

Chapter Three

BEACH CLOSED

ONE YEAR AGO

42ND STREET, NEWPORT BEACH, CALIFORNIA

SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD BODYSURFERS HARLOWE Pylott and Matt Riverstone would have thought twice about ditching classes that morning if they had taken their science teacher's lecture on the consequences of a domino effect more seriously. For Harlowe, the ultimate high was standing at the water's edge, waiting for the precise moment in which to dive into the rip that would carry him out to the twenty-foot waves pumping in from the north. Riverstone wasn't quite so sure. "We could die out there, pard," he warned Harlowe as his bright hazel eyes scanned the shoreline with worry.

The sun had barely peeked over the Santa Ana Mountains when the lifeguards closed every west-facing beach from Pt. Magu all the way south to the Mexican border. But on days like this, when the swells were marching in like an invading army as far out as the eye could see, Harlowe and Riverstone didn't read signs. They kicked them over and stomped on their faces.

"Man up," Harlowe grunted, appearing unconcerned as his clear blue eyes studied the great glass walls of unbounded power. The waves had no rivals. They were unstoppable.

Harlowe and Riverstone were both tall and lean, with boyish good looks, although Riverstone would be the first to admit he was the uncontested face man of the two. This was the first day Harlowe

was *legally* able to drive to the beach without an adult in his hand-me-down gold VW bug that was older than he was. Harlowe wore a tattered pair of dark blue No Fear surf trunks; Riverstone brought out the heavy guns for Harlowe's *legal* solo flight, wearing a pair of brand-new, bright red and yellow paisley Billabongs.

Already attached to their feet were pairs of thirty-inch black Navy Seal rocket fins that looked like they fit Godzilla easier than their size twelve feet. Approaching six feet even, and still growing, Riverstone was an inch taller than his childhood friend. They had just started their junior year at Lakewood High and had no idea what they were going to be when they *grew up*.

Riverstone tried a different tack. "The babes won't be out for a couple of hours, pard. We should wait. You could find a date for tonight."

"I'm not waiting."

"You're crazy, you know that?"

Knowing he would have a better chance arguing with the sun, Riverstone twisted around, taking his eyes off the giants for a moment while he scanned the nearly empty beach. A heavy shore mist from the swells kept them from seeing too far in either direction. Except for a couple of dog walkers and curious wave watchers, Harlowe and Riverstone appeared to be the only ones along the shoreline and, thus, with no common sense.

"What happened to Wiz, by the way?" Riverstone asked. "Does he know where to take Baby when our bodies come in belly up? The drift is pretty strong, dude."

"He knows."

"Well, I don't want to walk three miles back from the Wedge in wet trunks," Riverstone whined.

Harlowe didn't care.

After Riverstone had aired his concerns, he spotted a goddess materializing out of the morning mist, running along the soft sand. She had the strength and the stride of an Olympic runner. Her long

yellow hair rose and fell in great waves as her long, gazelle-like legs propelled her along in a slow, rhythmic gait. She continued south in her powder blue Nike sweats, her bright green eyes glancing more than once their way.

Riverstone moaned. *I'm in love.*

Running beside her with incredible ease was a small creature that defied logic as to whether it was a dog or some prank Mother Nature had designed in jest. The “undog” cantered along on its four padded feet, whipping its tail playfully as its bulging yellow eyes and parabolic ears scanned the horizon as though searching for apparent threats.

After a heavy breath Riverstone leaned over to Harlowe and asked, “Did you catch that doe, pard? She was so hot, Harlowe, I would go to the end of the galaxy for a babe like that.”

Harlowe said nothing. The giants were his only concern.

Suddenly, a bright orange lifeguard vehicle roared up fast and skidded to a halt at the top of the berm just twenty feet away from the two bodysurfers. The sound of breaking wood split the air as the four-wheel Pathfinder, with big knotty tires, demolished the A-frame sign that was lying flat in the sand. Broken pieces of wood tore through the undercarriage, making a loud crunching sound.

Harlowe ignored the noise. Nothing could disturb the moment. His long, tight, nut brown curls with sun-touched ends waved freely in the onshore wind, in sharp contrast to his keen blue eyes that were so focused he seemed to be locked in some form of symbiotic communication with the giants.

“What was that, Kyle?” the driver of the emergency vehicle shouted as he jumped out and slammed his door. “Did you kick that sign over, kid?”

Riverstone smiled at the overzealous guards in their official-looking dark blue sweatshirts, white crosses, and red swim trunks as he gave them a friendly wave and pointed south. “Who’s the babe, brah? She had legs up to her neck!”