

**KEN  
FOLLETT**



**Out  
of the  
Mouth  
of the  
Dragon**

Outline: 3<sup>rd</sup> draft

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Part 1: Four Weeks

Part 2: Seven Days

Part 3: Forty-eight Hours

## Part 1: Four Weeks

1. Jess Granger stands under a blazing sun in the flat sagebrush desert of the South Texas oilfield. He is gauntly handsome, with a high forehead, intense dark-eyed gaze, nose like a blade, and sensual full-lipped mouth; but right now he has taken pains to disguise his appearance with a moustache and beard, and his long dark hair is concealed under a cap. He looks Hispanic, like most of the workers here, and he is using the name Ricardo Lopez.

He is staring at a truck which he wants to steal.

As he watches, the truck moves a few yards along a dirt track and stops precisely beside a bright pink marker flag. Behind the driver's cabin, complex machinery lowers a heavy steel plate to the stony ground. After a pause, there is a low-pitched rumble and a cloud of dust as the plate begins to pound the earth rhythmically. The ground shakes like an earthquake beneath Jess's feet. Over a period of several seconds, the vibration steadily rises in pitch then stops abruptly.

This is a seismic vibrator, a machine for sending shock waves through the earth. The vibrations are reflected off discontinuities in the earth's crust, and the reflections are picked up by hundreds of listening devices called geophones—or "jugs" in roustabout slang—precisely placed in a grid across several square miles of ground. The data recorded by the jugs is fed into a supercomputer to produce a three-dimensional map of the earth beneath the surface. The maps are sold to oil exploration companies.

Jess works on the jug team, picking up the geophones and moving them to the next sector. But this job is almost finished, and tomorrow the vibrator must be driven to a site in New Mexico, normally a journey of two to three days in a vehicle with a maximum highway speed of about 40mph. Jess wants to steal the truck while it is in transit, so that it will not be missed immediately and he will have a chance to drive it back to California before the alert goes out.

He needs this truck so badly it hurts him to look at it.

The truck moves fifty yards in a straight line and stops beside the next pink marker flag. Jess waits for it to finish vibrating, then jumps into the cab.

He has previously befriended the driver, Mario. Working 12-14 hours a day behind the wheel, a driver is always glad of someone to talk to.

Jess hands Mario a carton of Marlboros, explaining: "I been bummin' your smokes for three weeks." Then he takes one from the open pack on the dash.

Mario says: "Why don't you just buy your own cigarettes?"

"I can't afford to smoke," Jess says, and Mario laughs.

Jess has always had this easy ability to befriend people. As a runty kid in the Los Angeles slums he learned to read people's faces, find out what they need and give it to them—whether warmth, deference, humour or anything else. "I know how you feel" is his motto.

There is a beep from the radio, indicating that the supervisor has checked the recording of the last vibration or "sweep". Mario drives to the next marker, stops, lowers the plate, and sends a ready signal. A few moments later, the supervisor operates the vibrator by remote control.

Jess is desperate for some means of separating Mario from his truck. At present his best plan is to ride with Mario to New Mexico and somehow on the way get him drunk, tie him up and dump him where he will not be found for a couple of days. But this is full of hazards.

Mario says something about Jess's girlfriend. Then he produces a photo of his wife, a pretty Mexican girl holding a baby. They live in El Paso.

Jess's antennae twitch. "When will you get to see them?" Mario shrugs. He doesn't know. Jess says: "Hey, I got an idea. Go see them tomorrow. I'll drive the truck to West Texas and meet you at Lubbock airport the next day. You can pick up the truck there and take it the rest of the way."

"Would you do that for me?" says Mario.

"Hey, why not, I've never been to Lubbock."

Mario is tempted. "I dunno, I shouldn't leave the truck."

"Think about it, okay? I'll see you tonight at the bar."

He returns to his lodgings. Waiting for him there is a woman called Star. Famous in sixties San Francisco for her beauty and her insatiable sexual promiscuity, Star is now fifty and weighs 180 pounds. She is the founder of the California commune where Jess lives. She and Jess have a daughter, Flower, 13.

Star has come to Texas to help Jess drive the truck home. By taking turns at the wheel, and using amphetamines to stay awake, they will be able to travel nonstop and get back to California in about 60 hours.

He now tells her the proposition he put to Mario. The beauty of the plan is that Jess will probably never be suspected. When Jess fails to show up at Lubbock airport, Mario will guess the truck has been stolen. Knowing he is a party to the theft, he will probably disappear in order to avoid blame. The police will then assume he is the culprit.

Jess and Star make love. Afterwards she asks him about Melanie. In accordance with the hippie philosophy, they are permitted to take other sexual partners. This has not happened much since Jess and Star slid into middle age. But lately Jess has brought to the commune a pretty 30-year-old blonde. Star says she doesn't mind him screwing a young girl—we do not necessarily believe her here—but she is anxious that she and Jess stay together for the sake of Flower. Jess tells her they will stay together because he loves her. Melanie is just a plaything. But we do not accept this at face value: Jess always tells people what they want to hear.

That evening in the bar, Mario agrees to the plan. Jess arranges to meet him the following morning in a lonely spot outside of town, so that no one will see Jess getting into the truck.

Star heads off for a motel 50 miles down the road where she will rendezvous with Jess tomorrow.

In the morning, Jess knows something has gone wrong when Mario arrives at the rendezvous in his car, not the truck. "I changed my mind," he tells Jess. "I can't do it."

Jess becomes enraged, pulls a knife, and stabs Mario to death.

He puts the body in Mario's car, pours gasoline all over the inside, and torches it.

He drives to the trailer which serves as the office and tells the boss Mario changed his mind and went home to see his wife and kids. He offers to drive the truck to New Mexico.

The boss accepts. "Just fill in this form," he says.

