

Chapter One

The Fogher Cliffs, Valentia Island, Ireland / Late September 2007

All day I'd focused on keeping my gear and myself from plummeting into the Atlantic, which growled below. The other thing was maintaining a second-fiddle position to - and out of the way of - the girl from Killarney. Both of us were shooting some bizarre and elegant rock climbing moves performed by this California showboat free climber, Ric Conroy. That was pretty much the assignment until, from out of nowhere, a monstrous silent swell rose and snatched Conroy off the first pitch of a north-facing cliff of Valentia Island. And this happened right as I had him artfully framed with a 70 to 200 zoom lens. He just disappeared into an explosive wall of greenish black water.

I barely heard his publicist scream, probably for us to leap in to save him, not noticing that we were at least a hundred feet above sharp rocks and seething ocean. She kept on screaming into a muscular wind that snuffed her words into little staccato peeps.

Glennie, the photographer from Killarney, already had a cell phone to her ear and was shouting in earnest. Being several hundred feet away - she on the east side of the

climbing route and I on the west - I couldn't hear anything but the roar of that rogue wave's surf. I tried to see where Conroy might be in the swells, but there was nothing. The sea had taken him. Ever the optimist, I kept searching while scrambling up the edge of the cliff face to compare notes with Glennie.

She was on her second or third call, to the Knightstown Sea Rescue Station. She'd gotten the number from the local Coast Guard Station. It was clear she knew her stuff, all those years shooting for the main Kerry newspapers, plus stringing for every other paper of note. A lot of stuff happens in the Kingdom, and Glennie McDonald, I'd been told, was usually on top of it.

I felt as helpless as a camera without a lens, was jet-lagged and still not quite at one with my new Irish cell phone. You'd think by 2007 an expensive Yank cell phone would work in Ireland, but no. Puffing and entering a level of distress I wasn't prepared for, I ask Glennie, "This looks serious. What's the plan?"

She looked past me, at the aftermath of what was clearly a monster rogue. "You bet it's serious. No sign of him. We stay on the cliff edge so when the S&R arrive we can point to where he was."

"Sort of hard to describe where this cliff is when this whole part of the coast is nothing but cliffs." Stating the obvious showed just how astute I was. She glanced at me as if I were a passing goat then hit another speed-dial number. Out of the corner of her mouth she said, "Just watch for him," then pointed downward, into what was now a distinctly unfriendly black-marbled sea.

The screaming publicist, who struck me as a Junior Leaguer from La Jolla, reached our little rock shelf and was out of breath and speechless. I tried to calm her. “Glennie’s called the Coast Guard as well as the sea rescue guys who are all on their way here now. By boat.” Seemed fitting to add that little detail. I’m not sure any of it registered because she was hyperventilating and looked to be on the verge of a heart attack. “C’mon, let’s keep watching for him.” I tried my manly reassuring voice, one tinged with Southern for that extra bit of avuncular charm.

I took her arm in mine and held it as we scanned the wild water below. Ric Conroy always wore bright colors when climbing because he knew they helped make a better photo...or as he said, a great promotional image. So that would help us spot him, bright yellow shirt, French blue climbing pants and bright red shoe laces.

He’d spent time producing films and was a keen marketer so he knew how to make a living doing impossible free climbs. No protection, no belays, no help other than great climbing shoes, a rosin bag, huge talent and strength. It was he and the rock face and he had a knack for picking dramatic routes that others had struggled on. He’d race up these needles, sheer faces with huge overhangs, smooth basalt monoliths, on any continent, and he’d reach the top before noon.

The wind had picked up, making it increasingly hard to hear one another. Once I braced myself into a good watching position, I scanned back through the last twenty or so images on my camera’s screen. In the next to last image I had of Ric, he was laughing and holding his arms out, as if he’d just hit a bases-loaded homerun. The one after that was mostly crashing wave and a piece of Ric’s leg being pulled under.

I shut the camera off and began to feel stiff from the cold. Between the damp wind roaring up the cliff face and the fact that I was both dead tired and hungry, the chill bled right through my parka. The afternoon was waning into a deadly gray. The publicist hunkered behind me and made phone calls and cried and shouted and made more calls. It would be noon in New York and 9 AM in L.A. I could see Glennie above me, working her way down the cliff edge. She looked calm but watched the sea the whole way down. When she got within hearing distance, I asked her what I could do to help.

