

*Where there is mystery, it is generally suspected there must also be evil.*

-- Lord Byron 1788-1824, British Poet

## **Prologue**

November 2002 – Astaire Castle, top of Spencer Mountain, Deep Creek Lake, Maryland

Shivering, Rafaela turned up the fan for the heater in her old Plymouth. The weather channel was calling for snow. With an eye on the storm clouds heading straight for Spencer Mountain, she picked up the speed a notch. Her car bumped along the worn road cut through the trees and rock to take her to Astaire Castle.

The notion of being trapped at the castle by a winter storm made her curse the day she had accepted the job as housekeeper at the Astaire estate. The young illegal immigrant thought her prayers had been answered by landing the job at the luxurious estate. Not only was it prestigious to work in a castle, but lucrative since Damian Wagner was paying almost twice her normal hourly wage.

*What a gem to put on my housekeeping resume! To be hire by only one of the world's most famous authors of horror books—even more famous than Robin Spencer—to clean an honest-to-goodness castle. So what if the Astaire Castle has a reputation of being haunted? I'll be making a bundle for cleaning five days a week in the daylight. Besides, I don't believe in no ghosts.*

Rafaela regretted her decision the first time she walked into Astaire Castle.

At first, she dismissed her cleaning supplies moving from where she had left them as forgetfulness. Then there was the time she kept hearing someone whispering her name. She had looked around, but never saw anyone. Same with doors closing or opening or footsteps coming up behind her, and the old-time music and party noises in empty rooms when no one was there—she tried to tell herself that it was all her imagination.

None of that was anything compared to the Wolf Man who she had seen in the dining room mirror while she was cleaning it.

She had heard all about the Wolf Man who lived in the woods surrounding Astaire Castle. The woman with two teenagers who lived in the apartment next to hers was quick to tell her about him. Rafaela had dismissed it all as ghost stories made up by her neighbor's kids to scare her—until she had seen him with her own two eyes.

That day she ran out of the castle. She returned only after Genevieve, Damian Wagner's daughter, had promised that her father finish his book and be moving out of the castle by the end of the year—at which time he would pay her a handsome bonus that would give her enough money to visit her family in Brazil for Christmas.

Rafaela caught her breath when her Plymouth entered through the gate at the end of the road to pull into the front courtyard and fountain.

The fountain was off. Damian Wagner had never bothered to turn it on. He wouldn't notice if it was. He spent his time banging away on his computer in the study on the top floor. He wouldn't eat if it weren't for his daughter bringing food to him.

Then there was the editor—Mr. Jansen.

He reminded Rafaela of a bird with his bony frame, high cheekbones over a pointy chin, and thick eyeglasses with his blinking eyes magnified behind them. He sounded like a squawking bird with his high-pitched voice no matter what his mood or what he was saying. Ready to pounce in anticipation of any need from Damian Wagner, he was always lurking nearby.

Damian's daughter, Genevieve, was as charming as beautiful. She often asked Rafaela about her family in Brazil and about her life in Deep Creek Lake. For the new immigrant to America, Rafaela felt as if she was making a friend who would give her good references for more housekeeping jobs in the resort town of Spencer—more millionaire estates to clean—estates that weren't haunted.

Rafaela pulled her car around the circular drive and parked at the bottom of the steep steps that led to the front door. When she got out of her car, the wind howled and whipped her long dark hair around her head. The wind actually seemed to want to rip her thin coat off her body. Grabbing her box of cleaning supplies, she squared her shoulders, and sucked up her nerve to go inside.

*Need to make this quick. They don't have enough money to make me stay here during that storm.*

The wind yanked the heavy wooden door from her grasp to slam it against the side of the house.

"Stupid door!" Rafaela set the box inside the foyer and went outside to grab the door and pull it shut. "Mr. Wagner! Mr. Jansen! Genevieve! It's me, Rafaela! Hope I'm not disturbing you." She picked up the box and made her way through the foyer.

