

PROLOGUE

Simultaneously mobiles rang in every corner of the world, the trapped and dying reaching out for a lifeline, as if a miracle of modern technology could rescue them. Last words of love and desperation soared into the air, with radio masts quivering under a deluge of calls. Within seconds, the besieged towers were screaming *no network coverage* to the millions who, witnessing the disaster live on television, heedlessly keyed in the numbers of anyone that might be caught up in the quake, even now wiping out the Californian coastline.

A skyscraper, which five minutes before had been central to a vast hotel complex, nosedived into the ground. The resulting tremor catapulted the camera sideways so that, to the people staring at the screen, it was as if they were standing on their heads. Blackness followed then silence, the calm voice of the anchor man trying to reassure viewers they would be *back at the scene momentarily*.

In London, the cab driver, chatting amiably with his passenger and ignorant of the unfolding drama, had one eye on traffic, which appeared to be fast backing up, and one eye on his mirror, nodding in agreement to the various subjects offered up for discussion.

‘It’s a long time since I was in England,’ the man said, the faintest trace of an American accent marking his voice.

That was when the cab driver began to wonder if his fare could be a film star. Even features, excellent teeth, not an ounce of extra flesh, with a thatch of light brown hair tipped blond

by the sun, and steel blue eyes of a shade that only ever belonged to Americans.

The mobile in the American's jacket pocket rang. 'Excuse me,' he said. 'Sweetheart, where are you calling from? Everything okay?'

Since mobiles were designed only to be heard by the person into whose ear they were pressed, the cab driver couldn't hear the terrified syllables speeding across the saturated airwaves. He could only watch with astonishment as his passenger's face turned into a mask of dangerous impotence.

'They told us we had to work for them to stay alive,' the whispered words flew across the Atlantic. 'But they tricked us. Can you hear it? The earthquake!'

'What are you talking about? *Who tricked you?*'

'The Styru Project – they want it. We said no.'

'Who, goddamn it! *Who?*'

There was a blur of static then the line cleared. '... there's no way out.'

'Yes, there is,' the man snapped. 'There's always a way out – find it.'

'I'm trying, that's what you can hear – me – running. But it's hopeless. Charlie's dead, so's James. It's impossible. We're trapped.'

'Try, *goddamn it!* If someone's after you, they won't let you be killed, you're too valuable. And if they can get in, you can get out. Stay alive, *do you hear!*' The pleasant quality of the man's voice had vanished, his tone vicious, as if it could force a reaction thousands of miles away.

The mobile crackled, the words becoming staccato. 'There's no way. Can't make it... Sky ... keep him safe. The building ... it's toppling ... *Sky ... safety.*'

'You're not checking out on me. *Crawl* if you have to, *but don't you dare check out,*' the passenger yelled into the static.

The cab driver watched in a state of near panic. Whatever had happened? His passenger's face was now chalk white under its tan, his expression animal-like in its ferocity, his eyes

glittering as he swiftly keyed in a number, speaking briefly.

‘Get me back to Grosvenor House – fast,’ he snapped, his eyes fixed on the small screen in his mobile, where newsreaders crowded to report events.

The cabby stuck his arm straight out of the window and, heedless of the vehicle bearing down on them, swung the cab round, saluting the driver’s blast on the horn with two fingers. Grosvenor House came into view and he swung the cab along the apron in front of the hotel and stopped.

‘*Wait!*’ his passenger took the hotel steps in a single bound. ‘Get me on the next flight to New York,’ he snapped to the Bell Captain, scarcely hesitating in his path to the front desk.

Ten minutes later he reappeared, clutching a small valise. The cabby, who had considered jettisoning his lucrative fare and fleeing the scene, convinced he was carrying a knife-wielding maniac, obligingly pulled back into the traffic. There’d been no lack of volunteers in the cab rank eager to update him on the disaster taking place in California. He viewed his passenger with careful sympathy; someone belonging to the American was caught up in the earthquake, that much was evident. He fished around for something to say but found nothing. He didn’t know the bloke and *sorry* was an empty, meaningless word, trotted out when you bumped into someone. Instead, he cursed the traffic and urged his cab forward, one eye on the crowd of onlookers that had spilled on to the roadway outside Debenhams. Ignorant to the danger, they had their gaze fixed on the television sets in the shop’s window display, where live footage of the disaster was being transmitted.

‘*Son of a bitch!*’ his passenger cursed. ‘The vacuous pleasures of the petty-minded, who derive their kicks from someone else’s misfortune.’

‘That’s not fair, guv,’ the cab driver rebuked. ‘The English don’t celebrate tragedy. Those people watching, they’ll be putting their hands in their pockets tomorrow to help.’

