

HIT AND RUN

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Slender Thread
Publishing

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ISBN-13: 978-0-9953713-0-9

For Michael

CHAPTER 1

The rock ledge trembled beneath her feet, quaking with the force of the tons of water surging over it. On the falls' far side saplings clung to the sheer cliff face, its tree-lined summit looming above her, silhouetted by a three-quarter moon.

In the presence of such a wonderment of nature Raina felt small, insignificant. Salvation Falls. Boundary between chaos and calm. Gateway between the tranquil waters of Jessop's Lake and the churning rapids of Moosehead Run. Drawn by the hypnotic lure of its power, she stepped to the granite's edge and looked down.

Moonlight shimmered off the cascading flume, shattering into a thousand diamonds in the canyon plunge pool far below. Not the largest of Maine's many falls – its mouth a mere twenty-foot cleft in the rock, its drop a paltry two-and-a-half stories – but the boulders heaped about the pool's edge would ensure any misstep would be her last.

She inched closer. Loose pebbles rolled underfoot. A flurry of pine needles, nudged by her toe, fluttered soundlessly over the edge.

HIT AND RUN by DIANE HESTER

She closed her eyes. At once phantom laughter echoed around her, remnants of the childhood memories forever linked to this special place. The touch of Rick's hand. His shy smile. The way his hair dried to a tangle of curls whenever they emerged from a swim. Shared afternoons of guileless ease that held no hint of what was to come.

She opened her eyes and stared once again at the pool below. Wind off the lake pressed at her back, compounding the urge to lift her arms and lean toward the gulf until oblivion rose to take her.

What held her in place she couldn't say. Cowardice or a vestige of hope? Whatever the reason, it seemed she wasn't yet ready to embrace the release held forth in that final step.

With a last look at the beckoning drop-off she started back the way she'd come, negotiating the moonlit ledge with newfound caution. She followed the series of granite outcrops to the wooded track where she'd left her car, drove the quarter mile back to the road, and turned for home.

Her detour to the falls had been spur of the moment. A mistake, she now realized, giving her a chance to contemplate the state of her life in far too remote and dangerous a setting. She should've gone straight home after the movie.

In the dark she groped along the console in search of a CD to jam in the player. She grabbed the first one her fingers lighted on and promptly dropped it. Leaning aside to feel where it went, she never saw the shadowy figure that darted from the woods.

Until it bounced off the side of her car.

CHAPTER 2

On the dark wooded road she screeched to a halt and sat clutching the wheel in a death grip. That sickening thud. That jolt of something hitting her fender, something big. A deer? Had to be. Oh god, what if she'd killed it? Worse, what if she'd only injured it?

Raina looked in the rearview mirror and felt the air in her lungs turn to ice. Bathed in the bloody glow of her brake lights, the body lying in the road was human.

No! "Oh my god! How could... Where did..."

Her heart battered against her ribs.

Seconds to grope for a rational thought, then she snatched up her bag. With trembling hands she rifled through its contents; fumbled, dropped, recovered her phone—

Light flooded the car's interior. She squinted as the passenger door swung open. A rush of cold air. A figure folded itself through the opening, collapsed on the seat.

And a stranger sat there staring back at her.

She caught but a snapshot of his face – wild dark eyes, patrician nose, features twisted in a grimace of pain... Then the door swung shut, plunging them into darkness again.

"Drive," he said.

Shock and disbelief held her frozen. Tearing her gaze from the aberration, she checked the mirror. The body lying in the road was gone.

“Are you crazy? You shouldn’t be walking around. Wait till the ambulance gets here before—”

“No ambulance.” The man looked back. “Just drive, damn it.”

“What, to the hospital? I can’t leave the scene of an accident. I have to report this, I have to call—”

Ripped from her hand, her phone went sailing out into the night. He turned from the window, the gun he clutched aimed at her face. “I said ‘drive’.”

A mile down the road her thoughts were in turmoil, her breath coming in short punches, the steering wheel greasy with sweat. A man with a gun. Sitting in her car. A man peering back over his shoulder.

“What’s back there?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why won’t you let me call an ambulance?” In the feeble glow of the dashboard lights she saw him wince, his jaw clench tight.

“This is insane. You’re obviously hurt. You need help. You could be bleeding internally, go into shock. At least let me take you—”

“What part of ‘just drive’ don’t you understand?” The gun waved closer.

