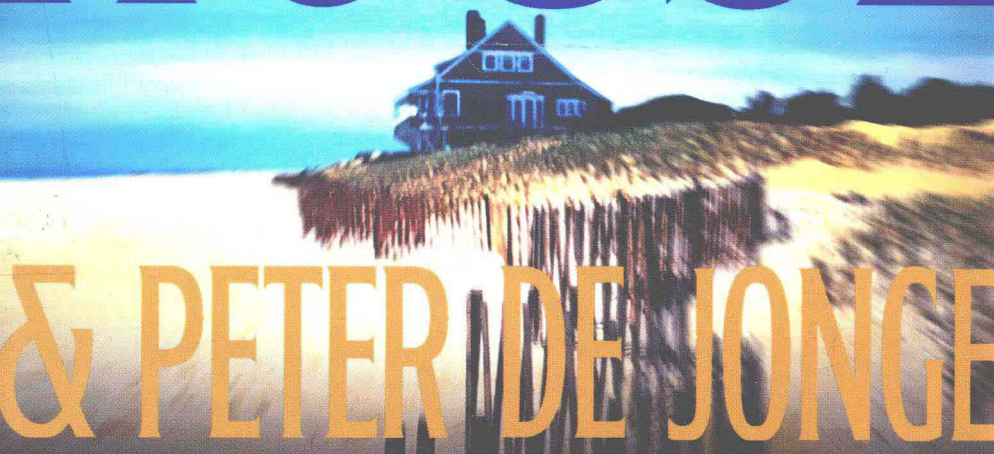


1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JAMES PATTERSON

THE
BEACH
HOUSE



& PETER DE JONGE

The Beach House

A NOVEL BY

James Patterson

AND

Peter de Jonge

江苏工业学院图书馆

藏书



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For Pete & Chuck

— *P. de J.*

For Jack, the big boy

— *J. P.*

Prologue

PETER RABBIT

1

IT'S LIKE DANCING SITTING DOWN. Squeeze — tap — release — twist. Left hand — right foot — left hand — right hand.

Everything unfolds in perfect sequence and rhythm, and every time I twist back the heated, gummy, rubber-covered throttle, the brand-new, barely broke in, 628-pound, 130-horsepower BMW K1200 motorcycle leaps forward like a thoroughbred under the whip.

And another snapshot of overpriced Long Island real estate blurs by.

It's Thursday night, Memorial Day weekend, fifteen minutes from the start of the first party in what promises to be another glorious season in the Hamptons.

And not just any party. *The* party. The intimate \$200,000 get-together thrown every year by Barry Neubauer and his wife, Campion, at their \$40 million beach house in Amagansett.

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And I'm late.

I toe it down to fourth gear, yank the throttle back again, and now I'm really flying. Parting traffic on Route 27 like Moses on a Beemer.

My knees are pressed tight against the sleek, midnight blue gas tank, my head tucked so low out of the wind that it's almost between them.

It's a good thing this little ten-mile stretch between Montauk and Amagansett is as straight and flat as a drag strip, because by the time I pass those tourist clip joints — Cyril's, the Clam Bar, and LUNCH — the needle's pointing at ninety.

It's also a good thing I used to be in the same homeroom as Billy Belnap. As the most belligerent juvenile delinquent at East Hampton High, Billy was a lock to end up on the payroll of the East Hampton Police Department. Even though I can't see him, I know he's there, tucked behind the bushes in his blue-and-white squad car, trolling for speeders and polishing off a bag of Dressen's doughnuts.

I flick him my brights as I rip by.

2

YOU WOULDN'T THINK a motorcycle is a place for quiet reflection. And as a rule, I don't go in for much of it anyway, preferring to leave the navel gazing for big brother Jack, the Ivy League law student. But lately I've been dredging up something different every time I get on the bike. Maybe it's the fact that on a motorcycle, it's just you and your head.

Or maybe it's got nothing to do with the bike, and I'm just getting old.

I'm sorry to have to confess, I turned twenty-one yesterday.

Whatever the reason, I'm slaloming through bloated SUVs at ninety miles per hour and I start to think about growing up out here, about being a townie in one of the richest zip codes on earth.

A mile away on the Bluff, I can already see the party lights of the Neubauer compound beaming into the perfect East End

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night, and I experience that juiced-up feeling of anticipation I always get at the beginning of another Hamptons summer.

The air itself, carrying a salty whiff of high tide and sweet hyacinth, is ripe with possibility. A sentry in a white suit gives me a toothy grin and waves me through the cast-iron gates.

I wish I could tell you that the whole place is kind of tacky and crass and overreaching, but in fact it's quite understated. Every once in a while, the rich will confuse you that way. It's the kind of parcel that, as real estate brokers put it, comes on the market every couple of decades — twelve beautifully landscaped acres full of hedges and hidden gardens sloping to a pristine, white sand beach.

At the end of the white-pebble driveway is a 14,000-square-foot shingled mansion with ocean views from every room except, of course, the wine cellar.

Tonight's party is relatively small — fewer than 180 people — but everyone who matters this season is here. It's themed around Neubauer's just-announced \$1.4 billion takeover of Swedish toymaker Bjorn Boontaag. That's why the party's on Thursday this year, and only the Neubauers could get away with it.