‘I know,’ his passenger said, his tone bleak. ‘Excuse me.’

‘Look, guv. I can’t help much but I can drop you by a tube station. You’ll reach the airport quicker that way. It’s not fair to take your money.’

He pulled in to the side of the road, opposite the entrance to the underground at Oxford Circus. ‘Good luck, sir. Who was it?’ he said, the traditional inner core of reserve, so great a part of being English, battling with his cabby’s nose for entertaining titbits to pass on to his next fare.

‘My wife!’ The man pressed a twenty-pound note into the cabby’s hand. He glanced up briefly, meeting the concern in the driver’s eyes. ‘Only my wife.’

At dawn the following morning, a rental car made its way down narrow, dust-filled tracks that wound across the slopes of the Sierras. The driver knuckled his eyes. He felt bone weary, but thanked God he had at least made it. If the call had not got through – if the taxi driver had been lazy or greedy and withheld information about travelling by subway – if he had missed his connection in New York, he would now be stranded. The rental car’s stereo, his only companion, had kept him abreast of the news. And less than six hours after he reached New York, the President had declared a State of Emergency closing every airport on the continent. By then he was landing in Las Vegas. Now nothing moved in the skies, unless by order of the Federal Government.

Beyond that nothing had happened, the lessons learned from the tragedy of New Orleans too far distant to be remembered. In any case it had been a double whammy. Participants at meetings, hastily convened to set up a rescue operation with help for survivors, had awakened to find their decisions literally wiped out, as a deadly wave submerged the battered coastline in the dead of night, sealing the fate of those who had somehow survived the earthquake.

To the American driving through the night, the horrific details of the tsunami constantly tore holes in his belief that his wife had somehow survived. Nevertheless, each time he

stopped for coffee he punched in numbers on his speed dial, praying someone, somewhere, would have news, only to be met with silence.

The couple waiting for him out on their porch had no news either. They only knew what the television had relayed and prayed their son had something more hopeful. In their sixties with white hair, they continued vigorous and upright; the husband still carrying the firm muscle of a sportsman, his clear grey eyes watching the distant track as the car appeared through a cloud of dust.

The disaster hadn't reached them, high in the hills above Sacramento; but the slopes, a mile below them, were thronged with battered survivors, many still in night wear. Anxious residents had opened their doors and ransacked closets for clothes and shoes, handing out water and blankets, all the time desperately searching the skies for some sign the government cared.

The man pulled the Chevy to a halt and got out, his face grey with fatigue.

'Any news?'

A unified shake of the head spoke volumes as to the length of time the couple had been married. The older man put a gentle arm round the younger man's shoulders, escorting him onto the porch, his expression carefully noncommittal. 'We were hoping you had something, son. But it was not to be. Seems like it was totalled all the way to San Francisco. Sacramento escaped the water, but it's raining refugees. Lord knows when help's coming; seems like our government's got itself frozen. Come in, lad, you need food and sleep.'

'Any strangers?' the man said, looking round.

'No son, you're safe. *You* only got here with help. How can anyone else?'

From the sky, the man thought, but he didn't offer up the words, they had enough to worry about, no point adding more. He rubbed his eyes. 'You're right, I need sleep, but straight after we must all leave ...'

His father nodded. 'We're already packed up. We'll go up to my cabin. No one can find that. Wish you'd come, too.' He held up his hands, backing away. 'Yeah, I know we've discussed it. You have to get out of the States. But that's not going to be as easy as you think,' he added. 'There's lock down on the roads, nothing's moving and the only things flying belong to the Federal Government and there's a chronic shortage there, too. I expect the quake put paid to State Government. But I guess you'll find a way.'

The man nodded, smiling briefly at his mother, who had put a heaped plate of bacon and eggs in front of him and was busily pouring out a cup of coffee, strong enough to hold a spoon upright. 'It won't keep you awake,' she said, her voice stern. 'I doubt anything will.'

The food appeared to revive him, his blanched cheeks resuming their normal tanned appearance, although the deep black smudges under his eyes remained. He got up and went into the back room, where there were two beds, stripping off his shirt. A smile lifted the lines of fatigue on his face, as he stared down at the bed where a small child lay sleeping.

The four men that deplaned from the Lear jet a little after two o'clock in the afternoon were young, in their late twenties. The jet, which had landed them at the airport fifty miles east of Sacramento, was of military design sporting the crest of the Federal Government, the men's combat gear, only serving to confirm their status.

