

# ONE



I FLOAT IN the Pacific Ocean.

As I straddle my longboard, cool water lapping around me, I watch surfers up and down the coast take on baby waves, four-footers that will carry them a short distance before breaking into froth and foam.

I'm waiting for something better.

The sun beats down on the slip of my neck between my wet suit and hairline. The tender skin burns, but I don't dare move to massage it. Seagulls circle overhead, squawking over the swilling water. They dive to the surface, then soar back up, carrying scraps of seaweed and tiny fish.

And then I see it—in the distance, coming toward me, coming *for* me. My gaze flickers over the green-blue water as I watch the wave take shape. It's not a three-footer or even

a four-footer. No, it's much better. My fingers drum against my thighs, and I lean forward, gnawing my sun-chapped lip.

As the water climbs, mounting higher and higher, my body thrums with anticipation. Waves are mild in Santa Cruz. It's rare to catch an overhead one, for me anything taller than five ten. But the wave coming for me now, the wave rattling toward me with unfettered determination, looks closer to ten feet, which would make it the tallest ride I've ever had.

I know I should feel fear—fear of a riptide dragging me under, fear of losing control and cracking my head against my board's sharp fin—but all I feel is overwhelming adrenaline. This is it. My miracle wave.

The water hurtles forward with growing fury. I slide from my sitting position onto my stomach, my lower body pressed firmly against the board, hips taut and feet pointed. With a practiced arm, I paddle to the right so that my board spins to face the shore. I take two short breaths and then a single deep one, a ritual I've been doing since I was a little kid. And then, before I have time to second-guess or readjust, the wave is right behind me. I jump to my feet. The cold spray is everywhere, consuming and empowering. I'm riding the wave, a beautiful and terrifying barrel wave that arcs over my head so that I'm parallel to a wall of rushing water, the nose of my board just seconds ahead of the break.

But then my lead falters. The wall of water becomes a dome of water, surrounding me on all sides, and then I do the most reckless thing possible: I panic.

I should submit to the wave, dive under and wait for it to pass overhead. Instead, I try to keep going, which is basically impossible when ten feet of water crashes on top of you. The force slams into me, submerges me deep beneath the surface, cutting off all oxygen and any sense of up and down as I swirl like a helpless scrap of plankton. My board flips up behind me and knocks me hard in the side. I instinctively gasp and salt water rushes in, burning my throat.

*Air. Air. Air.*

I claw my way back to the choppy surface, gasping and wrestling onto my board for support. My heart pounds, my side throbs, and seawater clogs my ears. And in the distance, the remains of my miracle wave rocket toward shore without me.



I paddle back to the coast in defeat. Eric greets me. A sweatband pushes back his curly blond hair, so I can clearly see the amusement in his eyes. “Holy shit, Anise.” He pats me on the back. “Rad fucking ride.”

“Shut up.” I lift my surfboard, then spear it into the sand. “Like you haven’t been pitted a million times.” I unzip the top portion of my wet suit and tug it off my shoulders, letting the fabric hang around my waist.

“Dude, that was a compliment. No need to get your bikini in a twist.” He grins at me, and I bristle. “Seriously, though.

Chill. Wiping out on a ten-footer isn't going wreck your reputation of most awesome surfer ever."

He's not just flattering me. I *am* an awesome surfer—the best in our group of friends, a dozen or so of us who get together almost every day during summer from low tide to high. "I know," I finally say. "But it's still infuriating. That was such a good wave, and I almost had it." I shift on my feet, then glance back at the towering swells. "I'm going again."

I'm reaching for my surfboard when Eric places a hand on my shoulder. "No, you're not," he says. "We promised everyone we'd meet them at the Shak for lunch, and we're already like an hour late."

His hand lingers for a moment, hot against my bare skin, and I have to force myself not to lean into the touch—this is Eric, my friend of seventeen years; the kid I took bubble baths with as a toddler when his mom watched me overnight; the absurd preteen who, when I first got my period, made a mini surfboard out of my pads and tried to float it on shallow waves; the person who has spent countless rainy afternoons on my couch, in pajamas, watching surf competitions on ESPN2 and stuffing down days' worth of junk food in one sitting.

This is also Eric, my recently single and unfairly attractive friend, whose six-pack is glistening at me like a fucking Hollister billboard.

"Fine." I force myself to pull away from his touch. "Let's go food."

I hate to leave the ocean on a sour note, especially when it's

offering up glorious waves, but I have a bad habit of ditching my friends for surf. So Eric and I both grab our boards and head down the shore toward the Shak, which is technically called Suzie and Sal's Surf Shak, but all of the locals (and the yearly tourists who think they're locals) go with the shorthand version.

