

CHAPTER ONE

The investigative journalist slammed his back hard against the concrete wall inside the causeway, forcing his exhausted body to an abrupt standstill. His chest heaved violently every breath he took, his eyes darted frantically back down the tunnel, half expecting someone to be at his heels. Ducking into the causeway gave him some chance of evading the men tailing him. His breathing amplified in the confined space. He swallowed, desperately trying to steady his rhythm. A twig snapped outside and his heart jumped. A predator stalked him just metres away and he flattened his body against the curved wall, trying to become invisible.

Believing he had little time left, he unclipped his mobile phone from his belt and awkwardly keyed in a number. The images were taking too long to transmit. Millions of lives depended on the information reaching its intended destination.

The journalist, a young upstart not long out of uni, had known from the onset that he was onto something big, but even so, he had no idea into what dangerous paths his research would lead. His older, more experienced colleagues had tried to deter him but in his naivety, he refused to listen. What he thought would bring unimaginable prestige and fast track his promotion was morphing into a nightmare beyond imagination.

His breathing now steady, he looked to buy some time. The seasonal dry had reduced the gully at the mouth of the causeway to a broken chain of muddy puddles. Barely a few metres away in a park five children were playing, laughing and tumbling on a grassy knoll. The young man weighed his chances of escaping the causeway undetected.

Who were these mysterious figures pursuing him? He was clinging to the hope they would not take him on in front of a group of pint-sized witnesses.

The sound of a shoe scraping on the causeway brought his attention back to his immediate situation. He swung round to catch sight of a man, arm extended. With a flash, a shot rang

out. The journalist flew backwards into the muddy water, his shoulder awash with blood.

The gunshot drew the children from play and they lined up along the bank. As the young journalist's life drained into the gully, a boy called out to the figure below him, 'Is that man okay, Mister?'

Another man edged down the path into the gully and stepped gingerly over a puddle, careful not to get his expensive Italian shoes wet. Bending down to pick up the dead man's mobile, he called out to the boy in a singsong manner. 'Why don't you come down here and see for yourself?'

In fear, all the children squealed and ran away.

'A bit anxious to finish him off, weren't you?' He searched through the dead man's electronic address book. 'Here,' throwing the mobile to the other, 'Give this to Lacey. I want him to find out where every contact on this list lives. I want them taken care of. Capire?'

Two years on...

At first glance, Scott thought a woman had winked at him, but instead, it turned out to be a man. His oversized false eyelashes batted through a thick coating of face paint, as he pranced about in a fluorescent body suit and ostrich plumes. The scant outfit offered little protection from the cold bite of winter chill. In an explosion of shimmering light and sound, the Mardi Gras brought the street alive with colourful characters in erotic movement to a Calypso beat.

No doubt, the atmosphere was electric. The Prophets of Doom were wrong, for God did not judge this city as they supposed, nor had the ominous build up of seasonal storm clouds to the south released their drenching rain and sleet. The sky was clear and but for the dominant lights radiating from the streets, the stars would be out for all to see. It seemed the gods fully endorsed the proceedings and had turned out a wonderful evening to celebrate the occasion.

With each dazzling float and giant luminous balloon character that passed by, glowed messages of peace, harmony

and goodwill. The ‘Family of Man’ was the universal theme that dominated this Christmas season, portrayed by mythical gods and interfaith icons. ‘This is the culmination of everything we believe in!’ a foreign television journalist proclaimed in her satellite telecast. ‘It’s the message of goodwill to humankind.’

Her camera operator panned across the intoxicated revellers, his lens catching the image of a group of adventurous youths stripping off to dance naked through the parade. Even the cold, night air and the strong presence of security patrols could not subdue their enthusiasm. Scott thought it would be fun to join the frivolity but alcohol had not dulled his inhibitions enough for him to step out. Instead, he pulled the hood of his jacket over his head to keep the cold from his ears. With his arms folded snugly over his chest and his gloved hands tucked into his armpits, he decided he was better off, watching.

Down the street, a lone prophet cried out, his breath turning to white clouds as it made contact with the freezing air. ‘You think you can keep mocking God this way? The coming of the Lord is near and you won’t escape His judgment!’

He was pushed back until the throng engulfed him. His words were ignored by most but to Scott, they were icicles, piercing his heart.

Brisbane City, Australia...

‘That was one scary movie!’ exclaimed Sharni as she and her two friends meandered their way through the crowded cinema.

‘It was fun!’ chirped Kirsten. ‘I mean; it had everything!’

‘Yeah! Ya mean, like atmosphere; the build up to somethink big ‘n scary?’ Sharni hugged an almost empty popcorn bucket.

‘Yeah! And it delivered!’

‘You two sound a bit like professional movie buffs,’ giggled Sally and then mimicked a movie critic. ‘The two characters worked well together and had a simmering chemistry!’

‘Seriously though, did ya honestly think the bad guys would win in the end?’ Sharni stuffed the last of the popcorn into her mouth without offering any to her friends.

‘No!’ Sally gave Sharni a disapproving look. ‘But I’m glad

one bad dude didn't die.'

The other two girls' eyes lit up. 'Tobin Jay!' they shouted in unison.

'He's seriously hot!' Kirsten added. 'Wait here! I have to get his poster. I won't live another day without it.'

She dashed past a life-size cardboard cutout of the movie's stars and passed a man wearing dark shades lingering around the entrance, leaving the pair stranded in the foyer.

'What she up to? She's sooo impulsive!' Sally's eyes followed Kirsten and then fixed onto the man.

'Ya heard... She's gettin' a posta. She won't live another day without it,' Sharni imitated Kirsten as she scrunched up her popcorn bucket, then changed tack. 'So tell me Sal, why couldn't ya join us for coffee earlier?'

Sally breathed deeply and took her gaze from the man. 'One word... 'Church'.'

'Oh... That's right. Ya mum goes to church.'

'Uh-huh, and I'm still trying to figure out where I fit in.'

'Ya can't live ya life for ya mum. She orders ya go to church and ya go,' Sharni said.

'I can say 'no' you know!'