She swallowed. “Fine. Drive where?”

No answer this time. He turned away. With a stifled groan he leaned toward the door.

Raina stole glances aside as she drove. He looked to be wearing a tweed jacket and pleated pants. Clearly not a hiker or fisherman. His jaw was clean-shaven, his dark hair longish but not unkempt. If they’d met on the street she might think him a teacher, a businessman maybe.

So where had he come from? She'd seen no car. No houses out here as far as she knew – this side of the lake was undeveloped. Not even cabins. Just a few boat shacks engulfed in acres of primal forest.

She peered at the tree trunks strobing past. What could be roaming these woods that would frighten him? Force a grown man of thirty, thirty-five, hale and hearty – until she'd slammed into him – to run out on the road without even looking. The gun, though hardly a hunter's weapon, would still protect him from scavenging bears, the odd coyote, a rutting moose. Unless...

Oh, god, those dilated pupils. Shock or delusion? Crack? Something harder? A drug-crazed madman had hijacked her car? An escaped lunatic? A wanted crim—

She yelped when something flopped in her lap. His hand. The gun still gripped lightly in his fingers. His body slumped against the seat.

She held her breath, fighting not to panic at the feel of the dead weight across her leg. If she startled him now, if he jolted awake, he might squeeze the trigger and accidentally shoot her.

She leaned forward to glimpse his face. His eyes were closed. Out cold by the look. But no way to tell how deeply. If she moved would he wake? Then again, if her shriek hadn't roused him...

She straightened, twisting her grip on the steering wheel. This could be it. Her one and only chance to get him to the hospital.

Or pull the car over and get the hell out!

CHAPTER 3

Gravel crunched beneath the tires. Raina eased the car to a stop on the shoulder and cut the engine.

The man beside her still hadn't moved. Was he dead? No, in the silence she could hear him breathing.

Beyond the window darkness beckoned, the safety of the forest just a few feet away. A refuge she would never reach unless she could get his hand off her lap.

With the tips of her fingers she pinched a fold of his jacket sleeve, careful not to catch the flesh beneath, and slowly lifted his hand from her thigh. The gun slid to the floor with a clunk.

She froze, his cuff still gripped in her fingers.

Nothing. No movement, no fluttering eyelids, no change in breathing.

She lowered his arm across his lap.

When he didn't stir, she eased her handbag from the space between them, slid the keys from the ignition, and curled her fingers around the door handle.

The light! She reached up and switched it off.

Door open, she regarded the stranger one last time. Grab the

gun? Throw it away and head for the hospital? Even without a weapon, if he woke and became enraged...

The man beside her let out a groan.

She launched to her feet and ran blindly into the forest.

Pain. A razor slashing his side, prying a tortured groan from his throat.

He reached for the source. Sticky wetness suffused his shirt. He raised the hand before his face but could make out only its basic outline in the mire of shadows filling the car.

As he stared, his fingers and the blood they were smeared with came into focus, awash in a strengthening glow of light. He straightened and turned in the seat.

Headlights were coming up the road behind him.

His heart leapt to a thready gallop, furnishing a burst of mental clarity. Beside him the driver's seat was empty, the woman gone – he leaned to grope along the steering column – and she'd taken the keys.

Another look back. His pursuers were still a half mile off but coming up fast. How far would he get on foot? Maybe if he could staunch the bleeding...

An open box sat on the car's rear seat. He pulled it toward him, felt inside and came up with a handful of woolen hats. Stuffing the handful into his shirt, he clamped it to his side with his elbow and opened the door.

He lifted his legs out, tried to stand. Blackness not of the night engulfed him. He dropped back, clenching his jaw till it passed.

He squinted at the light rapidly turning night into day. He had his answer – he'd never outrun them. The best he could hope for was to keep them from finding the thing they were after.

He pulled it from his pocket and shoved it beneath the seat.

The moon stippled fallow light through gaps in the forest canopy. Enough that Raina could make out the trunks of trees but not their lower clawing branches. Her face was stinging and raked with scratches before she'd gone a dozen yards. Still, she was safe. Even if the man revived, he'd never find her out here in the darkness.

A flicker of light through the trees caught her eye. Out on the road a car was approaching, coming from the same direction she had. It cleared the bend a short way back and began to lose speed.