I watch the foamy water lap onto the coast as we walk, then notice a glint in the sun. I yelp and drop to my knees, scavenging through the sand.

"What?" Eric asks.

"I think I see one!" I dig, only to find a shard of a beer bottle. "Fail." I pick it up to throw away later, wondering if it's from a recent bonfire or washed up with the tide. Eric and I collect sea marbles—smooth, colorful glass orbs the ocean churns out, so rare we only find about one a year. We have a tradition: whenever one of us finds a sea marble, we give it to the other person.

"Bummer," Eric says.

"Definitely a bummer," I agree.

We continue down the beach and approach the Shak, with its familiar tin awning coated in green paint and smattering of wooden benches and umbrellas staked in the sand. The majority of the lunch crowd has already dispersed, but our friends are still planted at a table, chowing down on hot dogs slathered in pineapple chunks and hot sauce, fish tacos drizzled with wasabi balsamic vinaigrette, and my personal favorite, watermelon and papaya fruit salad mixed with cayenne pepper and crushed sugar.

“Hey there, strangers,” Tess says. She’s Samoan, and even though it’s still the beginning of summer, her skin is already a deeper shade of bronze than usual. She holds a veggie dog in one hand and an almost-surely-not-virgin strawberry daiquiri in the other. Apparently day drinking during summer is perfectly appropriate and not at all a sign of early onset alcoholism. “How was...*surfing*?”

“Fine,” I say, then shoot her a look that I hope conveys, *I love you, but shut the fuck up.*

Tess is my best friend. We’ve been attached at the hip since we could walk the half-mile distance to each other’s house. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of telling her I’ve been thinking about Eric (or more precisely, the perfect planes of Eric’s shoulders as he paddles out to catch a wave) as potentially more than a friend lately.

“Anise Sawyer ate it on a ten-footer,” Eric says.

A chorus of “no ways” and “oh shits” erupts from the table, and I cross my arms and stare at Eric. “Really?” I ask. “You had to tell them?”

“Oh, come on.” He puts an arm around my shoulder and pulls me into a half hug, which leaves me wondering how the hell he smells like spearmint after being soaked in briny water for five hours. “It makes us all feel better to know you’re not infallible. Besides, you should be bragging, not hiding.”

“Can you go into specific detail?” Marie asks. We’ve been buddies ever since we both brought surfboards to first grade show-and-tell. Her arm is wrapped around her girlfriend,

Cassie, who makes up for her five-two height with the most impressive set of abs and biceps on the West Coast. They'll come in handy when she heads off to boot camp for the navy at the end of summer.

"No, I can't," I say stiffly. I know I sound like an asshole. I know I should laugh with the rest of them, play off my fail like it's no big deal. But, well, surfing is the one thing in this world I'm good at. Like really good at. And I love it. So whenever I screw up a ride, it stabs hard, like how an argument with someone you love cuts deeper than an argument with a stranger.

"Okay, okay you guys," Tess says. "We actually have important details to discuss."

"We do?" I ask.

"Oh, yes. Surf Break."

Around the table, everyone cheers with variations of, "Fuck, yeah!"

I say it perhaps loudest of all because Surf Break is *fuck, yeah* amazing. It's a festival held at the end of every summer, a giant three-day party posted up right in our backyards. Professional surfers come in droves to perform demos, local bands and a few famous headliners play on temporary stages constructed on the beach, and dozens of food trucks flood the area. Not to mention the thousands of drunk, sunburned festival attendees.

My friends and I have been attending since we could toddle down the beach in plastic orange floaties. And as soon as we

were old enough to ditch our parents, the festival got a lot more interesting.

“All right,” Tess continues. She pulls a tattered notepad from her enormous yellow-striped beach bag. Since she prefers sunning over surfing, she always comes to the beach stocked with supplies: sunscreen, novels, her sketchbook, colored pencils, and more. “We have one weekend of nonstop partying to plan. First item on the agenda: Who wants to host the bonfire?”

“I’ll do it,” I say.

“Really?” Tess raises her eyebrows. Most years I keep my Surf Break schedule commitment-free, leaving plenty of time to go off on my own, watch the demos, learn some new moves from the visiting professionals and amateurs alike. But since so many of my friends are leaving for colleges all over the country at the end of summer—or, in Cassie’s case, enlisting—this will be our last Surf Break all together. I don’t want to miss a minute of it.

I nod. “Really.”