'No ya can't! What're ya doin' there if ya hate bein' there?'

'I don't hate it. It is just it's not for me. Besides I go for Mum's sake,'

'Who's that dude?' Sharni spied the man in dark glasses at the front of the cinema.

'He looks Middle Eastern don't you think?' Sally said, suddenly agitated. 'Let's go!'

'What? Are ya afraid he's a terrorist or somethink?'

'Shush! Not so loud! He's looking our way. He heard you.'

'Come on Sal. Ya not serious! Don't freak me out like that. He's prob'ly innocently waitin' for his kids or somethink. Not all foreigners are terrorists or suicide bombers, ya know. He's prob'ly not even a foreigner. He only looks that way.'

Sally giggled nervously. 'You crack me up. What does a foreigner look like in a multicultural land like ours anyway?'

'Oh, ya know what I mean.'

‘I know, but it freaks me out all this talk about terrorism. It’s always in the news and our pastor is stuck on the same track, always preaching about it. I really think he must hate people the way he talks. Honestly Sharni, I’m starting to have nightmares.’ Sally looked nervously around, then at her watch. ‘What’s keeping Kirsten? I don’t want to stay here longer than I need to.’

The man smiled. Two giggling twelve year old girls headed out the foyer toward him. He leant forward to greet them and placed his hands on their shoulders, steering them out the door as the girls engaged in a volley of excited chatter.

The corner of Sharni’s lips curled up in a sardonic smile. ‘Good one Sal. What did I tell ya? He’s innocent! ...Just waitin’ for his kids.’

Rome, Italy...

Scott was one of thousands who planned to be in Rome during the festivities when the President of United Europe would deliver the Christmas address straight after the parade at Campo de Fiori. The greatest economic reformer the world had ever witnessed somehow stabilised the tumbling stock markets against incredible odds and rescued Europe from economic ruin. Managing to do what no one else was able to do, he brokered a Middle East peace deal that conformed to both Jewish and Arab expectations.

With the Middle East a little more secure and its oil cartels continuing to do business with the West, the whole world had this one man to thank, a man who boasted of still greater things to come. It would seem improbable but who could doubt him? He had the Midas touch. In his hands, everything turned to gold. At last, Europe had someone to revere, someone who, with a brilliant mind, had an optimistic plan for the future.

As the last characters of the parade disappeared out of view, a podium bathed in light with the Pantheon as its grand backdrop drew the attention of the people. It was ten o’clock and as the civic band played fanfare, the Mayor of Rome, Felix Georges, stepped out into the spotlight. The music died down and so too did the people’s chatter. They waited eagerly for the

announcement of the President.

Mayor Georges took the microphone and commenced in his native tongue. Then interpreters repeated his welcome in Spanish, French and English. ‘Distinguished guests, international visitors, citizens of Rome, and fellow countrymen, it is with much pleasure that we welcome our most distinguished guest, the President of United Europe, the Honourable David Jacobi!’

Georges enthusiastically clapped as he stepped aside and cleared a path for Jacobi.

Flanked on both sides by muscle-bound minders and an interpreter behind, Mister Jacobi stepped forward and for the first time, many people saw their saviour in the flesh.

The lights gave Jacobi’s countenance an angelic glow and in an instant, a roar of adoration from onlookers rose and reverberated around the Italian capital.

This was a memorable moment for eighteen year old Scott, son of Jeff and Cecily Ryan. He had backpacked across Asia with virtually no knowledge of other languages or customs but within a few weeks, had become a seasoned traveller. Finally, at what he was calling the pinnacle of his journey, he studied the face of the wonderworker who dominated world news.

Scott hung on Jacobi’s every word. Television networks from around the world beamed out his message of hope; ‘a world united without fear of terror’.

His address was brief yet resolute. Concluding, he wished everyone a merry Christmas, a holy Hanukkah and a happy holiday. His entourage then steered him out of view and back into obscurity.

Media everywhere proclaimed that the drenching the city had was not from torrential rains but from the praises of Jacobi’s adoring public.

Brisbane, Australia...

‘Mum! Dad! It’s Scott!’ Sally yelled excitedly from the living room.

Cecily was cleaning her kitchen cupboards. She always took

to vigorous cleaning when something troubled her and Scott was on her mind. She was dusting around carefully wrapped Christmas presents, hidden away from her offspring's prying eyes when she heard the phone ring. Still wearing rubber gloves, she rushed to where Sally was perched on the sofa. 'Is he in Rome? Is he all right?' Cecily bombarded her daughter with questions.

Sally turned her head away from the handset and shushed her mother, and then carried on her conversation. 'It's just Mum. She wants to know how you are.'

'Did someone say Scott's on the phone?' asked Jeff Ryan, coming in through the back door, pulling off his garden gloves and boots. He had been fastidiously building his holiday project, a rock garden around the patio.

'He said he's fine!' Sally snapped, returning to her conversation, 'Really...? You saw the Mardi Gras? I wish I was there.' She stopped a moment and a glint came into her eye. 'What? You were *in* the Mardi Gras! You were dressed in what? ...Is that all?'

Cecily tugged at her daughter's uniform sleeve and ordered her to relinquish the phone.

'Okay! Okay!' Sally snapped, annoyed at having her conversation cut short. 'I have to go Bro. Mum wants to talk to you.'

Cecily whisked the cordless phone out of her hand before she had a chance to hand it over. She scowled at her mother. Jeff had joined his wife who was now wedged in tightly next to Sally on the sofa. He leaned closer to catch the conversation between mother and son.

'Scott, what were you thinking of?' she asked sternly. 'You know what I mean...in the Mardi Gras... Oh.' Her voice and the lines on her forehead softened as she eyed her mischievous daughter. 'You weren't? ...Ummm. I never know who is pulling my leg when it comes to you two... Scott, how are you? Are you taking care of yourself? ...Eating the right food? ... Really? You saw David Jacobi? ...So where are you heading now? ...Okay, Paris on Tuesday.'

‘Hi, Son!’ interrupted Jeff. ‘Don’t drink too much and be careful of those Italian girls.’

