

The Hook

Surfing to survive a shattered family, drugs, gangs and
the FBI

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To Brian,
husband, cheerleader and cattle prod.
I love you.

Chapter 1

I plunge headfirst into the roiling darkness. The wave's lip punches me down, and its roar fills my head. My eardrums pop. I rise up and then I'm spun, rotated horizontally. Or for all I know, I'm head down, twirling like a top. The sharp tug of the board's leash stretches my leg and hip. My throat and chest tighten; I need air. I force myself to resist thrashing... even though I feel it lurking, always at the edge of my thoughts in every hold-down, the terror of being buried alive. The wave has me in its maw. I remind myself: Don't fight, just fight the urge to struggle too hard.

I wait for the wave to expend its energy and release me.

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Ten seconds, twenty five. The urge to breathe is all-consuming; every cell in my body screams for oxygen. I open my eyes to distract my brain. My eyes sting, but still I can see the blurry dark-green water and foamy milk rush around me. The leash is taut, but it's stopped dragging me. I pull wide with my hands and arms and instinctively right myself, head up, kicking and crawling toward the lighter green, toward the promise of air. Breaking the surface, I gasp, my mouth wide open, and gulp a breath. And then the coughing of a hold-down wracks me. Water rammed up my nose when the wave's lip took me down. My sinuses burn and drain down my face.

I've surfaced in a lull between sets and my leash didn't snap. My board floats behind me. I finally stop sputtering and wriggle aboard, then paddle to the edge of the impact zone, to safety.

I float there, panting. My body rocks in the passing swells. I swipe the back of my hand across my still dripping nose and mash my hands into the neoprene of my wetsuit, under my arms, trying to warm them.

I replay the drilling in my mind...riding out, speeding well ahead of the pitching curl. But the wave didn't peel off; instead it broke in one big section and drilled me from behind. I shrug. Life — just when you think you've made a clean getaway you get caught, caught from behind.

*

At the car, I fumble and twist, pulling cotton over clammy skin; my fingers are frozen claws. My keychain hits the floor when I drop it trying to shove the key into the ignition. On the second try, I get the key in the slot and then use both palms wedged

together to turn it. I crank the heater; it rattles as it blasts, slowly warming air at my feet and hands.

From the parking lot, I watch one more set of waves rise outside the lineup and then roll through. My hair soaks the back of my hoodie. I huddle down in the Honda's torn bucket seat, a melting popsicle. I can't put it off any longer; I need to see Joe and find out what he knows about Shane.

Dammit, Shane. We used to surf, the two of us together. We'd escape, blanking our minds, and later our memories.

*

On the drive, I note the changes to Half Moon Bay, more chain restaurants, more traffic. I miss how it used to be, a community of ruddy complexions and calloused hands, fishing and farming. Now it's an outlying burb for Silicon Valley engineers, with their computers and their pallor, too many hours lit only by screens of code. Even the surf has gained some respect and notoriety. Local surf dogs discovered a break called "Mavericks" years ago. Two miles out from Pillar Point, it only breaks when giant winter swells roll across the Pacific and hit its treacherous underwater rock reef. Now, every winter it's the site of an invitational big-wave contest. Pro surfer Mark Foo died at Mavericks in 1994, which just increased its status and media coverage. And the annual contest has brought more tourists and transplants to town.

Yuppie rebuilds notwithstanding, the blocks closest to our family home are still more Pabst Blue Ribbon than Anchor Steam. The house's beige stucco is stained worse than ever, from years of fog and field dirt blowing down the coastline.

I pull into the driveway, behind Joe's primer gray pick-up, but before I unfold out of the car, I hesitate. It's been three years. Entering this house never gets easier, and talking to Joe is always stilted and awkward. I've brought him a carton of Marlboros, so that ought to get him to acknowledge me, though that might depend on which sport he's watching on TV.

I stumble up the uneven brick walkway and jab the doorbell. The musical "ding-dong" is answered by a cacophony of barking. Behind the door, Lady's and Sampson's toenails tap down the hall. Farther back in the house, I hear a gruff "Shush! Shuuuush!"

My father is shoved aside, as the dogs bounce out and circle my legs.

I step forward and he pulls me in close. He squeezes me to his barrel chest; his day-old beard scratches across my forehead. At nearly seventy, he's still solid; he has the inner strength of the athlete he once was, plus the brawn of thirty-five-years working as

a welder and marine mechanic. He smells of smokes and spearmint gum. I hand him the Marlboros.

“How was the drive?” He sticks the smokes under his arm.

“Not bad. I made tracks and did it in six and a half hours.”

