

TERMINALLY
SAFE

A NOVEL

DANIEL MARTINEZ

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Terminally Safe

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DEDICATION

To my sister

Sandra Noemi Martinez

She triumphed against innumerable adversities
And on her own raised two wonderful daughters

CHAPTER 1

The gargantuan earthquake at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean jarred the needles of hundreds of seismographic stations around the globe at exactly 3:22 early morning that Friday in November of 2003. Officials at the Broadband Array for Seismology in Taiwan and also those at the Australian National Seismic Network quickly identified the center of the seaquake as approximately 200 miles southeast of the Northern Mariana Islands and about 10 miles beneath the ocean floor. As they scanned more details of the data, they had an uneasy feeling that went far beyond their usual apprehensions when tremors would occur. For this was not just another seemingly random spot on the ocean floor but, the location of the deepest, most treacherous part of any ocean on the planet — the Mariana Trench, more than 36,000 feet below the ocean surface and stretching for about 1200 miles along the ocean floor. It is where the huge Pacific plate, moving ever so slowly in a northwesterly direction, rams the smaller Philippine plate with trillions of tons of quiet, persistent, unrelenting, and unforgiving force. The ever-vigilant officials quickly conjectured that the quake was due to the sudden slip of the Pacific plate under the other, lighter one, a colossal movement that, no doubt, instantly displaced millions of cubic kilometers of seawater, creating a devastating tsunami in the process. Immediately, the alarm went out to dozens of tsunami-warning stations all over the Pacific Rim.

As the calamity developed, U.S. Navy military intelligence officer and attack-helicopter pilot Troy Hamilton was enjoying a few days off, relaxing in his bachelor apartment near West 115th Street and Riverside Drive on Manhattan's upper West Side. In his middle 30s, Troy was tall and lean, with that workout hardness in every bone and muscle in his body. Originally from

Boston, he had joined the Navy after graduating from MIT, specializing in the military applications of computer and electronic technology. In the 10 years since he'd joined, he had advanced pretty well, and, five years previously, he had been assigned to sensitive intelligence operations and investigations around the globe — really, wherever the U.S. government found risks or threats to national security.

It was already about 3 o'clock on Thursday afternoon — a little more than two hours after the quake had hit in the Pacific — when Troy walked out of his apartment on his way to his usual long walk on Broadway toward downtown Manhattan. As he exited his building, he met up with Lilly Weinberg, his next-door neighbor up on the third floor.

“Good afternoon, Lilly. You are looking spritely and pretty, as always,” said Troy as he kissed her on the cheek and got a whiff of her strong fruit-fragrance perfume. Lilly was a childless 80-year-old widow who lived alone and looked after Troy's apartment when he was gone for weeks at a time on his intelligence assignments. She believed he was a business consultant who was contracted by companies all over the world. Troy would regularly ask her to feed Arturo, his pet goldfish.

“Oh, you're just flattering me because you want to take me out to dinner again, Troy, I know you, you weasel.” Her hands had slight tremors, but her mind was sharp, and her bright blue eyes still had a girlish gleam to them. Troy knew that she was only half-joking about the dinner thing, since she often complained about feeling lonely in her apartment and in the impersonal big city, for the old woman apparently had no friends or relatives anywhere. In fact, Troy had felt sympathy for Lilly ever since he had moved into that apartment five years before. And, for that reason, he often visited her and sometimes took her out to dinner at one of the many Chinese restaurants on Broadway.

“No, Lilly, I really mean it, your face looks brighter than those of the many young ladies there at Columbia. If you don't watch it, some young man will get enthralled by your spirit and sweep you off your feet!”

“I don't need no young man, Troy, as long as you keep taking me out to dinner or to Zabar's on 81st Street to buy some cheese. You know how I love to go shopping for cottage cheese with you!”

“Well, okay, Miss Lilly, I'll knock on your door soon, but if you need something in the meantime, well, just buzz me on my cell phone, okay?” And, with that, he said goodbye, and she entered the building.

Troy definitely felt that, as probably Lilly's only friend in the huge metropolis, he had some kind of moral duty to see to it that she was always comfortable. Troy did not see that, as he turned around to walk away, Lilly was watching

him through the building's glass door, her eyes a bit glazed, her spirit a little bit saddened.

Troy felt his duty as a moral imperative, but that is not how the building superintendent saw it. Sneaky-looking and with bulging eyes that made him look like a frog, 40-year-old Antonio Colon, who lived with his loud wife and six disorderly children on the first floor, felt that Troy was cozying up to Lilly Weinberg to maybe inherit the \$10 million that her retail-store-owner husband had left her. The super had not said anything relating to the widow's money to Troy, but he certainly gave him hateful looks whenever he saw Troy and Lilly together. In fact, it made Troy think that Antonio was feeling jealous of the relationship, as ridiculous as the idea may have sounded. Outside, Antonio gave him the usual sneer and blurted out, "Whatsa matter, big man? Can't get young woman in bed so you goes for the ones ready to die? Man, you should be sorry about yourself."