‘That was some ‘wise’ advice from your father,’ Cecily said sarcastically. ‘I want you to text me when you get back to your hotel. You do have somewhere to stay? ...Oh...A hostel... I hope it’s in a good area of town.’ She giggled nervously. ‘Do you need anything? I could package it up and mail it to you... Oh... That’s good... Well... Scott, your father and I are going to miss not having you here for Christmas.’ A lump formed in Cecily’s throat and her voice wavered. As Scott talked, she fidgeted with the fingers of her empty glove lying on her lap. ‘I better not stay on the phone. It’s costing you a lot of money. Perhaps next time you could reverse the charges... Love you Darling... And your father sends his love too ...and so does Sal... Bye.’

Sally leaned over to the phone. ‘Bye Bro!’

Cecily kept her ear to the hand piece until Scott hung up. A tear trickled from her eye as she slowly put the phone down; quietly savouring the conversation and the sound of his voice. Suddenly angry with herself she chided, ‘Oh... I should’ve asked him for the name of the place he’s staying at!’

‘Did I ask you to say that?’ Sally scolded, still smarting over the way her mother took over Scott’s call.

‘What?’

‘You told Scott that I sent him my love.’

‘Don’t you?’

‘That’s not the point! Don’t assume Mother! I can tell him myself and would have if you gave me half a chance.’

‘Then maybe you won’t say silly things to try and trick me.’

‘I thought I was quite successful.’

Cecily groaned in frustration then turned to her husband. ‘He won’t be seeing the boys ‘til Tuesday. And I don’t think he’s staying in a nice part of town. Jeff, he’s so young. Why did we let him go to the other side of the world on his own?’

‘Oh no... Here’s the mushy stuff!’ Sally extricated herself from the sofa and made a beeline for the door.

Jeff wrapped his arms around his wife. ‘You know there was no telling Scott what to do once he turned eighteen. He already

had his mind made up.'

'I know... I know... but it's Christmas! I just wish he would see sense.'

'Eighteen year old blokes see sense? Who are you trying to kid, Honey?' As he placed both hands on his wife's shoulders, Jeff pulled back to look into her eyes. 'Hey, he's meeting up with his cousins in a couple of days. It's not like he's totally alone you know.' With his thumb, he gently dabbed at the tear in the corner of her eye. 'Hey! I could do with a cuppa... and do we have any cake in the place?'

CHAPTER TWO

For a couple of years on weekends and evenings, Scott had worked as a casual shop assistant to save up for his overseas trip. According to his friends, Rome was where it was happening and so it was necessary on his itinerary. He dreamed of being a writer, an international correspondent. *What better job to have and be paid to write and travel at the same time*, he thought. This would mean a few more years of tertiary study but before he again put his nose to the grindstone, he wanted a taste of jet set life.

An insignificant little backpacker lodge on the Via Villafranca became his base in Rome. The rent was better than most places he investigated and this allowed Scott to live comfortably on his meagre budget for the few days he was there. If he was short of cash he knew he could always ask his parents to wire him some. Now as his weary legs climbed the stairs to his room, Scott could still make out the faint music in the streets several kilometres away. Setting his backpack down by his feet, he paused for a moment to see if the tag hanging off the key ring in his hand matched the number on the door. His eyes adjusted to the dim hallway light. It was a match and he inserted the key into the lock. With a click, the door swung open and after fumbling for a moment, he found the light switch.

The light revealed a modest little room with only the essentials: a single bed and faded patchwork quilt already turned down, a bedside table, a reading lamp and an oil heater. A wooden blind for privacy hung limp over the one small window and a coir mat partially covered the tatty linoleum floor. His budget did not include an en-suite and the shared toilet and shower were a few metres down the hall.

Before he retired for bed, he was determined to record the day's events in his journal; a habit he wanted to cultivate for his chosen career.

His long, lean body lay diagonally across the bed. Raking a hand through his dark hair, he carefully chose the sentences to

put on paper. In no time, thoughts of the day began to flood his mind and his pen struggled to keep up. Then he paused as he warmly recalled an encounter with the man that made his trip all the more worthwhile.

Scott was not passionate about politicians. In fact, he was rather cynical of them. He often heard his father venting his frustration, believing politicians to be the sole cause of Australia's economic woes. However, Jacobi was not a politician like any other. He was a great leader and a hero in most people's eyes. Few, it seemed could fault the man.

Closing the book with his pen now resting between the pages, he dutifully sent an SMS on his mobile to his family to let them know he was okay, then flicked off the lamp and settled down for the night.

A restful sleep eluded him. He was still hyperactive from the earlier events and his inner spring mattress, having seen better days, squeaked every time he turned over. Throughout the night, sirens sounded down the street and flashing lights from emergency service vehicles filtered through the blinds. Below his window, a vagrant rummaged for a few minutes amongst the rubbish tins and then moved on, disturbed refuse being his calling card. A muffled sound of infant cries penetrated through the wall from the adjacent room, only interrupted by laughter, chatter, and the odd slamming of a door as tenants, still celebrating, made their way down the hallway to their rooms.

Finally, in the early hours of the morning, with thoughts of the Mardi Gras, home and family fading from his consciousness, Scott finally succumbed to fatigue. His snoring joined the other sounds of the night.

Brisbane, Australia...

Sally had managed to secure a part-time job as a checkout girl at Cannon Hill Hypermarket for the duration of the school holidays. It was payday and the cashed-up Sally, refusing to keep to a budget, went shopping after finishing her rostered hours. Later, her accommodating father arrived to taxi her home so she would not have to juggle bags of Christmas shopping on

the bus.

The front door swung open announcing the return of the pair. Cecily was busily preparing dinner and could see them down the end of the hallway.

‘Come on Dad... Kirsten and Sharni are going to the party.’ Sally hobbled through the door with her ‘bargain’ shopping.

‘No Sal... You just arrived home.’ Jeff felt weary. ‘Yeah, after working all day I should be able to have some fun once in a while.’

‘You went out last night!’

