

CHAPTER I

The Swimmer

Howard Bennett swam every day in nothing but an old, stretched-out black Speedo, dunking his slender, mostly naked body into the frigid, fifty-six-degree Pacific Ocean at six o'clock in the morning. Given his habit of self-deprecation, he might have admitted how stupid this was, especially in winter, but Bennett *had* to swim each morning. This was more than mere routine; it approached a biologic need. He symbolically, almost ritually, washed off the stress he had accumulated as a high school teacher the day before by stroking away in the dark morning water. He *needed* to be enveloped in that chilling water for the twenty-minute-or-so swim just beyond the surf line. He couldn't imagine a day without it. It renewed him. It was better than a hammock. It was better than sleeping in a few more minutes.

Except for days when the weather was so bad the thrashing waves would have killed him before the cold could, he slipped out of bed when the alarm's buzzer woke him and pulled out the Speedo he kept in the nightstand. He used to run, but in his

thirties his toe joints had developed an inflammation so bad it couldn't be fixed by rest or surgery, and so a Scottish surgeon had recommended swimming. "I don't know how to swim," Bennett had told him, as if a new routine scared him. "Then damn it, learn," the doctor said.

Bennett joyfully tells this story now as a series of punch lines timed with such ease that you're both captivated by his delivery and a little suspicious of the tale's veracity. In other words, he's a consummate storyteller. Just the same, he leaves out just how important this moment really was. The doctor's suggestion, possibly thrown off in half-jest, affected not only Bennett's life but also, one could say—with a touch of the hyperbole he often employs himself—an entire city. It could even be argued that Bennett banging away out there every morning in his skimpy swim trunks was the catalyst for changing people's careers, in both good ways and bad, and that it cost Los Angeles billions of dollars. Not bad for a guy who was just trying to relax before going to work.

As it turned out, Bennett fell in love with the ocean and the skilled simplicity of the crawl stroke he soon learned. In 1961, he and his wife, Bente, bought a boxy two-story house on Playa del Rey beach, south of Los Angeles, where they rented out the first floor and kept the second-floor view of the beach for themselves. Having Santa Monica Bay as essentially their backyard was a grand thing. It was so big, so powerful, it belittled anyone who thought of it as their own; and yet, after a few years of living on the beach and learning both the pleasures and dangers of swimming in the impersonal ocean, Bennett couldn't help feeling as though he had an intimate relationship with the bay. As big as it was, he wanted to protect it.

On the morning of March 28, 1985, Bennett pulled his swimsuit over his slender legs, tied its floppy waistband tight around his flat stomach, and walked down the long hall from his bedroom to the guest bathroom, where his swim goggles hung on the end of a towel rack. Bente, still in bed, listened to him for a moment as he walked out the front door and, with bare feet, quietly descended the outside stairs to their small backyard garden, where he exited to the beach.

The sun had risen about fifteen minutes earlier in a partly cloudy sky, but it hadn't yet topped the low hills to the east, so the shadowless dawn still hung over the hundred yards of beach between Bennett's house and the whooshing surf. For Bennett, whose eyesight could best be described as a notch or two better than blindness, the scene came through as a muted blur of soft shapes. But then, the great thing about an empty beach was: you couldn't trip over anything, and even if you did, it wouldn't hurt. So he'd left his glasses back in the house.

After so many years of swimming, there was little fat on Bennett's nearly six-foot frame. His chest looked strong, the pectoral muscles well defined. In a business suit, standing before his classes, he looked older, a curmudgeon with thinning hair, but this morning, he seemed half his age, a tall, wiry jock still feeling his youth.

It was the kind of early-spring morning when the damp, forty-degree air was colder than the wet sand or, for that matter, the water, so he jogged out to get into the warmer ocean as soon as he could. As the waves got louder, he saw an old man at the edge of the surf sitting on a three-legged stool sunk into the sand, with a lit Sterno can and fishing pole.

“Don’t go in water! No swim! Very bad for you! Poison!” the man shouted as Bennett approached the shoreline.

Without his glasses, Bennett thought the guy looked Japanese. Well, Asian, at least. Bennett had seen him fishing most mornings and assumed he lived in the hills above the beach, where the houses were bigger and more elegant than the plain beach homes stacked side by side.

