

Death Contingency 1

Signs every few yards along the cliff edges warned that they were dangerous and unstable. But he'd had a few beers and needed to relieve himself. If the cliffs were unstable, why hadn't the signs fallen into the ocean, he sniggered with intoxicated logic?

An impish grin crept across his face; he was seventeen, invincible master of the world. He moved to the very edge of the cliff and stood, feet spread, hand tauntingly on a warning sign, head thrown back crowing at the sky as he sent his stream arching into the ocean below.

He was stunned by the suddenness of the fall.

He didn't cry out for help as he plummeted. There was no time.

He plunged deep into the ocean. Frigid water slammed his body, contracted his muscles, and forced the air from his lungs.

He strained for the surface, battling his emptied lungs that were desperate for oxygen, struggling against the urgent need to take a killing breath.

He surfaced with a gasp, gulping air until his lungs hurt less than his skin.

He wasn't afraid, just shaken and angry. Sobered. This was the Pacific. The ocean was warm where he came from near San Diego. How could it be so cold here? He was partying just north of Santa Cruz, home base to so many world-class surfers; how could they surf in this water?

He shivered violently. His entire body felt like it was being slashed by tiny, sharp razors. Except for the long pants and the tightly zipped sweatshirt that covered him, he half-expected he would see his blood oozing from a thousand cuts.

The plunge left him disoriented. By the time he turned to face the cliffs, he was surprised how far he had drifted out to sea.

Not a problem. He was a strong swimmer. He kicked and paddled hard in the direction of the cliffs.

But, despite his efforts, after a few minutes they seemed farther away, not closer. The music from the party was growing fainter. Not good.

The cliff face was sheer where he dropped into the ocean. He was going to need help getting back to the top. By now, some of his friends should be climbing down with flashlights, calling his name, ready to lend a hand when he got near land. Why didn't he see lights moving down the cliff face?

He rubbed his ears—they must be affected by the cold—he could hardly hear the sounds of the party anymore. And he was getting tired fast. He took as deep a breath as he could manage and called to his friends. No response ...

His arms and legs didn't feel like they belonged to him any longer. They were heavy and stiff—his joints almost old-man arthritic in the cold sea. It took real determination to kick his legs and reach out his arms to paddle.

Maybe taking off his shoes would make swimming easier, less tiring. He stopped his ineffective strokes to reach down and take them off. But his fingers were numb and lacked strength; he couldn't be certain when he grasped the Velcro tabs on his shoes. A task that should have taken a few seconds stretched into exhausting minutes.

Finally, one of his shoes popped to the surface behind his head. He didn't notice it...

At least the water wasn't as cold anymore. He felt prickles—pinpoints of pain rather than the overwhelming agony of razor-cut cold.

As he struggled with his shoes, the sounds of the party faded more and more, growing softer and farther away until he couldn't hear them at all. The beacon of light given off by the party bonfire on the cliffs had become very faint, more a memory of warmth than luminosity.

Perhaps he should have been concerned, but he wasn't. He was comfortable in the water now. The moon came out from behind a passing cloud and shone brightly. Cool silver light reflected off little lapping waves all around him. The sounds they made were soothing...restful. And he was so tired...

He had no fear of sinking; the salt water buoyed him up. Maybe he'd turn on his back, close his eyes, and just rest for a few minutes, enjoying the warm Pacific and the lapping of the waves before he got back to the hard task of swimming to shore.

Another man was resting momentarily in the ocean, too, well beneath the young partygoer. He hadn't expected rescue when he went into the sea. He never struggled to return to the surface after his drop into the Pacific. His breathing had been regular and deep. His lungs had filled with water as naturally as they had with the air that would have buoyed his body and kept him afloat in the dense, salty sea. Instead, the weight of the water in his lungs had quickly sent him to the ocean bottom.

A school of surfperch swam around him near the marine floor. They were small fish in a vast ocean, but the unified movement of their silvery bodies caused a slight ripple in the dark underwater world. Caught in the flow, the man gave up resting and swam, his arms and legs lacking coordination and purpose, on his random undersea journey.