‘That was to Kirsten’s parents’ poetry reading night! It was boring! That doesn’t count! Come on Dad... I’m almost sixteen! And working! Give me a break! It’s school holidays! Please!’

‘You went to the movies two days ago with your friends!’

‘How does that count as a night out? Really!’

Cecily, placing knives and forks on the dining room table, could see Jeff was getting nowhere. ‘Sal, your father is right. You had a late night last night. You work tomorrow.’

‘Give me a break, both of you! I’m not a kid anymore!’ Her green eyes flashed with anger. ‘Scott’s having fun on the other side of the world and you won’t even let me go to a tiny, little party a couple of blocks away with friends! It’s practically a tea party! This is the way you repay me after I spend my hard-earned money buying expensive presents for you!’ She stomped up the steps to her room, yelling, ‘I’m going whether you like it or not!’ She slammed the door as hard as she could.

Cecily raised her voice. ‘No young lady! You will not be going to any party tonight or any other night for the next week! And don’t you slam that door!’

Jeff looked at his wife. ‘A whole week?’

‘Come on Jeff; I backed you in your decision not to let her go out tonight.’

Upstairs, Sally dumped her shopping bags on the bed. She looked around angrily, sensing an intrusion in her hallowed space. Someone had moved everything. Her eyes narrowed and her anger intensified when she realised that that same someone had picked her clothes off the floor where they had laid

crumpled for days. They were now hanging, freshly ironed in her wardrobe. The doona lay folded at the foot of the bed and pressed clean underwear filled the cupboard drawers rather than mixing with dirty clothes around the room. Her duchess looked fresh and wiped clean of loose face powder that normally coated its surface, and the brush and comb set was not smothered in scrunched up facial tissues and used cotton balls. Fresh air had flushed away familiar stale air when that ‘someone’ opened Sally’s windows during the clean up. This infuriated her even more. *How dare she enter my room without my permission! Who are they to tell me what to do? They should let me go to the party. After all that is the least they could do since I bought those expensive things for them.* She muttered to herself, ‘I’m going to that party whether they like it or not.’

Rome, Italy...

It was five in the morning. A large commercial jet flew low over the hostel. The roar of its engines caused the old building and everything in it to shudder. Scott stirred in his sleep. Suddenly, the sounds of screeching tyres, horns blaring and crunching metal as vehicles collided jolted the young man from his slumber. A moment later as an explosion rocked the inner city Scott was tossed from the bed and found himself on the hard floor.

At first, he was dazed and confused but then it dawned on him. *Earthquake!* For a few lingering moments fear kept him glued to the floor, then he moved quickly. After switching on his lamp and dragging himself to the window, he parted the slats of the blind and looked out. He could barely make out the dimly lit piles of crumpled metal below.

For a second, his mind was selective and did not register the chaotic scene nor hear the groans and terrified cries for help. *I have to be dreaming. I have to be.*

Then there was another explosion. This time, not so close. Even though it happened in the foothills thirty or so kilometres from the city centre, it still reverberated through the building. The light from the reading lamp buzzed and flickered before

finally dying. Apart from the subdued glow of a violent fire a block or so away and the lights of a few cars, the city was plunged into darkness and chaos.

Muffled voices and chilling screams came from outside Scott's door. He could hear wave after wave of tenants emerging from their rooms and fumbling and groping toward the staircase at the end of the hallway.

What is going on out there? Scott was frightened and his mind raced. *What should I do?* His pulse was racing. *Get out of here and be crushed? Is it safer to wait here?* Thoughts of the building, its structure weakened and on the brink of collapsing, flashed through his mind and with that, he made his decision to collect his belongings and make for the door. His heart was thumping in his chest as he groped through the darkness. His hand fell clumsily onto the doorknob and finally he fell out of the room and into a blackened hallway straight into a stream of pushing, choking humanity.

Brisbane, Australia...

Black Hawk helicopters chopped the air as they thundered overhead, interrupting the peace of the usually quiet suburb. Cecily and Jeff hurried outside to see the commotion in the dusky sky. So too did dozens of neighbours who gathered in their backyards to view the spectacle.

'Look!' Jeff pointed to the flashing lights of helicopter gunships moving toward them from the north-west. The sound of beating rotors grew louder as they approached. 'Sally! Come take a look at this!' Jeff called out while still watching the fly-over. There was no answer from her room.

'What do you think it means?' Cecily was not excited to see the huge machines and took them as an ominous sign.

Barry, their next-door neighbour, was hosing down his small run-about in his back yard after a day out on the bay. He came to the fence and peered over. 'I don't like the look of that.'

'No...' Jeff's voice tapered off as if he was in deep thought. Actually, he was shielding his eyes from the setting sun while counting the number of helicopters buzzing overhead. 'They

have to be heading for some joint military exercise or something.’

When all the gunships moved out of view, he traipsed back into the house to turn on the television.

Cecily was hot on his heels closely followed by the family pet, a muddy-pawed golden Labrador. In the excitement, Kimba barged through the door causing Cecily to lose her footing. She was not pleased and the situation nearly turned ugly when she saw paw prints all over her freshly washed floor.

‘You stupid animal!’

The telephone rang and Kimba retreated. Cecily drew a deep breath and picked up the handset. Her face softened, so too did the tone of her voice. It was her older sister. ‘Oh, hello Vicky,’ Cecily said cheerfully. ‘Is there any activity in the sky over your place?’

Vicky’s voice broke. ‘Cess, have you heard from Scott?’

‘Yes Vick...He rang this morning.’ Her heart sank. ‘What’s this about?’

‘I haven’t heard from Damien and Brad. A bomb went off in Paris and...’ Vicky broke into sobs. ‘I’m afraid for the boys. I can’t reach them on their mobiles.’

‘Maybe they’re too busy having fun to answer your call.’ Cecily knew how protective her sister was too.

‘Oh Cess... How lame is that!’ Vicky snapped.

‘Is Brian with you?’ Cecily stayed composed.

‘Yes. I was hoping Brad and Damien met up with Scott already and he said something to you.’

