

BEACH HOUSE *Rescue*

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Chapter One



“I don’t think she’s armed. She’s asleep on my couch.”

Tessa Trask blinked her eyes open, hit by the fog that always accompanied a nap stretching longer than fifteen minutes. What a crazy dream.

A man’s voice. Calm, but firm.

A squatter in a beach house.

Requesting police.

The beginning bloom of a headache seeped behind her forehead. Her eyelids fell back in place, giving her a chance to regroup and take a minute to consider waking up.

The dream continued. The voice continued.

Wait. What?

She pressed her eyelids together.

“Just send someone right away, please, and no sirens. I don’t want to startle her. Just get her out of here.”

Heart galloping from lounging to horror movie gear with the speed of a Kentucky Derby darling, she squeezed the book on top of her chest in a death grip. Her lungs struggled to keep up, whooshing out breaths in short puffs.

Somebody—some man is in this house with me. Think, brain, think.

Lord God, help me.

From the corner of her half-closed lids, she spotted the remnants of her afternoon snack, forgotten on the coffee table. Before she planned follow-up steps, she rolled off the couch, grabbed the fork from the saucer, and pointed the utensil like a laser gun at the owner of the voice.

“I amend my earlier statement. She *is* armed. With a fork.”

Swaying to the beat of the pounding in her head and chest, she ground her teeth at the arrogant amusement lacing the burglar-slash-rapist-slash-serial killer’s voice. Why had she taken a nap? She wasn’t a napping person. Naps made her feel worse, not better, and this nap allowed a criminal to break into her house.

“Leave my house.” She cleared her throat to lose the froggy remnants of sleep.

“I beg your pardon. This isn’t your house. Put down the fork, grab your things, and leave now.”

Gripping her book tighter to her chest, she straightened her weapon-wielding arm.

“I’m staying. You’re going.” Hating the tremble in her voice, she ignored it and narrowed her eyes, hoping they conveyed confidence and menace and follow-through with her fork.

“Yes, please.” He adjusted the phone beside his mouth. “She’s refusing to leave.”

Tossing her book onto the coffee table with her left hand, she grabbed her phone. “Leave right now, or I’m calling the police.”

“I already did.” Smirking, he wiggled his phone at her.

A burglar-slash-rapist-slash-serial killer calling the police?

What. Is. Happening?

Commanding her brain to think of a plan, she massaged her forehead with the back of her hand.

How had such a happy day with beach strolls, finding a stray cat, and a slice of vinegar pie turn into ... into ...? An intruder here in her house?

The pie roiled in her stomach.

An intruder had broken into her beach house.

* * *

She's swaying like a town drunk. Wyatt Henry ground his molars. *Don't you throw up. Don't need to deal with that too.*

Rubbing her forehead with the back of her phone hand and doubling down with her fork hand, the squatter groaned, "Why did I nap so long?"

He glanced at the book on the coffee table and smiled. "Easy. You were reading *Jane Eyre*."

She growled. "Heathen. Of course, you hate *Jane Eyre*. I'm sure you've never read it. Get. Out. Now."

"I've read it. I read it when a special person asked me to. I love her, but she couldn't make me love that horrible book." He shifted his weight, longing to sit down and put up his throbbing foot. "Look. Except for the whole breaking and entering and squatting thing, you don't seem like a bad person. Why don't you leave before the police arrive and arrest you?"

"They won't arrest me. They're coming after you."

Confident criminal. Wonderful. Pushing out a heavy sigh, he closed his eyes for a beat and muttered. "Oh, Petey. What've you got me into now?"

The squatter sucked in a breath. "What did you just say?"

A knock sounded on the front door, sagging his shoulders with relief.

A voice called from the front porch. "Police."

"Come in. It's open."

Slowly swinging wide the door, a female police officer entered the room. Darting her eyes over the scene, she placed both hands on her utility belt. "How are you folks doing?"

"I'm so glad you're here, Officer. Please make him leave." The squatter stepped toward the officer.

Man, she got her case in first.

He gestured with the phone. "I'm the one who called in the breaking and entering."

"Uh-huh." The officer nodded. "Let's take a few minutes and

assess the situation.” She glanced over both of them again. “Besides your foot”—she nodded to his left foot encased in a boot—“is anyone hurt?”

“No.” Both spoke in tandem.

“Thank you. You both agree. Can we sit down and chat for a few minutes?”

“Yes.” Again, they spoke over each other.

Great idea. My foot is killing me. Hold up. She’s not moving.

The throbbing in his foot intensified.

Not sitting down before she does.

He folded his arms in front of his chest. For thirty seconds, the impasse held.

The officer worked her jaw, then moved toward the wicker chair near the far wall. “Tell you what. Let’s sit at the same time.” Lowering her chin, she raised her eyebrows. She held out her hands like a choir director and slowly lowered herself to her seat, motioning the two to sit. The squatter sat back on the couch. Wyatt took the love seat perpendicular to the couch.

“Okay. That wasn’t hard, was it? Do you need to prop your foot?” Taking a notebook out of her pocket, she pointed to his foot with a pen.

Would putting up my foot show weakness?

“Miss, put down your fork, okay? We’re just gonna talk for a few minutes.” The officer motioned toward the makeshift weapon.

Giving him the side-eye, the squatter laid the fork across the saucer.

Conceding the officer’s point, he shifted to prop most of his leg on the love seat.

Nodding, the officer smiled. “Now. Let’s begin with introductions, and then we’ll sort all this out.” She swung her gaze between the two. “Sir, why don’t you start?”

Storm clouds gathered on the squatter’s brow.

Eyes trained on the entire room, the officer caught the

weather front change. “Ma’am, he called it in. That’s the only reason I chose him first.”

Snorting, the squatter grimaced.

“I arrived about thirty minutes ago and found her asleep on my couch.”

“Not your couch.”

“Ma’am, you’ll have a turn.” The officer turned back to Wyatt, pen at the ready. “Start with your name, sir.”

Glaring at him, the squatter pressed her lips together.

“I’m Wyatt Henry.”

“And your name?” She nodded to the squatter.

“I’m Tessa Trask, and he’s the one in the wrong place.”

“I’m just gathering all the details, Miss Trask.” Finishing her note, she raised her gaze, inviting him to continue.

“And then I called 911.”

Scribbling in her notebook, the officer nodded. “Got it.” She glanced back at him. “May I see your rental agreement, Mr. Henry?”

He made a sound. *I don’t have one. Didn’t expect to need one. Thanks again, Petey.*

“Let me text my friend who owns this house.”

“Your friend doesn’t own this house. His wife owns it.”

He locked eyes with the squatter.

“Yeah, I know who you are now. Actually, when you said *Petey*, I had my suspicions.” Arms folded, Tessa Trask drummed her fingers on her elbow.

“Suspicions?”

“Miss Trask, I need to see your rental agreement too.”

“I don’t have one. My friend, who owns this house, invited me here. I’m on assignment for her.” Her smirk and voice evoked a challenge.

Assignment? He furrowed his brow. Petey gave him the assignment and never mentioned sharing with anyone.

The officer laid her pen on top of the notebook, holding it in

place with her thumb. “Hmm. So, both of you could be—out of place, if you will.”