

The
Bikini
Collective

Book 1: Ocean Rules

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#1

Jaspa Ryder patters across her lawn and loosens the knot on top of her head, letting her sun-torched hair trickle down to her waist like a waterfall. A stray lock catches her bottom lip, and instead of brushing it away she pauses to suck on the tip, the salt dissolving on her tongue. Soon she might have to give in to her mother's pleas and wash like a regular person – you know, with soap and shampoo. But there's something about going to bed with the ocean dampening your pillow and grains of sand crusting the bed sheets that only a beach lover like her can appreciate. Besides, she's not at dire dreadlock stage yet.

Her heels bed into the blades of grass, the mildew dampening skin roughened by a predominantly barefoot existence, while her toes burrow into the chalky sand.

The first time Jaspa visited Sydney she was shocked by how different its beaches were to hers, the sand a burnt orange, heavy and coarse. Here on the north coast it's like a field of white sawdust. Jaspa pauses to watch the sun yawn its way up from the horizon, not yet ready to fully awaken. Beyond her front yard, two rabbits scurry over the carpet of bright green grass then up the hill into the thick native bush. Jaspa spent most of her childhood here playing adventure games, racing along the forested path to the top of the headland cliff. But these days, what's more important to her is what lies at the bottom, where enormous round boulders and jagged rocks spill into the ocean, swells rolling in from the Pacific surging over them and hugging the headland to produce something Jaspa dreams about every single night – Bonita Shores' best kept secret. It's Paradise Point: a wave of absolute perfection.

Tucking her surfboard under her left arm, Jaspa heads down the path to the bottom then steadies herself against the cliff face with her right hand. She waits for the set to rush at her feet before following the whitewater as it crackles over the rocks back out to sea. On autopilot, she takes the easiest route out, hopping across the familiar flat boulders. She spots Mel alone in the line-up, her silhouette dancing across the shoulder-high waves, spray shooting out from beneath her feet. Jaspa paddles out to her with a grin, the ocean so still she glides over it.

‘Morning,’ Jaspa sings as she reaches Mel, using one hand to guide her, resting the other on the nose of her board. ‘Look at that sky. We *literally* live in paradise.’

Mel slices the back of her hand through the water, sending a splash towards Jaspa. ‘Ahoy, *amiga*, what took you so long?’ she smirks. ‘You missed our sand sesh, and I’ve already clocked up ten extra waves that could’ve been all yours.’

Jaspa shrugs. She did whack the snooze button twice this morning, favouring a few extra moments cocooned in bed rather than meeting Mel on the beach for bodyweight training as she had insisted. Then there was that ten minutes Jaspa spent handwriting a note that she’ll no doubt ponder and agonise over later today. But now’s certainly not the time to tell Mel about that. There’s no rule to say you have to share everything with your best friend, is there?

‘Looks like there’s plenty more left for me,’ Jaspa says as a line of swell moves sluggishly towards them. ‘And for him!’ she giggles, pointing behind Mel as a dolphin races underwater, tailing the unbroken ride.

Jaspa strokes gracefully to greet the wave as it pitches over the sandbank. She swings under the curling lip, points the nose of her board towards the headland, leans her fingers onto the deck and glides her feet between her arms to stand tall. A startled laugh catches in her throat as the dolphin

leaps from the ocean a metre away, then lands the perfect pin-drop dive.

Instead of snapping a turn into the breaking lip, Jaspa slides her front foot forward, trimming along the top of the wave, and the chase is on. A section of water swells up and Jaspa can't resist drawing on its blank canvas. Dropping down to the base of the wave, she leans so her chest almost brushes the ocean and carves her fins into the top pocket to leave a snake of whitewater. The sleek grey of the dolphin bounds in front of her like a shiny rock skimming the surface, and Jaspa wonders what it would be like to be that free. No pressures. To simply surf the waves, play with your friends, eat fish and dodge the occasional predator.

