

Chapter One

He was there again, sitting in the shade of the scraggly crape myrtle across the street. This was the third day in a row. Well, the second day. He'd arrived two nights ago. So, two nights and two days. Not that John was counting.

He looked young, but it was hard to tell from here. He was wearing baggy jeans and a dark hoodie, definitely not your typical Thursday morning, late spring uniform here in Mercury, North Carolina. At least not that John had seen in his few months here.

John took a sip of his coffee. It was still too hot. He wished he could figure out how to lower the temperature on the machine, but that kind of shit had been Steve's job. John hated little gadgets like espresso machines. Which was ironic considering he'd made his fortune as a computer programmer and designer. But the Italian monstrosity that Steve had insisted on didn't come with a keyboard. It barely came with instructions. Steve had fallen instantly in love with it and talked to the damn thing every morning he'd been home.

With a shaky hand John set his coffee down on the table in the entryway. He blew out a breath and ran his hands through his hair, which felt a little greasy and very messy. He unlocked the door. Now was as good a time as any to find out who this guy was and what he wanted.

As soon as he stepped out the front door onto his beat-up porch, the guy put his book down and stood, his hands shoved in his pockets. He looked defensive. Not in a threatening way, just wary.

"Are you casing the joint?" John called out congenially. He casually leaned against the post at the top of the stairs. It was a big wraparound porch, the kind that made him think of a younger America—families on the porch after church on Sunday, kids and dogs running up and down the steps while the grown-ups rocked on the porch and sipped lemonade and mint juleps. It was why John had bought the house. That and the backyard.

"No," the guy answered. His voice was deep. He hadn't even had to yell. John could hear that bass tone easily, spoken from across the quiet street. *No kid, then.*

John waited, but there was nothing more forthcoming. He frowned and pursed his lips. Thought about going back in. Rejected that plan. "What are you doing here?"

The guy looked down and scuffed his shoe in the dirt. "That was my mama's house."

A jolt of surprise went through John. “They told me there was no family. I bought the house at auction.”

The guy nodded and looked to his right, down the street. “Yes, sir. They couldn’t find me. I’ve been gone awhile.”

They stood there for a few more minutes, the stranger studiously not looking at John, and John staring holes through him. Finally he turned to John, and his direct stare shocked John enough to make him straighten up and take a step back.

“I just wanted to come in for a minute,” he said. He spoke quietly, but that voice of his carried on the cool morning air. “I just want to walk around for a bit.”

John shut his ears to the grief in the other man’s voice. “No.” He turned and went back inside.

The day grew warm. And humid. John wasn’t used to the Southern weather. Cool spring in the morning, hot summer by afternoon. Well, hot for him. People around here laughed when he called it hot. That did not bode well, in his opinion, for the summer.

The deep-voiced stranger was still there. He’d taken his hoodie off and wore a faded red T-shirt underneath. Still, he had to be suffering in those jeans. By midday that crape myrtle wasn’t offering much shade anymore. His back was against it as he sat there watching the house, his gaze wandering up and down the street now and then. He had one knee bent and his arm rested on it, pointing to nowhere. A Southern David, waiting for the touch of Robert E. Lee to bring him back to life.

John wondered why no one else found his presence odd. None of his neighbors had come out to investigate. No one had called the cops. True, he wasn’t doing much more than sitting there. His neighbors probably thought he belonged to John. They didn’t know what to make of that Californian who’d bought the old Meecham place. John’s lips quirked in wry amusement. He didn’t know what to do with him either.

He turned resolutely away from the window. Lunch was over. Back to work.

At dusk he was gone. John was irritated that he was worried about him. Did he have a place to stay? He knew he had no family around here.

He shook it off. The stranger’s voice, his demeanor, everything about him told John that he wasn’t as young as he’d first thought. He had the patience of Job to sit out there waiting. A man had to learn that the hard way. John knew all about waiting.

John didn't go look first thing in the morning. He forced himself to keep to his routine. Not that there was much to it. Roll out of bed, run his hand through his hair and pull a T-shirt on over his flannel pajama pants. Steve had hated those pants. He complained they made him hot, lying there next to John. So John left them off when Steve was home. He didn't have to worry about that now. He could wear them whenever he wanted.

This morning's T-shirt was blue. He'd bought it at a Walmart in Oklahoma City on the drive from California to North Carolina, just because he could. Just because he'd never bought a shirt at Walmart before. Kristine had laughed when he'd texted her from Walmart and sent a picture of himself proudly wearing his new shirt. Steve's sister hadn't understood why he'd left California. She'd been a good friend over the years. There were times, when Steve was overseas, that John had felt closer to Kristine than Steve. They were the only family either of them had, and he knew she missed him and worried about him. He still couldn't explain it properly to her. Hell, he couldn't explain it to himself half the time. She was coming to visit in a few weeks. Maybe once she saw Mercury she'd understand. He glanced around the homey kitchen. *Then again, maybe not.*

He turned on the coffee machine. *Good Morning*, the LCD screen said. *Your espresso machine is heating.* "Good morning," John automatically replied. He'd started talking to the machine the morning he knew Steve wasn't coming back. He didn't want it to get lonely.

He stared out the kitchen window to the backyard. He'd gotten quite a bit done out there yesterday. He was replacing the fence. The old one had been falling down when he moved in. It was the first major job he had to do outside. He was going to get the yard in shape before he tackled the front porch. And the house needed to be painted. He'd never done any work like this before. It was slow going.

The gardening was going to be tough. He wasn't a gardener. He didn't have a rapport with plants. But there was no nice Japanese gentleman here that he could hire to come and make his yard bloom year-round with beautiful exotic plants. He'd left Mr. Natsumi in L.A. He'd been one of the hardest things to leave behind.

On that depressing thought, John turned back to the coffee machine. *Make your selection*, the screen said.

"Thanks, I will," John answered. "How about a regular cup of normal coffee, not too hot?" Just like every other morning, there was no response. So with a sigh, he grabbed a mug from the cupboard and got his own too-hot espresso.

John finally allowed himself to check about half an hour later. The stranger with the deep voice was back. John stood there in front of the bay window wearing the khakis he'd replaced his

flannels with as he sipped his second cup of coffee. That sort of diligence deserved a reward, he supposed. And he could spare a minute or two while he finished his coffee.

He walked over and opened the front door.