Jess suppresses a moment of panic. He cannot fill in the form: he is illiterate. He can just about scrawl his name.

He wanders away. He has dealt with this situation many times before but it always fills him with shame and dread. Getting control of himself, he smiles warmly at the boss's secretary and says: "Would you help me with this, my handwriting is so bad." She fills out the form for him. He signs it laboriously.

He sets off in the truck.

After a few miles he is stopped by the police. He thinks they have discovered the burned-

out car and somehow connected it with him. But they only tell him he has a broken brake light. Still he is scared: he has no driving licence. But they do not ask for it.

He picks up Star at the appointed rendezvous and she takes the wheel. As they head for California, Jess shaves off his moustache and beard and lets his hair down gratefully. Suddenly he looks quite different.

2. A jury files into a courtroom in the Federal Building at 450 Golden Gate Avenue, San Francisco. In the dock are four men—two oriental, two Caucasian—accused of running a money-laundering ring in co-operation with one of the Hong Kong triads.

Waiting anxiously for the verdict is the FBI agent who brought them to book: Judy Maddox, 35, a unit head in the San Francisco field office. Small, dark and beautiful, she is half Vietnamese. (Organised crime in San Francisco is dominated by ethnic Chinese, and consequently many law enforcement personnel are oriental.)

The assistant DA prosecuting this case is Don Riley, a former lover of Judy's. They lived together for a year, then Judy unintentionally got pregnant. Don was adamant that he was not ready to be a father. Judy decided that she, too, wanted to progress her career farther before starting a family. So she had an abortion. But that seemed to blight their relationship, and they split up.

Now Judy and Don study the jury intently. Judy has put a year of her life into this case. Her immediate boss, Assistant Special Agent in Charge (ASAC) Charlie Kincaid, did not want her to have the assignment. He favours Marvin Hayes, an agent of the same age as Judy but a contrasting philosophy: where Judy is neat, logical and scrupulous, Hayes is lazy, intuitive and brutal. Both are rising stars in the FBI. Although Kincaid wanted Hayes to have this assignment, he was overruled by the boss of the San Francisco office, Special Agent in Charge (SAC) Milton Lestrangle, whose protégée Judy is.

Judy is naturally eager to prove herself and vindicate Lestrangle's judgement. If she does so, she can be sure of promotion to ASAC in charge of organised crime, a post that is vacant. This promotion is terribly important to her, partly because of an irrational feeling that she gave up her baby for it.

She thought her case was watertight, but the defendants hired the best law firm in San

Francisco, Brooks Fielding, and they have done such a good job that the result is now too close to call.

She is surprised that neither Milton Lestrangle nor Charlie Kincaid is in court this morning to hear the verdict, and she wonders if there is some kind of panic on back at the office.

At last the verdict is announced. All four men are guilty. Don embraces and kisses Judy. The judge gives out long prison sentences and denies bail pending appeal. Don invites Judy to a celebratory dinner and she thinks: What the heck, I don't have another date.

She takes the elevator to FBI headquarters, which (in real life) happen to be in the same building. She rushes into the office of SAC Lestrangle, eager to share her triumph. She finds his secretary in tears, unable to speak. In the inner office, ASAC Kincaid is sitting at the big desk. He tells her that Lestrangle has been diagnosed with liver cancer. He has been admitted to hospital for intensive treatment, and he is not expected to return to work soon, if ever.

Judy cries.

Meanwhile, Kincaid goes on, he is acting SAC.

Promotions such as the one Judy is hoping for are made in Washington, but based on a recommendation of the local SAC. Now Kincaid tells her he will be recommending Hayes for the organised crime job.

Ignoring Judy's emotional state, he gives her her new assignment.

The governor of California has received a terrorist threat. It is signed by Stop Now, which purports to be the radical offshoot of a legitimate environmental pressure group called the Green California Campaign. Stop Now demands a freeze on the building of new power plant in California. If this demand is not met, they threaten to trigger an earthquake in exactly four weeks.

This threat first appeared on an Internet bulletin board. No one took any notice until it caught the attention of John Truth, a maverick Sacramento talk radio host whose show is syndicated live on several California stations. John Truth put the governor under pressure to respond to the threat. He did so by asking the FBI to investigate. In short, this is a bullshit case. Judy says so and storms out.

She goes home. She lives with her father, Lewis Maddox, a ponytailed Vietnam veteran who is now a detective with the San Francisco police. She has always called him Bo, the Vietnamese equivalent of Daddy (Mommy is Me). The name caught on at work and now

everyone calls him Bo Maddox. Bo met and married Judy's mother in Saigon and brought her home. She died in a car crash when Judy was 13. Since then, Judy and Bo have stayed close, and she moved in with him when she left Don Riley.

Now she tells Bo she is thinking of quitting the FBI. She has a law degree: with her experience and record she could get a job with Brooks Fielding and make a fortune. But she would be defending the kind of lowlifes that were in court today instead of putting them behind bars.

Bo says she should marry Don Riley and produce some grandchildren. Judy turns away so he will not see her reaction: he does not know about the abortion.

She goes to dinner with Don. He tells her she should fight for promotion *then* quit the Bureau. She decides that is exactly what she will do.

The first thing she does is sit down with the FBI's psycholinguistics expert and analyse the threat message. The expert tells her that two people sent this message. The vocabulary and sentence structure are those of a lower-class man in middle age, raised in Los Angeles. But the punctuation and spelling indicate a well-educated young woman.

Judy is surprised. She imagined she was looking for one nutcase alone with his computer and his fantasies. This is different.

The message has been checked against the FBI database, but the patterns do not match those of any known or suspected terrorists on file.

However, the individual behind this threat is sane, capable and serious, the expert warns. If he says he can cause an earthquake—check it out.