“Awesome.” She tips her drink in my direction, takes a sip, and then writes on her notepad while going on to discuss an absurdly long list of other details.

A few minutes into the discussion, I nudge Eric’s shoulder. “Back to the waves?”

We haven’t eaten yet, but I have a couple of power bars that will sustain us for a few more hours. And as much as I love Tess, the idea of surfing with Eric is infinitely more appealing

than listening to her discuss the important advantages of Kraft *jumbo* marshmallows over regular Kraft marshmallows. He nudges me back with a playful smile. “If you insist.”

“Oh, I do.”

As we leave the Shak and head back to the surf, his fingers graze against mine.

This time I don’t pull away.



Six hours later, I’m trailing up the sandy wooden walk to my house. My surfboard is damp and gritty under my tired arm, but the strain is good, the kind that tells me my muscles are growing, the kind that tells me this year I’ll be able to paddle longer and harder than ever before. The sun is half-set, the Santa Cruz horizon a mess of orange and red with the faintest hint of violet. The ocean reflects the light and resembles a giant bowl of pink lemonade.

I’m late for dinner. Very late. If the sun has almost slipped away, it must be close to nine. But Dad won’t mind. He understands the call of the water in the summer, when I can surf all day instead of cramming in a couple of measly hours before and after school. The few times he’s lectured me for staying out too late, I calmly reminded him that he was the one who bought his little girl a surfboard when she was seven.

And besides, there was no chance I was going to come

home early tonight. Eric and I surfed together all day, catching wave after wave, taking breaks on the shore, digging our toes into the damp sand while discussing the details of each ride. As the day progressed, I felt him pulling closer. It wasn't my imagination—the way I'd catch him watching me out of the corner of his eye, the way he'd sit next to me so that his bare shoulder would press against mine. Maybe wanting my friend of seventeen years isn't so wild. Maybe I'm not the only one wanting it.

I readjust my grip on my board as I approach home, a ramshackle one-story house perched right behind the dunes. It's a fourth-generation inheritance from my great-great-grandparents, a small and crumbling structure sitting on about a million dollars' worth of prime beachfront property. Sometimes when the bills start stacking up, Dad considers selling and moving further inland, but then the construction company he owns will pick up a few extra jobs, and we're in the clear.

Before heading inside, I grab our mail because Dad never remembers to get it. I tuck the stack of letters under my free arm and head into my garage. Like a true beachfront family, we keep the vehicles in the driveway and the gear in the garage. The entire two-car space is packed with surfboards, kayaks, paddles, as well as buckets and boogie boards for when my younger cousins visit, not to mention decades' worth of beach chairs, umbrellas, and extra towels hardened from years of salt water.

After dropping off my surfboard, I enter the house through

the garage door, which is unlocked like always. I call out, “You home?”

“In here!” Dad calls back.

As I follow his voice to the kitchen, I pick through the mail to see if *SURFER Magazine* came. It’s mostly bills and junk, but then I spot a postcard. The front side shows a picture of some bar called Kelsey’s in Reno, Nevada. I flip it over. The backside reads *Dear Anise* in handwriting I haven’t seen for years.

My mom’s handwriting.

“You coming?” Dad calls.

“One second!” My voice cracks and I clear my throat with a quick, tight cough. I slip the postcard into the entryway table’s junk drawer. I’ll read it in private after dinner, away from Dad’s prying eyes and questions: *Are you okay, sweetheart? Let’s talk about it. I love you.*

I head into the kitchen with the rest of the mail and find Dad sitting at the small, round table. A two-person family doesn’t need much eating space. When company comes over, we sit out on the deck, relaxing on the weathered patio furniture and watching the waves.

Instead of joining him at the table, I hoist myself up onto the kitchen counter, letting my feet dangle. I grab an apple from the fruit bowl and take a huge bite. Hunger never strikes in the water, but it sure as hell makes up for it later. I glance back at the entryway. My hand shakes—more of a tremor really, like my blood sugar is low. Hopefully Dad doesn’t notice.

“What’s up?” I ask and direct my attention back to him, taking another bite of the apple.

He looks more stressed than usual—the three lines on his forehead crunched a little deeper, his shoulders sagged a little lower. For forty-one, Dad’s in great shape, mostly from working construction during the day and then running the beach and practicing yoga in the evenings. But that hasn’t kept his hair from turning salt and pepper or the arthritis in his knees from kicking in. “Well...” he says slowly.

Fuck. My grip on the counter tightens. Dad is a come-right-out-and-say-it type of guy. For him, open and honest communication is the solution to just about every problem. He almost never picks his words carefully, and when he does, it’s never to share good news.