Pictures of devastation on the television beamed into the Ryan family room: columns of smoke, wreckage, flashing lights, broken buildings and mass hysteria. Jeff stood, transfixed to the tube in silence and disbelief.

Cecily tried in vain to console her sister. ‘They’ll be alright. They are healthy, resourceful, young men...’ She felt a sense of disbelief at the horrific images on the tube. ‘If you don’t hear from them by tomorrow afternoon you could try phoning the Department of Foreign Affairs to see if they know anything.’ Cecily waited but Vicky could not speak. ‘Let me know what

you find out...Okay Sis?’

‘Okay.’ Vicky finally responded in a weak, far-away voice. ‘But I won’t be waiting ‘til tomorrow afternoon.’

‘Do you want Jeff and me to come over?’

‘No. I’ll be in touch. Brian and I need to try and reach the boys.’

‘Tell Vicky there’s news on Channel Nine,’ Jeff suggested without taking his eyes from the screen. ‘Paris was bombed!’

‘How do you think she found out about it?’ Cecily snapped at his insensitivity, her hand covering the phone. Then she assured her sister that Brad and Damien would be in her prayers, and that it was too soon to assume anything.

‘Poor Vicky and Brian,’ Cecily sighed, as she put down the handset.

Jeff’s eyes stayed on the screen. ‘Cess, there are reports coming in from around the world; New York, Washington, LA, London, Amsterdam... They were all bombed.’ His sombre demeanour turned to anger. ‘Those terrorist pigs did this and hell isn’t good enough for them.’

He went silent for a moment and then in a flash of inspiration, he dialled his son’s mobile number on the cordless.

‘Do you think Rome was bombed too? Surely not... They didn’t mention Rome in the news report.’ It was too painful for Cecily to consider the thought of her sweet, sensitive, son in another country and separated from his family, in the midst of an atrocity.

After repeatedly trying to raise Scott on his mobile, Jeff flopped down into the sofa next to his worried spouse. Cecily had been praying fervently for her son and nephews. This made Jeff feel more uncomfortable for he failed to see how prayer could help. He did not want to see his wife’s faith crushed by his negativity but he needed to do something concrete. He was feeling more and more helpless. All of a sudden, he stood to his feet and headed upstairs to check on Sally.

Headlights of a police patrol car lit up the faces of twelve youths as it turned the corner where they gathered. It slowed and came to a halt five metres from them. One of those gathered was

Sally. She had slipped away under the cover of night in spite of her father's warning.

Sally did not intend to miss the fun she helped organise. The friends had met at the street corner at dusk to decide where the party would go from there, and when the patrol car pulled up, the group was reclining on the footpath, enjoying the military display in the sky.

'What are you people doing here?' the police officer called as he stepped from his car.

'We weren't waitin' here for you; that's for sure,' replied one of the boys.

'Shush Nat!' giggled Sharni. 'Be good!'

'Would you all stand up,' the constable asked.

As they did so an empty spirits bottle rolled from under a boy and into the gutter. The others glared at him.

'Put your hands to the front; palms up.' The constable made a quick search but found nothing else. 'I'm sorry I have to break up this party, folks. It's extremely important that you all go back to your homes.'

'Why?' Three members of the group asked at once.

'Australia's on high alert and for you folk it means a curfew.'

'Curfew? Since when?' one boy said.

'Wow! It's got to be terrorists!' the boy with the bottle exclaimed. 'So that's why all the choppers!'

'For your safety you must go home immediately. Do any of you people need a lift?'

'Yeah!' everyone shouted excitedly, wanting a ride in the patrol car - everyone except Sally. It was the last way she needed to announce her arrival home.

Rome, Italy...

For the first time that morning, Scott was aware of the groans and the cries of distress and pain. Through the blanket of muffled chatter within the confines of the hostel came another sickening scream. A frantic woman emerged from her room, her face barely visible by the fleeting light of a match. Although Scott did not understand what she was saying, he sensed

somehow that she was panicking about her children. A young man holding a flashlight came to her aid. He confirmed to onlookers that her baby was missing.

Beams of light darted and flashed about as desperate parents and searchers scoured the top floor, moving from room to room. Scott joined in the search. It became quickly apparent as the search continued that there was no trace of her child or the other five children boarding there with their parents.

A woman claimed to witness a child vanish before her eyes. The young mother tearfully reported how she placed her baby daughter on her bed to change her only five minutes earlier, and turned to take a nappy from a bag. When she looked back, her baby had disappeared. With the series of extraordinary events that were happening, the massive explosion and the choking, black soot, it was easy to see how quickly disoriented people had become.

Amid mass confusion, people, many dressed in night attire, had crowded the hostel common area. They all carried visible signs of trauma. Some complained that their ears were ringing and many bore superficial wounds. A night watchman tried to take charge behind the reception counter and called for calm. No one was willing to listen and instead, a slinging match of words erupted. The security guard tried to call police, but the telephone line was dead.

Frustrated, helpless boarders lashed out in anger at him when he had no satisfactory or comforting answers. Fathers rushed outside in search of a public telephone, while those with mobiles tried in vain to get a signal. Panic was rising.

The crackling sounds of a radio brought momentary relief to the group. Someone was attempting to tune into a station for news about the desperate situation. Frantic flicking from station to station turned out to be a fruitless exercise. The radio's antenna was not picking up a signal. *God help us!* Scott thought. *Possibly there was no time for a broadcast and the stations were no longer transmitting.*

The heavy, choking soot polluting the air troubled those prone to respiratory problems. Someone called for assistance for

an asthmatic woman, overcome with anxiety and breathing with difficulty. So many needed help and so few others were able to respond to their needs. Lights flickered and torch beams darted about as wild-eyed people emerged from the street and joined those gathered in the common room. Their faces told of the horror outside. *Surely, ambulances will arrive soon to take control of the situation.*

Yet minutes passed and still there was no sign of police or emergency services. Over the pathetic moans and wails of the distressed, a lone sound of a siren in a far away place rang out. It seemed odd to Scott that police and ambulances were everywhere when the city was celebrating and when he was trying to sleep. Now they were nowhere!

