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# THE INTRUDER

**FREIDA McFADDEN**

  
*Poisoned Pen*  
PRESS

## CHAPTER 1

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NOW

CASEY

There is at least a fifty percent chance that in the next twenty-four hours, the roof of the cabin I'm renting will collapse and kill me.

It's an apt metaphor for the rest of my life.

There's not much I can do about my shattered life, but the roof issue is more surmountable. I have been calling my landlord, Rudy, for the last month to try and fix it. Every day, I find a few new shingles on the ground next to the cabin, and one day, I'm fairly sure I'll sit on my living room sofa and look straight up to see the moon.

And then a few days ago, my calls became more urgent. There's a storm coming, and if this roof doesn't get fixed ASAP, I could *die*. So I told Rudy he needed to get his butt over here—now. I wasn't nice, but I said what I had to say.

Now, a dozen messages later, Rudy is finally here in the flesh.

As we stand together just outside the cabin, Rudy

squints up at my roof with his droopy blue eyes. He's a scrawny man in his late fifties who looks like he only eats one or two nonliquid meals per day. He scratches the gray stubble on his chin and adjusts the worn gray baseball cap he always wears. As usual, he reeks of cigarette smoke. The stench of it was overpowering when I first moved into the cabin, and it took me a week to get it aired out. It still clings to some of the furniture months later.

"Looks okay to me, Casey," he says.

My fists clench in barely restrained rage. "How? How does it look okay? There are shingles all over the ground!"

I in fact gathered the flat rectangular shingles into a little pile that I now gesture toward angrily. I don't entirely understand how a roof is constructed, but I know those things are needed to keep it together. The fact that they are falling off does not bode well for my roof.

At least this is just a rainstorm. Once it snows in a month or so? Forget it. I'm going to wake up one morning in a snowdrift.

I wish I could afford a *decent* isolated shack in the woods.

"It's not safe," I insist.

"You worry too much." Rudy grabs a pack of cigarettes out of his back pocket, and before I can ask him not to, he lights one up and takes a deep drag. I've never known him to go more than two minutes without a smoke. "You need to learn to relax a little, Casey."

*You need to learn to relax a little.* That was my goal when I moved out to this cabin in The Middle of Nowhere, New Hampshire. I wanted peace and quiet, which is exactly what I got. Even with all the chirping birds and crickets and woodpeckers, it's so quiet that I've got no

distractions from thinking about the complete mess I made of my life.

I came out here after I lost my teaching job. I had this idea about living off the grid for a little while, but then I discovered what living "off the grid" actually meant. As much as I enjoy roughing it a bit, I very much did not want to build my own septic system. So here I am, *not* living off the grid—I have electricity, running hot and cold water, and a working landline telephone—but I do not have a television, and I look back with disdain on the days when my smartphone was glued to my right hand. I sold the phone before I came out here.

Living off the grid is great. As long as you can still use the toilet. Oh, and you definitely need a roof.

I grit my teeth. "I want my roof fixed, Rudy."

I wish I were anywhere else but here. I especially wish I were back in Boston, in front of my classroom. I miss my students. I would have done anything for those kids.

Except that's what got me into trouble.

"Just hold your horses, little lady," he says. "I can't fix the roof now. That storm is coming."

I clench my fists. I *know* there's a thunderstorm coming tonight. There will be buckets of rain and winds strong enough that I'll likely lose power. I've mentioned it in every single one of my increasingly urgent phone calls to Rudy.

"Yes," I say in a clipped tone. "That's why I want you to fix it."

"Yeah, but I don't got my tools," he points out. "Or a ladder."

"Why the hell not? I told you my roof needed to be fixed."

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“I had to check it out first, didn’t I?” Rudy takes another drag from his cigarette. “I’ll fix it when the storm is over, okay? Next week.”

He doesn’t give me a specific day or time, which is par for the course. Undoubtedly, he’ll call me with an hour’s notice, and if I happen to be out, then my roof just won’t get fixed that day. I’ll have to annoy him as much as I can to make sure this gets done.

“And one other thing…” I add.

Rudy grunts impatiently. “There’s *more*?”

I shoot him a look. On a scale of one to ten, Rudy gets a two on the landlord scale. Not only does he never answer my messages, but he refuses to believe there’s a problem with anything. When the refrigerator randomly stopped working a few months ago, his response was, *Well, it was working when you moved in.*

“I’m worried about that tree,” I tell him.

Rudy cocks his head in the direction I’m pointing, at the tree on the edge of my property. I don’t know what kind of tree it is, but the trunk is wider than three of me, and it towers over the cabin.

“And *why* are you worried about the tree?” he asks me in a patronizing voice.