'Oh my gosh, did you see that?' Jaspa beams as she joins Mel out the back, sitting upright to straddle her board.

Mel nods excitedly. 'It was a cheeky drop-in. Every turn you did, it matched it.' Mel uses one hand to mimic Jaspa's surfing and the other as a makeshift dolphin. 'I'm sorry to say, I scored you only eight points, and your opponent a ten.'

Jaspa snorts a laugh and shakes her head. 'Trust you to turn my spiritual moment into a competition.'

'Well,' Mel says, wiggling a finger at Jaspa, 'think of it as a trial run for this weekend, and pray you don't draw a dolphin in your first heat.'

Trying not to let doubt creep in the way of her smile, Jaspa puts Mel's comment out of her mind. As if she needs reminding that the final event is two days away – the event that will supposedly decide her future as a professional surfer. She glances at Mel. Her best friend never second-guesses anything, self-confidence drips from her every pore. Just like her surfing, Mel flings herself over life's ledges and worries about the consequences later.

'Urgh, hipster alert,' Mel groans with a roll of her eyes. 'Seriously, there must be a factory somewhere manufacturing top-knots and beards. That's so 2013.'

Jaspa follows Mel's gaze back over her shoulder to see a figure paddling out from the rocks. 'Oh, I kinda like it,' she teases. 'I even had one myself this morning.' She grins, bracing for Mel's onslaught.

'Of course you did, you little hipster hippy.' Mel launches from her board onto Jaspa's. 'Here, let me help you with that,' she says, ruffling Jaspa's hair up like a bird's nest.

'Stop, stop, you've turned cray cray,' Jaspa pleads, dissolving into giggles as they both tumble into the water.

Mel tugs on her leg-rope, catapulting her board towards her, then slides onto it and strokes into a wave. 'It's time to get down to business!' she calls as she takes a freefall drop.

The ocean is calm and peaceful and Jaspa takes a moment to catch her breath, the laughter still trying

to escape. Mel has been cracking her up since they were both seven years old. Even back then she had the energy of a hyperactive puppy, leading Jaspa into all sorts of mischief. There's no way she would've spray-painted Mrs Nimble's poodle, or gone door-knocking to collect for a fake charity without Mel's persuasion.

Nothing much has changed, Jaspa thinks, digging her fingernails into the wax. She's tailed her best friend into many a dull party only for Mel to instigate some crazy idea, like a handstand-off, jelly wrestling in an inflatable pool, or what the heck, it's a full moon, let's night surf! Mel manages to switch between a childlike charmer and a sassy siren who can sweet-talk her way into over-18s gigs.

Jaspa's spent almost every day with her for the past eight years, but as with any friendship, it doesn't come without friction. Most of their arguments are ignited by Mel's frustration that Jaspa doesn't think like her. If you could rip open their heads, inside Mel's you'd find a calculator, a year planner and a hammer to drive home her bluntness. Inside Jaspa's there'd be a gratitude jar, a fortune cookie and, quite possibly, dancing fairies.

'Did you see my air?' Mel sits up, pulling one knee to her chest to adjust her leg-rope.

Jaspa screws up her nose and shakes her head. 'Sorry, no, I missed it.'

‘How’s it goin’?’ interrupts the hipster, whose top-knot is, remarkably, still dry. ‘Looks fun out here.’ Offering a smile from beneath his forest of chin growth, he paddles past Jaspa and sits cross-legged on his single-fin board.

‘It is, we’re having a ball!’ Jaspa chimes as she kicks into a wave. Just as she’s about to stroke into the lip she hears a ‘Yo’ to her left, calling her off the ride. Yanking her board back, she’s stunned to see a blur of floral boardshorts fly past. She smiles and offers a ‘woooo!’ as the hipster weaves down the line like he’s on a rollercoaster.

‘Jaspa, what the hell?’ Mel returns from catching a wide set, screaming over the sound of the ocean.

