

CHAPTER 1

Macca

For months he had nightmares. Her screams woke him in the dead of night. He heard her cries in his sleep. Her name was Lauren. She was eighteen.

“I’ll never forget the sound of her voice. I’ll take it with me to my grave. During the night she suddenly went quiet. I kept shouting and shouting and shouting but I never heard from her again. It haunted me for a long time.”

Macca never saw Lauren. Like him, she was trapped on a roof in the Lakeview area of New Orleans. She was two streets away and started yelling and crying the day the levees broke. He kept shouting to her and reassured her over and over help would come. He coaxed her into talking about herself and urged her to keep her spirits up.

Someone would rescue her soon. She just had to hold on a little bit longer. But she fell silent in the pitch-darkness of a drowned and abandoned city. He repeatedly called her but she never answered back. He never did find out what happened to her. But right then he knew—he just knew—she was gone.

Ex-professional soccer player Macca was thirty-three when Katrina hit and had been in Louisiana two and a half years. He won the League Cup in Scotland with Raith Rovers before being sold to English club Bolton Wanderers in a record move worth the equivalent of nearly \$2 million. Former England national team coach Kevin Keegan then signed him for the London outfit Fulham, but when Frenchman Jean Tigana took over, Macca left for the lower

league club Cambridge United and was looking for a new challenge when his contract ended.

He found that the game in England was like an old boys' club and he had burned too many bridges as a hotheaded player to get a job in the close-knit world of top-level coaching. So in 2002, believing soccer was set to explode in the States, he flew to South Carolina intending to sign for the Charleston Battery. The deal collapsed and he returned home, but on the trip he met Irishman Kenny Farrell, who persuaded him to join a minor league team starting in New Orleans.

When he arrived in February 2003, the Shell Shockers didn't even have a name. He was unveiled as their first signing and helped get the club off the ground, combining playing for them with coaching roles at youth teams in the city. Finn McCool's was one of the first bars Kenny took him to and Macca, who likes to drink, immediately made it his local. As a Celtic supporter who grew up in sectarian-split Glasgow, he relished being able to indulge in friendly banter with Rangers fans while watching explosive "Old Firm" battles between the two teams.

When our pub team started we wanted him to manage us in the Shell Shockers' off-season. He was initially reluctant because of his paid coaching commitments and thought it would be a short-lived joke.

"But being around the guys all the time and seeing the excitement grow was an eye-opener for me. I realized it was more serious than a muck-around on a Sunday and you wanted to take it a step up from just having a drink and a laugh. It's that British mentality of wanting to win all the time: it's okay to have fun but it's no fun when you are getting beat. And it was because of that attitude I said I'd do it."

Even amongst the hardened drinkers who hang out at Finn's, Macca is famous for his benders. That Saturday when I left him at the bar, he was just getting started and he stayed there all afternoon and evening.

"With hindsight people think I was an idiot, but at the time I was laughing and joking over a few beers with the boys. The Weather Channel was on and we were keeping an eye on the hurricane as it was getting closer, but we were trying to avoid thinking too much about it and were discussing other things."

Later he met friends in a hole-in-the-wall bar near Bourbon Street and kept drinking. Then drank some more. He was still in the French Quarter on Sunday afternoon as the news reported gridlock on the I-10 Interstate out of New Orleans. He finally panicked as one after another of the restaurants, cafes, and bars shut down.

"I was at my wit's end. By now it's 5 P.M. and I realized it was too late to go anywhere. I made my way along Bourbon to Canal Street to get a cab, but there was nothing around, so I started walking home and from nowhere the wind picked up and was whipping around me at an incredible speed.

"It was pouring with rain and I was soaked, but then a taxi driver stopped and asked me where I was going. He wasn't working but gave me a ride to the top of Canal, and when he dropped me off I legged it as fast as I could to the house. By the time I got home and got bunkered in, it was a raging gale."

He hadn't prepared for a storm. No hurricane stockpile. No supplies. No emergency kit. Television showed Katrina drawing a bead on the city. The local channels signed off. Then the power died.

Complete blackness. The wind screaming outside and the

rain battering the house. Within minutes a window blew out. Pictures and photos crashed off the walls. Windows rattled and shook. Storm shutters were ripped loose and banged incessantly against the building.

"The noise was driving me nuts. There was nothing I could do but go to bed. The sound was unbelievable, unbearable, like being on a battlefield. I plugged my ears with toilet paper but couldn't sleep. I was just hoping and praying it would pass in an hour or two. It was bedlam, like five hundred people all having a party in your room.

"I could sense the roof straining as if it was going to be ripped off at any second. I thought, 'Bloody hell, if this goes I'm done for,' and I crawled into the walk-in closet and shut my eyes. The pressure was crazy."

In the early hours, dehydrated from a weekend on the booze, he got an orange juice from the fridge and saw through the patio doors that rainwater had flooded the garden up to the back step. On his next visit to the kitchen it was over the step. The third time it had reached the deck, and the back fence had blown down.

