



# FREE RUNNER

JENNIFER L. HAWES



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FREE RUNNER

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# Chapter 1



## Tsunami

L

Like a snake charmer flirting with death, I glide up and over the hypnotic waves as the ocean lures me into its magical spell. Fear exits my mind and my arms paddle faster, hoping to snag the swell past the pier. Surfing on the tail end of a storm rebels against common sense, but I ignore the warning and head for the danger zone.

The prize rises like a cornered cobra. I spring into position and tunnel through the barrel, the crest ten feet above me. The rain stings my eyes; I could surf in my sleep. My aerial stunt projects my body from the board. My fingers skim the Pacific blue while I return to my ride; but, without warning, the wave crashes, slamming me into a wall of water. My surfboard flips in the angry surf and the lights blink out in my head.

I awake to another life-threatening wave. The sea sucks me under as the ocean strangles my throat. The board's leash attached to my ankle wraps around my upper body. My straight jacket twists me in a tailspin. I thrash my legs and turn in the opposite direction. The cord releases me from my funeral; I swim toward the veiled light and break the surface. Grabbing my board, I catch a ride back on the next wave.

A seagull shrieks above and revives my senses. The sunlight pierces my vision and I roll off the surfboard and onto the sand. As I pull my hand away from my head, my fingers drip with blood. The salt water sears my throat and I gag on a mouthful of sand and part of a broken tooth. The mixture sends a wave of nausea to my stomach; I lean over and spit out more blood. I struggle to my feet, but my legs crumble like the tide washing over a sand castle.

Sitting up, I try to recall what hit me. A couple strolls by; the woman helps me stand and asks, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." I stumble forward and cover the gash on my head with my hand. The lady presses a towel to my temple and a crowd gathers; the man next to her punches a few buttons on his phone. Without any friends or parents present, I have no choice when the ambulance arrives.

I share the good news with my dad. "I was riding this crazy wave and crashed in the roll. My surfboard came back and hit me in the head—only fourteen stitches and a partially broken molar."

In the emergency room, the silence between us weighs on me, like one hundred percent humidity.

"So, where have you been? The nurse tried calling you a zillion times."



“Cam, we need to talk.” He takes a seat, runs his hand through his hair and speaks one sentence that changes my life forever. “We’re moving.”

His newsflash jars me, like the aftershock of an earthquake. Tsunamis often trail earthquakes. I drag myself to the edge of the bed and clutch the sheets. The final wave of the tsunami steals everything I’ve ever known and washes it out to sea.

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## Chapter 2



### California Dreamin’

A

fter my surfboard accident, my dad paces our living room and I hear sporadic phrases of his one-sided conversation. “Life happens, change is inevitable and one of these days you’re going to get yourself killed.”

I daydream of the sun reflecting off the water, scattering a million diamonds across the ocean. I hear the sound of the sea and it removes the sound of my dad’s voice. Out the window, where the sky and the water meet, the waves tempt me.

“You’re not even listening.” My dad sits next to me on the couch.

“You’re about to lecture me again on shark safety.”

“Never surf at sunrise or sunset, sharks’ feeding times, or on cloudy days. That’s when the water becomes murky and unclear and sharks can appear out of nowhere. Don’t forget one danger that’s not so obvious.” He takes a deep breath. “Even if you are standing in knee deep water, beware of the undertow. It sneaks up on you and takes you by surprise. When you think you’re safe, it will rip your feet out from under you and drag you to your death.”

My dad continues his lecture and I think to myself, *I’m not looking forward to telling my best friend Jace about our sudden move.* He doesn’t exactly share my passion for surfing and he’s not a free runner, but we’ve been friends since forever. I reminisce about free running, which involves parkour, the first piece of the puzzle to my story.

About ten months ago, prior to my wipe out, I lived the average life of a California teenager. My fourteen-year-old existence consisted of regular stuff like hanging out with friends, playing video games and riding some killer waves at the International Surf Festival. The beginning of a different—more dangerous—life began one normal morning.

My favorite surf shop got in some new boards, but I was drawn, like a bug to light, to a t-shirt, instead. A unique symbol decorated the front of the shirt along with a weird word underneath.

“Cool shirt. What’s that word?” I asked the guy behind the counter.

“It’s pronounced *par-KOOR*. You should check it out, dude.”

Three days later, the unusual word showed up at school on a flier with a phone number and an address. I talked my best friend into joining me for a little investigative work. We stood in front of the Tempest Freerunning Academy in L.A where I tried to give Jace a fist bump. I admit the thirty-foot tall brick building intimidated me, too; however, after the

tour and watching people bounce around on the indoor trampolines and the ninja-warrior course, I was hooked. Jace ran out of the building.

