

Excerpt from *THE HOOK*, Chapter 7

I stuff the key into the ignition and roll down the road, seeing nothing. I'm driving, but I have no destination. I just want to get away from this — I want the image of Shane in that hole purged from my brain. I want calm without crisis. As usual, I want to run away.

But I go to the market instead to pick up some supplies. There I can inhabit a place of normalcy, at least temporarily. The cart squeals as I roll up and down the aisles.

While waiting for my turn in one of the checkout lines, I see a former high-school boyfriend checking at the last turnstile. We dated for a whole two weeks during the fall of my junior year. He had a nice Mazda and he was a sloppy kisser. Now he's thirty pounds overweight, and since he's wearing a white shirt and tie under his apron I assume he's a manager or assistant manager. He's heavy, but he looks solid, with a neck the width of one of the hams in the meat counter, evidence he was once a high-school football star. I avert my eyes before he feels the stare. I can't remember his name, and I'm not in the mood for reminiscing.

I bag my own groceries, after the teenage clerk slides them across the scanner. She asks for my club card, but I'm not the club-card type. That requires buying groceries regularly and meals eaten at a table instead of over the kitchen sink or in front of my computer keyboard.

As I'm loading bags into the trunk of my car, I feel someone come up behind me. I turn around and look up into the dead eyes and twitchy sneer of Anton. He's standing over me, feet turned out, arms crossed. Despite the cold fog, he's wearing long red-and-black board shorts, flip-flops and a black sleeveless T-shirt. The crown portion of his shoulder-length greasy brown hair is pulled up in a top-knot ponytail, the rest hangs to just below his massive shoulders. His cheeks show the scars of teenage acne and are dark with a two-day beard.

"Welcome back, Dana." He snarls, his thin lips pulling back, displaying small yellowed teeth.

"Been following me, Anton?"

"Don't need to. I have eyes all over town." He spreads his long tattooed arms wide.

I give a casual shrug. I refuse to show my mounting fear, since I'm sure that's the reaction he most enjoys.

"I heard you want to talk to me. I'm listening." He leans in, breathing heavily.

I want to back up. His stale breath and too-close bulk makes me curl in on myself. "Did you break Shane's arm?"

"You begin our conversation with this accusation, Dana? Tsk, tsk, very bad manners."

"As if you know what manners are, Anton."

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His eyes darken and his jaw jumps, as he clenches and unclenches his teeth. Is he on his first gram of the day or third, I wonder.

“You’re out of your league, Dana. Go back to the land of plastic people.”

I just glare at him. His surprise visit hasn’t given me time to figure out how to deal with him and help Shane. If I start by showing my willingness to deploy my wallet, my only real weapon, he’ll just extort money from me and go right back to pounding Shane for whatever misstep he’s made. I opt for acting tough by snarling like a scared little mutt.

“Still playing the schoolyard bully, huh Anton?”

The sarcasm goes by unacknowledged. “Shane knows the score. But it’s embarrassing to have to play rough with the town wimp, who needs his little sister to stand up for him. Your former surf star is a pathetic addict, Dana. Not worth the cost of a single rock.”

My face reddens.

“He has to step up and answer for his mistake. We can be reasonable...or not.”

I recover my tongue, and let it loose in its usual reckless fashion. “Who’s ‘we,’ Anton? Who’s pulling your choke-chain?”

He quickly steps into me; his chest is just inches from my face. “I can hurt you too, Dana. I’d enjoy that.”

Panic hits and I’m up on my toes, ready to run. I catch quick movement to our left, and before I can see who or what is coming, Randy shoves Anton away from me; he stumbles nearly falling. It’s weird how his name escaped me when I was observing him at the checkout counter, but it instantly jumps into my brain when he barrels in as my protector.

“Get out of my parking lot, Anton, or I’ll have the cops remove you.” The apron pulled around Randy’s ample middle is inflating, expanding like a filling red balloon, as the adrenaline spikes his breathing and flushes his neck and face.

“Your parking lot, Randy?” Anton looks up and laughs at the sky. “The produce manager is launching a takeover. Whoa, look out!”

Randy huffs and stands his ground. A siren blares in the background and Anton twitches.

“I’ll catch up with you later, Dana. I’m not in the mood to splatter a box boy today.” Anton sneers at Randy, and turns on his heels, walking quickly toe-heel across the parking lot. I notice that another cretin was observing from a van during the parking-lot encounter. Anton jumps in and the driver guns the V8 and turns north into highway traffic.

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Though shaken, Randy is standing a little taller, a little more proud than when he was scanning groceries. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, Randy. Thanks for standing up for me.”

“I assume that was about Shane.”

“You’ve heard?” My breathing is fast and shallow.

“I heard he’s in the hospital, and that his arm’s broken. That’s all. I know you wouldn’t have anything to do with Anton unless Shane’s involved.”

Randy spins the grocery cart around, shakes his head and stares back toward the store. “Didn’t think I still had that in me.”

“You fooled me, Randy.” My voice shakes, and I hug my arms to my body.

He looks back toward me. “How long are you in town for, Dana? You’re still living in L.A., right?”

I haven’t spoken to Randy in years, but it’s the nature of small towns — through the grapevine he’s heard the basics of my life.

“I’ll be here through next weekend. Then it’s back to Smogland.”

Then he notices my tightly clutched arms. “Are you okay, Dana? I want to drive you home. You shouldn’t go alone; I don’t want Anton catching up to you again.”

I want to tell him I’m fine, but I’m not. Anton’s dead eyes and snarling lips come back to me. I can’t speak, but I shake my head.

Randy steps over and gently touches my shoulder. He takes charge once again. “Drive around to the back of the store. I’ll let you out the loading gate. Where are you headed?”

I tell him I’m going up to Dylan and Maria’s. He’s standing tall again. “Okay, I won’t drive you but I’ll follow you until I’m sure you’re safe.” I quickly reach out and hug him. He looks down at his shoes.

I close the trunk and throw myself into the car. Randy folds himself into the passenger seat. I grip the wheel to stop my fluttering hands. Glancing in the rearview mirror to make sure Anton hasn’t magically returned, I see my blood-drained face.

At the loading gate, Randy hops out and gets into an older blue SUV. We convoy out of town, and start up the canyon. Uneven puffs of fog separate from the gray bank and move up the cut like wispy scouts, showing the fog wall the way into the canyon and hills. Just before we reach Dylan’s driveway, I pull to the side of the narrow road and Randy follows.

I trot to his car door. “Thanks Randy. You are my knight.”

A shy smile widens his mouth. “You take care, Dana. Scum like that can be hard to scrape off.”

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In the kitchen, Maria is banging on her computer. Music blares from Marco's room down the hall. I bring in the groceries and start putting things away.

Maria closes the laptop's lid and sighs. She spies the wine on the counter.

"I didn't buy a great meal, but I got the most important side dish." I put another bottle on the counter.

She stands and opens a nearby drawer, extracting a bottle opener. "Red or white?" She holds up two bottles.

"After this day, definitely red."

She cocks her head at me, a question without words.

"Later."