"Raf-aela ..."

She stopped. With wide eyes, she peered up the staircase to the second floor balcony. "Is that you, Mr. Wagner?" She paused to listen. "Genevieve?"

"Get out. Now."

*Has to be my imagination.* She reassured herself. "There's no such thing as ghosts. There's no such thing as ghosts," she muttered over and over to herself while hurrying to the back of the castle.

"I don't suppose you had any trick-or-treaters last night, did you?" she called out to ease her nerves with the sound of her own voice. "Not up here I suppose."

She waited for an answer. She heard footsteps on the floor up above.

The smell of burnt meat came to her nose. It smelled like steak that had been left on the grill for too long.

*They must have grilled steaks last night.*

"Lots of little children stopped by my apartment." Feeling braver as she rattled on, Rafaela set the box of cleaning supplies on the kitchen table and gathered together her duster and furniture polish.

*Best to start in the living room. The antiques, wood, and silver takes the longest.*

Admiring the decades-old priceless china encased in the china closet, she went through the dining room. With her cleaning lady's eye, she gauged what needed to be addressed on this visit that she may have missed before. She stopped when the blotch of red on the doorframe through the kitchen caught her eye.

*What's that? Catsup?*

It wasn't until she spotted a spot on the floor that she first considered that it wasn't a condiment, but something much more sinister. She spotted another. Bigger this time ... and another.

There was a red pool in front of the kitchen door that opened out onto the back patio and deck that projected out over the rocks to provide a massive view of the valley down below. All of the drops and splatters and pools led to the common source—the fire pit outside.

She saw the flames and smoke wafting in the wind whipping around her where she stood in the open doorway. She stared at the blackened objects in the pit. What at first appeared to be a burnt log projecting out of the flames took shape.

The hand and fingers reached out to her.

The index finger was pointing at her.

Through the rapid beating of her heart, Rafaela could hear the footsteps behind her coming closer.

*"Get out!"*

His image was reflected in the glass pane of the door. The wild hair. The crazed eyes.

*It's the Wolf Man!*

## Chapter One

Present Day—Late-October

The two ATVs shot through the shrubbery that had overtaken the south side of Spencer Mountain's top. The occasional sunray that managed to peak through the clouds above would catch on the gold trim of the black all-terrain vehicles.

To the left side of the road, Police Chief David O'Callaghan scoured the landscape littered with bare trees for any sign of the old woman they were seeking.

Behind him, Mac Faraday searched the right side of the road. A retired homicide detective with more than twenty-five years of police work under his belt, Mac had looked for more than one missing persons. His experience, plus his availability, made him a regular volunteer to be called in by the Spencer police department when extra manpower was needed—whether it be a missing person or a major murder case.

This search was for an elderly woman with Alzheimer's who had wandered away from her family at the Spencer Inn. She had been missing for five hours. The sun was starting to set. Soon, the chilly day would turn into a freezing night. Snow was expected and that wasn't a good thing in the mountains.

They were running out of time.

David held up his hand in a fist to signal a stop and slowed down his vehicle. While waiting for Mac to halt behind him, the police chief removed his helmet and ran his fingers through his blond hair. "Any idea where you are now?" He shot Mac a wicked grin.

Guessing, Mac shot a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the road they had just traveled. "The Spencer Inn is about three miles back that way."

The police chief nodded his head. "The Spencer Inn is on the north side of the mountain top, looking down on the lake and the valley to the north."

"But the Spencer Inn owns the whole mountaintop," Mac said with a question in his voice.

"And you own the Spencer Inn." David took out his radio. "Therefore, *you* own this whole mountaintop." He pressed the button on the earpiece on his Bluetooth to speak into the radio. "Hey, Bogie, we're up on the southern side of the mountain top. Nothing's up here. Any luck in your area?"

"Nothing, Chief," the deputy chief responded.

"We're going to head back toward the Inn," David said.

"But we haven't searched to the end of this road." Mac pointed further up the trail.