My dad agreed to pay for the advanced course. I think he was glad I was on dry ground, for once. The next day, I met my coach. He gave me a brief history lesson on David Belle, the founder of parkour. Then my coach explained, “Think of parkour as urban gymnastics where you jump, leap and vault your way through an obstacle course. Free running involves these maneuvers but also includes flipping and spinning from high walls and buildings, but the traceur, someone who practices parkour, runs while performing them. When you’ve mastered the basics, I’ll teach you how to defy gravity.”

I pressed on, month after month, and fought through the pain as my body grew leaner and stronger. The day I graduated from the advanced course, my coach threw me a t-shirt, one with the cool symbol on the front.

“Congratulations, Cam. All your hard work and persistence paid off. You’ve earned this.”

“What? No gold medal?”

“Next time.” My coach glanced at his watch. “Well, I’ve gotta run.”

I should have run, too—away. After the trip to the ER, my dad informed me of our permanent trip. I think being eaten by a shark would have been more enjoyable.

My photographer dad, Cameron White of *Cameron White Photography*, heats oil in a pan on the stove. In his white apron, he resembles a chef in a beachside diner. The smell of grilled Mahi-Mahi fills our home, a spacious, open-concept loft in L.A. Soon, all of this will be a memory.

My dad turns the fish in the skillet and says, “I’ve landed the photography dream job of a lifetime.”

“Is your job close to California?”

He pours a cup of coffee, taking his time. “London, England. We leave on Monday.”

“You must be joking.”

“I’ll be working on a new photography exhibit called *Perspective* for the National Gallery.”

“OK, I’m positive I just entered the fourth dimension.” I ask my dad, “Is this an episode of *The Twilight Zone*?”

He hands me a plate of food and I push it away. I want to forget everything happening in my life, so I focus on my favorite photograph, a panoramic of me and my dad on the beach.

“Who knows, Cam, maybe we can take a cool photo of us this Christmas in London. Think of the adventure we’ll have.”

# Chapter 3



## New Kid on the Block

T

he fog swallows me, my father and the entire plane as we land at Heathrow Airport. I follow my dad into a taxi and the fog lifts, revealing the true shades of London. The gray sky matches everything, including the buildings, the landscape—even the rain. When we arrive at our apartment in the West End of London, my dad shares more good news with me.

“By the way, I’m sending you to Prestige Academy in Oxford.”

“You’re sending me away to school?” I ask.

“Think of it as an English tradition. They call it boarding school and it’s only an hour away.”

“Like that helps.”

My dad loads my luggage into a rental car the next morning. I throw my backpack into the front seat and slam the door shut. He gives me *the look* and starts the engine. As we zip along in the luxury sports car, the radio offers the only noise in the confined space. A revelation snaps me out of my stupor: two more years until I get my license.

We merge into Medieval Times; I ask my dad, “What time does the jousting begin?”

My sarcasm brings a smile to his face.

“Glad you’re enjoying the humor in all this,” I say as I search the interior of the car for an ejection button.

“Oxford is home to the Bridge of Sighs and the Dreaming Spires,” he says, pointing out the window.

I slide my sunglasses down. “Yeah, I’m dreaming all right...of a warmer climate.” Then I sigh and say, “This is going to be so much fun.”

We enter the campus of Prestige Academy, where the Headmaster, Ms. Frieda Faulkner greets us. Her tussled curls and flowery skirt remind me of a hippie commune. Then she hands me a rulebook—with a thousand rules—and I doubt we’re anywhere near Woodstock.

I sneak back to the car. “Take me with you,” I beg.

“You’re going to be fine.” My dad speeds off in his fancy car, while I refuse to wave at him.

When I fail to locate one of my classes, I get lost, give up and roam the hallway. A kid struts past and gives me the hang-ten symbol. My California tan sticks out, like a surfer in Alaska and I humor him with a peace sign.

I wake up to another rainy day, remember my school uniform and consider running away. But on the way to my third hour class, I change my mind.

I groan, “I hope I don’t get a detention for wearing my running shoes.”

Prestige Academy’s obsession with boots causes me to review the uniform policy. I recall the one relaxed area of the dress code, footwear, and relax. Near my locker, I spy a pair of gray and pink Nikes, and I expend every effort to meet the owner of those shoes. She watches my approach. Being a California native, I’m familiar with every shade of tan. Her pale complexion mesmerizes me. I stand there, staring at her gray eyes. My voice, stuck in the off position, stalls. She speaks to me but not with an American or a British accent.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” she asks. “We have one class together—physics. I sit in the back and you’re up front.”

