

## CHAPTER I

SEPTEMBER 11 WASN'T THE BEGINNING but in time it grew to be the anchor onto which everything clung. When I think of Stephanie now I can't help but think of that other catastrophe, too. They've become inseparable events, strange doorways into an uncertain space and time, doorways leading to a terrible height from which Alice and I both had to leap blindly.

On the day the terrorists struck I woke early and turned on the bedside radio, waiting for the morning news to come on. At first I wasn't tuned into it, my focus instead on sunlight trying to prise its way between the venetian blinds and for a second I was fooled into thinking it was going to be a glorious day until I remembered where I was, the empty space beside me in the bed, everything else.

At the same time I became drawn to a voice from the radio. There was talk of a building, perhaps two — it wasn't clear — being struck by aircraft.

I forced myself out of bed and trudged foggily to the living room. I switched on the television and stood back with the remote in my hand, scrolling through the channels. Every one was showing the same thing. I read the caption at the bottom of one screen — TERRORIST ATTACKS IN NEW YORK CITY.

I shivered and turned to another channel. Once I was properly awake I'd have to jump under the shower, shake Alice out of bed and get her ready for school, throw something together for her lunch. But there was panic boiling in front of me that I couldn't wrench myself away from.

And I wasn't certain then whether what I was watching was

happening at that moment or if it had occurred overnight. New footage showed a second plane steaming up the Hudson River and ploughing into the mass of concrete, steel and glass that was the World Trade Centre's second tower, fiery clouds of smoke and flame bellowing through the building.

And I wanted to turn to Stephanie and cry, 'Can you believe that?' Or call someone, anyone because I could barely comprehend the enormity of what was going on.

But I wouldn't call her — I knew that — and kept sitting by the television wrapped in a blanket instead, as if that might provide comfort when adrenalin was coursing through me. All I saw though was the ferocity of the carnage peeling open before me and it soon became clear that the attacks had happened overnight. It seemed a terrorist strike, but there was little as yet to prove it.

In my impatience I flicked back and forth between channels again and watched footage of the first plane crashing into the North tower over and over.

'What's happening, Dad?'

I hadn't noticed Alice standing behind me in her pyjamas.

'I'm not sure,' I mumbled. 'They think terrorist attacks.'

'I could hear the television.'

Whether she should have been watching something like this I didn't know, but she was anyway. She sat down beside me on the couch, watching intently.

'You'll need to get ready for school in a minute. Make sure you have a shower first too, hey?'

'I will during the ad break. Did an airplane crash into a building?'

'Probably two they think. Or even three.'

'Was it an accident?'

'It doesn't look like it.'

'On purpose?'

'They think so.'

'Why would somebody do that?'

I changed the channel for another perspective. 'Not everyone loves the United States.'

There was chaos around the towers as fire services fought their way through. New shots were broadcast: footage taken from the air,

footage taken from wobbling handheld cameras.

We kept sitting, were glued to it.

‘Are you going to work today, Dad?’

‘I will later. No one is going to be on time today.’

‘Can I go later then, too?’

‘Maybe, but I want you to have a shower first, okay?’

At the next switch to an advertisement Alice leapt up to ready herself for school. My phone went and I could barely tear myself away to answer it. It was my friend, Steve.

We traded what we had seen, talking at the same time, our two voices and the televisions discordant in my ears. A report had come in of a hijacked fourth plane.

We interrupted each other until Alice returned.

‘Is that Mum?’ she asked, her lips working nervously.

‘Steve.’

I told him I’d call back after work.

And then something completely implausible happened. One of the towers began imploding, stripping itself floor by floor, a great spider of rubble and dust flattening the building and spewing clouds of smoke through neighbouring streets. In replay the first World Trade Centre tower dragged the second one terrifyingly down behind it as Alice’s eyes scooted from the falling tower to what lay around it.

‘Will the other buildings fall, too?’ she wondered, her fingers at her mouth. ‘Will it knock the other ones down?’

Like dominoes. And it seemed there was no way it couldn’t happen such must have been the force of two massive buildings being shredded like that.

Faces came and went on the screen: reporters, an FBI analyst, witnesses, politicians. There were pictures of the Pentagon smouldering as fire trucks pumped water over it, and of the fourth plane down and broken in a field somewhere.

Time curled back on itself then, reporting the reaction to what we’d been watching. Someone had filmed a group of office workers storeys high in a nearby building, panning across their faces as they cried and screamed at what they were witnessing: the second plane tearing into the south tower, people leaping to their deaths from the burning towers, the apocalyptic sight of the World Trade Centre buildings being reduced to smoking rubble.

## After September 11

‘That’s enough,’ I said to Alice.

We moved ourselves to go out.

‘What will happen now?’ she asked.

‘This will go on for weeks and weeks.’

‘And what about the people who did it?’

‘There won’t be much of them left to find, I don’t think,’ I said as we quickly forced down some breakfast.

‘It’s not very good is it?’ she said earnestly.

‘No, it’s not.’

While Alice was getting herself to the car I quickly stabbed out the hospital’s phone number. It took a minute before Stephanie finally picked up at her end. ‘Are you all right?’ I asked her. ‘Did you sleep okay?’