"Sure, Antonio, you've got it all figured out. Just watch your step with Miss Lilly, and make sure you respond to her requests on time, or you're gonna have to deal with me when I find out. Have a nice day. And wash that ugly, greasy hair of yours. It smells like motor oil."

Troy walked east up the hill on West 114th Street, tall apartment buildings on either side, turned right on Broadway, and merged with the considerable crowd of familiar strangers and hundreds upon hundreds of stores on both sides of the street. Truly a cultural smorgasbord.

He had already walked past 96th Street, where the big subway express/local station lay beneath Broadway, when his highly secured and encrypted cell phone rang. Caller ID indicated just a code, which he knew was of military origin. *This is my time off. It must be big — it better be big, on a beautiful day like this*, he thought.

According to protocol, he answered the phone with a simple "Yes?" and waited for a confirmation code, which he quickly recognized and acknowledged. "Affirmative — this is Arpeggio 103," he said to identify himself. He received the corresponding acknowledgment from the other end. A business-like voice told him that Vice Admiral Christopher Ferris, Troy's immediate supervising officer in the U.S. Navy, was coming on line. Officially, Troy was in the Navy, but, for some intelligence assignments he would work with the Air Force, still under the direction of Admiral Ferris.

"Troy, I'm sorry to say this, but we have a very bad situation over on the Pacific Rim. Have you heard?" asked the Admiral, almost apologetically.

"No, what's up?"

"Killer tsunami, about three hours ago."

Troy was perplexed. *So what's that got to do with me? I don't do tsunami-relief work*, he thought. "I don't get it, Admiral. What's military intel got to do with that?"

"Troy, there is something very sinister going on with that seaquake and the tsunami, and I'd rather not discuss it — even on this secure line. We need you over here at Dover AFB, stat! I have ordered two choppers to pick you up at Kennedy Airport — they're also picking up some Navy support staff in New Jersey. You have one hour to get to JFK. As your commanding officer, I know you'll have no problem getting there on time, right?" Troy knew that the Admiral's question was rhetorical.

"No, sir. I'm always ready."

On the flight to Dover, Troy could not help but wonder just how an earthquake and tsunami could be called "sinister" — "dangerous," "devastating," "tragic," "deadly," yes, but not "sinister," no matter how many lives they could take. He figured he would know what the Admiral meant soon enough. He found a few moments to call Miss Lilly to advise her of his sudden business trip and asked her to go easy on feeding Arturo — he's a light eater.

The two mammoth Sikorsky CH-53E military helicopters finally arrived at around 8 o'clock that Thursday night at Dover AFB in Delaware. Because of the urgency of the situation, the Air Force was making its facilities available to Troy, the Admiral, and other support Navy staff. Little did anyone know at that point that this was to be the beginning of not just another military-intelligence investigation of imminent danger against the United States, but a colossal, worldwide undercover race against a threat so vile that even the continued existence of the entire planet Earth would be in question.

Military Police escorted Troy to Hangar 1301, where some special-operations offices had been rapidly configured for the briefing. Nothing fancy — some tables, chairs, two desks with phones, nothing hanging from the drab-grey walls, but plenty of overhead lighting, and the pervasive, oily-engine smell of the various older aircraft that had a permanent home in this hangar. The meeting space was quite chilly, since this corner spot did not have any heaters. Over the last several hours, electronics counter-intelligence agents had swept through the entire area to guarantee there were no bugs or other security leaks. Troy entered the briefing room, and, for the very first time in his career, he had not the slightest idea of what kind of problem he would be briefed about.

"Ah, Troy, a little late, but, heck, let's just say it was the damned New York traffic," quipped the Admiral as he motioned for Troy to sit. The Admiral sat, too, and waved his arm to dismiss the other security personnel in the tiny

meeting room. Not knowing the real nature of the meeting, Troy was still in a good mood and responded to the Admiral.

“Well, I was happy with my few days off in New York, but I’m happy to be here, too.”

“This damned military is causing me ulcers, Troy. I should be home relaxing with my wife and enjoying the fruits of my 35 years of service to this country. But, hell, I love America, and I’ll tell my wife I’ll be a few days late.”

The beefy Navy Admiral, about 60 years old and with hardly any hair left, was a legend in military-intelligence agencies around the world. He had developed novel techniques for information gathering, useful also for counter-intelligence officers, but was also known to be quite stingy about sharing his methods. Foreign services knew about him because he was all too happy to acknowledge victories — after they had become obvious, that is. But, as he got older, he preferred to be in command of military-intel agents, as in the case of Troy.

“Okay, sir. Reporting for new duty. Tell me what you got.”

“Don’t know what to make of it, Troy,” lamented the Admiral. “Don’t know if this is a military-intel issue, but the Navy higher-ups don’t want to take chances. Damn those higher-ups, Troy; they’ve got pensions coming up that’re about three times the size of mine. They sit on their fat asses all day long. Well, they also go to ceremonies and all that crap!”

Troy thought it would be better to interrupt the Admiral. “On the flight here, I kept wondering about the tsunami but couldn’t figure out what that’s gotta do with me, with the military.”