"She's not up there," David said in a tone so sharp that it startled him. The police chief shifted his ATV into reverse and backed up.

Even though David O'Callaghan was the chief of police, Mac Faraday was one of Spencer's wealthiest residents. Descended from the town's founders, he was unofficial royalty in the small town of Spencer located on the shore of Deep Creek Lake.

Several years younger, David O'Callaghan had much less law enforcement experience than Mac. Being David's older half-brother added another level of respect to make David tread softly when issuing orders to the retired homicide detective. With the same tall slender build, their familial relationship was evident to the few who were aware of it. The only notable difference was in Mac's dark hair with a touch of gray showing at his temples.

"We won't know unless we look," Mac argued for going further out the tattered road. "We've searched for her in all of the usual areas. You can't—"

"She's not there." David's hard expression ordered him to drop it.

"We won't know unless we look," Mac said in a steady tone.

“Check it out,” David said. “Do you see any sign of humans being in this area in recent years? This road is completely overgrown. No sign of hikers. No one comes over to this side of the mountain. We’re talking about an eighty-six year old woman with Alzheimer’s. She’s fragile and on foot. She’d never be able to make it this far.” With a wave of his finger, he ordered Mac to turn around. “We’re going back.”

The order only served to make Mac more suspicious. “What’s up that road?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why are you afraid to go up there?”

David whipped off his sun glasses as if to show him the glare in his blue eyes, which were identical to his. “Drop it, Mac. Forget about this road. Forget about this side of the mountain. Now turn your vehicle around and go back to the Spencer Inn and forget about coming back here ever again. Got it?”

Mac met his glare. “And what if I don’t? Like you said, it’s my property. You can’t stop me from going up there to search ... or whatever.”

“Don’t make me shoot you, Mac.”

“Shoot me?” Laughing, he shook his head. “Are you serious?”

Any shred of humor that David had when they started talking was now gone. “If you go out that road, there’s nothing I can do to help you. Have I made myself clear?”

The corner of Mac’s lips curled while he studied the intense nature of David’s order. “Very clear.”

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They were halfway back to the command post set up at the Spencer Inn when the call came in from Deputy Police Chief Art Bogart: Mac Faraday’s German shepherd, Gnarly, and Archie Monday, Mac’s housemate and “lady love” as he liked to call her, had found the woman.

Gnarly had followed her scent down the mountain trail. He had zig-zagged through the ski slope to the service shed that managed the electronic chair lift. The elderly woman had forced her way into the shed and fallen asleep in the dark corner.

Gnarly was hero of the day, which was why Mac thought it suspicious when he found the German shepherd hiding in the backseat of his SUV.

“We need to go,” Archie whispered in a hurried voice to Mac. “We need to go *now*.” There was fear in her deep emerald green eyes. Her pink cap was pulled down to cover her pixie blonde hair and ears. With her petite features, the cap made her resemble Tinker Bell in *Peter Pan*.

“Why?” Mac received part of his answer when he saw the dog lift his head to peer out of the back window. Mac caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a cigar in the dog’s mouth, before he laid his pointy ears back to rest flat on his head and ducked back down.

Mac heard a crackling voice yell from the open back of the ambulance. “I’m telling you one of you robbed me. How dare you rob an old woman! You should all be ashamed of yourselves—*all of you*.” He turned around to peer through the window at where Gnarly was crouched.

Hurrying up to them, David interrupted before he could launch a full investigation. “Mac, Gnarly was the one who found her, wasn’t he?”

Mac hung his head.

The police chief turned to Archie. “That scent that Gnarly was following—we assumed it was *her*, but could it have been the scent of beef jerky?”

“He did find her,” Archie said. “Whether it was her or the beef jerky she was carrying in her purse doesn’t matter.”

“Thieves! You’re all thieves!” They heard the impact of her purse hitting one of the EMTs.

“Mother, calm down,” her daughter said to her. “I’ll buy you another package of beef jerky on the way to the hospital.”



