

Chapter One – *Mendocino*

Crane's dreams brimmed with water, and this one was no exception.

From where he stood, toes hugging a trail that snaked down to the ocean, he could already feel the chilled sapphire flowing over him, tingling his muscles, nipping his exposed skin. His eyes dropped to his daughter, the tall figure creeping over tidepools with a surfboard under her arm. In less than a minute she'd be out in the thick of it, paddling hard.

He panned the bay. The swells were fat wrinkles, curving as they inched forward through a heavy mist. He watched the nearest wrinkle curve, tower, and then fall into a churning, roaring white. When the broken wave struck, the rocks on shore rattled like marbles, shaking as water surged, rose, then spilled backward in a dozen waterfalls. Crane hugged the longboard beneath his bicep, listening as the rattle climbed from the rock mounds to the cliffs and the tree line.

Out in the water, Aideen was already paddling.

He smiled.

Crane took the rocks carefully, squatting as he lowered the longboard to the dark, frothy water. With a shove and a lunge, he landed prostrate and got to work, reaching one arm over the water and then another. While he paddled, Crane felt the ancient strength in his biceps and shoulders stirring to life, warming like an engine on a subzero morning.

His arms ached but they remembered what to do.

Too old for this he thought, wincing as the spray lashed his face.

Lifting his chin from army-crawl, he saw Aideen out ahead of him, sitting on her board near the breakers, insect-like in her black wetsuit. Even in the water, her hair was unmistakable—strands of crimson, wet and twisted but glowing like a hearth against the stone-gray water. A wave towered, and Crane watched his daughter disappear over the crest. In a minute or two she'd be on her feet and soaring down the next one, red mane swaying behind her like shreds of a Medieval banner.

Fearless, he thought, remembering that Aideen lived for this.

Twenty to the day and invincible.

When a broken wave rolled toward him, Crane reached over the longboard's flank and flipped it over his head. When he sank beneath it, the swishing cold stung his brow and temple like tongs of ice.

Back on the surface, Crane rubbed the warmth back into his face.

Out ahead of him, Aideen rose and fell.

When he turned his head and squinted at the shoreline, he recognized the two figures standing side by side with their feet in the surf. Daren's navy-blue UCLA cap was a bright oval. Daren's wife Ruth, plump and heavy beside her scrawny husband, was fortified against the cold in jeans and a sweatshirt. Even at a distance, the sheer opal eyes, the soft cheeks and sleek, graying hair blowing straight across her face hinted at her regal, Japanese ancestry. Crane waved to his friends and watched them wave back.

On the bluffs beyond them, the rectangular snout of Crane's olive-green Volkswagen Rabbit looked out at them. Beneath the cheap roof rack and the cracked windshield, both high beams lit the beach in blazing triangles.

He frowned.

Why on earth were its *lights on*?

Without warning, a mound of whitewash knocked Crane off the longboard and into the dark, stinging soup. On the surface Crane coughed, gasped, and climbed back on the board—but when he peered back at the shore, everything stopped.

A crowd of people were spilling down the trail.

They scrambled over the rocks to the shoreline, shouting, waving, holding up what had to be bats, or sticks. As Crane's mind scrambled to make sense of it, he thought of a scene from an old T.V. show—a blurred crowd racing across the sand as a main character stumbled in the foreground, stunned and helpless. Except now the fallen character was Daren, down on his back in the surf and kicking upward at a young man swinging a trashcan lid.

What in the hell...

He swam toward them, dragging the longboard behind him. He watched as Ruth ran forward like a linebacker, arms braced to repel the attackers. Somehow, the Rabbit was inching forward on the bluff, its high beams rising like twin suns over the bluff, blinding everything. Blocking the light with a forearm, Crane thrashed the waist-high water, looking around for a longboard that had vanished behind him.

He heard Ruth shouting

“Go Crane! *Swim to her!*”

Crane saw her trudging forward, lifting leg after leg out of the water as molten high beams burned behind them

“What are you waiting for? Go help her!”

Then she was stumbling backward, falling as a masked woman with tattooed sleeves clamped onto her back like a child playing rough. The woman shrieked as she and Ruth crashed against the water. Fighting every instinct to wade toward Ruth and her attacker, Crane turned around.

Aideen was in trouble.

Aiming for the breakers, Crane dove and swam, flailing blindly. He thrashed until his lungs gave out, forcing him to lift his head and gulp air. Up ahead, Aideen’s shortboard bobbed along the surface without a rider.

Oh, God.

Crane turned, thrashed forward.

And then he saw her—the red knob of hair drifting like a mass of seaweed toward the base of an unbroken juggernaut. He saw her tiny hands cutting into the water, inching her closer and closer to the mountain’s base.

Crane swam as hard as he could, stopping when he heard a rustle—the top of the mountain lurching, shifting, and breaking like a fractured glacier. He groaned as thousands of gallons began their fall, tumbling like an avalanche toward his daughter below

“*Aideen!*” He croaked.