A few mechanics sat idly. With all planes grounded they were unemployed. Although a few had stayed on, feeling the need for human companionship in the face of what was happening on their doorstep, the majority had left in a rush to check their family weren't among the victims. The handful now remaining, concentrated alternatively on their mobiles and the larger TV screen in their rest room, endlessly chewing over events. They eagerly inspected the four men, hoping they were the vanguard of a rescue mission. But what could four

men do when the news readers were crunching numbers like a million dead? Still, at least their appearance spelled movement.

The door to the office opened abruptly, slamming shut behind a bespectacled clerk waving a slip of paper. He trotted out over the tarmac towards the party, bending slightly as the slipstream of the Lear hit him.

‘Is there a Lieutenant *Dervoy*?’

The officer, his shoulder sporting the stripes of a lieutenant swung round. ‘Davois,’ he snapped.

‘Message for you, sir. Came through ten minutes ago.’

The lieutenant took the slip of paper, scanning its message.

‘Your ride’s waiting, sir,’ the clerk said stating the obvious, an army chopper which had clearly been sent to collect the four men, already parked near one of the sheds, its engines idle.

The officer crossed to the helicopter, speaking briefly to the pilot. A couple of mechanics, who had been checking its rotor blades, heard the heavily accented voice but didn’t bother with it, so used to Mexicans and their broken English. He returned to the little group.

‘The address just came through. Our pilot says ’e knows the place we want. It’s about an ’alf hour ride.’

To the watching mechanics the lieutenant and two of the three men came across exactly as they were meant to look – regulation; their carriage upright as if a twenty-five-mile run was no more than a gentle stroll, although the frame of the lieutenant would pile on fat in middle life, a half-inch of spare flesh already showing above his belt. The fourth man, his words lost in a roar of noise as the chopper’s engines burst into life, appeared an unlikely sort of soldier. Bone thin and rangy, he gave the impression rather of long days spent in the saddle, with walking a painful necessity rather than a pleasure. Shouldering his kit bag, he moved out slowly towards the chopper, followed by the other three.

The engines cut back making it possible to be heard.

The soldier, his reflective lenses leaving his face a blank

canvas, lacking expression, tossed his bag up onto the cabin floor. 'Hope it's not a wild goose chase.'

'Where else would 'e go?' said the lieutenant. 'Pity about 'is wife.'

'They found her body yet?'

'The wave put paid to that. But we 'ave to find the 'usband. I'm not expecting any bother. You two ...' he called to the two men, already strapping themselves in for the ride. 'If 'e's not there, you two 'ave got the job of asking 'is parents where 'e is.'

The two men grinned, saying nothing.

Preparations for leaving were almost complete when they heard the chopper.

The man stared at the moving silhouette. 'How long?'

'Twenty minutes – tops,' said his father. 'You sure about this?'

A Harley Davidson stood ready to go, the open doors of the outhouse sheltering it from view. The man adjusted his goggles. 'Can't afford to take the chance, Dad, you know that.'

'I've filled the panniers full of food and clothes, but I don't like it,' his mother said tearfully. 'It's running away. I'm sure they won't hurt us.'

'For God's sake, woman,' snapped her husband. 'If they're responsible for a million people dying, they're hardly going to lose sleep over two more.'

Her son put his arm round her, giving her a hug. 'Dad's right, Mum. I'll phone when it's safe but you know I won't be back – not yet anyway.'

She slipped back into the house immediately reappearing with a heavy rucksack, only the top of the child's head showing. She strapped it firmly to the man's back. 'That's the best I can do,' she said. 'Promise me?'

Her son smiled briefly and touched her cheek. 'I'll buy something more comfortable.'

'Go slow,' the older man warned.

'Five minutes and you're gone. *Clear?*'

‘We’re gone, now. I’m not stupid, boy. Mother, go and get your bag. Leave the door open.’

‘But ...’

‘If they find it locked they’ll kick it in.’

‘Don’t come back, Dad.’

‘Teach your grandmother to suck eggs. I wasn’t a marine for nothing.’

A brief smile flicked across the younger man’s face.

‘It’s not a good day, son,’ his father said, ‘but I’ve survived worse and we’ll survive this, I can promise you that.’

The couple, linking arms, watched sadly as the Harley Davidson disappeared with a cloud of noise and dust, its rider returning the way he had come.

Taking a final look at the dust-blown track down which their son and grandchild had vanished, they climbed into the heavily laden rental car, its rear bumper now decorated with branches, trailing the ground behind it. The ex-marine turned the ignition and leisurely, as if he had all the time in the world, moved out along the track, the densely-packed leaves sweeping the roadway clear of all tyre tracks.