An hour later the garage roof had been clawed off and the doors torn from their hinges. The contents floated around the garden and porch and the barbeque set was repeatedly clanging against the glass. He considered going out to get it but went back to bed instead.

"I must have managed to doze off, but then I woke with a start and saw there was water right up to the bed. I said, 'Holy s—t, what's going on here?' and jumped up and waded across the room to the chest of drawers. On top of it was a zippered waterproof wash-bag with my passport in it, and I don't know why but I had the presence of mind to snatch it and stuff my mobile phone in there as well.

"I couldn't believe how fast the water was flooding

in—even in the seconds it took to grab my stuff it'd risen higher. I waded out of the bedroom and saw a broken window where the water was pouring in. I clambered onto a chair to escape through it and was halfway out when the current yanked me away."

He was swirled down the street by the force of water gushing through the rupture in the nearby levee. He can't swim and thought he was about to drown, flailing helplessly as the torrent tossed him about like a cork on the ocean.

"It was chaos. I couldn't see anything, but I could hear trees falling and there was stuff everywhere. Tiles and bits of roofs were being blown about and I was trying to protect my face with my hands, but I couldn't tell if anything was coming towards me.

"I could hear things landing in the water all around me and I was trying to keep a clear head and get my bearings but I was scared s—tless. I was being slammed into electricity cables lying in the water and didn't know if they were live so I was trying to duck under without touching them.

"I was sliced open from being pounded into fences and railings and street signs. The water was so high it was above the stop signs, so they were hidden and you didn't even know they were there until you hit them. I was only wearing a tee-shirt and shorts and my legs were cut to ribbons. Eventually I managed to cling onto the edge of a roof, scramble up, and climb to the highest point.

"I was knackered. It was only maybe one hundred yards from the house but it felt like miles. I was trying to hang onto the chimney stack but there was nothing to grip and I felt like the wind was going to blow me back into the water at any minute. I was also convinced it was going to break off and I remember thinking, 'If this gives way then I'm f—ked.'

"I was trying to shelter myself from the worst of the gale but it was coming from all angles, and I could hear trees breaking apart and bits of buildings cracking. It was absolutely terrifying."

The storm eased as the morning wore on and the driving, stinging rain—like needles on his body—finally stopped. He caught his breath. Possessions drifted past. The middle-class Lakeview neighborhood had been reclaimed by the sea, and Macca saw firsthand the awesome devastation caused by the catastrophic collapse of the levees.

He shouted to Lauren and heard other trapped survivors dotted about the district. By late afternoon the wind died down, the clouds dissipated, and he was drenched in an eerie silence. It was as if he was alone in the world's largest swimming pool. He spent the night clinging to the roof.

"At dawn I just thought, 'Well, here we go again.' I was getting more and more dehydrated and exhausted but couldn't lie down to sleep because of the pitch of the roof. I kept telling myself that a boat or a helicopter or something is going to come and rescue me. Even if I had been able to swim there was no way of knowing what dangers were in the water."

Helicopters buzzed high in the sky on Tuesday as the rescue mission trundled into gear and America struggled to comprehend the scale of the disaster that had almost obliterated one of its most famous cities from the face of the Earth.

The southern summer sun beat down relentlessly. There was no hiding place. Macca, partially clothed, fair haired, and pasty skinned, was being baked alive. He made contact with a couple in their eighties a few houses down. They'd spent the night hugging each other as they balanced on a

chair in their upstairs bedroom with the water up to their necks.

“At this stage I was delirious. I’d had nothing to eat, nothing to drink, no sleep, and I was getting sunburned to death. I’m not a religious person but I was reliving all the things I’d done wrong in my life. All the times I’ve been an ass, all the times I’ve pissed people off . . .

“But the main thing I was thinking about was my five-year-old daughter, Marissa, in Scotland. I wanted the chance to see her again and I said to myself that if I get out of this then I’ll never act so stupidly again. When you are given that much time to think it is a huge bloody lesson, believe me.”

By late afternoon the Coast Guard choppers were flying lower, and every time one passed he’d scream at it and frantically wave his white top. On a low sweep a pilot spotted him and hovered so close he could shout over the noise of the blade.

He asked, “Are you alright?”

Macca answered, “I am now. Where have you been?”

Macca told him to evacuate the elderly couple first and watched them being winched to safety. The pilot signaled he’d be back in ten minutes. Two hours later he still hadn’t returned.

“I thought, ‘Are you kidding me?’ I couldn’t believe it. I was being teased. That was the breaking point, and I can’t tell you how deflated I was. It was about 7 P.M. because the sun was setting and I knew they’d be stopping the rescues for the night. I don’t think I would have survived another night.

“But just as I was about to give up, they reappeared and a guy came down, tied me onto the rope, and I was pulled in. ‘It’s okay, you’ll be safe now,’ he said and I burst into tears.

He gave me water and I was dying to drink it, but my lips were so burnt it stung and all I could do was dab it on them. I just cried and cried like a baby."