Chapter 2



Drowning

I was drowning. I was going to drown. And I was most probably going to be smashed into the lava rocks as it happened. My mind went utterly calm. There was nothing I could do. A lifeguard was going to have to save me, or I was going to die. No real choices on my end. No options left except to try to keep air in my lungs a few more seconds at a time.

I was treading water just outside the shore break of Waimea Bay, about fifteen feet from the beach, getting sucked rapidly toward the "Death Zone" (the name the locals endearingly gave the razor-sharp black lava rocks and cliff faces on the west side of the bay).

The swell that day was easily twenty feet Hawaiian (close to thirty-five-foot wave faces), with some even bigger sets. The water was a deep turquoise blue, and the swell was rolling in from far across the world, gathering tremendous momentum as it crossed the wide-open expanse. The surf was huge and an amazing spectacle to watch. Its power was tangible from up on the road as it thumped and pummeled the shore with a deafening roar, sending massive sprays of salt water high into the air as the waves hit the beach and surrounding cliffs.

I had met Latham, an *incredibly* handsome, well-known Australian big-wave rider, the day before while watching the sunset at Sunset Beach. And in my effort to get to know him better, I had allowed him to talk me into paddling out into the channel with him, on his board, to watch people surf Waimea Bay. I knew better than to do

this. I had been raised on a boat by a military father who commanded a landing craft infantry vessel in five invasions during World War II. He taught me from as early as I could remember to respect the ocean, to understand tides and swells, and to never, ever get myself in water I could not handle. But . . . this guy was so hot. And he was such a good surfer.

And, I reasoned with myself, *he has to know what he's doing; he surfs here all the time.* And did I mention that he was hot? Six feet tall, big blue eyes, golden-brown skin, curly sun-kissed dirty-blond hair, muscles on top of muscles on top of muscles. Built like an Adonis. How could I possibly resist?

So I agreed to go. And I got on the front of his thirteen-foot rhino chaser (surfboard for surfing huge waves). And I lay down on my stomach and put my tan, round, bikini-clad bottom in his face, my legs spread slightly so he could lie down behind me, torso between my thighs, chest resting on the curve of my behind. And together we paddled out into the channel, my heart racing the entire time.

A lifeguard on a Jet Ski raced up to us as we were paddling out.

"You're not planning to surf, are you?" he asked, concerned.

"No," we responded in unison.

He recognized Latham.

"Oh, howzit?" he said, sounding relieved.

"Just going to sit in the channel and watch, mate," Latham said.

"Okay," the lifeguard responded reluctantly, then took off to our left and went out to the lineup as we continued our paddle out.

Latham kept us safely away from where the waves were breaking, and we got to see some *incredible* airdrops by surfers on huge boards—angles and views you simply cannot get from the beach. The energy of the surfers in the lineup was frenzied and passionate. The fear and adrenaline were tangible. The surfers swirled around one another, jockeying for position, those deepest and farthest away from us having priority but also holding the most dangerous positions, with much farther to go to make it to safety once they

dropped into a wave and more of a chance that another surfer would drop in on them, blocking their exit into the safety of the shoulder of the wave and the channel beside it.

Men were screaming support to one another, hooting and hollering for each surfer who went for it, and yelling in unison when surfers got shot out of the barrels. Lifeguards on Jet Skis were racing from the outside to the inside, constantly scanning for surfers who might need rescue. The buzz of the Jet Skis was barely audible over the roar of the crashing surf. A helicopter was circling above, adding to the noise, photographers hanging out the side doors. I was smack-dab in the middle of one of the best surf spots in the world, surrounded by the best surfers in the world.

But I was afraid. Too afraid to enjoy myself. I knew too much about the ocean. I knew you could never, and *should* never, predict it. You could never, and *should* never, assume in a situation like this that a random rogue sweeper set (bigger set) would not roll through. I didn't care how much he knew about Waimea, about where it would break and where it would not. I was terrified. This was a typical day in the office for Latham; it was toying with death for me. I wanted to go in.

So, after less than ten minutes, I asked to go back to the beach. We turned around and paddled back, my heart thumping in my chest, my body quivering from all the adrenaline, my breath shallow, coming in panicked gasps.

"Okay, now here's the tricky part," Latham said. "I will take us to the beach, and you will have to jump off immediately so the shore-pound doesn't smash us."

"Okay," I responded nervously. And in we went, to the north corner of the bay. Latham had timed it perfectly. I jumped off. I stumbled as a wave hit me from behind. I kept my gaze fixed on the dry sand and heaved my body through the waist-high, churning, foamy, sandy white water. I didn't know what he was doing, and I didn't care. I just wanted to get to the safety of the dry sand. I was trembling, panting, and filled with fear.