Holding her breath, she watched it slow and veer off to pull up behind her own. Someone thinking she'd broken down, stopping to help?

The engine shut off. Car doors slammed. Footsteps on gravel.

She stood twisting the strap of her handbag. Go back? Call out to them? Reveal herself? They'd have a phone. She could get help.

No, she felt safe where she was for the moment. They'd look in her car, see the injured man and call 911. And when the ambulance and police arrived, *then* she'd come out and show herself.

And if the man with the gun woke up before that? Started shooting? Took these people hostage in place of her? And if they had a child in the car...?

"Damn!" She started back for the road.

Ahead through the trees, in the wash of headlights, something moved. A figure walking from her car to the one behind. The injured man or one of the others?

The person got in behind the wheel and slammed the door.

She quickened her pace.

The engine revved.

She ran for the road, stopped short of stepping out on the shoulder, and stood frowning as the car sped away. How could

HIT AND RUN by DIANE HESTER

they just drive off like that? Hadn't they seen the injured man?

She turned to the darkened hulk of her car. No silhouette in the passenger's seat.

She eased closer, damned the crunch of her shoes on the gravel, and leaned down to peer through the driver's door.

Empty.

A bolt of fresh fear. She straightened and scanned the forest around her, straining to see into the impenetrable shadows. Was he there? Watching? Or had he run off? Considering the state he was in, how far could he get?

From across the road – the snap of a twig. Rustling, as something moved through the undergrowth. Something big.

She jumped in her car, locked the door, and sped for home.

CHAPTER 4

Her neighbors' houses, what few there were on her quiet cul-de-sac, huddled back among the trees in darkness. As did her own. No-one waiting up to see she got home all right. No-one to get her a nice tall brandy and sit holding her hand while she drank it, relating the startling events of her evening.

Raina buzzed the garage open, coasted inside and cut the engine. In the deafening silence she sat taking long deep breaths as the garage door slowly closed behind her.

Somehow she'd managed to make it home, despite the tremors that rocked her frame, the painful knot that twisted her gut. Reactions totally understandable. She'd had an accident, been car-jacked on a deserted road, and had a gun aimed in her face. Naturally she was upset, who wouldn't be?

She gripped the wheel tighter and closed her eyes. But of course that wasn't it at all. It wasn't the man or the road or the gun. It was the memories this night had evoked.

A sob fought to crawl up her throat but she swallowed it down. Incredible how all the old feelings, lying still and dormant so long, could be so easily resurrected. And all by a single unanswered

question: had she caused another man's death?

She thumped the steering wheel with her fist. "It wasn't my fault. He came out of nowhere. He never even looked!"

The words did nothing to ease her distress. What did it matter that circumstances were different this time? Who would believe she wasn't to blame? *Who would believe it could happen again?*

In her rush to grab her handbag she knocked it off the seat instead. It landed upside down, spilling everything onto the floor. She bent and swept it all back in.

And spotted the dark wet stain on the carpet.

Her breath choked off. *You have to report it. He might still be there, lying unconscious in the woods somewhere. They'll send someone. Maybe they'll find him, take him for the treatment he needs.*

And then?

With a shudder she straightened, clutched her handbag to her chest. She climbed from the car, crossed the garage to the breezeway door, and entered the house. In the kitchen she tossed her bag on the counter, grabbed rubber gloves from under the sink, cleanser and paper towels from the cupboard, then returned to the garage.

Her feet dragged her slowly toward the car. Hand on the door, she steeled herself and yanked it open.

Spatters of blood down the side of the seat trailed to the larger blotch on the floor. For a moment the sight held her transfixed. What part of her car could've cut him so badly? Perhaps it had happened when he'd hit the pavement? Or maybe when...

She shook herself mentally. What did it matter? The blood was here; she had to get rid of it. She swallowed hard and set to work.

With every spot of gore she removed, she felt a bit calmer. Her thoughts at last like a normal person's, like those of someone without a past. Call the police? What would be the point? The guy

had run off. She'd offered to help him and he'd refused. End of story. She'd done all she could.

She wadded up the soiled paper towels, dumped them in the bin, and closed the lid. All she'd accomplish by going to the police would be to get herself in trouble. If they didn't find the man – a distinct possibility – how could she prove he'd had a gun? That he'd *forced* her to leave the scene of an accident?