“What kind of people are you to steal beef jerky for an old woman?” the mother demanded to know.

“Is she going to press charges?” Archie asked David.

“We’ll replace the jerky,” the police chief said.

“Oh, a cover up?” Mac replied.

“Only because it’s Gnarly,” David said. “Bogie is going to stop to buy a pack of jerky on the way to the hospital and somehow slip it into the bottom of her purse while she’s being treated so they’ll think she missed it.”

“Sounds like you’ve been down this road before,” Mac said.

“Only since Gnarly came to town.” David paused before telling him in a soft voice, “Sorry I was so hard on you out there.”

“How were you hard on him?” Archie wanted to know.

“He threatened to shoot me,” Mac said.

“Well, you must have done something to deserve it,” she said.

“It was nothing,” Mac told both of them. To change the subject, he glanced at his watch. “Hey, it’s late and I’m starved. How about dinner here at the Inn? My treat.”

“I’m meeting Finnegan at her place,” David replied. “But you two go ahead. I have to stop by the cottage to shower and change. I’ll take Gnarly back home to Spencer Manor and drop him off.”

Mac wrapped his arms around Archie. “I guess it’s just you and me, kid.”

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Mentally, Mac Faraday would often have to pinch himself when entering the Spencer Inn. Before his inheritance from his birth mother, he would never have been able to afford to set foot in the elegant mountaintop resort.

With its five-star rating, the Spencer Inn was the place to go for romance and luxury. There were a dozen other little out of the way places around Deep Creek Lake that couples could patronize to explore the intimacy of love. For those blessed with wealth, and who desired the best on fine food, drink, and romance, then the Spencer Inn was the place to go.

Two years later, Mac was still getting used to receiving the royal treatment when he walked through the front doors. Doors were opened for him. Trying to anticipate the inn owner's every need or desire, clerks would race to get his favorite cognac or predict what type of dinner he may be in the mood for. If Mac and Archie were dining at his table in the gourmet restaurant at sunset, they would ensure the blinds were set to perfection to block the sun from his eyes, while still allowing him a view of the mountains and the lake below.

Mac Faraday was forty-seven years old when he had learned that the teenaged girl who had given him up for adoption had grown up to become Robin Spencer, an internationally famous murder mystery writer. She had come from a long line of blue bloods, who had founded the upscale resort town of Spencer, Maryland. For a middle-class kid from the suburbs who grew up to become an underpaid homicide detective, the whole experience was still surreal.

Mac didn't think he would ever get used to it.

The hosts of both the lounge and the restaurant opened their cut-glass doors to hold for them open for Mac and Archie when they spied them crossing the lobby.

Unsure of where they wanted to eat, Mac and Archie paused. They glanced down at their coats and gloves and dirty boots and jeans that they were still wearing from the search. In the luxurious resort, they appeared more out of place than usual.

Archie suggested the lounge.

The host hurried in ahead of them to signal for a server to prepare the corner booth where Mac usually sat when visiting the lounge. By the time they crossed the bar area, the bartender was getting a

bottle of Archie's favorite white wine from Mac's private collection—2008 Domaine Leflaive Puligny-Montrachet Les Folatières. He also fetched two wine glasses.

"What happened between you and David?" Archie asked once they were settled in the booth.

"Nothing happened," Mac insisted in a low voice.

"Liar."

The bartender showed the gold bottle with the white label to Archie, the wine expert of the couple. After she gave her approval, he uncorked and served the single swallow for her to sample before filling their glasses. "Have you decided on what you would like for dinner this evening?"

Mac turned to Archie for her choice. Dining with Archie Monday was an adventure. As Robin Spencer's assistant, she had traveled all over the world. Fearless when it came to exotic food, she loved to test the culinary skills of the chief chef.

"What does Iman feel like trying this evening?" Archie replied. "Tell him that I'm drinking a 2008 Domaine Leflaive Puligny-Montrachet Les Folatières and to surprise me with something to complement it." With a wicked glance in Mac's direction, she added, "Make it a dinner for two."