Judy begins to wonder if this is such a bullshit case after all.

3. As the sun rises over Interstate 80 in northern California, Jess drives a big old Ford Mustang, painted in fading psychedelic colours, towards San Francisco.

Beside him is Melanie Quercus, 30, a pretty blonde in shorts: intelligent, ditsy, dependent.

Asleep in the back seat is her son Dusty, 5. He has a severe health problem: he suffers from multiple allergies. He sneezes uncontrollably, swells up, and breaks out in itchy skin rashes. Drugs only partly relieve his symptoms.

Also in the back is Jess's German shepherd dog, Spirit.

Jess is tense. He is about to steal some information which will make a difference to the rest of his life. He is also exhilarated. He has a beautiful girl at his side and he is in the middle of the kind of daredevil adventure he gave up 20 years ago. He feels young again.

Dusty wakes unhappy and cries to go home. Melanie, who is also tense, speaks sharply to him and makes him worse. Jess goes: "Hey, Dusty, take a look behind—I think that's a Centaurian warbird disguised as a dirty Subaru station wagon. Shields up! Let me know if they fire a photon torpedo—you'll see the yellow light blink."

Dusty gets into the game and every passing car becomes an enemy spaceship. Melanie smiles at Jess and says: "You're so good with him—thanks."

Jess grins and shrugs. He is good with everyone—children, women, men, pets. He has charisma. But we will gradually realise that his charm is entirely manipulative. Other people are not real to him. They serve only to shore up his ego in the absence of self-esteem.

A couple of miles from the Bay Bridge, Jess pulls off the freeway and drives into the leafy university town of Berkeley. The tension in the car rises. Melanie directs Jess to Euclid Street, lined with modest houses and apartment buildings which are home to graduate students and junior faculty.

Melanie says: "I still think maybe I should go in alone."

Jess allows a flash of anger. "No!"

"Okay, okay." She bites her lip.

She points to a building and Jess parks. Dusty says: "This is Daddy's house!" It is indeed the home of Melanie's estranged husband, Michael Quercus, 35. They are not yet divorced. Melanie turns to speak to Dusty, but Jess forestalls her. "Dusty should stay in the car."

"He might get scared."

Jess turns to the child. "Hey, Lieutenant, I need you and Ensign Spirit to stand guard over this space shuttle while First Officer Mom and I go inside the spaceport for a few minutes. Think you can handle an assignment like that?" Of course Dusty says he can.

Melanie says: "Just for Christ's sake don't let Michael know we left his kid in the car."

They go to the door. Melanie knocks hard and rings long. Jess knows that Michael is a night owl, sure to be in a deep sleep at 7am. That is why Jess has chosen to call at this hour—so that Michael will be too slow-witted to suspect the real reason for the visit.

Michael appears, bleary-eyed. He is a good-looking, studious type with a mild manner and a stubborn streak. He is fair-haired, but otherwise he might be played by the young Dustin Hoffman.

Melanie left him six months ago. She told people he was a workaholic. He is somewhat driven, but the truth is that she is a self-absorbed, idle parasite. She moved in with a musician who threw her out after a few weeks. She wanted to come back to Michael, but he refused to have her: he was too wounded. Nevertheless, he is still carrying a torch for her.

That left Melanie in trouble. She needs someone, and she is weak and vulnerable. Jess specialises in people who are weak and vulnerable. Melanie thinks he is the answer to her prayers.

Michael immediately says to Melanie: "I've been very worried—where the hell have you been?"

She replies calmly: "I'm here to explain. This is my friend Jess. May we come in?"

Michael's living room is his office. He is the leading young seismologist in California. One entire wall is taken up with a large-scale map of the San Andreas fault, beginning at Point Arena lighthouse a hundred miles north of San Francisco in Mendocino County, and running 500 miles south and west all the way to San Bernardino, inland from Los Angeles.

Michael has a sophisticated computer setup that was put together for him by Melanie. She too is a geologist, though she never finished her doctorate. She is also a computer whiz. However, she has not held a job of any kind since she got pregnant with Dusty.

Michael's work on the measurement of tension in the San Andreas fault has won him professional eminence and academic prizes. But he quit the academic world a year ago to start his own business, a consultancy advising construction firms and insurance companies on earthquake hazards. He has his own formula for calculating the risk of an earthquake at any point, and he knows more about this subject than anyone else in America. But most builders just take out insurance, and most insurers use their own crude methods of estimating the risk, knowing the customer will pay in the end. Consequently, Michael is finding it difficult to get people to pay for his undoubted expertise.

To get started he borrowed from his parents, a retired couple living in Fairfield. Business is slow and he is worried about paying them back.

Jess recalls Melanie telling him about her husband's work for the first time. They were

both stoned on pot—although Jess is never totally out of it. She talked about the earth beneath them and how it was cracked like an old china plate, ready to break at the least touch....

Now he quickly sums Michael up as brainy but guileless, totally lacking the ability to read other people—a talent Jess has in spades.

Indicating the map and the computer with a wave, Jess fixes Michael with his most intense gaze and says: “All this stuff, how does it make you feel?”

Many people would be disconcerted and give a revealing answer, but Michael just says irritably: “It doesn’t make me feel anything at all,” and looks away. Jess realises he will not easily dominate Michael.

Michael is angry with Melanie. Four weeks ago she went on vacation, taking Dusty, leaving Michael only a perfunctory message. She now explains that she was offered free use of a friend’s cabin in the mountains.

This leads Jess to recall how he met her. She was lost in the mountains and he helped her find her way back to the cabin, where he seduced her while Dusty took a nap.

Michael says that Melanie should have called him before taking Dusty away. She argues that Michael could have called her at any time on her mobile—except that it was not working because Michael had failed to pay the bill on time.