And even if they found him, how could she be sure he'd confirm her version of what had happened? He could tell the police she'd run him down and then driven off. It would simply be her word against his. And with her history, who were they more likely to believe?

She stepped around to the front of her car and slid her hand along the fender. A slight depression marred the finish. The point of impact. She'd expected the dent to be much larger. But then she'd only sideswiped the guy, not hit him full on.

Still, the evidence was plain to see. And if a forensics team went over the interior they'd no doubt find the traces of blood she hadn't quite managed to scour from the carpet. And because she'd tried to remove those stains her actions would look all the more suspicious.

She bowed her head and breathed through a sudden wave of dizziness. Clearly she wasn't thinking straight after all. She needed to talk this through with someone. Someone who'd always been good in a crisis. Someone who'd once said he'd always be there for her.

Moments later, seated in the kitchen, house phone in hand, she listened as her call stopped ringing and a distant answering machine kicked in. The sound of Brad's voice drove a spike through her chest. She hung up without leaving a message.

Eleven fifteen on a Friday night. Where could he be? Not two months ago—

HIT AND RUN by DIANE HESTER

She pushed to her feet. The hell with Brad. She could handle this herself. It wasn't that big of a crisis anyway. *You can't ever tell.* She'd hit a man but he was all right. *They'll never believe.* He couldn't have run off into the woods if—

She stopped. *And the blood?*

Her gaze returned to the phone on the wall. But no matter how loud her conscience screamed she couldn't bring herself to pick it up. It didn't matter how different the circumstances were this time. In a town the size of Brockton Mills people didn't forget such things. Nor did the police.

She closed her eyes. Especially the police.

CHAPTER 5

In the depths of his pain the woman came to him. "Get up," she whispered. "Keep moving, don't sleep. They might come back."

He reached a hand toward her glowing countenance. The image dissolved. In its place, the moon shone down through the trees.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed himself to a sitting position. The forest shadows were silent around him. His angel of mercy, the woman from the car, had been a delusion of shock and pain. Worse things to wake up to he supposed.

Like not waking up at all.

Delusion or not, her words had been wise. He battled to his feet and worked his way slowly back toward the road.

At the shoulder he peered out from the undergrowth. No cars visible in either direction. He was safe. For the moment. Of all the blind incredible luck. If one could call being hit by a car *lucky*.

In relief, he lowered himself to a log, using the moment to summon his reserves. Yes, she might not have done it intentionally but his guardian angel had saved his life; not once but twice.

Though he'd had the presence of mind to grab the gun before fleeing her car, he'd dropped it soon after and hadn't been able to find it in the dark. Not a dozen steps further he'd collapsed half conscious to the ground and there he'd lain, unable to move. A sitting duck. Watching one of them check her car as the other drove on. Listening with his heart in his throat to the sound of the man's approaching footsteps.

His pursuer had nearly been on top of him when the woman had returned and driven off, drawing the man back to the road. There he'd placed a frantic call and a moment later his accomplice returned and the two had taken off together. Leaving the very person they were hunting lying just paces away in the shadows.

He closed his eyes. Yes, if not for the woman...

His relief took a hit. Though her timely arrival had been fortunate for him, the

same could hardly be said for her. If the men had caught up with her, if they'd even just gotten her license plate number...

As he fought to blot out the ensuing thoughts, he recalled the woman's huge frightened eyes, her cowl of flame-shot auburn hair. He hadn't meant to drag her into this but what choice had he had?

He pushed himself up, turned from the road, and started walking, enveloped once more in the forest stillness. Not the direction he wanted to go but he had no choice about that either. He couldn't go back. They might be waiting. They might...

For an instant a pain far worse than his injuries choked off his breath. The thought of simply walking away, leaving behind...

No, he had to keep going. The thing he'd left in the woman's car was his sole objective now. That's all that mattered, getting it back. More importantly, making sure *they* never got it.

But how would he ever find her again? He hadn't even noticed the make of her car let alone her license plate number. All he remembered was a little toy moose dangling from her rearview mirror. What hope would he have...

The box on her back seat appeared in his mind.

A box. So what? What could that tell him?

Not an empty box, a box of items all the same. *Like an order that might get sent to a shop.*

He reached in his shirt, pulled out the mass of half-sodden wool. The hat closest to his skin was soaked through with blood, but the other two had barely a spot. He discarded the first and held a second one up in the moonlight – to reveal a name embroidered on the side.