I stomp over to the culprit in my waterproof boots and press my palm against its bark. In response to the pressure, the tree groans threateningly and shifts over about two inches.

Rudy frowns. “So?”

“So trees aren’t supposed to move like that.”

“Sometimes they do.”

“No, Rudy. They are *inanimate*.”

He takes a long drag from his cigarette, then blows

out a giant cloud of smoke. “Fine. I’ll call a landscaper. Happy?”

No. I’ll be happy when the tree is gone. I’ve been worried about it for the last month, and now that a storm is coming, I’m *really* worried.

I look up at the roof of my house. It will probably hold. And the tree probably won’t fall down. I probably won’t die tonight.

And if I do, the good news is that nobody will miss me.

## CHAPTER 2

Rudy thinks we're done here.

He's come, reassured me about my roof, and apparently, that's the end of his obligation. I want to kick him in the shin, but that won't fix anything. I should have just done it myself when I realized he likely wasn't coming, but roof repair isn't easy. There might be YouTube videos out there with instructions, but without the internet, I'm lost.

I'm not sure if it's the concerned expression on my face or my clenched fists, but Rudy adds, "The cabin will be fine. I would never put you in any danger, Casey."

I flash him a skeptical look.

"I wouldn't," he insists. "You know what kind of lawsuit I'd be facing if you got killed by a caved-in roof?"

"Gee, I'm flattered."

Little does he know there wouldn't be anyone to sue him if that happened.

"I promise," he says, "this roof will survive a rainstorm. And that big old tree isn't going anywhere."

"I'm glad you're confident."

Unfortunately, it's far too late for a major repair at this point. The storm is coming *tonight*. I thought that he could patch it just enough to hold through the high winds expected, but the strong gust of air that rips through my coat lets me know the time for any roof work has come and gone.

"Tell you what, sweetheart." Rudy blows a ring of smoke in my face. "How about if you and me go out and get a drink next week, and then after, I'll see what I can do about the roof?"

I don't know where to begin telling him what's wrong with all *that*. First of all, what kind of idiot gets a few drinks *before* climbing up on the roof? Also, I'm not going out with Rudy—he's nearly old enough to be my father, and I feel sick at the idea of his hand sliding up my thigh under the table at some seedy bar.

How did this become my life?

"How about," I say, "you just fix my damn roof like my lease says you're supposed to?"

He smiles at me with his yellow teeth. Well, most of them are yellow—one of his incisors is black. "My idea is more fun."

I cringe at the way his eyes travel down my body, even though my winter coat and blue jeans leave everything to the imagination. When I reviewed the lease, inside this very cabin, he leaned over me to show me where to sign, his hot breath on my neck. You can only accidentally graze a woman's breasts so many times before it's clearly no accident.

I should have ripped up the lease right then and there. But I was desperate for a place to live, and the price was

right. It's not like I have a lot of options in my zero-dollar income bracket.

"No, thank you," I say as calmly as I can.

The cold tone of my voice does nothing to wipe the lecherous smile off his face. In the seven months I've been living here, I have not interacted with Rudy once without him trying to hit on me. Thankfully, I rarely see him. If this cabin weren't so cheap, I would've moved out already.

"Listen..." He looks me over, that hungry grin back on his lips. "If you're really worried about the roof, you're more than welcome to stay with me at my house back in town."

Yeah, right. I don't want to spend a night with Rudy pawing at me. I would rather get blown away by a hurricane. "I'll pass."

"Come on, Casey." His gaze rakes over me in a way that makes me squirm, even under my thick coat. "I bet you don't even have supplies to outlast the storm."

I have plenty of supplies. Even when there isn't a storm on the horizon, I've got a whole pantry packed with canned goods, first aid supplies, gallons of water, dozens of candles, and a flashlight that's so bright, it would do permanent eye damage if you looked at it head-on. I'm always ready for whatever might happen next.

"I'm prepared," I say tightly.

"Still." He stands there rigidly, not fixing my cabin and not fixing to leave either, which bothers me. "You'll be safer with me. And if the power goes out..." He winks at me. "We can keep each other warm."

I want to tell him that I'd rather the roof fall on my head, but at this point, I just want him to leave. If he's not going to fix the roof, he's just here to annoy me.

"Come on." He slings his right arm around my shoulders in a way that's far too familiar for a shitty landlord. "I won't take no for an answer, Casey."

Before I went off to college, my father insisted on teaching me some self-defense moves he learned for a class he'd been teaching. He showed me this exact position, and I still remember what he said: *If some guy puts his arm around you to get close to you, you can get him off you real easy.*

His advice? *Instead of pushing away, you turn it around on him.*

I swing my left arm over his left shoulder, pushing into him. Then I grab his right forearm with my right hand and twist his arm so that it's behind him. My next move is to kick at the back of his knee so he falls to the ground with a yelp of pain. The cigarette goes flying.