Given that this was the first time either of them had said anything to the other, Bennett should have asked the man what he meant. But instead, he paused for a moment, looked at him, and then continued to step into the water. After all, to Bennett’s knowledge the water had always been clean, and, as huge as the bay was, presumably nothing could change that.

While the old man watched, a small wave quickly rose above Bennett’s knees and then washed back down and across his toes, the sand sliding out from underneath and tickling him for a moment. He kept walking, a swaying, unsteady maneuver, until the water reached his chest, and then he bent down a little to let a small wave temporarily submerge him. He began swimming, counting his strokes. Four hundred strokes equaled half a mile, and he had time for at least that. As relaxing as his swim was, he couldn’t loaf in the waves. He had to finish, shower, dress, eat breakfast, and be in class by eight o’clock. Perhaps that’s why he hadn’t replied to the man—his time was limited.

As he left the surf line, he watched the blurry breakwater to his right. The row of rocks jutting out from the beach was designed to reduce sand erosion, but the barnacle-encrusted obstacle could also slice a swimmer into shark bait if the current pushed him into it. Bennett had been thrown into the rocks

before. Clinging to one, he had slowly, painfully crawled out of the water while the waves pulled at his body as if trying to saw him in half. He had scraped himself over the sharp barnacles so badly that he bled from chest to feet.

Once he made it past the breakwater, Bennett turned left, to the south. He watched the shore for landmarks, not so much to measure his distance, given that he counted his strokes, but to make sure the currents didn't pull him farther from shore. But on this morning, out beyond the surf line, he just bobbed up and down in calm water while the as-yet-unformed breakers rolled through the water under him. There was little sound out here. Occasionally, birds flew by, some so low he could hear their wings beat against the air, and rarely, he would see an otter or even a dolphin. As the years went by, he had worried more and more about sharks, as though the chance of an attack got higher the longer he spent in the ocean.

Bennett didn't think much of the man's warning, although the natural storyteller in him was already processing the moment, hoping to shape it with a lengthy prologue, crafted details, and finally, after all the buildup, a denouement (prefaced by "to make a long story short"): "He waved this newspaper in the air and said . . ."

If asked about the warning itself, he might have said he realized that, although he once could see the ocean bottom as he swam, now it was murky, a gray translucence. Later, he would tell people he occasionally tasted something funny in the water, but, really, that was just his storytelling again. While he swam, he actually tasted nothing, not even the salt water. And generally, the water's turbidity so close to shore stirred up the sand and prevented the kind of clarity he claimed he'd seen.

But these were all momentary musings, the kind that might occupy others for longer. Bennett's mind simply wandered from idea to idea as if he were trying to clean out his mental files. He thought about his job, his wife, his son, or, if he allowed the memory to intrude, his daughter, who had died a year before when a truck hit her. And in the background, the strokes kept adding up, counted off almost subconsciously. With every other stroke he turned his head to the right and sucked in a calm, relaxing breath. True, the cold water was already drawing away his body heat, but he didn't feel it yet. The swimming itself was automatic, soothing, a meditation.

In about ten minutes, he reached 200 strokes and turned around, heading north, back toward the breakwater and the old man still fishing. He counted out another 150 strokes. He knew from experience that fifty more would probably get him to shore, so he pointed his body toward the beach. Soon, with the waves pushing him forward, his hand slapped sand and he stopped. Four hundred strokes: half a mile.

Bennett dropped his knees into the sand to steady himself, and, after a small wave patted him on the back, he quickly stood so another wave couldn't knock him over. You can't trust the ocean, he always told himself. It sneaks up on you.

His body violently shook as his wet skin hit the winter air. His core temperature had no doubt plummeted; he was nearly hypothermic. Every morning, it was the same—it could take two, three hours to fully recover. He might be standing before his second-period class before he realized he was no longer shivering.

He passed the man, who looked at him again, this time with an incredulous stare. "Water poison!" he repeated and waved a

newspaper at Bennett. Bennett couldn't read the *Los Angeles Times* headline, but it said, "Report Confirms Toxic Dumping; Hayden Decries Damage to Bay."

The marine life was dying. Chemicals had poisoned the water. Once he learned the details, Bennett had the most dramatic storyline of his life: He had been swimming in dirty water.