My legs did not seem grounded. I could barely gain traction. The swirling water grabbed me by the waist and legs and dragged me backward. I leaned away from it and made it a few steps toward the beach, but then got sucked backward, off the sand, by the water. Sucked off the shore and immediately swept south by the current. Latham was trying to get himself and the thirteen-foot surfboard onto the beach and did not notice. I didn't know what to do. The shore-pound was easily double overhead, smashing with ferocious force onto the sand, and there seemed to be no pause between waves. I would break into pieces and die if I tried to swim through it to the beach. And yet staying just outside it, I was getting swept toward the lava rocks. *Quickly.*

I made a few attempts to enter the shore-pound and ended up being slammed in circles, airless and choking on water and sand. I gave up. I was going to drown if I kept trying. And my body was quickly tiring from trying to fight the current and from my panicked shallow breathing. I knew I had to relax. I knew people drown because they panic. I knew a relaxed body stays afloat longer. And I prayed a lifeguard would see me. But I was tired. So tired. And I estimated I had about four minutes before I got smashed into the rocks.

I had recently been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome. After a six-month around-the-world modeling job, I'd tried to make up for my lost semester at college by taking twice as many classes. In my effort to become a professional ballet dancer, I had been dancing six hours a day on top of that. My illness forced me to drop half my classes and give up my roles in the upcoming dance performances. I'd fallen into a deep depression, which made my illness worse. I could barely get out of bed. I had been sick all the time as a child and adolescent and was beginning to realize the doctors, diagnoses, and pharmaceuticals weren't helping me. I needed to make a radical shift. This trip to Hawaii, I figured, was either going to heal me or kill me. But some part of me knew if I could get myself to Oahu, the *mana* (land energy) of the island would bring me back to life. And yet here

I was, drowning. The strength in my already-very-weak body was fading. I was going under. And my world suddenly went black.

Just then a man appeared. He was Hawaiian and wearing swim fins. He looked incredibly peaceful and calm. Dark hair, dark skin, beautiful smile, kind brown eyes.

"I'll hold you," he said to me. "I'll hold on to you until the lifeguard comes." He reached for my arm to pull me close. Then, with gentle hands, he grabbed my hips and held my head above the water. He radiated serenity. A calm enveloped me.

And then the lifeguard appeared. He had a red flotation device tied to him. "Grab my wrist," he yelled as he extended his arm. It was difficult to hear him over the sound of the crashing waves. I grabbed his wrist, and he wrapped his hand around my wrist, holding me so tightly it hurt. "We have to take the shore-pound in," he yelled to me. "Do NOT let go of me! Hold your breath!" he screamed.

"Okay," I responded, too weak and limp and scared to say anything else.

"Now!" he yelled. I gulped in oxygen. And we went for it. He pulled me down and forward. The water caught us. We got lifted and slammed into the sand, and lifted and slammed again, and around and around and around we went, head over feet over head over feet. Underwater was dark and sandy and cold and heavy. My wrist ached from where he held me so tightly. I thought my bony wrist was going to snap. My lungs burned from needing to breathe. My back and neck cracked repeatedly as I was smashed in all directions.

And then we came up for air, in shallow water; my feet could touch the bottom. "Run, run, run!" he screamed as he ran alongside me, desperate to get us completely onto dry sand. The sand was deep and wet and made it hard to get a foothold. The water was still swirling around our thighs and lower legs. I used all the energy I had left and ran with him until he and I both collapsed in dry sand. We lay side by side, panting. And then I began sobbing. "It's okay," he said. "It's okay. You are safe." He held my hand and sat up. I kept crying.

Latham appeared and collapsed, panting and crying next to us. He had been running down the beach, a long run in very deep, soft sand. He had gotten his board to shore and turned around just in time to see me getting swept down the beach. He began screaming, and his screaming alerted the lifeguard and initiated the rescue. He had watched the whole thing, panicked, as he ran south down the beach.

"Where is the man?" I asked, dazed and confused.

No answer. Just labored catching of breath.

"Where is the man who was holding me?" I asked.

"What man?" the lifeguard responded.

"The Hawaiian man. The one with fins. The one who was helping me swim," I said.

The lifeguard looked at Latham.

"There was no man," Latham said.

"Yes," I responded. "There was a Hawaiian man holding me afloat when you got to me. I let go of him to grab on to you."

The lifeguard looked out at the water and then back at me.

"Renee, you were all alone."