Plattsburg. . . .*

"You're going?"

Helen pointedly surveyed the mess of packing. "Yep."
He dropped the letter back onto the dressing table. "But he hasn't even asked you."

"Nancy Dobie has." She knelt, bent once more to her task.

"And who's that? Helen, you can't just drop everything and go off like this—for somebody who doesn't even want to see you."

"Who on earth said that?"

"You don't like him, either."

"We don't always get on, that's not the same."

"What about your new book? It's due out next week."

"So?" Damn the boots. She ripped them out savagely and threw them under the bed. "I'm all he has."

"When did that ever count?"

She looked up. "He's never died before."

His face went dark red. He never could take her sarcasm.

"Listen, he's Tim's grandfather. Damn this thing. Neil, sit on this lid a minute while I—thanks." She snapped the catches with quick, thin fingers, then wiped the melted snow from Neil's greatcoat off the green leather lid. She knew he'd be like this. Knew that she wanted out, that she was just looking for the graceful exit. It was hard, for a man who was so used to getting what he wanted.

"What about Tim?"

"Tim's fine," she said, standing up again. "We talked last night." Actually, Tim was not fine. In fact, he was devastated, but what could he do in his last year at the Royal College on the eve of finals? "He's almost twenty-one and able to look out for himself."

Neil clearly did not agree. His eyes were stony, his lip stiff under the bristling guards' mustache. Oh, the hell with it! She stepped over the case and looked him straight in the eye. "Sorry, Neil. Perhaps it's just as well."

"Just what is that supposed to mean?"

There was no backing down now. She leaned over, kissed him lightly on the cheek. "You're a nice man." A clone of all the others she seemed to attract.

His face flushed darker. But he dared not explode, she knew. Not with so much hanging in the balance. "Dammit, Helen. I thought we'd—well, for heaven's sake!"

She waited.

"How long . . . will you be gone?"

"As long as it takes a man to die."
His chin came up. "That was a mite unnecessary."
"Like the question."
It was time. She rang for Margaret to see him out.
"How will you get to the airport?"
"Cab."
"Anything I can do?"
"Thanks, Neil. As I said in my note, I'm all set."
He went to the door, turned. "Well, goodbye, then. Keep in touch."
"Yes." She walked over, embraced him stiffly, then he left. Just
enough time to put up her hair, change into her green wool suit.
Should she put on the black boots? That was a thought. It was very
cold in the Adirondacks this time of year. . . .

8.35 p.m.

Harold was at the barrier, bless him, looking more the capuchin
monkey than ever in homespun plaid and black vinyl hunting cap.
Yes, it had been a terrible flight she said, and changing planes at
Kennedy had been a nightmare but look on the bright side he said
she'd ended up just one hour late. She'd better do up her coat, he
told her in his pleasant, slow burr that could have been lifted from
the depths of Wiltshire. It wasn't too tropical out here. God! but how
right he was! By the time they'd made it to the car, she felt as
though she were walking barefoot over the ice.

Stupid black boots! That was why she'd not packed them—thin-
soled, high-heeled—they were no use out here!

On the back seat was Friday's New York Times, and a flask of
black coffee to warm up the half-hour's trip to Midport. Shame on
him for spoiling her, she said, but he shook his head.

"It were Nancy's idea." He looked pleased nevertheless.

"You've had some snow, Harold," she said, looking out. As stupid
as saying the ocean was wet, but it was something to help ease
into gear

"Not near enough. Not where we need it. Skin's terrible bad this
year. I oiled yours up, by the way."

"Why, thanks." She didn't even know they'd kept them. "You think

I'll have time for it?"

"Give you a week," he said.

Her cool slipped some. "How is he?" Suddenly, Toby was close again, and all the old stuff. Damn.

"Upsittin, just. Won't go to bed, though, won't listen to nobody, not even Doc Ben. Won't get a nurse, won't hear of hospital. Drivin us nuts."

"How does he . . . look?"

"Lost a lotta weight." Harold caught her eye in the driving mirror.

"He still doesn't know I'm coming?"

Harold made a face. "We're kinda leavin that to you. He thinks I'm gettin supplies."

"Huh, thanks." She returned the face with interest. Feelings rushed in, taking her unexpectedly, somehow connecting with the snowy blur outside. Memories . . .

Toby standing by his desk, pleading for understanding, she understanding all too well.

"Why, Helen, why? You must have known when you married my son that you'd be coming to live over here?"

Then, for the umpteenth time, the Clayton spiel, the traditions, the heritage tied up in the house. And she, folding her arm protectively over her belly.