While this family row takes its course, Jess is anxiously waiting for Michael to leave the room. He tries asking for coffee, in the hope that Michael will go make some, but Michael just points at the kitchen door and says: “Help yourself.”

Melanie tells Michael she has decided to move permanently to the neighbourhood where she has been vacationing. She will live with Jess in the hippie commune that has been his home for 25 years.

“Where is it?” Michael asks.

Jess butts in and says it is in Del Norte county, in the redwood country at the northern end of the state. This is not true: in fact it is in Sierra County, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada north of Lake Tahoe. Melanie is puzzled by this lie but she says nothing.

Michael protests: she should not take their son to live hundreds of miles from his father.

Melanie now reveals that Dusty has suffered no allergy attacks in the four weeks they have been in the mountains, perhaps because of the pure air and water. She shows genuine emotion:

her child's suffering distresses her, even though she is a selfish person.

Michael is moved, but not yet ready to give in. Allergy sufferers usually go to the desert, not the mountains, he argues.

"I don't give a fuck what people usually do!" Melanie yells. "This is the only place he's ever been well, and Jess will let me live there for nothing! I have to go!"

At this point, Jess says: "Why don't you ask Dusty how he feels?" Melanie shoots him an anguished look but, ignoring her, he goes on: "He's outside in my car."

As Melanie expected, this angers Michael. He storms out to get the child. Melanie wails: "Why did you do that!"

"To get him out of the room—now grab that disk!"

Melanie bends over the backup drive, ejects the optical disk, and replaces it with a blank one from her purse. She notes that Michael is still using the same brand, so there is no visible difference between the disks.

She set up the system to back up all Michael's files every night between 5am and 6am. Each morning he changes the disk, keeping the latest copy in a fireproof box. If his system crashes, his computer blows up or his house burns down, he should be able to retrieve his precious data.

Today, of course, he will have a blank disk instead of a backup file. But the chances are he will not suffer a catastrophe today, and therefore will not notice the substitution. Tonight the blank disk will be overwritten with the backup data, so by tomorrow morning the system will be back to normal.

Michael comes back in with Dusty. The boy is saying: "It's great in the mountains, I don't sneeze!" Michael softens. If it makes a real difference to Dusty's health, he says, we have to work something out.

Jess can see that Michael still loves Melanie. He feels irrationally jealous. He hates Michael, he decides.

4. Judy learns that California's most respected authority on earthquakes and what causes them is Michael Quercus. She goes to see him. Michael is in tetchy mood and says, through the monitor, that he is busy and she must call for an appointment. Irritated, she returns to her office

and has her secretary make an appointment for the following day.

When she finally gets inside his apartment, she tries to start again on a more friendly basis. She sees a picture on his desk of a pretty woman and a child. She asks who they are. Nobody important, Michael says. He really means it's none of her damn business, but she puts him down as a neglectful father, and gives up trying to get on with him.

But once she gets him on to his subject, he forgets about being mean.

She asks him if it is possible for human beings to trigger an earthquake.

In a corner of the room are a short plank of wood and a house brick. Michael, who has obviously done this many times before, puts the plank on his desk and the brick on the plank. He lifts one end of the plank slowly until the brick begins to slide. "The brick slips when the power of gravity pulling it overcomes the power of friction holding it still," he says.

Now he explains. A fault such as the San Andreas is a place where two adjacent slabs of the earth's crust are moving in different directions. If they move smoothly, no problem; but sometimes they get jammed. Then tension builds up until the friction holding them still is overcome by the pressure on them to move, and, like the brick, they slip—causing an earthquake.

Michael lifts the plank again, but this time he stops just before the brick begins to slide. "At any time, several sections of the San Andreas fault are like this—just about ready to slide." He hands her a pencil and says: "Tap the plank sharply just in front of the brick." She does so, and the brick slips. "Where the fault is under high tension, it may require only a relatively weak vibration to make it slip. *Normally*, we think earthquakes may be triggered by the kind of natural vibrations that constantly resound through the earth. But such vibrations *could* be generated artificially—for example by mining operations, especially underground explosions. Nuclear tests trigger earthquakes in places where there is no fault, so a lesser bang could cause a quake on a fault line."

"So," says Judy, "it is possible."

"Yes. The key factor would be knowing exactly where the fault was under high tension."

"Who has that data?"

"Universities, the state geologist, me."

"Could a terrorist group have got hold of your data?"

"I don't see how. I don't have many clients, and they're all major corporations."

“Have you been burgled lately?”

“Never.”

“Could a friend or relative have copied your data without your knowledge?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Your wife, or girlfriend?”

“I’m separated from my wife, and I don’t have a girlfriend.”

I’m not surprised, Judy thinks. But her main thought as she leaves is fear. She lived through the Santa Rosa earthquake of 1969. She was seven years old, and scared to death. And she is scared now.

5. The foothills of the Sierra Nevada form a lonely, beautiful landscape of wooded river valleys. The climate is temperate but the land is too steep to farm and too stony for grazing. Jess and Melanie drive on a back road alongside a stream called Silver River. They pass a gate guarded by barbed wire and men with hunting rifles beside a sign that reads: “Los Alamos.” This is a commune, but not theirs. Jess waves, and the men wave back, but they do not like one another. Los Alamos are right-wing vigilantes, not hippies.

Jess pulls on to an unmarked dirt road and drives a mile into the woods before arriving at a cluster of log cabins in a clearing. This is Hippie Valley.

Jess feels a sense of peace descend on him—just as he did 25 years ago when he first drove down this track in his then-new Ford Mustang.

At that time he was 23 years old. Born in the slums of Watts, Los Angeles, the son of a teenage prostitute, he grew up on the streets and stole his first car at the age of 10. But he got a straight job in a liquor store run by an elderly couple who eventually let him take over the business. He went into liquor wholesaling and was a millionaire at 23. Then the business went bust, the IRS came after him, and he fled with nothing but his car, a few hundred dollars in cash, and a navy blue suit with wide lapels and flared pants.