But as he shouted, he knew he was too late. The avalanche roared, landing in a burst of spray, right as the knob dipped beneath the surface.

Before he could think of what to do, Crane was right beneath it. Twisting underwater, yanked around by invisible currents, Crane heard the crash echoing like a thousand pins scattering across a wooden floor. As the scattering sharpened, crystalizing to the crunch of glass beneath rubber boots, Crane woke up.

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“Wake up.”

The deep, gravelly voice echoed around the curved aluminum, filling out the bus turned cabin. Crane murmured, his nostrils taking a deep drink of sweetish, musty air. Footsteps thumped past the driver’s seat, and a hollow floor groaned under the weight.

“Shit’s brewing down Highway One,” the voice added. “You and your friends should get moving. Remember that backroad you drove in on?”

Crane nodded, rubbed his eyes.

It was the guard named Ian.

For the first night in a week, he’d slept hard, dipping all the way to his dream about the ocean and his daughter. The dust-caked mattress laid flat on the floor had been a Godsend. He wondered what Jessica would think about chucking the camping gear out of the Rabbit and taking the mattress instead.

“Brought you this.”

Porcelain clattered on a small wooden stool. The floor groaned again as the guard stepped to the gravel outside. Crane sat, stretched his neck, and reached for the mug. As he slid it from the table, he found a sideways slogan, dangling from marionette strings—
‘The DAD father’

No comment, Crane thought, sipping the coffee. Almost on cue, he felt the ache from his swollen, bandaged brow radiating through his crown, his temples. Hadn’t the

sleep helped it? Feeling the threat of a massive migraine, he peeled some of the bandage, hissing in pain.

The voice outside echoed through the missing windows. “You good in there?”

“Fine,” Crane shouted.

“Hurry it up.”

Inhaling sharply, he tore the bandage off.

Crane stuffed his items into the patch worn backpack they’d given him yesterday, just after he’d parked the Rabbit in the grassy clearing past the sign that read *Lord’s Land*. Ready to leave, Crane paused when he noticed the tall mirror at the, streaked with water marks, leaned against the back wall. His reflection filled the frame—salmon-burnt cheeks sagging beneath sharp, hazel eyes, and a bruised, brow and temple, swollen but at least mellowed to light green and purple. Flecks of blood dotted week-old stubble. Crane chuckled, drawing his sweatshirt taut against his paunch. The bulge along the navy-blue fabric was smaller than he expected.

Had the week’s antics shredded some unsightly weight, along with his nerves?

Crane’s fingernails scraped the stitched logo above the pouch: *Los Angeles, 2028*.

The classic Olympic rings overlapping had gone retro, cracking and peeling over a decade of washing. Eyeing the logo, he pulled the sweatshirt off and turned it inside out. With no comb in sight, Crane raked his fingers through the thin tufts of browned but graying hair, wiry from eight hours against the mattress.

Eight hours.

A marathon of rest since he’d left the Triangle, five hundred miles to the south.

What a week.

The smirk in the mirror understood.

As Crane stared at his reflection, he wondered for the hundredth time how Aideen, now pushing thirty-five, would react to his appearance. She’d always been no-nonsense; he had no trouble imagining the kind of quip she’d offer up.

Full scarecrow, huh?

Something like that.

Crane sighed.

Between being hijacked, beaten, and marched forward in a makeshift revolutionary army, this disheveled appearance was the best he could do for a reunion after fifteen years, the culmination of a decade and a half of searching. As he looked right now, he'd have to do.

Assuming he found her; assuming he reached the coordinates within three days, just making the tail end of the ten she'd given him. Assuming it *was* her, his daughter in the flesh, not some phantom beacon and not some imposter who had made up the HAM radio message scrawled on newspaper—the one he'd memorized but still covered in plastic for the accompanying journey. Despite knowing every word, he'd kept it on him, guarding the message like some sacred relic.

And that wasn't far off.

As Crane had realized almost a week ago, the message itself was a miracle—one that a rich, educated agnostic of fifty-odd years could readily believe in.

That girl, he pondered, letting the thoughts drift back over her childhood.

Talk about miracles.

When the state's long-rumored secession from the United States broke ground, she'd just emptied her dorm room at Chico State. A day later, with the confusion, the scuttled communication, the fleeing refugees, and the fight for water escalating to an all-out implosion along the state's interior, Aideen was destroying her phone, packing, and squeezing into a van with the first wave of neo-Puritan survivalists headed for California's northeastern forests. Crane hadn't heard from her since. As much as it all grieved him, he'd finally come to the point of admiring the timing, the fact that his daughter left right on the cusp of a boiling experiment with forty million people and the world's fifth largest economy

Great timing, he thought.

He sighed, took another look, then walked the invisible aisle to the steps up front. By the time he reached the coordinates written on the newspaper, some two hundred miles to the east, he'd no doubt look different. Thinner, but not any less scarecrow.

All things considered, not too shabby.