

Chapter 1

The Wild Stirs

Life begins and ends in a body. That's how I learned it. But I didn't understand the holiness of all that came before and all that gets left behind until mine began to unravel.

My body was never just muscle and bone. It was an archive. A living ledger of the family who came before me. I swallowed their rage, bore the weight of their endurance, and stood inside their silence—their smallness and their brilliance, their bruised but unbroken faith. Their strength lived in my hips, their sorrows in my shoulders, their unfinished stories in my breath.

By the time the cancer came, it wasn't the first wild thing to take root inside me. It was the old ancestral howl rising through my womb at last—too fierce, too honest, too painful to ignore.

Maybe that's why the ocean called to me the way it did. In the water, I felt an inheritance deeper and wider than my own lineage—something immutable, feral, parentless. Out there I belonged only to the rise and fall of my breath, to the trembling edge between danger and ecstasy. The ocean stripped the stories of my bloodline from me—the obedient ones, the exhausted ones—and made me into truth as transcendent as the water itself. Each wave was a wordless permission slip: Take up space. Take a risk. Take what you want. Each paddle out a reckless leap into something bigger than myself.

So it came as no surprise that it was in the place I trusted most when something in me began to rise.

Before the diagnosis, before the scans, before the word *cancer* hooked itself into the folds of my life, there was that day in Costa Rica. The day the ocean gave my wild woman her voice.

In the lineup that morning, some dark piece of me clawed its way up from the dungeon where I had kept her caged for decades. The ocean had already stripped me bare, and when that surfer broke the code that day, it was as if the water itself gave me permission. Everything I'd been holding back—the exhaustion, the striving, the quiet betrayals of my body—rose in one violent surge, and I didn't stop it.

The ocean is unpredictable, even lethal. Because of that, surfers agree to a few unwritten rules. First and foremost, always respect the lineup. On this day, one stranger didn't. And that wave he stole wasn't just a wave. It was the echo of a thousand women being taken from. It was every

inherited silence I'd ever stood inside. I was already stretched thin from the longing, the waiting, the slow mutiny of my own body. But at that moment, I snapped.

My body had been unraveling for weeks. Maybe it was the waiting: We'd been in Costa Rica for seventeen days and this was the first real swell. I had walked muddy streets with a two-year-old strapped to my sweating back, trying to stretch our patience while the ocean slept. The savings I'd worked ten months to build—leaving for shifts while my toddler cried, *No, Mommy, don't leave*—were tied up in an Airbnb while we sat watching flat seas. This was supposed to be a surf trip, a season of freedom and joy, salt water rinsing off the months of exhaustion. Instead, it had become a slog of restless days, Velzy's toddler tantrums, my irritability swelling like the tide.

And then there was the pain. The way I cramped and swelled after every meal, so painful I'd stopped eating much at all. My mood was foul and I wondered if it had something to do with my late period. Whatever it was, it was rising now, sharp as a blade, and this man in the lineup was about to feel it.

I broke. The man had been blocking me from waves so his wife could catch them at an easier entry point on the shoulder of the wave. Then he'd spin around and take the next wave. Waving my arms, I began screaming across the water, "Just because you can't get it up in bed doesn't mean you should try to prove yourself out here!"

He looked punched, and when he barked back, "That's a lie!" I knew I'd hit something true. My voice went darker, louder, past the point of no return. "You want to go right here? I'll kick your ass in front of everyone so they know what your wife knows." I raised my pinky finger above the waves. "That your dick is this big."

My face burned hot. I didn't recognize myself. The words came from someplace raw and unguarded, a place I didn't know I had. My filter—the one I'd worn since childhood, the one that kept me nice, contained, Christian—was gone. Even the steady breath I'd trained into my body as a yoga teacher, the calm voice I'd practiced guiding others back to center, had deserted me. I'd always thought being good would make me safe, but now something inside had clawed out from six feet underground. What ugly truth was this?

Over the last few weeks I wondered if, even hoped, I was pregnant. Even though Dave and I had been struggling almost since the moment our two-year-old was conceived, we still had flashes of something tender—brief, unexpected moments when the old warmth resurfaced and I remembered why I chose him. I told myself that maybe this was just how relationships were, that some seasons were stormier than others. And in the middle of our mess, there were times when his calm, steady presence disarmed me. Sometimes his unwavering eyes were the only shoreline strong enough to hold my waves of anxiety.

A year earlier, the excitement of a second pregnancy had ended abruptly at thirteen weeks. The emotions that tore through me were just as tangled as our partnership. A torrential flood of relief and grief drenched my blood-stained legs. Velzy was only one year old, and Dave was still

struggling to find his feet as a father. But this summer, I was ready. At least, as ready as you can be. Velzy was two. My body was exhausted, yes, but my heart wanted another.

Too scared of disappointment, I avoided the test. I blamed Dave for my anger. I blamed parasites for the bloating. I blamed the stress of chasing waves for the lack of energy. Yet something was undeniably wrong. This version of myself scared me. My body had been giving me clues for weeks. I'd lost those last five pounds I'd be trying to get rid of my entire adult life, yet every waistband dug tighter into my distended belly. Then came the cough—guttural, chemical, rising like poison after a duck dive or in the middle of an argument about who should surf and who should watch the baby.

In the final week of our travels, I couldn't take it anymore. I went to the pharmacy, bought the pregnancy test, and trembled while I waited. The disappointment when the second line never appeared startled me, draining the blood from my head. I turned the test sideways and held it up to the light, thinking I must have missed something. But it wasn't there. I crawled into Dave's bed that night and confessed how much I had wanted another child. He held me close for a moment, then shifted so he could turn the pages of his book. He felt a million miles away.

"If it's not a baby, then why do I feel like this?" I whispered to Dave through tears. Always calm, always practical, he didn't look up from his book. "Maybe it's time to see a doctor?" I loved that calm. Until I didn't.

I knew my family history. I knew I was genetically predisposed to ovarian cancer. So the next morning, pushing my son on a swing, I opened my phone and typed in a search, more out of curiosity than real suspicion: "Symptoms of ovarian cancer."

The rusty swing squeaked in the damp playground, Velzy shrieking with joy as he flew into the sky, while my finger hovered over the search button. The tropical air pressed heavy on my skin, sweat beading on my chest. Somewhere above me a Macaw screeched. I hit enter.

The first result listed every single thing I'd been feeling: bloating, cramps, fatigue, pelvic pressure, moodiness, rib pain, dry cough. There were twelve symptoms total listed in black and white on the screen I held in my hand. I had every one of them. I laughed—not because it was funny, but because it was absurd. Every symptom, every word, felt like a setup. Like the punchline to a cosmic joke.