

5 years on

Five years after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, American author **JAMES GRIPPANDO** says 'Thanks, mates.'

The phone rang just around midnight, waking my wife and me in our Brisbane hotel room. 'Turn on CNN!' our nanny shouted. She was back in Miami with our five-year-old daughter and our son. The eleventh day of September, 2001, was our little boy's third birthday. We hated not being able to celebrate with him, but the collapse of Ansett Airlines had made it impossible to get home before the morning of the twelfth. I switched on the television just in time to see the south tower of the World Trade Center come crashing down upon New York's financial district. Minutes later, the phone rang again. This time it was Qantas Airlines. My wife Tiffany was glued to the television, teary-eyed and stunned into silence. I held her and said, 'Honey, we're not going home today.'

I was at the end of a 17-day book tour of Australia for my fifth novel, truly the highpoint of my writing career. My wife came with me, and we made every day count. We mingled with fellow authors at the Melbourne book festival, took in *Faust* at the Sydney Opera House, climbed the Sydney Harbour Bridge, hugged koalas in Queensland, snorkelled on the Great Barrier Reef, drank beers at Bondi and dined in world-class restaurants. We fell in love with Australia, its people, and its wines.

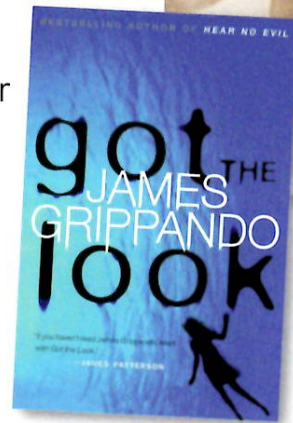
Though our flight home had been cancelled, we went to Brisbane airport the next morning to see what we could find out. All flights to the States were grounded indefinitely. We, and others like us, followed the same routine for the next three days: go to airport, check on flights, get bad news, go back to hotel. We looked at flights through Tokyo, Seoul, even Buenos Aires. We considered flying to Canada, renting a car and driving down to Florida. More than anything, we wished we had brought our children with us. We phoned them every day and Tiffany vowed never

to put an ocean between us and our children again.

On Saturday morning we headed for Sydney, figuring that the first flight to the States would probably not be from Brisbane. Security at the airport was high, but fears ran even higher. Among the passengers waiting to board the flight to Sydney were three young middle-eastern men; for some passengers, that was enough to rouse suspicions. The paranoia was palpable. My wife is a nervous flyer to begin with, we'd barely slept in the last five days, and by the time we took our seats on the aircraft she was on the verge of a full-blown panic attack. She wanted off the plane.

A flight attendant did her best to calm Tiffany. I explained the stress we'd been under, the anxiety of being separated from our children, the fact that we knew people who worked in the World Trade Center and didn't know their fate. The flight attendant escorted us from the plane, where I presumed we would simply be left behind. Moments later, the Qantas pilot came out to speak to us. He assured us that he wouldn't be flying the plane if it weren't safe. The head of airport security came and gave us the same assurances. I can't say enough about the compassion and professionalism displayed by that team from Qantas. It's a credit to them that Tiffany turned around and got back on that plane.

We arrived safely in Sydney only to discover that nearly every stranded American in Australia was operating under the same assumption: that the first flight to the States would leave from Sydney. We waited in a very long queue to speak to a ticket agent. We could hear passengers ahead of us asking the same questions we had asked in Brisbane, and of course they were getting the same answer: no flights to America. I'm not



sure why we stayed in the queue, but we did. When we finally reached the ticketing counter, we inquired about the flight to Los Angeles. The agent was halfway through her sentence, conveying the disappointing news, when suddenly she stopped and double-checked the screen in front of her. 'Oh, my God,' she said. 'We're flying.' We couldn't believe our ears, but the euphoria was short lived. 'The flight is completely booked,' she told us. There was a waiting list, but since our flight was supposed to leave from Brisbane we would be on the bottom of the list.

Perhaps the agent saw the desperation in our eyes, or maybe it was just her intuition. But she told us to wait; she had an idea. She grabbed the microphone and announced that the flight was scheduled to leave in ninety minutes. Then she did the most extraordinary thing. This Australian from Australia's leading airline asked if there were any Australians with confirmed reservations who would be willing to give up their seats in favour of Americans who were trying to get home. In thirty seconds, she had a couple of volunteers. In another minute, she had two more. They kept coming.

I don't know how many Australians stepped forward to help my wife, me, and other stranded Americans get home that day. But even five years later, their kindness towards total strangers still brings a lump to my throat. And from the bottom of my heart, I wish to say, 'Thanks, mates.' **gr**

James Grippando is the author of eleven suspense novels enjoyed worldwide in over twenty languages. His latest novel is **Got the Look**, the fifth instalment in the acclaimed series featuring Miami lawyer Jack Swytchek, published by HarperCollins, rrp \$32.95.