The bartender went back to the kitchen to deliver her message.

After a toast, Archie took off her cap and ran her fingers through her hair to revive the circulation to her scalp before urging Mac to continue. "You had to do something to make David threaten to shoot you."

"David wasn't going to shoot me," Mac said. "He only threatened to."

"He's been down lately," she said. "He tries to hide it, but I can see it. You do know that Finnegan is leaving for Quantico tomorrow."

"Yeah, that's right." Mac confessed that he had forgotten about David's latest girlfriend, a former US Marshal, was starting a new career with the Federal Investigative Agency. She was moving to

Quantico, Virginia. After her training was completed, she would be transferred to her first assignment, which was definitely not western Maryland.

“How long do you think that relationship is going to last?” Archie asked with a frown. “It’s like Yvonne all over again. It’s all hot and heavy. She gets a big job offer. They say they’ll make it work long distance. After less than six months, she’s sleeping with someone else and dumps David.”

Mac was only half listening. He was remembering the determination, with a hint of something else, etched on David’s face when he turned around and ordered that they were coming back. They were going no further.

*Fear.* “Something scared him,” Mac said more to himself.

“Do you mean like a bear?”

“David had a weapon,” Mac told her. “We were both armed. If it was a bear, we could have shot it if we had to. No, he didn’t—”

“Mac, they didn’t tell me that you were here.” Jeff Ingle, the manager of the Spencer Inn, was hurrying across the lounge in their direction. “I am so glad they found that lady.” He trotted at a quick pace while trying to maintain the dignity befitting the manager of one of the top hotels and restaurants in country.

“Gnarly found her,” Archie said.

The manager’s grin quivered at the thought of the rambunctious German shepherd. “I’m glad.” He turned to Mac. “Hector is debriefing the Inn’s security team to find out how these types of incidents can be avoided in the future.”

“The woman had Alzheimer’s,” Mac said. “I didn’t get any vibes from her family that they intended to hold us responsible for her wandering off.”

“Well, you never can be too safe,” Jeff said. “If you want to have a word with Hector before—”

Shaking his head, Mac took a sip of his wine. “Tell him to go home and enjoy his evening. We’ll talk about it later.” Jeff was about to turn away when Mac interrupted his departure with a question.

“What’s on the Spencer Inn property over on the south side of the mountain?”

Mac didn’t miss Jeff’s posture straightening. It was like a rod had been rammed down his back. Standing up straight, his shoulders tense, the manager turned to face him. “Pardon me?”

“What’s at the end of the road leading over to the other side of the mountain?” Mac asked again. “David and I went out there and I saw signs saying no trespassing, Spencer Inn property—but I don’t know what’s out there.” He shrugged. “I can’t believe I’ve never gone—” He recalled, “*You* took me on a tour of this whole resort when I inherited it, but you never took me out *there*.”

“Because there’s nothing out there,” Jeff said firmly.

Mac turned to Archie, who shrugged. “I’ve never been out that way either. The further you go, the more overgrown the road gets—nothing but rocks and trees. I assumed there was nothing.”

“She’s exactly right,” Jeff said. “There’s nothing.”

Mac narrowed his eyes at the manager. “What are you not telling me?” Beyond Jeff, he saw the man whom he knew would be truthful to him.

Hector Langford, the Inn’s chief of security, was a straightforward Australian who had been working for the Spencer Inn for over twenty-five years. He would know what was on the south side of the mountain that could spook David O’Callaghan, the chief of police and Marine officer. After serving two tours overseas, David wasn’t easy to spook.

Mac waited only long enough for Hector to pick up a beer served in the bottle at the bar and take a seat across from them—all under Jeff’s warning gaze—before he asked, “What’s at the end of the road leading to the south side of Spencer Mountain.”

While helping himself to a handful of peanuts from the middle of the table, Hector laughed at Jeff’s glare. “Oh, do you mean the castle?”