Brisbane, Australia...

The soft rapping on Sally's bedroom door was no match for the loud hip-hop music coming out of her room. Her father raised his voice. 'Sally! Turn down your music!' She did not answer.

Slowly and carefully, expecting her to explode, he opened the door and peered in. She was sound asleep! He tiptoed into the room and turned off the music. He marvelled how she could sleep through such din and suddenly thought it peculiar she lay so motionless. She never stirred even when the music ceased. He leaned over her shrouded form to take a closer look. There was no sign of breathing. Alarmed, he whisked back the sheet to expose a big teddy bear arranged on its side. Jeff was furious and stormed down the steps, thumping the wall with his fist in an explosion of misdirected energy. 'Sally's gone!' he roared.

'Oh great!' Cecily had just mopped up the last of Kimba's paw prints. 'That's all we need!'

Jeff grabbed his car keys. 'I'm going out to find her, and when I do... See if you can reach Scott.'

'Wait! Do you know where she is?'

Jeff stopped in his tracks and drew breath. 'No... Do you?'

'Didn't she say the party was two blocks away? She'll be with Kirsten and Sharni. Take a few deep breaths and calm

down before you go.'

He swung open the door to the garage. 'No time for that! When I find her I'm gonna kill that daughter of yours!'

'No need to look,' Sally's voice came from behind. She had stepped in through the back door as he was heading out the other. 'I guess you found Ringo.'

Jeff turned. 'How dare you defy me!'

'Calm down Jeff! At least she's home now... Sally, we need to talk right...'

'Look, I'm sorry about the trick with Ringo,' interrupted Sally, 'but you gave me no choice. I should not have to stay home every single night like a hermit. Just in case you didn't notice, I'm not a kid anymore!'

'That's what you keep saying!' Jeff's stance was forbidding.

'Hello! Then why aren't you listening?'

'Maybe if you didn't act like a kid...Do you really think sticking Ringo Bear in your bed and sneaking out is an adult action?' Turning to his wife, Jeff jumped up and down. 'Dear, when was the last time we did that?'

Shocked by her father's erratic behaviour, Sally softened her approach, fearing he was losing it altogether. 'I told you I was going out.'

'That's enough!' Jeff put his hands over his ears.

The girl stood motionless for a second, glaring. 'You're not my father!' she sneered as she climbed the stairs. 'Sometimes I really hate you. And by the way, stay out of my room!'

'Stop right there! Stop it! Both of you!' shouted Cecily, almost hyperventilating. 'Are you forgetting that we still haven't managed to contact Scott since the bombings?'

'What?' Sally suddenly changed her attitude and stopped halfway up the staircase. 'What are you saying?'

Jeff cleared his hoarse throat, taking a moment to calm down. 'That's right. There have been bombings around the world. We know cities in Europe and the US were bombed.'

'So... Rome is one of those cities?' asked Sally anxiously.

'We don't know.'

Cecily filled in the blanks. 'Aunt Vicky rang earlier. Paris

was bombed and she is sure her boys are there. She can't contact them.'

'Wow! Brad and Damien, missing? Wasn't Scott going to meet them in a couple of days?'

'Yes... It's too soon to jump to conclusions, Sal. The phone lines must be running hot. That's probably why your aunt can't reach them.'

'So that's why Australia's on high alert. We could be next.'

CHAPTER THREE

The first light of morning tried to penetrate through the thick haze. Twisted metal towers dotted the streetscape and clogged intersections. Pools of blood laid mingled with oil and petrol in roadside gutters. Fragments of glistening Christmas tinsel and flotsam whipped up by the slightest breeze travelled like sidewinders along the cracked and icy pavements. Buildings in close proximity to the place where an explosion ripped through the inner city hours before, stood vulnerable, ready to topple with the slightest tremor. Not even the most modern, sophisticated high-rises escaped damage. Few sheets of glass remained whole in windows. The fires still raged a block away and very few people had come to try to put them out.

Bewildered people milled about steaming car bodies. Survivors, dazed and unattended, sat shivering in shock on footpaths near the scene of their accident. Others laid injured or dying in what was left of their vehicles.

Scott pulled up the collar of his all-weather jacket around his neck and emerged with others into the street of what seemed a hellish nightmare. Shocked at what he saw, he lingered for a while just outside the entrance of the hostel to try to gather his bearings before tentatively taking his first steps onto the footpath with a friend. Roberto, a native of the area and in his early twenties stood with Scott, quietly surveying what resembled a war zone.

The number of injured and dead overwhelmed and distressed the survivors. The smell of death hung in the air and except for a few emergency generators, familiar city street sounds were eerily absent. The quiet street acted like an amplifier as it picked up every tiny sound made. As if through a wind tunnel, the intermittent gusts of chilling air blew in from the north.

What a contrast this was to the heady festivities of the previous night. Even the winter cold had not been able to take away the warming experience that comes with a celebrating crowd.

How can this be? What has caused this? Scott pondered as tears formed in his brown eyes and clouded his vision.

Roberto, a confident speaker of the English language despite his thick Italian accent, tried to decipher the surrounding conversations to his new friend. He pointed out a man consoling a woman, doubled over in deep pitiful sobs. ‘See tharta womun, she iz cryink fur her lost childrun. Der iza so many meesink. So many people not found.’

Faint at first, the sound of a moving engine came towards them. As the distant burring drew closer, the chopping of large rotor blades became more obvious. Everyone who could see raised their head skyward as giant military helicopters came into view over the high rises. The pilots had the unenviable task of finding a clear, safe place to land, away from overhead power lines and unstable buildings.

Many on the broad street scattered as the heavy choppers descended toward the ground. The strong wind generated by the rotors whipped up dust into a swirl, rattling awnings and shutters on windows and stirring up litter. A signpost, unhinged by the blast swayed precariously close to the blades as the helicopters’ landing gear made contact with what was once a bustling street. One by one, the deafening noise of engines cut out and the rotating blades slowed down.