“You’re French—from France,” I say.

“*Oui*, Yes.” She points to my Tempest Freerunning ski cap and whispers, “Did you know you’re not supposed to wear hats in the building?”

“Whoops.” *I can’t hide my battle scar much longer.* I take off my hat and expose my head trauma.

She gasps, but covers her mouth with her hand. “So, um, what was that symbol on your hat?” she asks.

“It’s kind of hard to explain. I’m a free runner, and it involves parkour.”

“That’s a French word—parcours. It means journey or route.” She inspects the Frankenstein stitches starting in the middle of my forehead and disappearing behind my ear. “What on earth did you do to your head?”

My friendship with Avery LaCrae begins. She shows me how to buy a coat and wear long- sleeve shirts. She doesn’t play video games or surf, but I show her my surfing photos anyway and I imagine she’s super impressed.

One day, right before our shared class, she asks, “When are you going to teach me this extreme sport?”

“Do you think you can handle it?”

“I’m a runner. Bring it on.”

I ask her, “How long have you lived here in England?”

“This is our second year. My dad is the French Ambassador to England.”

A student peers at us from his locker. Caught, he pretends to drop his books.

“That kid is always staring at us.”

“He’s new this year. I think he’s from South Africa.” Outside our shared class, Avery says, “Physics is so—”

“Boring? Ridiculous? A complete waste of time?” I fill in the blank.

“Yes, boring. I mean, I can get the stuff easily enough. But the professor always acts like he’s annoyed with us, like he’d rather teach without the bother of students and he never smiles.”

“Except when he’s around Ms. Faulkner,” I whisper.

We both laugh. The professor shoots me a warning before we take our seats. He’s somewhat short for an adult, which could explain a lot. I think he suffers from Short-Man’s-Syndrome. My dad explained it to me after I was punched in the gut by a short kid in my class for no reason at all.

*“Short-Man’s-Syndrome is when short people need to be in control of everything. Because they have no control over their height, they can develop this insatiable or unquenchable desire to rule the world, so to speak.”*

I drift back from my dad’s words and survey the professor’s feathered straw-colored hair. He spends way too much time in front of the mirror for a forty-year-old. I doubt he wants to rule the world. He probably wants the bell to ring, like the rest of the class does, so he can flirt with the headmaster.

He’d be a handsome guy if it weren’t for one thing: his fake eyeball. My eyes fasten onto his hideous feature. My entire suspicion of him rests on his glass eye—dead and dark—with a jagged scar, embedded deep into the upper eyelid. *Why doesn’t he wear an eye patch? Was he an MMA fighter? Did the other guy win?* Picking up my pencil, I sketch him, but something keeps me from finishing. I stop leering at his eye and cram my art project inside my notebook. Besides, if I get caught cartooning him, he might blast a laser beam at me from his prosthesis.

Avery and I sit together at lunch. The smell of fried rice and eggs rolls fills the room. She leans over (but not too close or we’ll both end up in detention) and lowers her voice, “Today, after class, I went back to get my extra-credit assignment from the professor, but he never showed up. His computer was still on and his email was open. In one of the subject lines, I saw the words, red bow. What do you think that’s about?”

“Did you click on it?”

“No, are you crazy?” She picks up her chopsticks.

“Hmm, red bow could be codename for The Grumpy Teachers’ Club.”

“I’m serious.” She smacks me in the arm.

Drinking the rest of my water bottle, I gargle the words, “I warned you, no physical contact, or I’ll turn you into a zombie.”

“I think you play too many video games,” she says. “Oh, I almost forgot. Last night, I was in the student center and Professor Vilner hurried by. He was on his cell, talking in a foreign language, but I heard him say your name, Cameron White.”

I swallow hard and force my food past my throat. I jump to conclusions—all of which threaten me with a subtle hint of apprehension. My dad and I share the same name. Only Avery is privy to this information, unless the professor accessed my personal records.

“No one ever calls me Cameron.”

“Well, do you think he was referring to you or your dad?” she asks.

“He was probably discussing my outstanding physics grade with a colleague of his.”

“Yeah, right. Hey, can we meet today before dinner, so you can show me those parkour moves?”

“Sure.”

The South African kid sits one table over. We finish our lunch and leave at the same time. The stalker-student shadows us, keeping his distance.

I whisper to my new friend, “Watch your back.”

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