Walking among the cuddly stuffed lions and tigers that Bjorn Boontaag sells by the hundreds of thousands are a gross of the most ferocious cats in the real-life jungle: rain-makers, raiders, hedge-fund hogs, and the last of the IPO Internet billionaires, most of whom are young enough to be some CEO's third wife. I note the Secret Service men wandering the grounds with bulging blazers and earphones, and I figure there must also be a handful of senators. And scattered

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like party favors are the hottest one-name fashion designers, rappers, and NBA all-stars the professional party consultant could rustle up.

But don't be too jealous. I'm not on the guest list, either.

I'm here to park cars.

3

I'VE BEEN WORKING at the Beach House since I was thirteen, mostly odd jobs, but parking cars is the easiest gig of all. Just one little flurry at the beginning and end. Nothing but downtime in between.

I'm a little late, so I jump off my bike and get to work. In twenty minutes I fill an out-of-the-way field with four neat rows of \$80,000 European sedans. They glisten in the silvery moonlight like metallic plants. A bumper crop.

A parking high point is when a burgundy Bentley the size of a yacht stops at my feet and my favorite New York Knickerbocker, Latrell Sprewell, climbs out, presses a twenty in my palm, and says, "Be gentle, my brother."

The rush over, I get myself a Heinie and a plateful of appetizers, and sit down on the grass beside the driveway. This is the life. I'm savoring my sushi and cheese puffs when a black-jacketed waiter I've never seen before hustles up. With a

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wink, wink, nod, nod kind of smile, he stuffs a scrap of rose-colored stationery in my shirt pocket.

It must have been pickled in perfume. A pungent cloud hits my nostrils when I unfold it. Shalimar, if I'm not mistaken.

The note itself, however, couldn't be more cut and dried. Three letters, three numbers: I Z D 2 3 5.

I slip away from the house and walk back through the fields of shining metal until I find them on a New York license plate screwed into the svelte behind of a forest green Benz convertible.

I slide into the front passenger seat and start pushing buttons to make myself feel welcome. With a comforting whir, windows drop into doors, the roof parts, and Dean Martin's wiseass baritone pours out of a dozen speakers.

I check behind the visor. Nothing.

Then I fish around in the compartment between the seats. Inside a Robert Marc sunglasses case is a long, thin joint dressed up with a pink ribbon. I spark it up and blow a yellowish wreath across the full moon.

I'm thinking this isn't half bad — getting baked as Dino confides about a French lady named Mimi — when a hand clamps down on my shoulder.

"Hi, Frank," I say without even bothering to twist around in my cushy leather chair.

"Hey, Rabbit," says Frank, reaching through the window for the joint. "Get laid yet?"

Frank is Frank Volpi, chief detective with the East Hampton Police Department and the only cop you're likely to see sporting a platinum Rolex. Then again, Volpi logged two tours of duty in Vietnam before tackling crime in his own backyard. So you could argue that he has it coming.

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"You know me, Frank. I don't kiss and tell."

"Since when?"

"Why, gee, since last night with your wife."

This distinctly male excuse for conversation continues until the joint is burning our fingertips. Then Frank staggers off into the fragrant night, and I sit tight with Dino in the Benz.

The phone rings. It's a woman. She whispers, "Peter, did you enjoy your gift?"

"Just what the doctor ordered. Thanks," I say in a return whisper.

"I'd rather you thank me in person on the beach."

"How will I know it's you?"

"Take a flier, Peter. You'll know me when you see me."

I push a few more buttons, chat with a couple of operators who couldn't be nicer, and finally I'm talking to my good pal Lumpke. He's in grad school, getting a Ph.D. in sculpture. Maybe it's not going too well, because Lump sounds cranky.

Of course, it's four in the morning in Paris.

I batten down the Benz and slowly make my way down to the beach. I know I've already told you how outrageously beautiful this place is, but I don't think I've done it justice. Every time I'm here, it amazes me. I'm sure I appreciate it more than Barry and Champion Neubauer do.

As I get closer to the beach, I think for the first time about who might be waiting for me. It wouldn't have been hard to figure out whose voice was on the car phone. All I had to do was open the glove compartment and look at the registration, but that would have spoiled the surprise.

The thrill of the Beach House is that there's no telling. She could be fifteen or fifty-five. She could arrive alone or with a friend, or a husband.

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Rose-colored stationery. Shalimar. Hmmm. I might know who sent me the note.

I sit down in the sand about twenty yards above from where the waves are breaking. The sloppy remains of Hurricane Gwyneth, which battered Cape Hatteras for a week, just hit the Hamptons this morning. The surf is huge and loud, and sounds pissed off.

So loud that I don't hear them approaching from behind until they're on top of me. The shortest and stockiest of the three, with a shaved dome and Oakley shades, kicks me full in the chest.

The kick breaks a couple of ribs and knocks the wind out of me. I think I recognize one of them, but it's dark and I can't be sure. My panic is growing with each professionally aimed kick and punch. Then the dark realization sinks in that these guys haven't been sent here just to teach me a lesson. This is a whole lot more serious.

I start punching and kicking back with everything I've got, and I finally break free.

I'm running and screaming at the top of my lungs, hoping that someone on the beach will hear me, but the reef drowns out my cries. One of the guys catches me from behind and brings me down hard. I hear a bone snap — *mine*. Then all three of them are whaling on me, one punch or kick landing on top of the next. Without stopping, one of them snorts, "Take that, Peter fucking Rabbit!"

Suddenly, about thirty yards away behind some bushes, a flash goes off. And then another.

That's when I know I'm going to die.

And for whatever it's worth, I even know who my killer is.

Part One

THE SUMMER ASSOCIATE