She eyed the publicist as she spoke. “Just keep her calm. And keep an eye out. If he’s not out of that water in another thirty, forty minutes or an hour max, he’s a goner. Hypothermia will take him if the ocean doesn’t.”

Just as a group of five orange and black Zodiacs appeared below on our right, two *Gardai* arrived by land, having taken their Land Rover as far as they could up a slate strewn track behind us. They had all the communication gear and were able to interface with Knightstown sea rescue. They also had big flashlights – called torches here – that they clicked on and waved at the Zodiacs. Then a bright orange Coast Guard power launch roared in behind the smaller boats. I began to feel a little less helpless – and responsible - because the pros were on the scene and all we had to do was answer questions, and describe what we’d seen. Both Glennie and I deployed our digital cameras to show the two *Gardai* what we’d seen. They clucked their tongues and shook their heads. “Jaysus, will ya look at that?”

The Coast Guard launch switched on their big searchlights and several scuba divers tipped backwards off the sides of the boats into swells that soon exploded against

the cliff face. It all looked dangerous. Right now it seemed absolutely foolhardy to do what he did. One of my favorite art directors had a marvelous deadpan delivery of a Universal Truth: “When you’re least expecting it, it’ll rise up and bite you in the butt.” And “it” was anything in the job that you had ignored or not thought about. I couldn’t help but remember his wise warning.

Without noticing it, the wind blew in the night. We’d been looking down into an increasingly dark sea, punctuated here and there with zipping Zodiacs lit occasionally by panning marine spotlights. I needed to get the publicist to our cars and on to her comfortable hotel or B&B. She was shaken, having seen her most colorful client disappear before her eyes. Being selfish when it comes to my own comfort, I wanted to retreat to my warm, dry single bed at *Carrig a Leathe* B&B. Still maintaining my second-fiddle position, I approached Glennie.

“Anything more I can do to help? Should I get whatshername back to her hotel so she can get something to eat, call Ric’s wife? Now that you’ve got a rescue story going, I don’t want to get in your way.”

I hadn’t seen her tired before and was surprised that it made her look older. Like maybe my age, but way more classic than me. Whatever makeup she had was long gone, but the fatigue made her look softer, more approachable, and lovely.

“Yeah,” she sighed. “It’s now a search and rescue. Too bad, eh?”

“Sure is.” I eyed the dismayed publicist.

“Look, get her off the mountain, back to the hotel. Then same for you. Call me later and we’ll talk about tomorrow. Too dark now to shoot and we can’t get on the rescue craft till morning anyway. But be prepared to meet at the station early. These guys are all iron men, never sleep, never eat, never get cold.”

I write down both her numbers and the number for the Knightstown rescue station. My fingers are so cold and stiff that I almost drop my pen. I give her both my new cell and the B&B’s number.

“Okay,” I say. “Will you find out what the call is at Knightstown then let me know?”

“Ta Cinte”

“Pardon?”

“Irish for you bet.” She’s actually nice when she explains it.

How in hell did I, a New York advertising photographer, get involved with all this? Once I got some heat going in our Ford Focus and calmed the publicist even further by driving her towards a warm room and food, I began to realize this wasn’t the creampuff shoot my rep, Spiro, had sold me. Not by a long shot. It was going to be easy, he said, in the land of my forefathers, perfect to help me get over the two deaths and two funerals in less than two weeks. I needed to get out of New York, he said, into some serious fresh air.

“What better place to do that?” He pressed his pitch. “In the West of Ireland, make some pretty landscapes with this maniac blond guy doing daredevil shit for Outdoor Magazine, maybe even Geo. So it pays peanuts? Magazines don’t pay crap and never have

so who gives a shit, Channey. You've already done better'n just about any other photographer...well, other than maybe Heisler, huh?"

I couldn't help myself. "What about the Queen?" Spiro's got wild eyebrows, like Buffalo Bill Cody ones, and they arched big like two bucking broncos.

"Oh, her. Forget ever catching up to her. We're talking fucking millions...beyond millions, and that only happens in our business every so many generations. She's got it sewed up for the five, six, seven whatever country houses, book deals, huge museum shows. Besides, you don't need all that shit anyways. Do you?"