Some folk, with no regard for safety, rushed toward the choppers before the rotors completely slowed or military personnel disembarked. Holding up a microphone, the *Capitan* of the operation spoke in his native Italian tongue to the people.

Roberto interpreted the *Capitan’s* words for Scott. ‘Efrywone, pleaz try to be calm. The paramedeek will tereat the minor injurez while the mora seriouz casualty will be airlifted out. I aska you not ta moof away from thiz area. We won’t be able to helpa you iv you do.’

Members of the angry crowd targeted the *Capitan*. ‘Where were you when thiz firsta ‘appened hours ago? What about our missink childrun? Who’s lookink for them?’

The *Capitan’s* cool facade began to crumble. His voice trembled. ‘Do you thinka thiz iz the only place that needz our

help? The whole ov Italia iz in a state ov emergenzyl?

Silence enveloped the crowd. The sickening feeling that had been brewing in the pit of Scott's stomach moved up into his throat. He could not conceal his fear.

'It'z not justa thiz street my friend.' Roberto was almost devoid of emotion. 'Thiza thing hasa happened all offa Italia!'

I picked a 'great' time to travel, Scott thought.

It seemed an eternity that people stood with glazed eyes, staring at the *Capitan*. He turned his head away to hide his emotions as they waited for something positive to come from his lips. *After all, had not society faced every disaster imaginable, always with dignity and hope? Surely, the madness of the hour would rally men and women to overcome the tragedy and set society back on course. What disaster could be so bad that humanity's ingenuity could not conquer?*

Paramedics started to carry emergency equipment and stretchers to where they would set up camp. The team was exhausted even before they commenced the operation.

One by one, emergency services and volunteers searched wreckage for survivors and attended to the injured. Every able-bodied person joined in the gruesome task of locating the injured or working as stretcher bearers to carry the worst cases to the waiting helicopters.

They quickly established a makeshift morgue and hospital in a number of hotel foyers for the bodies and casualties.

Snowflakes began to lightly fall and slowed the operation further. It was then a race against nature to get the injured under shelter before the snow got heavier.

A man shrieked as what appeared to be a mannequin plummeted to the hard pavement in front of him. The incident straight away drew an audience. A young man had flung himself from the fourth storey of a building and now he lay, battered and barely alive. No one hurried to help him. Everyone felt indifferent to his fate and the small crowd began to dissipate when someone concluded that he could not survive.

Scott rushed to the place where the body lay and remained to see if there was anything he could do.

With blurred vision, the pupils of his eyes dilated, the dying man struggled to look at Scott who knelt, cradling his head and shielding his eyes from the snow. A single tear rolled from the corner of the man's eye.

What desperation moved him to take such drastic steps?

From his bloodied, parched lips came a few disjointed words, which were barely audible.

'Leefa him be,' came Roberto's sombre voice from behind. 'Thereza nothink you can do.'

'Why won't someone come and help him?'

'Let the people helpa thozе who wanta be helpd.'

'I won't leave him die alone...' Scott hardly finished speaking those words when the man expired. Scott froze with his hands still cradling his head. *One split second in time, a living soul has departed to meet its Maker, he thought. Where is his family? Why should he die alone?* He gently lowered the man's head onto the pavement.

Roberto helped his friend to his feet and, latching onto Scott's arm, he led him slowly away from the body, leaving it for the clean-up crew.

By the end of 'Day One', December 23rd, the seriously injured in the immediate area were relocated to overcrowded hospitals and the need to remove bodies to minimise the spread of disease became of paramount importance.

Brisbane City, Australia...

Cecily and her sister's attempts to contact the boys had proved fruitless. Phoning the French and Italian embassies in the Australian Capital Territory only added to their frustrations. They had to hold the line while the operator switched from one extension to another. In the end they were told via an automated message that there was little either embassy could do until European Foreign Affairs had dialogued with them.

The women decided to visit the Brisbane consulates and office for Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Practices.

It was a hot and humid day and they despaired at seeing the

huge line-up of people who had obviously had the same idea. Many, like Cecily and Vicky held photos of their missing loved ones, hoping this would assist in the search process. Instead of feeling disheartened, the women were encouraged and their resolve strengthened after being with people who shared similar experiences. *The boys will be okay...*

Roving officials jotted down details. They said the Department would do its best to locate their loved ones and follow up their concerns, but it was a difficult undertaking that would require time.

Many overseas travellers had left their passports behind during the initial panic after the bombings. Nevertheless, the Australian officials would do their best to locate and account for everyone as soon as possible. It was all Cecily and Vicky could hope for after an exhausting six hours standing patiently in line under the hot sun.

‘I could do with a shot of coffee,’ Cecily sighed as she flopped down on a bench in busy King George Square.

Vicky sat, busily rubbing her feet and nursing fragile emotions. She looked drawn. ‘Those government bureaucrats won’t do anything. Bet they don’t have family missing!’

‘You can’t say that!’ Cecily cautioned. ‘You saw the line of people. It’s going to take time.’

Vicky sat up and pulled out of her handbag the photo of her sons she tried earlier to offload to a government worker. She stared intently at it, almost willing her boys to materialize. ‘What now? Are we supposed to go home and... and wait for a phone call?’

‘What else can we do, Vick?’ Cecily was nearing the end of her nervous strength.

‘We could fly over there. Look for the boys ourselves.’ Vicky’s voice was high and tense.

‘That might be a bit awkward don’t you think... since our government has banned tourists from taking flights over there?’

‘We’re not tourists, Cess!’ Vicky was curt and she hid her face behind her hand. She broke down and sobbed. ‘We’re mothers trying to find our babies!’ She tucked the photo back

into her handbag.

‘Let’s wait and see. We have to believe that the boys are okay.’ Cecily turned her attention to the enormous Christmas tree, draped in garlands and giant, glistening baubles in front of City Hall. ‘That tree is a symbol of hope.’

Wiping her nose with a tissue, Vicky looked upward at the tree. ‘Will you pray? You always know what to say to God and He listens to you.’ Her reddened eyes followed the narrowing contours of the tree to its apex and lingered on the angel perched on top.