He finished up here. The commune had been founded by Star three years earlier as the hippie phenomenon in San Francisco ground to a halt amid commercialisation and disillusionment. This place lurched from crisis to crisis until Jess showed up. His charisma and strength of will soon won him dominance over most of the communards; and those few who did not bend to his

mastery soon left. Only Star remains strong enough to stand up to him.

Jess put the commune on a sound financial footing. Under his direction the hippies terraced a hillside, diverted a stream for irrigation, and planted grapevines. They now make a chardonnay which is much sought-after by connoisseurs.

They lease the land from the federal government. There is no mains electricity, no tap water and no sewage. They have made a virtue of the simple life. They all subscribe to the Five Paradoxes of Baghram:

*Meditation is life; all else is distraction*

*Money makes you poor*

*Marriage is the greatest infidelity*

*When no one owns anything, we all own everything*

*Do what you like is the only law*

These sayings are attributed to a guru but were in fact made up by Jess. However, the commune has succeeded more than most in sticking to its principles. Meals and meditation are communal. No money is used: everything they need is available in the free shop. The distributor of their wine pays them in kind. (However, as we shall see, Jess has secret funds for emergency use.) In the early days there was a good deal of screwing around, and Jess has had sex with every woman here; but as the founders entered middle age they divided into more or less regular couples, and the principle of free love is now somewhat academic. There is more casual adultery here than in the average suburb, but no orgies. Similarly, their attitude to drugs is tolerant, but no more so than the average college dorm.

The more shrewd among them realise that the entire commune is founded upon a highly successful commercial enterprise, the winery, and that all their spiritual ideas would come to nothing without that material bedrock. Nevertheless they have lived by the ideals of their youth, and made those ideals work, while America has become increasingly materialistic and violent. They all feel passionately that they have proved, by their lives, that their philosophy is right and the rest of the world is wrong.

Jess, who was sheltered by the commune and who in turn rescued it from collapse, feels as if his whole life has been validated by this place. He will do anything to protect it.

An unexpected problem awaits him. Flower, his daughter, has been arrested for stealing

fashionable clothes from a boutique in the nearest town, Silver City. He has to put on his 1973 blue suit and get her out of jail. When he returns, another communitard, Dale, tells him the problem is that Melanie talks to the youngsters about fashions and cosmetics and pop records. Dale is also suspicious of Melanie's mobile phone and laptop computer. Plus, though everyone here has to work, Melanie seems to think that a few light domestic chores are sufficient to discharge her responsibility.

Jess sees that Melanie is just a symptom: the young generation will always be vulnerable to corruption by the blandishments of the outside world. The only remedy is to strengthen the communal bonds.

After dinner he runs over the plan with the adults. Melanie has selected a location in Owens Valley, a deserted area near Death Valley. Here, according to Michael's data, the fault line is under high stress and a nudge may cause an earthquake. But, he assures them, it will be controlled and limited. (He avoids Melanie's eye as he says this: she has given him no such assurance and she knows it is bullshit.) The earthquake will prove their ability, and the governor of California will be forced to accede to their demand.

After this, they meditate together.

6. Acting SAC Charlie Kincaid is summoned to Sacramento (the state capital of California) to report to Robert Cayron, 35, black, the governor's Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for Emergency Management. To Kincaid's chagrin, Cayron insists on also seeing the agent in charge of the case, Judy Maddox.

Beforehand, Judy discusses the presentation with Kincaid and they agree what should be said.

They meet in the Horseshoe, the governor's suite of offices on the ground floor of the grandiose Capitol Building. But now Kincaid reneges on their agreement, undermines everything Judy says and makes her look a fool. When she says that this is not a lone individual but a group, Kincaid says well, two at least. When she says these people are not insane, he says well, not clinically. And when she says they are serious, Kincaid says well, they think they are. If they cannot cause an earthquake, Judy says, they may do something else; but Kincaid doubts they have the capability. And finally, when Judy says the possibility that they really could cause an

earthquake cannot be totally ruled out, Kincaid laughs at her.

Then Kincaid says: Agent Maddox has given you the textbook answers, Bob, but let me give you the benefit of a certain amount of age and experience. He goes on to say there is nothing to fear and implies Judy has done a slack job in not bringing Stop Now to justice sooner.

Cayron says he will advise the governor accordingly.

As they leave, Judy fuming, Kincaid says: You did fine in there, little lady, just fine.

7. On their old transistor radio, Jess and the hippies hear John Truth say the governor has announced he will take no action about the earthquake threat.

Jess said he expected this. Now they must prove themselves.

Before setting off for Owens Valley, they discuss what to do after the earthquake, if it really happens. They must send another threat immediately, Jess decides.

This time the means of communication should be more dramatic than an Internet bulletin board, and the deadline should be shorter. Star suggests a phone call to John Truth at the radio station, threatening another earthquake a week from now. She is willing to make the call. Melanie says: What if someone recognises her voice? But she has hardly spoken to anyone outside the commune for 25 years, and even she had, it's a remote chance that whoever answers the phone at the radio station would know her. Star asks what she should say, and Jess says he will think about it en route.

They drive to Owens Valley and park the seismic vibrator at a spot carefully chosen by Melanie, who has Michael's fault stress data on her laptop. Immediately beneath here, two tectonic plates are wedged together, straining to spring free.

Jess sets the vibrator then they all move half a mile away across the salt flats. He uses the remote control to start the vibration, just as in the oilfield. It shakes, but there is no earthquake.

They move the truck and try again, still without success.