I just had to laugh, which was something I hadn't done in exactly two weeks.

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Madame Publicist had booked several rooms, for her and Ric only, I might add, at a hoity-toity spa-type inn overlooking Portmagee, the kind of place that avoids being listed in the run-of-the-mill B&B listings for County Kerry. Made of dark gray stone and perched on a rise above the harbor, I had a helluva time finding it. She was no help, thumbing her glowing cell phone and sniffing and working up some way to blame me for her discomfort. I'm used to this because another truth in our business is that we're usually down there – well, not the Queen or Heisler or Albert Watson - in the pecking order, so consequently get blamed for the craziest shit.

My non-spa, non hoity-toity B&B is the first one after crossing the Valentia Island bridge. Nice sweet owner, Mrs. O'Sullivan, clean rooms, great breakfast, killer view of

Portmagee and the jaw-dropping green mountain rising behind the town. But the best pub is, according to Mrs. O'Sullivan, the Bridge Bar in Portmagee so that's where I head.

Having only been here two full days, and cold and tired, I'm anxious not to crash head-on into someone driving on their Irish side of the road. I'm also not wanting to get lost again, but since Portmagee is largely a one-street town, I park, one set of wheels up on the sidewalk next to the harbor wall, and soon find the Bridge Bar.

I'm too tired to worry about looking lost, a confused Yank that will make for amusing bar talk when I'm out of ear range. The bar is packed, but I find a tiny table near a drafty part of the front window and order a Bulmer's cider and a bowl of seafood chowder, something to warm me gullet, as my mother used to sing in her pretty good version of a North of Ireland accent. The chowder comes with two great pieces of brown bread and heavenly sweet butter.

Spiro's last instructions were like something you'd say to a rookie photographer and he knew it. His eyebrows dipped low. "Look, all's you gotta do is shoot and don't pull any of that I'm a big-time New York asshole photographer sort of stuff that big time New York asshole photographers always do. Always! There's this girly shooter, local, and she's covering it for the publicist. You're doing the tree-hugger magazine shit so stay out of her way as best you can." His eyebrows bucked and arched. "Unless of course she's a babe and you want to get cozy. Nah, forget I said that, just lay back and have a good time."

So that's what I was doing, none of that I'm from New York shit, as Spiro put it. The chowder went down good and fast so I ordered another. The thin waiter dude with

earrings and a couple Celtic Goth tattoos around his wrists smiled and nodded. “Bulmer’s too, mate?”

I was too damn tired to try the “Ta cinte” bit, knew I’d screw it up so just said, “Yes please.” I’ll ask Glennie again how to say it. I noticed the guys at the next table talking about Ric Conroy being eaten by the Atlantic. Some feckin Yank doing some crazy shit was their view. I just ate and was thankful I wasn’t flailing around and dying in fifty-degree water. There was no way Ric would make it, a sobering thought.

I had a full day’s shoot on two flash drives, a number of cover-quality images, some two-page spreads, all the coverage a magazine layout editor loves to have in Quark or InDesign. They love you when you give them lots of options and you can bet that your favorites will never see the light of day, except in your own portfolio. But with the death of the main feature, I doubted the article would ever run. But if I shot some of the rescue, which looked to be dramatic, that might interest Outdoor. After all, Ric Conroy was a big outdoorsy celebrity and media hound. So be it.

Just as I was scraping my second bowl of chowder, wishing I had the kind of tongue a good Lab has, Glennie McDonald leans through the door, which when it opens with a blast of chilled air, bumps into the edge of my little round table.

“Glennie!”

She does a subtle double take. “How’d you find yourself here?”

“Mrs. O’Sullivan at the B&B. Any news of Ric?”

“None.” She sinks into a chair with great fatigue. “I need to sit awhile.” I arm wave as best a New Yorker can do in a busy bar on the furthest western edge of Europe. Tattoo Earring swerves over and Glennie tells him what she wants, then she turns to me.

“Half-four at the station. Go as far as you can down the hill in Knightstown. Follow the ferry signs to the harbor, bear left when you get to the boats, put on brakes or you’ll crash into the station. Wear as warm as you...em, you have wellies, raingear?”