“That’s why you’re here, soldier. Reports indicate that the tsunami has already reached Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, as well as hundreds of small islands in the Western Pacific area. Lots of destruction, thousands of lives lost. According to the Berkeley Digital Seismograph Network, the seaquake itself also caused major destruction in the large region west of The Trench.”

“So, what’s the sinister part, Admiral?”

“It’s unbelievable, Troy. One week ago, our Naval Submarine Base in Groton, Connecticut, received a fax message from The European Advanced Earthquake Detection Center in London.”

“So what’s so sinister about that?” challenged Troy, with an air of frustration.

“Patience!” the Admiral retorted, with flared bull nostrils and penetrating eyes radiating the microwave heat of disapproval. He immediately composed himself. “The fax message indicated that the European Center had calculated that an ocean-floor earthquake was imminent within a radius of 250 miles from the Northern Mariana Islands in the Pacific. The document gave the date and the approximate time: 3:17 A.M., local Chamorro Time in that area.”

Troy was shocked and couldn't quickly respond. "Admiral, they got the day and location correct, and they missed the time by only five minutes! This accuracy in prediction is unprecedented anywhere in the world!"

The two men just stared at each other and then at the floor, and then at each other again, digesting what had just been said and thinking of a possible explanation. "Admiral, I know of no agency in the world capable of making such uncanny predictions."

"Right, Troy. We all know the science of earthquake prediction is still in the dark ages. Hell, some agencies even depend on the changes in the behavior of farm animals to predict that an earthquake will soon happen. Some use toads, for God's sake! But this?"

"So what'd the sub base in Groton do when they got the fax? I bet they must have thought it was a joke or some stupid prank."

"Obviously, they thought it was ridiculous that an earthquake-monitoring agency would dare make such a highly specific prediction — down to the minute, mind you. They tried faxing back for more info, and they also called. No luck. Something about the calls ending up at the wrong place. They were baffled that no one had ever heard of that earthquake agency before, so they just ignored it after a couple of days."

"Well, Admiral, we cannot deny or ignore that their prediction was incredibly accurate. I can only conclude that the European Center has come across a very valuable method of prediction." As soon as he heard himself say that, he froze from the realization of the implications. His mind was whirling with all the possible scenarios, none of them good. Troy was now getting a feel for what the Admiral had meant when he referred to this event as "sinister."

Admiral Ferris was building too much anxious energy just sitting down, so he got up and paced the floor. "Yes, Troy, a very valuable method, indeed. Just imagine the military, economic, and political implications of some entity having such predictive power over earthquakes and the resulting tsunamis."

Troy's eyes were wider than normal, as one would see perhaps in a person who's in shock or in a daze or deep in thought. His brilliant military and logical mind was quickly assessing the nature of the unfolding events, comparing them with intelligence breaches that the United States had suffered in the past. Traitors like Aldrich Ames, Robert Hanssen, Nidal Hasan, John Walker — they had all inflicted damage against America, but this European Agency — could it use this prediction strategy to compromise the national security of the United States?

"You know, Admiral, it worries me to no end that the naval station could not make contact with this European Center. Was the fax sent to Groton a

bona fide professional prediction, or was it sent as a provocative signal, a threat perhaps?”

“Troy, I sense we are in deep trouble. I have no doubt in my mind that the information contained in the fax message was meant to let us know that the sending agency, or whatever, has a technical capacity with enormous strategic advantages against which no military of any size can compete. I feel that, for the very first time in history, we have been cornered.”

“Not so fast. I have yet to fail on a mission, and you know that I have several dozen under my belt. I love America, and military service is deep inside my heart. What plan did you have in mind, sir?”

“Gotta move fast, Troy, for we do not know what nefarious agency or terrorist group or government we are dealing with. I’m afraid to put this problem in the lap of the CIA over in Langley — they’ve had some pretty serious leaks lately in their London station, so it’s up to military intelligence to tackle this one. The first step is to check out the earthquake-warning agency that sent us the fax — they indicated an address in north London. That’s where you’re going.”

“I’ll be ready in one hour, with all my gear. Will it be a commercial flight or a private jet?”

“The jet is waiting for you on the tarmac. Troy — another thing. I’m aware that you are not well versed in geophysics or seismology, so I am sending a highly experienced specialist along to help you interpret whatever technical crap the European Center may throw at you. She is Lieutenant Karla Bloomfield. And, like you, Troy, she is a decorated attack-helicopter pilot.” Troy was taken aback, but tried not to show it. With that, the Admiral picked up the phone and ordered that Ms. Bloomfield be sent in.

“Come in, Lieutenant. This is the Troy Hamilton I told you about. Troy, this is Karla.” They shook hands, sizing each other up as quickly as possible, and that began by noticing the firmness of the handshake. Troy knew instantly she would not easily acquiesce to playing second fiddle on this mission.

“Glad to meet you, Lieutenant Hamilton. Heard good things about you, but I gotta see that for myself. You know how some people often add fluff to just about everything they do,” charged Karla as she gave Troy a smileless, penetrating stare.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Luckily, I’ve never heard anything about you,” retorted Troy with a cynical smile.