Melanie recalls a theory that the pitch of the vibration might be a key factor, just as a note of a certain pitch may shatter a glass. Jess tinkers with the vibrator to make it shake at a constant pitch instead of the usual rising sweep. They try several different frequencies.

At a very low frequency, it works.

The ground shakes; dust clouds form; someone screams; there is a rumbling sound like

an underground train; then they are all thrown to the ground, and a great gash opens up in the earth all across the valley.

The motion stops.

It takes several seconds for them to get over their fear and realise they have survived. Then they whoop and holler. They have done it!

## Part 2: Seven Days

8. Judy is alone at home on Saturday night. Bo is out with his buddies, Don Riley is working on a case. Michael Quercus calls and asks Judy out on a date. She is astonished, but she says okay.

As they are driving she gets a call on her mobile phone. It is Bo, yelling: "Turn on your radio! Turn on your radio!"

John Truth is playing a recording of Star's message. (He mentions that all calls to the station are automatically taped.) She announces that Stop Now have triggered a demonstration earthquake in Owens Valley and will trigger another in exactly a week unless their demand is met. John Truth has spoken to the State Geologist who has confirmed there was a tremor in Owens Valley earlier today, but has also firmly denied that this or any tremor could be caused by terrorists. Truth is demanding a statement from the governor. Other media are picking up the story.

They drive to Michael's apartment to look at his seismograph. This, he says, will quickly settle the question of whether the earthquake was triggered by human agency. He explains that a normal earthquake is preceded by a gradual buildup of lesser tremors. By contrast, when an earthquake is triggered by an explosion there is no buildup: the graph begins with a characteristic "spike".

But the Owens Valley data do not fit either pattern. Instead there is a series of preliminary vibrations that Michael cannot identify. All he can say is that the pattern seems too regular to be natural.

Despite the remaining uncertainty, it looks more and more as if Judy was right to take Stop Now as a serious threat. She goes to Kincaid with the latest information. But Kincaid tells her he has been talking to seismologists who say there is no way an earthquake can be triggered by terrorists. He takes her off the case and gives it to Marvin Hayes.

9. Jess realises he never truly believed he could trigger an earthquake until it actually happened. Now he feels as if nothing is beyond his power. He is involved in a personal struggle

with the governor of California, a battle of giants.

But mundane considerations bring him down to earth. Star is worried about her voice being broadcast all over the world. If she had known that her voice would be tape-recorded, she would never have made the call.

Jess again assures her that no one outside the commune knows her voice. She accepts this. And, because he is overly pleased with himself, his usually hypersensitive antenna fail to pick up that there is something Star is not telling him.

But she does tell him of another worry. She accuses him of neglecting their daughter. He used to spend time with her, teaching her things—recipes, guitar chords, poems, how to draw Mickey Mouse. Now he is always too busy. He replies that he is fighting to save the commune and, besides, Flower these days spends most of her time babysitting Dusty, who has brought out all her nascent 13-year-old maternal instinct. For some reason Star bursts into tears and runs away.

That night, when they are all stoned, Star gets into bed with Jess and Melanie. She has done this before, many years ago, with Jess and his girlfriends. But Melanie is not interested in playing this game, and Star is brutally rejected.

Meanwhile, Jess listens obsessively to radio coverage. He is sure the governor must give in—but as the hours and days go by, he hears of nothing but the FBI investigation. (He loathes all law enforcement personnel. He picked up this attitude from his mother, who hated the cops when they busted her, and hated them when they demanded free blow jobs for not busting her.) He now learns that the FBI are giving a press conference about the case, and he decides to go. It is terribly dangerous. They will be looking out for him, because all cops know that high-profile perpetrators often insinuate themselves into the investigation. But he has to know what they are thinking.

The press conference is to take place in a hotel. Reporters are asked for accreditation before being admitted. Jess and Melanie buy name badges and a cheap camera at a stationery store and pose as hotel employees doing an article for the amateurish in-house magazine. Jess takes pictures while Melanie flirts and questions Marvin Hayes. They learn among other things that he and many of the agents in the FBI San Francisco office frequent a bar near the Presidio called Everton's.

SAC Kincaid chairs the press conference. He says the FBI does not believe the Owens Valley earthquake was human-made. However, the Bureau continues to hunt for the people who made the threat. He introduces Hayes, who reports that he has raided the offices of the Green California Campaign, arrested two staffers and five volunteers, and seized the mailing list.

Jess realised the State Governor is going to ignore his demand. He returns to Hippie Valley in savage mood. He announces that they must prepare to fulfil their threat of a second earthquake—this one in a location where it will cause property damage amounting to millions of dollars.

10. Hayes' interrogation of the Green California people produces nothing. He starts on their mailing list. Judy worries. She is waking up at night with earthquake nightmares.

She gets the results of analysis of Star's voice (which she ordered before she was taken off the case). She reads it before passing it to Hayes. Once again the analyst believes that two people were involved in sending the message. It was composed by the same lower-class middle-aged Angelino, but spoken by someone else—in this case a middle-class woman of mature years.

Judy thinks: In what circumstances does an uneducated lower-class man have a plurality of middle-class women to do his bidding? This is beginning to sound like a cult.

Bo wonders if the cult's concern about new power plants in general might mask an interest in one particular building project. Inspired by this thought, Judy accesses Lexis-Nexis and searches for power plant building projects in California. She finds several, including a nuclear power station on the Arizona border. All of them are controversial and have aroused local protest. But one that catches her eye is a project to dam the Silver River in Sierra County. The name rings a bell and she cross-checks on the FBI computer. Sure enough, Silver River Valley is home to a right-wing vigilante group called Los Alamos.

In great excitement Judy goes to Kincaid with this hypothesis. She is shocked and dismayed when he screams at her, accuses her of trying to get back on the case because she is publicity-mad, and warns her that she will be fired if she works on it against his instructions.