“No wellies, but I’ve got this parka, fleece sweaters, climbing boots. All that I have on now.” I was still stunned by the early call. Would I be able to sleep or be too tired to sleep?

“Okay, ask Mrs. O’Sullivan for anything to wear for a Zodiac. She’ll know. One of her sons is on the search.”

Now how did she know that? It was subtle, but Glennie had warmed up considerably. She likely expected a Yank moron who’d trip and fall all over the place, talk too loud, say things really stupid. In other words, another American asshole on the loose in Ireland. Good thing I was a veteran with assignments in 17 or so other countries, but only in Ireland a few times.

“I didn’t pack marine storm gear and from what I saw of those Zodiacs tossing around down there, I’ll be soaked before we get out of the harbor.”

“Not to worry, iron men will have tossed you overboard before we hit the big swells.” She squeezed a tiny, charming smile out from her tired face. I just shook my head and felt my face go green at the thought of gut-wrenching seasickness, frozen fingers and saltwater drenched cameras. I’ve never been keen on tossing and rolling boats.

“Just slaggin’, Channey.” Her Kerry accent softened. “Iron men have stuff for you to wear, Coast Guard duds. Just be nice to ‘em or they’ll kill you fast.”

“I’m telling you, I’m the damn nicest guy from New York you’ll ever see. Thanks for the heads-up.”

She nodded and smiled, her eyes locked on mine, then sank her top lip into creamy Guinness. “God, this is too much, isn’t it?”

I thought she meant the Guinness, but her tone was too dark.

“Sure is. I’ve never photographed someone....” I had to stop. I’d just dealt with so much death in the past month. In a way, I should have at this very moment been back at my mom’s house trying to handle the aftermath of my father’s death. But two highly contentious brothers made that prospect so unappetizing that I easily let Spiro sell me on this creampuff – his smooth 100% bullshit name for it – photo shoot.

I asked her about shooting for the newspapers. She gave me a where-the-hell-should-I-start look. “Too late in the day to go into that. I gotta go sleep. But thanks for asking about that. And thanks for the Guinness and salmon special.” She got up and left me to flag down Tattoo Earring and pay

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“Have wool socks, do ye?”

“Got those but no wellies.”

Mrs. O'Sullivan had waited up for me, knowing I had seen the last of Ric Conroy. News travels fast on islands.

"You must be famished, so?"

"I availed myself of your best suggestion so far: the Bridge Bar and it was wonderful. But I'm to ask you about wellies."

"I think Billie has some extras out back."

"I'm supposed to be at the rescue station at four-thirty."

"You'll have a box of food to take with you, whatever I've got I'll pack and leave on the bottom step. It'll be a long day, so it will."

In my room I went over all my gear and wondered how I would ever beat out cold sloshing seawater, going in every direction. At least my Tamrac Extreme camera pack was reasonably rainproof, padded with closed-cell foam, storm flaps over the zippers. The bad news was that I had to actually get my cameras out and use them, water or no. Stuffed between the main compartment and the shoulder straps were several plastic bags, 30 gallon size and a few tall kitchen ones and a dozen Zip-Lok gallon size, just in case - anything to keep the cameras dry and working. Plus I had some bubble wrap, for that just-in-case stuff.

I plugged all the batteries into chargers, then clipped the flash drives into their USB connectors and downloaded both cards. While I shower the files are burned to DVDs on my beat-up Mac. Now I could sleep, or toss and turn, with a vivid recollection of that huge swell, like curved dark green marble, rising at least twenty feet above the tide line, maybe ten feet above where Ric Conroy stood as I photographed the last of him.

Glennie's fatigued smile, the way that she looked at me, was so reassuring. She has a remarkable face, strong yet fine featured, lips that are worth writing home about. This was somehow important.

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The Knightstown Sea Rescue Station is all lit up as I pull my Focus into a parking spot. Glennie is already here, talking with two wetsuit-clad men standing beside a couple of bright orange and black Zodiacs, the largest ones I've ever seen. Once I get my gear together, Glennie motions me over and quips, "Really helps to sleep late once and awhile, eh?"

"I feel dead and we haven't even started," I reply, trying not to drop Mrs. O'Sullivan's box lunch.