“Did you check the oil and water before you left?”

“Yeah Dad.” I dig my fingernails into my palms. I’m thirty-five years old and a world traveler, not a hapless teenager.

We walk down the dark hall to the living room; my nose is assaulted with cigarette smoke and damp dog fur. HBO is broadcasting a fight — looks like bantam weight division. I know my boxing; I spent my whole childhood watching sports with my Dad, “quality time” with him. Not much communication, but I can talk sports with the boys in the newsroom.

Nothing’s changed here. It’s the same early seventies décor, high-low, brown-and-beige carpet, light-sucking chocolate brown sofas, mustard appliances. Why update it; it’s just the dogs and Dad, traveling between the master bedroom and the recliner in front of the TV.

He drops into his chair, and the dogs sit expectantly at his feet. He pulls two dog cookies from his pants’ pocket. Each dog sits and takes his or her reward gently from his fingertips. “Easy...good pups.”

Lady, a stray bitch, was sleeping in the alley until Dad began feeding her. She was skin and bones, some kind of shepherd/collie mix. Now she’s glossy and friendly, though easily startled. Sampson is a belligerent Jack Russell terrier. He’s the brains in this duo, though his motives are suspect. He always has an angle — not surprisingly, he and Shane are uneasy in each other’s company.

Dad stares at the sparring boxers. I wait him out.

“Shane looks bad,” he finally says.

“How bad?” I stare at the side of his face, as he continues to watch the boxing.

“His arm’s a mess and he’s skinny and scraped up.”

I gulp and then prod. “Did he say anything about how his arm was broken?”

“No...well, not exactly. He was ranting before the ambulance took him to the hospital, about someone twisting it...and about those drugs.” Joe looks at his hands and shakes his head. “Goddamn it, Dana, when is he going to take responsibility for his life?”

I study the dog fur on the carpet and push my still dripping hair away from my face. “Have you visited him since he was admitted?”

“No.”

He goes back to the TV and I sense that this is all the information I’ll get. Even if he knows something else, he doesn’t

want to know it. Once, Shane was his blond wonder boy – Dad wanted everything for him and would give him anything. But decades of petty crime and drug addiction have left Joe drained of his emotions and his savings.

Part of me is yearning to see my brother, or the brother I used to know. Wild, dangerous, beautiful Shane: Images of him as a big-eared, buck-toothed boy, a gangly teenager and a broad-shouldered man flip through my brain. Tarzan, I’ve often thought of him as Tarzan, the half-wild ape-man. He lives half in this world and half somewhere less civilized. His crooked grin says, “I’m bad and you love it.” His charisma is as undeniable as his character flaws.

I slouch, waiting. Will Joe ask me anything about my plans while I’m here, or perhaps something about my life in Los Angeles or my writing? It’s a childish thought. Just because Joe doesn’t want to deal with Shane’s problems anymore doesn’t mean that he’ll take more of an interest in me or my life. When I’m away, living in L.A., I deal with his indifference quite well. But in this house the long-held childhood resentment bubbles up. I’m not his son and I have never been the center of his attention. I loathe my juvenile desire for recognition.

Fleeing, my usual strategy, is the best course of action. I never stay here when I come to town. This house can suffocate me faster than any wave. From the time I was old enough to form the thought, I remember telling myself, “I’ll be okay when I get the hell out of here. I’ll be happy then.”

I pull myself out of the sofa’s collapsed cushion. “I’ll be at Dylan and Maria’s. You can reach me at their house or on my cellphone. I’ll check in when I know more about Shane’s situation and his arm.”

Joe brightens. “Ask Dylan how his fence is holding up, and say hello for me.”

“Uh huh.” I stiffen. Joe has always had plenty of time for my boyfriends, doing projects and enjoying chummy relationships with them, even well after I’ve departed the scene. And he always takes their side during the inevitable break-ups. They all think “he’s a great guy” and don’t understand the uneasiness between us. I don’t let them in. I stuff my resentments and keep my inner dialogues to myself.

Oh hell, Mom, Shane’s in trouble again. I’m back in town trying to find out the details of his latest mess. Dad can’t cope; big surprise. I remember all your talks with Shane when he was a boy, your attempts to love him and straighten him out, the screaming and the hugs.

Shane's hurt, and Dad says he looks awful; I'm glad you can't see that. You were always so proud of your gorgeous son.

I don't have your touch with Shane, Mom. I don't know if he'll rebound this time. How do I make him see the positives in life? You couldn't teach him this...not as you struggled to hold on. You gave in to the darkness and let it swallow you. You shot yourself and wounded all of us, especially Shane.