Vicky’s mobile buzzed. ‘It’s Brian. He’s finished his meeting. Let’s go...’

‘Christmas Eve seemed like any other festive time, except for an increased number of uniformed police and military personnel patrolling the city streets. It was a time for self-indulgence and a time for renewed hope for the future. Many people had finished their Christmas shopping before news of the bombings had saturated the media. They had come out to look at festooned windows and streets, hear carollers sing and be entertained. Others came to patronise their favourite watering holes and to hear assuring words from others of like mind.

There were not many families with young children in the city mall due to the heightened security alert but there were plenty of young adults. Ignoring all warnings, they relaxed in open-air cafes, sipping lattes and chatting to friends.

Back home in Murarrie, Jeff was trying to keep busy in his garden. He did however sporadically dash to the living room to follow news updates on television. At times, he would attempt again to reach his son’s mobile. The waiting took its toll. Sally’s dog, Kimba sniffed about, digging up freshly planted seedlings in search of old bones. Jeff was too distracted to notice her destructive handiwork.

‘Dad!’ yelled Sally from her window. ‘Where does Mum keep her wrapping paper?’

‘I don’t have a clue Sal. You’ll have to wait ‘til she comes home.’

‘That could be ages! You sure you don’t know where it is?’

‘It’s no good asking me. Who knows where your mother keeps those things?’

‘That’s it then... You will be getting your present in a plastic shopping bag!’

Jeff was about to lay down tools and go inside to get a drink when the ground shook violently for what seemed a long time. In fact, it would have lasted only five or six seconds but it was enough to see his house and his neighbours’ houses sway back and forth. Sally screamed.

Hundreds of birds took flight as a thick reddish cloud mushroomed over the city skyline and dissipated slowly toward the east. Kimba joined neighbourhood dogs everywhere as they howled and barked excitedly. As if it was in the throes of death, a deep gurgling sound surfaced from the bowels of the earth.

Rome, Italy...

Restoration of some communication to the outside world brought cold comfort to the grief-stricken people of Rome. As numbed boarders sat speechless around tables or on the floor in the candlelit dining room, the radio crackled to life. Meagre offerings of upbeat music made an unsuccessful attempt to drown out everyone’s sorrow and despair.

Scott and Roberto sat on the floor with their backs propped against the wall. ‘I must try and get through to Australia. Mum and Dad need to know that I’m all right.’

‘I thinka the lineza still down.’

‘Tell me something I want to hear...’ Scott keyed in some words on his phone to send to his parents but the message did not transmit. ‘You’re right... there’s still no signal.’ Thoughts of family and friends back home in Australia, in a much saner world flooded his mind and for the first time since the explosions, he had time to feel homesick.

The music stopped abruptly and a welcoming voice from the outside world came over the radio. The speaker first presented his message in his native French tongue. It was then translated in German, Italian and then finally in English. ‘More reports are coming in to our news desk from around the world...

‘The series of bombs that devastated much of Europe are no longer regarded as isolated events. A previously unheard of terrorist group, Mastermind United Jihad, has claimed responsibility. The group has targeted cities in many parts of the Western world. In a well-coordinated strike on civilian populations in the Americas, Asia and subcontinent of India, it has left devastated regions without power or communication. We fear millions are dead and many more left homeless.

‘A number of commercial and private jets and small aircraft have gone missing and perhaps a hundred aircraft have crashed. The magnitude of these disasters is so great in some places, that it has been suggested that a census count of survivors is more feasible than a count of the lost.

‘World leaders will meet with President David Jacobi for an emergency summit in Rome. President Jacobi has advised all non-European foreign citizens to report to their own embassy by December 26. All citizens of Europe please remain where you are to avoid turmoil in already congested areas. Food and medical drops are on the way. We will bring you more news as it comes to hand.’

The broadcast ended and music returned.

Scott had not intended to speak his thoughts aloud but they echoed out of the silence. ‘I think... it’s... the end of the world.’

Roberto’s dark eyes searched Scott’s face. The young Aussie in his distress had unwittingly caught everyone’s attention. A man became very animated as he called out in Italian to Roberto. He understood what Scott said.

‘Itza not the enda the world. Thereza alwayz disasterz, Scott. Thisa iz not the first and ita won’t be the last.’

‘I... I didn’t mean to upset that man...’

‘Heza upset... everyoneza upset... but itz notta your fault.’ Roberto shook his head. ‘Justa don’t make waveza... Right?’

Their conversation grew louder and an angry man yelled ‘Arresto!’ to quell the noise. He then turned up the radio for everyone to hear.

‘...thirty minutes ago, His Pre-eminence, the Prelate and Patriarch, Pastor and Prophet, Pope and President, John James,

only yesterday invested as the world leader of the Unified Church recorded this message to the citizens of the world.

‘We are presently experiencing the greatest test in the history of humankind. Many of us have lost loved ones. ...I give my sincerest condolences to you all.

‘It cannot be denied that an incredible burden has come to bear on the survivors. Our lives are in disarray. Our routines have come to a standstill. We are grieving, uncertain about our futures, and confused about the present. We are seeking answers as to why so many of our brothers and sisters are no longer with us and we are wondering why we have been given the chance to live. The rumour voiced by many in our united fellowship about the end of the world and the rapture is a dangerous delusion. This false teaching can only add more confusion to an already hurting people. I would discourage such negative, destructive talk. It offers no hope, only deeper wounds that will hinder the rebuilding of our fractured societies. Instead, let us be united for the cause of all humanity and for the united world. May you be blessed and keep safe.’

‘You have been listening to His Pre-eminence John James of the Unified Church. His message will be repeated in a news update in half an hour.’

Roberto was stunned about the reference to the end of the world. ‘What does this mean... the end of the world and rapture?’

Scott was reluctant to say too much. ‘It means...It needs no explaining Roberto!’ His face drained of colour as it dawned on him that his family might be casualties of terror.

‘Do you really think we’re at the end of the world?’

‘No!’ snapped Scott. He did not want to continue the conversation. He needed time to collect his thoughts. *What if Mum and Dad... and Sal were not so lucky?*