She hauls me over to the Zodiacs. "Fintan and Billie, yer man Channey Moran. He's shooting for some American magazines."

I shake hands and know immediately why Glennie calls them iron men.

"Glad to meet you, but wish it weren't under these circumstances." I check them for knives.

"Ah, be glad you didn't have a date with the night crew. Two of 'em will be steaming in any time now. Then we'll saddle up and go out to the search site. Be out till noon or so."

“Just tell me what to do, where not to be. I don’t want to be a pain in your butts. Just taking photos so I’ll try to stay out of your way.” I’m getting good at second fiddle. Glennie never says shit like this. I lean over to her and continue. “Look, you’re in the lead boat and I’ll bring up the rear. Will this work for you?”

“*Cinte*,” she says. The two guys are chuckling and comment to each other in Irish.

“Okay, say it slow once more so I can get the pronunciation.”

“Kin-shah, or if you want to say ‘yes, certainly’ it’s ‘Ta kin-shah’, okay?”

“*Ta Cinte*,” I say and everyone responds, “Okayyyyyy.”

In the big, double garage rescue station, Billie fits me with marine foul-weather gear and some rubber boots, better ones than the floppy wellies that came with my box lunch. These yellow ones have soles that won’t slip on all that seawater I’m about to be in. Best of all, double wool socks and a red life vest.

I see bouncing lights and hear powerful outboards at full tilt approach. Two bright orange Zodiacs, one with four iron men, the other smaller one with three, arrive at a frightening speed. The bows plow right up the grooved concrete ramp and stop with just the stern in the water. I figure the largest is over twenty-five feet long, the other about eighteen or so, as the crews leap out, compare notes, give instructions, load and refuel the outbound boats, and unload the two that just arrived. The whole procedure looks well rehearsed, like a Nascar pit stop. I stay out of everyone’s way, standing beside Glennie.

“Ever been out in one of these rigs?” I ask while watching the iron man carnival.

“Yeah, few times...year or so ago.” She stands close so I can hear over the din.

“They hold training sessions for the press here, also Waterville and Dingle. With a

coastline like ours, these men are well practiced and have saved many lives. The different teams do weekend training sessions all over the place but one of their favorites is Portmagee harbor, just in front of the Bridge Bar.”

I’m relieved that the crew – Fintan, Billie and two other wet-suited men who are built like the cartoon Taz, low, stout and powerful – aren’t brandishing knives, ready to throw me overboard. They’re professional and carefully stow my Tamrac in a watertight bin that functions as a bench in front of the pilot’s station. In front of that is an electric winch of heavy white nylon line. Antennas, lights, grab handles and scuba equipment are everywhere. Marine radios crackle with constant chatter. There’s firm decking once inside the orange blimp-like gunwales. Fintan points me to the starboard side of the bench and then, like for a dog, makes the hand gesture for “stay.”

My butt is firmly pressed to the fiberglass bench as we head out of the harbor. Twin Yamaha engines lift the bow and shoot us forward. The high velocity acceleration feels like a waterborne dragster. As we clear a small rock peninsula, the wind feels as if it will rip my clothes off. I hang on as we reach the open sea. Our Zodiac feels airborne much of the time, crashing back down with huge walls of spray flying past me on both sides.

Three of the men wear what look like white crash helmets, and yellow storm jackets topped with bright red life vests, all edged with silver reflective material. The larger Zodiac in which I’m hanging on, legs wrapped around the winch supports, has a tower on the stern that holds antenna, a revolving radar or Loran. I pull my wool stocking cap down to my eyebrows and try to believe that I’m not going to be bounced overboard and die out here.

The smaller Zodiac with Glennie sitting in the bow blows by and she gives me a look, then a thumbs up. Soon they are just a wake, a few lights and some spray. Must be doing 35 or 40 mph. Dawn slips onto us as the cold ocean swells grow larger. Soon the boat swings to port and plows along the tops of waves, running parallel to their direction. Beyond the bow, I see a Coast Guard ship with several powerful spotlights scanning the lower parts of the endless black cliffs looming to my left. Because the hull is dark blue, it looks to be part of the sea, with only the bright orange superstructure visible.

For the first time since falling out of bed this morning, I wonder what in hell am I doing here.