"You have no right. It's blackmail. Children are free to live where they choose—your child, and mine!"

Twenty years, for God's sake, and her hands were still bunching, her mouth was still clamping shut. *Lighten up!* She leaned forward over the front seat.

"How're things going in—" she began. But just then the snows burst, flocking the windshield. She slid quietly back in her seat, unfolded the Times, and poured herself some coffee.

Toby was in his study when she walked in on him.

"Helen!" He tipped back his chair and stood. There was gray stubble on his chin and his hair hung in wisps over his ears.

She walked around the desk and embraced him. "Toby." How frail he felt.

"What—*who* brought you here?"

"A little bird." She mustered up a smile.

"A little bird, huh? One with a big mouth. Here, sit." Toby gestured

her to an easy chair beside the desk, subsided himself. "Excuse the dressing gown. It's so damned cold in here. You eaten?"

She nodded. "All the way. I'd rather have a drink."

He poured her Scotch, and one for himself. "How're things, then?"

Tim, he meant. "He's got exams this week."

"Uhuh. When haven't you, your final year?"

They both smiled.

"And you, Helen? When's the next one due?" He waved at the bookshelf behind her. Good God. He'd bought the lot! She'd not noticed, and he'd not said. And she'd never have guessed it. In fact, she'd have said her lively style would have irritated him, furthermore, historical novels were not in his line. She'd always felt he'd consider her books cheap, even though they were bona fide reconstructions and not just bodice rippers.

"Helen?"

When was her new book due? "Sometime next week."

"This is a flying visit, then."

Helen shook her head. "They'll do without me. Tell you the truth, I need a break. So here I am." She raised her glass and drank.

They talked some more, mostly of Tim, his last summer visit, his next one, then fell silent.

Four years and two months since the crash. She'd brought Clive home to be buried in the family plot, Toby had been grateful for the gesture.

"I planted the rose, Helen." A White Knight, Clive's favorite, at her request.

He'd called her straight after he'd planted it, two whole months before on the anniversary of Clive's death. But he needed to tell her, so she let him. "Lucky you got it in before the freeze, Toby."

"Yeah. A couple of years, it will be beautiful. Clive so loved roses, you know."

Oh, she knew. She and Clive had planned to have a rose garden one day, had spent hours poring over which specimens to include. But not to mention that, or the cottage in Surrey that would have gone with it. "I'm so glad you liked my suggestion. I'll go out to take a look tomorrow."

"You won't see much. It's under snow."

"I'll still go, all the same." That pleased him. "How's Ben? And Mary?"

Doc Otis and his wife were the only locals she knew socially, holdovers from the early days before she and Clive moved to England. She hadn't seen them since Clive's funeral.

"They're fine. Looking forward to having you over for dinner."

They talked a little more, but she could see that he was tiring fast. Pleading jet lag, she got him to see her upstairs to unpack. When next she looked in on him, she found him on his bed, fast asleep. She covered him, put out the light, and closed the door with care. Almost midnight, local time. Her body claimed five a.m.

Nancy was waiting by the kitchen stove. She looked just the same, except for the grayer hair. "Nancy, you shouldn't." The Dobies never sat up late.

"That's okay. Hungry, hon?"

"I'd like a cup of tea."

Nancy took down the little brown pot Helen had brought over, oh, years before and set it on the stove to warm. Then she filled the kettle while Helen wandered aimlessly, picking up things and setting them down. China pigs, African violets, the tea cozy shaped like a bee hive. Nothing changed. Just a bit faded, and shabbier. Last summer, and every summer before, Tim had sat in this kitchen, among these familiar things that she'd forgotten. She sat down abruptly. Her hard-won detachment was eroding fast. "Looks much the same," she said.

Nancy nodded. "Harold and I try to keep things up, even though we don't live in no more. There's bin a coupla changes, mind. New carpet in the dining room, and Harold replaced the lattice for the ramblers."

The kettle began to sing. Helen watched Nancy measure Earl Grey into the pot, no tea bags here. "You'll stay on, won't you?"

Nancy nodded. "I guess, since our house is half-torn apart. Did Harold mention anything about gettin a nurse?"

"Yes. I can see—" Without warning, Helen's voice broke.

"There, there, hon. Here, your tea. You know what you always said about lettin it get cold."

Helen took the cup, but somehow couldn't seem to see to hold it straight. Damn, she was tired, that was all. Tea splashed over the saucer and onto her green wool skirt.

Nancy took the cup, set it down, and sat while Helen wept; for Clive, for Toby, for all of them, and the clock they couldn't turn back.