

*A Place In The Shade*



RONALD GOODMAN

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# Chapter ONE

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With one remarkable exception – a hole the size of a washtub in its cedar shake roof – the house looked pretty much as described in the realtor’s brochure.

“It’s the old Crocker place,” the realtor said. His tone was low and he sounded as though he was divulging a secret while leaning away from the phone a bit as he spoke, occupying himself with parcels more lucrative. Papers were being shuffled and there were other voices in the background. “It’s been listed with us for five years, remote part of the lake, up in Rainy Creek a ways,” the realtor continued. “We don’t get down there to check on it very often; not many calls to see the place.”

Since leaving the Camdenton realtor’s office – a little over an hour’s drive to the Crocker place, he was told – he had been lost for three, winding and twisting along some of the most godforsaken and abused

roads known to Mother Nature, or man. He backtracked a half dozen times and spoke with local folk at least that often concerning directions. Once – utterly confused at an unsettlingly familiar crossroad, he thought that he’d seen his own truck pass him. But he arrived, at last, and what he saw did little to comfort his shredded nerves and numb buttocks.

Parking alongside a split rail fence that was partially collapsed, Billy got out and slammed the pickup’s door. He strode on toward the house and stopped a few feet out from the porch. He thrust his hands into the back pockets of his jeans and let his eyes move over his new home. It clearly wasn’t much of a house, outright pitiful he thought as he moved forward and put a foot on a loose porch plank. But then again, he didn’t need much, and not for long, he further considered.

Billy Walker was forty-two years old. He stood just under six feet and weighed a hundred and eighty pounds. He was in excellent health, as far as he knew, and his naturally athletic, smoothly muscled body was trim and agile. Large, almost fierce eyes, touched now with shades of tragedy, were the color of burnt cashew. They were clear, fluid, and intelligent. His teeth were good, decently white, and lent themselves to a generous mouth that smiled willingly, not with a flash, but coming on slowly, sincerely. His hair, dark brown – almost black in lesser light, was peppered with gray that added to his mature good looks. His ears were a bit too large, he thought, a “flaw” he managed with hair length that swept back at mid-ear.

He mounted a couplet of flat stones that were stacked to serve as a step onto the porch. The porch shook slightly as Billy strode across it. He fished a door key from his pocket and smiled at the alarming simplicity of the purchase of this place: six thousand in cash to the Camdenton realtor; payment – as it turned out, for the ground upon which the rather worthless house stood; a door key in return; and the promise of a deed forthcoming in the mail; all this before laying eyes on the property. It's not the way a Walker does business, ordinarily, he mused as he turned the key in the door. But his weren't ordinary circumstances these days. And he hadn't really cared what the place looked like. He considered, again, that he wouldn't need it for long. And the broken-down house was weirdly fashionable for one such as him.

The house's shabby exterior was an appropriate introduction for what lay ahead, for the interior was a disaster. Wildly floral linoleum covered the small living room floor and was deeply stained with befouled rain that coursed down the roof and into the house through a gaping wound where a section of tree limb – four feet long and big around as a stovepipe, had blasted through the roof like a rocket. The limb lay in the middle of the room among shattered cedar shakes. Bird droppings and other excrements covered the floor and furniture: a couch and two straight-backed chairs. Billy made an instant mental note that he would burn the couch before another day passed.

Two small bedrooms were off either end of the living room and a short, narrow hall led to the back of the house and an ample but rustic kitchen. The