‘Huh?’ Jaspa asks with raised eyebrows, wondering if she missed another of Mel’s aerials. Perhaps she should just pretend this time.

A huff shoots from Mel’s chest and she shakes her head. ‘Seriously, that dude just totally snaked. You were waiting first, that was *your* ride.’

‘Oh.’ Jaspa blinks her saucer-shaped eyes at Mel. ‘I don’t think he meant it. He was super friendly – I guess he just wanted a wave.’

‘You let that happen to you *all* the time,’ Mel growls, tightening the grip on her rail. ‘Don’t you get it? Guys beeline for chicks in the surf because they think we’re pushovers. They assume we’re at the bottom of the pecking order.’

Jaspa drops her head and fidgets with her shell necklace. ‘Okay, okay, please don’t get mad at me,’ she mumbles. ‘I honestly didn’t think of it like that.’ Jaspa glances up to see her friend’s nostrils still flaring. This conversation isn’t over yet.

‘And anyway, you should be practising for the comp and holding your position, not letting some pony paddle to your inside.’ Mel sighs and pushes the nose of her board to dive with it into the ocean. ‘I’m getting the next one in. Can I still get a ride to school with you? Meet at your house?’

Jaspa nods while staring out to sea as her best friend/harshlest critic milks her last wave almost to the sand. Feeling as though she and her surfing have suddenly been locked in a pressure cooker, Jaspa takes a minute to think about the note she’d been working on this morning, which now seems more important than ever. Oh crap! The note! Having your bestie live next door is convenient most of the time, except when you want to hide something from them. *I’ve gotta get there before Mel does*, she thinks, scrapping through the water as though being chased by a great white. There aren’t many things that Jaspa hates, but confrontation is definitely one of them.

#2

‘Now that’s a good look, you should rock it to school next week,’ Mel says, standing in the doorway of the Ryders’ garden shed, her board gripped in one hand and a carrot in the other. Jaspa is wearing a bikini, still in her socks and school shoes, with her uniform hanging around her neck.

Jaspa grins at Mel then turns back to contemplate the quiver of surfboards slotted into racks along the back wall. ‘I guess I got a bit excited about getting out there before it gets dark,’ she says, yanking the uniform over her head and throwing it on the ground. It’s not unusual for Jaspa to start one thing and be drawn into another, like a toddler distracted by shiny things. This is mostly harmless, except for moments like this morning’s simultaneous grilling of

banana bread, bidding on eBay for a tropical print maxi dress, and blending a smoothie. She was now the proud owner of a new frock, but it came at the expense of burnt breakfast and a kitchen splattered in milk and banana. ‘Hey, you missed a couple of classes today, where were you?’ Jaspa asks, trailing her finger along the surfboard rails.

Mel places her board on a strip of old carpet and crunches into the carrot. ‘Tough question. Some might call it truancy, others would deem it dedication of the tallest order to my prospects as a professional surfer,’ she bellows, waving her carrot to accentuate her speech.

‘You skipped a school that has surfing as a subject to go surfing?’ asks Jaspa, who lives out most of her rule-breaking urges vicariously through Mel, simply because the thought of disappointing her parents is too much to bear. It’s not that Mel doesn’t care about other people’s feelings, it’s just that she tends to prioritise her own.

‘Your honour, I know the unreasonable nature of this notion, but in my defence it was four feet and offshore. Case closed.’ Mel breaks into a giggle and slams her fist into her hand, proclaiming her innocence.

‘Oi, Jaspa!’ The distant voice sounds peeved, and the girls stop laughing. ‘Where’s the freakin’ wax?’

Jaspa frowns at Mel, recognising the less than chirpy tone of her older brother. Mel rolls her eyes

and mutters out of the side of her mouth, ‘Brace yourself, hurricane hothead incoming.’

Tyler Tiger Ryder appears at the door with a brand new unwaxed all-white – apart from a cluster of sponsor stickers – surfboard tucked under his arm.

