

Excerpt from THE HOOK, Chapter 8

It's late afternoon, a low sun drawing white shimmering streaks west to east across the water. No marine layer yet. I decide life will look a lot better if I just add water. So I speed to Craig's and raid his toy stash. I pull into Harborside beach with two hours of daylight left.

Within five minutes of parking, I'm paddling out in ankle-biter waves. They're mostly one- to two-foot rollers, but peeling nicely right to left. I punch through a wave to get outside the break, pulling my knees under me and pushing my head and board-nose through the wave's lip, buns up. I emerge out the other side of the water wall; my head soaked and my wetsuit flushed. I grin, start paddling again and shake the sea from my ears. Yep, life is definitely better when wet. I dance across the waves, working Craig's longboard with my feet to hook into and hold rides all the way to the sand. No brother, no family, no past...and at times no thoughts.

I ride in as the light starts to fade. With the heater blasting, I check my cell and replay two short messages from Dylan, asking me to call.

He picks up on the second ring. "Hey, Dana, how did the drop-off go?"

"He's contained...for now."

"Good. Can you get to my office in the next twenty minutes?"

"Sure. What's up?" I push my wet hair behind my ears.

"I'd like you to meet one of the feds who's been tracking Ling. He's been over here discussing another case with one of my partners, but he should be free for a chat in a bit, if you can get here soon."

"I just got out of the water at Harborside, and I'm salty, but I'll jam over there."

"How's the swell?" Dylan may be a successful attorney, but every surfer wants the latest wave report, whether he can ride that day or not.

"One to two, but peeling and glassy. Longboard friendly."

I weave through quitting-time traffic. When I arrive, the G-man is already sitting in one of the square chairs opposite Dylan's desk. I stiffen as I enter.

They both stand as I walk into the office. He's in his late thirties, but still hanging on to that college prep look, polo shirt with the little embroidered horse galloping across his noticeably pumped peck. He's paired the baby blue shirt with perfectly creased khakis. City dweller all the way — no dry cleaner in Half Moon Bay can deliver creases that sharp.

Dylan makes the introductions. "Dana McCarren, meet Agent Stokes." As I lean forward and shake his hand, my wet hair drips onto his forearm.

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“Sorry about that. Haven’t had enough time to drip dry.”

Agent Stokes’ mouth turns up into a slight smile, with a sneer behind it, and he wordlessly and deliberately wipes the salt water from his forearm. He rubs his hands together to dry them; he wouldn’t want to wilt those creases by swiping his hand across those perfect pants.

As we all take our seats, I glance sidelong at him and take in his imposing presence. Seated he still makes Dylan and me look diminutive. His light brown hair is conservatively cut, short sideburns, clean neck. He has hazel eyes, a long straight nose and a ruddy complexion. I’m thinking East Coast upbringing, graduated a name college, varsity crew team.

Without any preliminary pleasantries, Agent Stokes starts the conversation/interrogation: “So Shane is your brother?”

“Can I plead the fifth?” I’m not a criminal, G-man. What’s more, to use a bad cliché, I question authority. I’m a journalist; it comes with the territory.

Dylan jumps in before the nipping and snarling can begin in earnest. “Agent Stokes, Dana is a journalist and lives in Los Angeles; she’s only just arrived in town to help her injured brother. She’s trying to find out how he got hurt, and how we can best help him.”

Stokes apologizes, with obvious insincerity. “Sorry, I go immediately into interview mode.”

“Me too.”

He doesn’t smile at my snarky remark. Instead Stokes feeds me a short teaser of information, hoping I’ll reciprocate. “Ling has been on our radar for roughly two years. We estimate he’s currently operating seven meth labs in Half Moon Bay, Daly City, Brisbane and South San Francisco. He’s a Thai citizen, with a legitimate green card.” He sighs. “Don’t ask.”

He continues his report. “Prior to cooking meth, he smuggled it in from Thailand. Over there, it’s called *yaa baa*. It’s as common as pot, and cheaper in some cases. Ling hooked up with some of the American surf crowd because Thailand is on the global surf radar: warm water, friendly ladies, and cheap drugs.” Clearly, Agent Stokes isn’t much of a surf groupie. And his esteem for the surf crowd is sure to decline further when he meets Shane.