Mac's and Archie's mouths dropped open. "Did you say 'castle'?" Mac asked.

Hector nodded his head. Jeff rubbed his face.

"As in moat and alligators and drawbridge ... castle?" Mac leaned across the table at him.

"Well," Hector drawled, "this one doesn't have any moat or alligators or drawbridge, but it is an honest to goodness castle."

"Castles are kind of big," Archie said. "Why can't we see it from the lake?"

"Because it's on the other side of the mountaintop facing the valley to the south," Hector said.

"Used to be—back in the old days—that you could see it from the valley below. After about a decade of no one going near it, it's all overgrown and everyone has forgotten about it. In the winter, when all the leaves are down, if you know it's there, you can see from the valley floor if you look for it. It's made of stone. So, if you don't know about it, with the trees and rocks, you could miss it."

"Why don't I know about it?" Mac asked. "I got a list of my holdings and property that I inherited from my mother and I don't recall seeing any castle on that list. I would have noticed if I owned a castle."

Jeff answered, "Because it was listed as a vacation rental property under the Spencer Inn. It's identified as a luxury mountaintop vacation cabin."

"There's a big difference between a castle and a cabin," Archie said.

"Why has everyone been keeping this castle a secret from me?" Mac asked. "Why all the secrecy? Even David refused to go out there this afternoon."

"He had a bad experience out there," Hector said with a wave of his hand. "We used to have a devil of a time keeping kids looking for ghosts and scaring each other out of there."

"There was that boy who disappeared out there," Jeff said with all seriousness. "David knew him."

“The Adams kid,” Hector said with a nod of his head. “David was there the night he disappeared.”

“What happened?” Archie asked.

“It was back in 2000,” Hector recalled. “A bunch of young people, David and some of his friends, wanted to have a Halloween party out at the castle. David had just gotten out of college and was going into officer training with the Marines. It was vacant at the time—”

“We were using it as a vacation rental,” Jeff interjected.

“David said there were between twenty to thirty people—all in costume,” Hector said. “We’re not talking high school kids that were out of control. They were responsible young people. After the party, one of his guests was missing. He never made it home.”

“Maybe something happened to him after he left the castle,” Mac said.

Jeff and Hector shook their heads in unison. “No one saw him leave,” Jeff said.

“It wasn’t an open party,” Hector said. “David knew everyone who was there. None of them did anything to him.”

“He disappeared in that castle?” Mac asked.

“Riley Adams,” Jeff recalled the name. “The whole state was looking for him.”

“He was dressed in a werewolf costume,” Hector recalled. “A lot of the guests believed that he was killed or captured by a ghost and we had no trouble keeping kids out after that. He was never found, but unofficially, it was believed that he got drunk or was on something—witnesses said he was acting very strange that night—and wandered off into the woods or fell off the cliff—died—and his body was never found. If he had fallen off the cliff, his body could have been caught in some deep crevices of the rocks where searchers couldn’t find it.”

“I think the ghosts got him,” Jeff said.

“Ghosts?” Mac laughed. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” Jeff responded without humor. “Look it up. The Astaire Castle is one of the ten most haunted houses in America.”

Excited, Archie tapped Mac’s arm. “I’ve heard of Astaire Castle. I knew it was in Maryland, but I never knew it was here.” She grasped Mac’s arm and squealed. “And you *own* it!” She dug into her bag to extract her computer tablet to look it up on the Internet. “This is totally wicked!”

Jeff uttered a hollow laugh. “Yeah, congratulations,” he said with heavy sarcasm.

“It’s haunted?” Mac still laughed.

“Not a week goes by that some paranormal expert wants to come film it,” Jeff said. “The answer is always the same. No. After the last murders, Robin ordered the place boarded up and to never let anyone inside it ever again.”

His attention piqued, Mac sat up straight in his seat. “The last murders?”

Hector locked his gaze on Mac and said in a sinister tone, “The last of several.”



