

Prologue

Stillman Mansion on Deep Creek Lake, Maryland

“Austin is back this year,” Olivia said in rhythm with the pace she had set for her power walk.

Two paces behind his wife, Roland took note of the white stone mansion along the chilly lakeshore. The mansion looked closed up. All was quiet, as it was with many of the estates along the lake in the early spring. With each passing day, the quiet was giving way to the snowbirds coming in to roost at their summer homes in the resort town of Spencer, located in the corner of Deep Creek Lake in western Maryland.

The middle-aged couple walked briskly on the running trail along the lake while noting the stillness of the mansion. The only tell-tale sign of change from its winter hibernation was the yacht on the dock in the back. It had not been there the morning before.

“I wonder if Janice will be throwing her week-long Fourth of July bash with all her has-been clients this year?” Roland asked.

“I can tell you right now that I’m not going if that loser Lenny is there.” Feeling her heartbeat slowing down, she picked up her pace.

“Come on,” her husband said with a laugh, “Lenny Frost isn’t that bad. He’s really kind of funny.”

“He’s crude,” she shot at him from over her shoulder.

Roland was going to respond that he felt sorry for the least popular of Janice Stillman’s former celebrity clients when a black Porsche almost hit the couple rushing past them and turning sharply into the driveway of the white mansion.

“Do you two ever take a break?” the young man shouted at them when he threw open the door and climbed out of the sports car.

“Never,” Olivia answered with a frown at Derrick Stillman’s apparent lack of self-discipline that was displayed in the slight stagger in his pace and the fact that he had clearly slept in his clothes. Judging by his disheveled appearance, she concluded he hadn’t been sleeping at all.

“Well, you can work out for me, too,” Derrick said.

“Party last night?” Roland asked.

“Date.” Derrick ran his fingers through his dark curly hair. “I was going to come in yesterday with my folks, but when I met Maddie the other day—” Clutching his stomach, he groaned.

“That must have been some date,” Olivia said in a bland tone.

“I’ve had better.” With a stagger in his walk, he made his way to the front door.

“Come along, Roland,” Olivia ordered.

The couple continued on their way. They had only made it to the other end of the property when Derrick’s screams stopped them. The young man was running out the front door and dropped to his knees in the yard when they made it back to the driveway.

Olivia rushed over to Derrick, who had his face buried in his hands. “What’s wrong?”

Shrieking, he pointed to the door. Roland ran inside.

“What happened, Derrick?” she demanded to know. “What’s going on? What’s in there?”

His face white, Roland came running back outside.

Olivia’s heartbeat was racing. “Roland...”

“They’re dead,” he said in a panicked tone while taking his cell phone out of his pocket. “Both of them. Janice and Austin. I can’t believe this would happen here...in Spencer.”

“Who—” she asked with tears in her eyes.

“Janice wrote something in her blood,” Roland said before turning his attention to the cell phone. “I’d like to report two murders.”

“Her killer,” Derrick spat out. “I saw it, too. Lenny. Why else would Mom have written out his name in her blood while she was dying? Lenny Frost did it. He killed my parents.”