My father told me that the next thing I should do in this scenario would be to disengage and run away. But where am I supposed to run? This is *my* house.

So instead, I climb on top of him, keeping his arm forced behind him. I stick my knee into the small of his back so that his face presses into the dirt, and I step up the pressure on his right arm, twisting his rotator cuff.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Casey?" Rudy barks out, probably getting a mouthful of dirt. "Have you lost your damn mind?"

I twist his arm another few millimeters, and this time, he screams.

"You're going to break my arm!" he cries.

I lean in to his ear so this time he can feel *my* breath, although it doesn't stink the way his does. "Don't you dare touch me ever again. *Ever.* Do you understand me?"

"Jesus, what are you so uptight about?"

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I twist even harder, feeling the tendons strain, threatening to snap. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes!” This time as he yells, his face turns bright red, mud in his stringy hair. “For Christ’s sake, yes! Let me up!”

“And you’ll fix my roof,” I add. “Right after the storm is over, you’re going to come over and fix my roof first thing.” When he doesn’t say anything, I tighten my grip on his arm again. “*Right?*”

“Right! Anything you say!”

I wait another few beats, my hand holding pressure on his shoulder, his face pressed into the soft earth. I remind myself that if I break his arm, he won’t be able to fix my roof. Also, I just felt a drop of rain. So with a sigh, I get off his back and let him free.

He takes a second to catch his breath before gingerly struggling back to his feet. He glares at me with his watery blue eyes, rubbing his sore shoulder. “What the hell is wrong with you, you crazy bitch?”

I assume that’s a rhetorical question.

“I’ll see you in two days to fix my roof,” I say tightly.

I wait for him to refuse. Or attack me again, which I think I’d enjoy because I’m fairly sure I could take him. He’s twenty years older than me, only a couple of inches taller, with wasted muscles and now an injured shoulder. *Bring it.*

But he must see the look in my eyes, because he lowers his own eyes and nods. “Fine. I’ll come back when the storm is over.” And then he adds, “If you survive it.”

I can’t tell if that’s a threat or just an observation of the fact that I’ll be spending the night in a small cabin with high winds and a dodgy roof. I study Rudy’s drawn features, wondering if he might feel compelled to pay me

back at some point for shoving his face into the ground. He seems like the petty type.

Well, that’s what my gun is for.

## CHAPTER 3

**W**hen I go back inside the cabin, I turn on the radio. Reports of the storm are dominating the local news cycle.

*Thunder and lightning. Gusts up to sixty miles per hour. Stay off the roads except for emergencies.*

Somehow, I hoped things would turn around. Maybe the storm changed course or lost strength. They do that sometimes—you think it's going to be a disaster, but then all you end up with is rain showers. But based on the urgency in the newscaster's voice, this will be pretty intense.

I glance out the window. Rudy's truck is out of my driveway, which means he must be gone. I head back outside to take a look at the sky and to make sure the outside of the cabin is secured.

The clouds have darkened, eliminating any trace of the sun that was shining so brightly early this morning. The large cloud directly above my head looks like something dark and dangerous giving me the evil eye.

A sharp gust of wind hits me then. It lifts the strands in my brown ponytail clear off my neck, and it seems to go right through my puffy winter coat like it's made of nothing. I shiver. Any second, those scary-looking clouds will break open, and all the rain will come pouring down.

Fortunately, there's not much left to take care of. I find a few large stray branches scattered around that could be a hazard, as well as the dirt-cheap lawn mower I bought when I moved in. I take the branches and the lawn mower, and I bring them to the toolshed just on the edge of my property.

I rarely use that toolshed. It's mostly empty aside from maybe a rusted old rake shoved into one corner of the small space. It has an even more questionable roof than my house, so I figure it's best to avoid it. But it will serve for keeping the lawn mower from flying through my kitchen window in a gust of wind and mowing off my head. (Hopefully.)

The shed is dark inside because all it has is one small window and no working lights. I toss the branches and lawn mower inside. Before I shut the door, I see a glint of something in the corner of the shed, probably some sort of old gardening tool. Once this storm is over, I'll have to take a closer look at the contents, but now is not the time. I close the door as tightly as I can, knowing the odds are fifty-fifty it will get ripped off when the sixty-mile-per-hour winds start up.

As I walk back to the cabin, I take one last look at my roof. I assess the possibility that it might blow away at some point during the night. It looks sturdy enough to me, but the whole cabin is quite old and decrepit. The