He leans forward on the table and clasps his hands together. “Now I don’t want you to worry,” he says, “because she’s going to be perfectly all right, but—”

My mouth goes dry. I struggle to swallow a bit of apple stuck in my throat. *She*. He must be talking about my mom. Something happened to my mom. I fight the urge to jump off the counter and grab her postcard. I will myself to not care. This is the woman who abandoned us and who still *repeatedly* abandons us. The woman who took off before I started walking to follow a band no one had ever heard of around the country. The woman who came back full of presents and apologies when I was three. The woman who left again weeks later because she wanted to work on some fucking riverboat

casino in Louisiana. The woman who has been in and out of my life so many times that sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night wondering if she exists at all.

“—Aunt Jackie was in a car accident earlier today.”

Oh. *Oh*. A confusing mixture of relief and anxiety floods through me. “Honey, are you okay?” Dad asks.

“Umm, yeah.” My fingers tap rapid beats against my legs. I need out of my wet suit. The tight fabric constricts. I jump from the counter and peel it off. “What happened? Was it serious? Is she okay?”

“She’ll be okay,” Dad says. “But it was serious. Both her legs were crushed. Severely. She’ll be in the hospital for weeks for surgery and recovery and then in a wheelchair when she comes home.”

“*Fuck*,” I breathe out the word slowly. Dad doesn’t mind when I curse. He says if his teenage daughter is going to have one vice, it might as well be a sailor’s mouth. “That sucks. Shit, that sucks.”

And it really does. I’m closer to Aunt Jackie, my shit-excuse-for-a-mom’s sister, than I am to my actual shit-excuse-for-a-mom. I sure as hell see a lot more of her. She has three young kids—twin boys and a girl—and every summer they scavenge up the cheapest tickets they can find and come stay with us at the beach for a couple of weeks. Money is tight for them because Aunt Jackie’s husband passed away about six years ago from a heart attack, but they always make the summer trip a priority.

Even though it interrupts my summer surf time, I love having my little cousins around. We trail up and down the beach, hunt for seashells, build sandcastles, and ride boogie boards. Since they only come once a year, the ocean is still magical to them. I love seeing it through their eyes as opposed to the eyes of Santa Cruz locals.

“Is she okay?” I ask. “Like awake and stuff? Can I call her or should I wait until tomorrow? How’s Emery? And the boys? Do you have her number? I always forget to save it in my phone.”

Dad doesn’t answer right away. Oh god, what if the kids were involved? Dread knots my stomach. “Honey,” he continues, “you know how I said Aunt Jackie will be in a hospital and then a wheelchair?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, it’s summer, so your cousins are home. And Jacks will be in the hospital for a few weeks and then in a wheelchair for even longer. She won’t be able to take care of them on her own.”

“Oh,” I say. “Oh...”

“We’re going to spend the summer in Nebraska helping out your cousins and Aunt Jackie. I’m going to have to pick up some work while I’m there, so I’ll need your help with the kids during the day.”

Spend the summer in Nebraska? I’ve never left California, much less spent weeks away. Why would I, when everything I love—my friends, Dad, the ocean—are all within a half mile

of my bedroom? But of course I want to help. Of course I want to be there for my aunt and little cousins, even if the idea of being that far away from home makes me wish I could take my wet suit off a second time.

“O-kay,” I say slowly.

Dad clears his throat. “Sweetheart, when I say we’re going to spend the summer in Nebraska, I mean...*all* summer.”

“*All* summer?” I pause. “Like what part of *all* summer do you mean?”

He rushes out the next words. “We leave tomorrow, and we’ll be back a week before school starts.”

“A *week* before?”

He nods.

And then it hits me. Coming home a week before school starts means I’ll miss the entire summer. It means I’ll miss Surf Break, my last chance to spend three nonstop days with some of my closest friends. By the time I get back home to start my senior year, half of my friends will already be on their way out of town.

I stare down at my wet suit. It’s crumpled in a pile on the kitchen floor. Tomorrow I’ll yank it back on and head out to the surf with the sun rising behind me. Tomorrow I’ll meet up with friends. Catch wave after wave. Make bets on the best ride. Eat veggie burgers and plantain chips at the Shak. Tomorrow I’ll have salt in my hair and sand between my toes.

“You should probably pack tonight,” Dad says, though I

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can barely hear him. Through the open window, the ocean's amplified. It's calling to me. It won't let me leave. It won't let this happen. I cannot spend the entire summer in Nebraska. "Flight's tomorrow morning at eleven."