Then he orders a raid on Los Alamos.

11. Judy is right about the Silver River dam. The whole valley is to be flooded. The Hippie

Valley commune will be destroyed.

There was a campaign against the project, of course. Landowners in the valley fought it at every approval stage. They lost. They got compensation. But the hippies got nothing: they hold their land on a simple one-year lease from the federal government that Star signed in 1970 and has renewed every year since. It specifically says they are not entitled to any compensation if the lease is not renewed.

Now their entire way of life is to be wiped out—everything material and spiritual that they have built up over 25 years—just so that Californians can power their electric toothbrushes and heated hair rollers.

The hippies have discussed all sorts of desperate measures to stave off destruction. They went to the public library and looked up how to make a nuclear bomb. (The mechanism was simple enough, but finding the plutonium would have been the hard part.) They found out the name and address of the president of the utility that wants to build the dam, and even put his house under surveillance, developing a plan to kidnap him. They also discussed a hunger strike. Then Melanie started talking about earthquakes, and that captured everyone's imagination.

Now, however, they suffer a shock. Feeling secure that no one has the least idea who is making these earthquake threats, they are dismayed to wake up and find the valley crawling with FBI agents. Helicopters circle above, police checkpoints block every road, agents call at every house.

Jess keeps his nerve. He swiftly establishes that the FBI are interested mainly in Los Alamos. He gets the hippies calmed down and organised. First he double-checks that the seismic vibrator is well concealed. Then he picks out certain individuals to talk to agents and briefs them on what to say. They must not mention their religious philosophy or their unconventional way of life. They say they are all shareholders in a wine-making enterprise. They have no political agenda. When asked about the dam, they say it is a nuisance, but they own the Silver River brand name and they are planning to start a new farm somewhere else. They offer the agents a taste of their latest vintage. There are several tense moments, but the FBI are not really interested in them and their suspicions are not aroused. Jess realises that the raid is in fact a blessing in disguise, for the FBI will draw a blank at Los Alamos and eliminate this valley from its inquiries.

When the raid is over the hippies, scared, reopen the question of the second earthquake.

Star leads the opposition. Jess palms them off then takes her aside and asks what's really on her mind.

She cries. The way Flower has taken to Dusty, and the way Melanie has rejected Star, has given rise to nightmare visions of Jess's new family—including Melanie, Dusty and Flower but excluding Star.

Jess tells her there is only one way to ensure they can all stay together, and that is to save the commune, which they can do if they stick to the plan. She promises to keep the others on side. Jess makes love to her then spends the night with her.

12. Judy gets an urgent call from Michael and drops by his apartment. She finds him romping on the rug with Dusty.

He tells her he has solved the mystery of the Owens Valley seismograph. The peculiar readings preceding the earthquake were caused by a seismic vibrator, which almost certainly triggered the shock. So Stop Now are telling the truth: they did it, and they could do it again.

However, he warns, there is no way they can control the extent or the magnitude of an earthquake once they have unleashed it. They were lucky in Owens Valley—but the next one could kill thousands.

Judy realises she has to work on this case in defiance of Kincaid, even if it means risking her career. She gets Bo to put out a nationwide alert for a missing or stolen seismic vibrator.

On a date with Michael, she meets his mother, who says she thinks she recognises the voice that called the radio station. She remembers a record album in the sixties with a woman reading poetry against a background of psychedelic music. Judy talks to a music journalist who recalls several such records. She visits a rare record dealer. Finally she finds the album. On the sleeve is a small monochrome mug shot of the poetry reader, and a name: Stella Higgins.

Then Bo gets a call from a detective in Corpus Christi, Texas, to say that a seismic vibrator was stolen on his patch a couple of weeks ago. He e-mails a picture of his prime suspect, Ricardo Lopez.

At the next meeting in Sacramento, Kincaid and Hayes have nothing to offer Robert Cayron except bland assurances that Stop Now cannot trigger earthquakes. Then Judy gatecrashes the meeting. She shows Cayron the evidence that a seismic vibrator triggered the

Owens Valley tremor. Then she gives him names and pictures of two suspects.

Kincaid and Hayes look like complete assholes. At Cayron's request, the governor calls the director of the FBI in Washington and insists that Judy be put in charge of the case.

13. The newspapers carry the story about the seismic vibrator, plus the pictures of Star at 19 and Jess in his Ricky Lopez disguise. Jess is flabbergasted. How did they find out so much, so soon? Desperate to know how close they are to the truth, he takes the risk of going to Everton's bar.

There he finds a very disgruntled Hayes. When Jess has lulled his suspicions, Hayes tells him the investigation has been taken over by a slant-eyed cunt called Judy Maddox. Jess is bitterly disappointed that his contact is now out of the loop. He is about to leave empty-handed when Hayes mentions that Judy is fucking a seismologist called Michael Quercus.

Jess is full of hope again. He asks Melanie to visit Michael and try to find out what he is up to. But she refuses. To overcome her resistance, Jess takes her and Dusty to a place where he knows Dusty will have an allergy attack. Melanie remembers that the commune is the only place she can live where Dusty will be well, and she agrees to Jess's demand.

14. Judy is disappointed when the publicity about the vibrator and the pictures of suspects bring no new leads. She prepares for a second earthquake.

She gets Michael to print a list of the likely locations, i.e. places where the fault is under high stress. Then she arranges police surveillance of roads near these areas, looking out for a seismic vibrator.

She sleeps with Michael.

But next day he cancels a date with her mysteriously. She cannot help herself she checks on him. She is disappointed and angry to find he is spending the night with Melanie.

15. Melanie returns to Hippie Valley and tells Jess what Judy's plan is.

Jess scouts the locations he has in mind and sees cop cars near every one.