‘Jaspa –’ he begins harshly, before softening his tone as he realises they’ve got company. ‘Oh, hey Mel, how’s it goin’?’ Tyler mumbles, leaning his super-fit six-foot-two frame against the wall.

‘Yo, TT, I’m good. Wanna hit the waves with us?’ Mel offers, carefully pulling her brown, sun-lightened hair into a ponytail at the exact centre point of her head.

‘Yeah, come and join us, Tyler, it was awesome this morning!’ Jaspa agrees, keen to lighten whatever’s darkening her brother’s mood.

‘Nah. No offence, but I’ve gotta train for the comp tomorrow. Don’t really need a couple of chick kooks getting in my way,’ he says with an arched back and a puffed-out chest. At seventeen, Tyler is blessed with the Ryder genes: tall, blond – although he might want to try a hairbrush now and again – blue-eyed, and a red-hot surfer.

For as long as Jaspa can remember, Tyler has been her hero, and he adored her too. He’d take her down to the Shores’ ice-cream shop, Treat Yourself, every Friday after primary school and buy her favourite, rocky road delight, with his own pocket money.

He always let her join in on his *Kelly Slater Pro Surfer* marathons when she interrupted, begging to play, even if he was on a roll of rippable proportions. Jaspa's favourite photo of Tyler shows him pushing her six-year-old self into her first wave in Bonita Bay. But lately his attitude towards her has shifted. It's like he's permanently stuck in a wetsuit two sizes too small. Uptight and agitated.

Tyler shies away from Mel's glare and goes back to interrogating Jaspa. 'I need my wax, where is it? I told you not to use it.'

Jaspa sighs deeply and looks from Mel to Tyler. 'I think I saw it in the car. Like I've said a million times, I don't use it.' She averts her eyes, keen to avoid conflict.

'Look, Mr Merry,' Mel pipes in, 'as you can clearly see, we have our own stash. But be my guest.' One hand is on her hip, the other holds out a block of pink Stick for Chicks surfboard wax. 'And I've got a pair of frilly floral halter-neck bikinis that'll top you off perfectly.' Her sarcasm is drowned out by expletives as Tyler stalks off.

'Thanks,' Jaspa says, pulling a board from the rack and wondering if she should ask Mel for a tutorial on comebacks. 'I don't know why he's always so grumpy at me lately.'

'My guess is his blue eyes are turning green at the thought of you being a kickass pro surfer. Wait, you're

not taking that out are you?’ Mel points to the retro round-nosed polka dot surfboard in Jaspa’s hand.

‘I’d planned to, it’s my favourite frolicking board. Why, do you want to use it?’ Jaspa offers it to Mel.

‘No, it’s not that ... I just think you should be testing what you’ll use on the weekend, don’t you?’

‘I guess. I hadn’t really thought about it.’ Jaspa sheepishly puts her beloved Dotty back into the rack.

‘Don’t you think you *should* be?’ Mel sits on an esky and rests her elbows on her knees. ‘It’s like you don’t even care about making the junior tour.’

Jaspa gulps. Did Mel see the note this morning? She was sure she’d got to it first, while Mel was tucking into the banana bread.

‘I do, I do, I do care, I promise,’ Jaspa protests, her voice pitched too high. She quickly diverts the conversation. ‘What board are you taking out?’

‘My five-five. Gimme your five-eight and I’ll wax it up for you.’ Mel gestures towards the high-performance surfboard. ‘I don’t mean to nag. I just can’t imagine travelling to Malibu or the Maldives or anywhere else beginning with M without you.’

‘I know that.’ Jaspa watches Mel criss-cross the block over the board’s deck. They’ve spent the entire year competing in junior events around Australia, and now they’ve finally got the chance to qualify for the world tour. No wonder Mel’s pumped. It’s every surfer’s dream – isn’t it?