“We think Ling recruited some local surfers to smuggle for him, before he came to the States. Thai authorities tell us he had a couple of small labs in Koh Samui, plying locals and tourists. But the high risk and severe penalties in Thailand for getting caught drug smuggling limited his drug mule recruitment and thus his franchise expansion. So he got a relative to give him and two friends legitimate jobs in a Thai restaurant, or that’s how it looked to immigration. And they’re cooking in the U.S. alright, but they’re

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not whipping up curries.” Stokes grins, so proud of his clever little turn of phrase.

“So why haven’t you busted him?” Blunt, that’s how I roll.

“We’ve arrested a couple of his dealers, but he uses runners to get the drugs to them, so they don’t know the locations of the labs. If they knew, they would have cut deals with us and pled out. He moves his labs frequently and he cleans up when he moves on. We’ve only heard from one landlord, who thought his rental smelled foul and got curious when the previous tenant, a Thai family, cut out a few square feet of the kitchen’s vinyl floor and volunteered that the landlord should keep their deposit.”

Stokes tilts his head at me. “The subfloor in that kitchen tested positive for meth, but we were unable to track the ‘family’ to a new address. In Daly City, residents keep their heads down. No one could accurately describe their former neighbors.”

I continue to listen...while waiting for the pitch ...

“As Dylan probably told you, we’ve dedicated resources and a task force to gathering evidence against Ling and shutting him down. That’s where Shane comes in.”

Bingo. As yet, they have no case against Ling and no proof that Shane actually works for him. But he’s already on their ballot for top *yaa baa* informant.

I could tell him upfront that there’s not a chance in hell that Shane would ever snitch. But he’d just get mad and try harder to nail Shane. And I want the information flow, even if it’s just an FBI trickle, to continue for as long as I can.

“Shane’s in rehab. And he’s not allowed visitors for the first couple of weeks. After that, only immediate family will be able to visit him while he finishes his four-week program.”

Stokes’ face darkens. He’s visibly frustrated by this news, not just because his chosen informant is untouchable for four weeks, but even more ego-damaging I’ve managed to stash Shane out of his reach before he knew he was being released from the hospital.

I don’t want to enrage Agent Stokes, so I ease out some fishing line. “Perhaps you can tell me what you can do for Shane, and when I get to visit him I’ll relay your offer?”

But this statement still gets Agent Stokes hot under his Polo collar. “Shane is in serious trouble — he’s up against at least four felony charges and Ling clearly isn’t pleased with him either. He needs to get smart and figure out who can help him.”

Right, Stokes, you’re his guardian. You can set him up to get killed instead of just maimed. But I keep this opinion to myself. “How would you *help* him?”

Shane’s just a tiny anchovy in this ocean; long-term witness protection won’t be on the fish hook. And if they had a case to charge him with he’d be in county jail already.

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“He wouldn’t need to testify, only help us locate labs and gather evidence. He’d get a pass on any charges for trafficking, selling and possession.” Stokes crosses his ankle over his knee...a relaxed deal-maker, offering a reasonable solution.

While I mull this over, Dylan jumps in. “Could you relocate him temporarily afterward to a drug treatment facility out of state? And would the government pick up the tab?” Dylan has lots of experience haggling for deals with law enforcement. He says it’s like bartering in Mexico for souvenirs: Only amateurs accept the first price.

Stokes rubs his chin; it looks like a practiced gesture to convey not-so-serious contemplation. “It might be possible. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Well, Shane is unreachable for two weeks in any case.” I look at Dylan when I say this and he tilts his head at Stokes.

“Actually, if we charge him or name him as a material witness, a judge would order his treatment facility to let us see him.” Stokes sits up taller, the stiff-backed commander. He places his feet flat on the ground.

I tighten my grip on the chair arms. “And you’d get nothing. You push Shane, and he’ll just clam up. If you wait, and it seems to me your case needs a lot of work anyway, he’ll be down off the ice and perhaps more cooperative.” I don’t really believe that, but it buys time.

Quiet fills the room. It’s a stalemate, for now.

Still, I want one more piece of data, Ling’s full name. With it, I can do my own research on Ling’s criminal history, both online and through my journalism contacts. “Why do you call him just Ling? Is that his first or last name?”

Agent Stokes mulls his reply. Law enforcement only wants to gather information, not share it. He decides to open up...a little. “Ling is a nickname. But it’s the only one he ever uses. His full name is Noi Krungbakorn.”