He decides to disguise the seismic vibrator. In a junkyard he and Melanie find a busted-up carnival ride called The Dragon's Mouth. They buy it and take it home. They use the gaily-painted

panels from the ride to disguise the vibrator.

They drive to Felicitas, a small town off Interstate 101 where it crosses the San Andreas fault. There is a police cruiser patrolling the freeway and another outside a coffee shop on Main Street. Jess parks on a vacant lot and they begin to go through the motions of setting up a carnival ride. The hippies parade through the town handing out flyers, and they give free tickets to the cops at the coffee shop.

Meanwhile, Judy is scanning the reports from all the surveillance units as the deadline approaches. She notices one that reads: "Nothing but a bunch of carnival folk setting up a ride." Her antennae twitch. She and Michael leap in the helicopter and head for Felicitas.

Jess operates the vibrator. The ground shakes, but there is no earthquake. The cops feel the vibration but do not know where it is coming from.

In the helicopter, Michael's seismograph shows him that the seismic vibrator is operating in Felicitas.

Jess moves the truck to try again. He sees the FBI helicopter approaching and the cops closing in on him. He does not have time to get the usual quarter of a mile away from the truck. As the rest of the hippies flee, he operates the vibrator, standing only a hundred yards away.

As Judy and Michael land, the earthquake happens.

The freeway buckles and heaves; cars and trucks crash and burst into flames; bridges collapse; a train runs off the rails; fires break out, water pipes burst and the town of Felicitas is flattened.

The ground has opened up a few steps away from the truck. The vibrator is damaged but still driveable. Miraculously, Jess is uninjured. In the chaos, he gets into the truck and drives it away.

## Part 3: Forty-eight Hours

16. Jess resists the temptation to abandon the damaged truck and flee. His only power lies in the threat of another earthquake. If the vibrator were found abandoned, the governor would know Jess was no longer a threat. So he must hide the truck.

He manages to coax it all the way to San Francisco, where there are several possible earthquake locations. Close to a suburban shopping mall there is an abandoned car repair shop where he hides the truck. (The cops on surveillance have rushed to Felicitas to help with the rescue operation.) Then he buys a voice distorter, calls John Truth and threatens another earthquake exactly two days after the last.

He expects trouble on his return to Hippie Valley, and he gets it. The others are appalled by the death and destruction they have caused. Star looks at Jess like a total stranger. She says they have decided to give themselves up to the authorities.

Jess musters all his charisma and strength of will. He pretends to be as shocked as everyone else. He accuses Melanie of misleading him about the danger. He says the truck is damaged and will never vibrate again. He points out that if they give themselves up they will all go to jail for the rest of their lives. Finally he says perhaps the destruction was the will of God.

This does not convince them, but it calms them down and is enough to hold them for a few hours. Jess believes the governor will now give in to their demand and that will end the matter. Then John Truth announces on the radio that the state governor is seeking a meeting with Stop Now.

Jess can barely conceal his triumph. He is to be admitted to the councils of the mighty. He heads off. He takes Melanie with him, feeling she is the one he can trust most to help him, and they head for Sacramento.

17. Judy and Bo follow up the lead of the carnival ride and find the junkyard where it was purchased. They get e-fit pictures of the buyers. Judy immediately sees the resemblance to the woman in the photo on Michael's desk. She shows the e-fit to Michael and he agrees.

They figure out how Melanie and Jess must have got hold of Michael's data. The scales

fall from Michael's eyes and he sees Melanie for what she is.

Judy looks for a cult in Del Norte county threatened by a power plant project but nothing fits the bill. She guesses Melanie lied to Michael about the location of the commune.

She goes over the other possibilities again. On the lease of a small piece of land in Silver River Valley she comes across the name Stella Higgins.

She raids Hippy Valley. Star, realising that Jess has betrayed his own principles, confesses everything. But Judy is too late to catch Jess and Melanie.

However, Dusty is here. Michael takes him home.

18. Jess rents a car, a helicopter and two actors.

He arranges to meet the governor on the front steps of the Capitol building in Sacramento.

At the appointed time, the place is crawling with secret service agents, but Jess has insisted the area is not roped off and the public have normal access.

A car pulls up—but the person who gets out is not Jess. Then a helicopter appears over the rooftops. It lands and a Jess lookalike gets out. He identifies himself to the governor. Judy says over the radio: "Not yet, not yet!" But an over-eager young agent jumps the gun and grabs the lookalike. He is thrown to the ground and handcuffed.

The real Jess is a few yards away, watching, camouflaged among a group on a guided tour of the building. He slips away. Furious, he calls John Truth, screaming: "No one can stop me! This is the Big One! San Francisco is the target! I can kill you all!"

Truth broadcasts this live. Hundreds of thousand of people jam the freeways as they attempt to flee the city.

19. Judy devises a desperate plan.

She calls the media and announces that she is about to make an arrest. Then she arrests Michael. She makes sure the cameras have clear pictures of a social worker carrying Dusty off to a San Francisco children's home.

Then she waits for Melanie to call.

20. Jess and Melanie are at the disused repair shop. They hear about the arrest of Michael on

the radio. Melanie calls and Judy answers the phone, pretending to be a social worker.

Melanie keeps trying to find out where the children's home is, and Judy keeps trying to find out where Melanie is. Finally Melanie screams: "Make sure my baby isn't in Daly City!"

Judy and Michael leap into the helicopter.

Jess, having heard Melanie give the game away, starts the vibrator.

Melanie tries to stop him. He kills her.

Judy and Michael arrive. Judy and the FBI bust into the garage. Jess is at the wheel of the truck. Suicidally, he starts the vibrator while he is still inside. Judy shoots him, killing him. Then she jumps into the truck and stops the vibrator before the earthquake happens.

The end.