Chapter One

“The weather today will be hot for February, and dry. High temperature, 114-degrees. Skies will be partly cloudy with a chance of meteor showers.”

The Weather Channel
Atlanta, Georgia

“Run!”

Samarra nearly shoved Audry out the door of Jeff’s newest boy toy, a cherry-red Rimac Concept One, mouthing a silent curse at the sports car. Surely he could’ve found something a little more difficult to get out of; the seats seemed to encompass the soul. Seemed to her a one million dollar automobile ought to have some sort of seat-ejection system to help get out of the car.

“Come on Thomas, gotta go, hut... hut... hut. Run!!” she repeated with a shout to her son, wondering if he would ever make it to teenagehood; and they jogged hand in hand across the steamy-hot asphalt parking lot toward safety, hopefully. The
dark pavement seemed to sink around their shoes, and the heat reflecting off the parking lot surely felt like a pizza oven.

An explosion in the distance sobered reality, and they ran faster toward the old Suwanee High School, out of breath and drinking water in the hot morning sun. At 105, the temperature wasn’t a record for the late February morning, even in Atlanta. That had been set the year before at 108. But it was early.

“Let’s go. Hurry.”

“I’m coming, Mom for Pete’s sake,” and Samarra smiled at how quickly her son had picked up Jeffrey’s sayings.

Audry held Thomas’ hand tightly, and fear was evident on her new brother’s face. Her heart beat a million beats a minute, at least.

Another tiny but potent meteorite slammed into the ground, followed by an earth-shaking boom; and a blue Chevy Volt evaporated from the corner parking spot, replaced by a house sized crater. A six-foot section of Buford Highway disappeared in an instant, along with two motorcyclists and the silver SUV, all hoping to find safety with no success.

“I’m glad you bought that app, Samarra!!” Audry screamed, trying to be heard over the constant booming and keep balance on the shaking ground at the same time. She was glad.

Me too, Samarra thought. The IM-App had surely saved their lives more than once, she reckoned. Being warned of Incoming Meteorites had to be the
app of all apps, considering how often they were happening.

“Incoming, Incoming!” her phone had announced just a few minutes earlier at her Sugarloaf home. “Twelve minutes until impact. Gwinnett County imminent target.”

While the IM-App had already proven to be a life saver, the app designers’ sense of humor shown in the background, a song by Skeeter Davis, Don’t They Know it’s the End of the World? It was an oldie, and she found it unnerving.

“Proceed to old Suwanee High School Shelter.”

Samarra’s heart pounded; and she stepped between Audry and Thomas, pulling both behind her. Thomas’ tiny, four-fingered hand was slippery with sweat; and Samarra hoped she had his asthma inhaler with her, just in case.

As parts of the Chevy Volt and chunks of black asphalt sped their way, Samarra threw the children to the ground, thankful that they had made it to the shade and crawled on top in the only protection she could think of, the only safety barrier she could provide. She held her breath, knowing something was bound to hit them.

Three workers having an early lunch in their white utility truck, escaped the truck and ran but fell to the ground. Samarra covered Audry’s eyes and was glad she couldn’t see what she was seeing as paving debris, a motorcycle tire and a Gideon Bible flew barely overhead.
The explosion’s after-effects passed quickly. Samarra and the children were up and running again. The back doors of the building would be heavy, but hopefully the shelter would save them. Samarra’s ankle began to burn, and she glanced on the run. Blood.

They continued their jaunt toward the old Suwanee High School, along with dozens of others. The building seemed to be getting further away.

“Ouch!” Samarra said, slapping the side of her neck.

With the heat and lack of rain, mosquitos were more aggressive than ever, she thought; but that sure didn’t feel like a mosquito bite.

“What?” Audry asked, still running as fast as possible, out of breath.

“Nothing, honey. Something bit me, that’s all.”

The shelter was a product of post-World War II and was the area’s nuclear bomb shelter during the cold war. Though never used for that purpose, the building remained intact and was now a research facility built of thick concrete and steel with a six-foot thick reinforced roof.

“Will the roof be thick enough, Samarra?” Audry asked on the run, dragging the dazed and confused Thomas along.

Meteor showers had become common, and Samarra always listened to the Weather Channel to stay abreast of the deadly showers. Between the daily meteorites and those huge chunks of ice falling
from the sky, she thought she might open a helmet business. Their friend Chadbo had recommended helmets while outside, and she had listened. He called them Satan’s Hailstones, and Samarra thought maybe they were. She adjusted Thomas’s helmet, and the shelter was finally within reach.

In the far distance, toward Lawrenceville, she was sure she heard thunder; but the sky was blue. They ran faster.

Samarra and Audry stopped in their tracks and turned at the scream, looking back across the parking lot, now with three craters that resembled perfectly round sinkholes. The utility truck was no more, and the three men were now one.

He was limping badly, running the best he could; and in an instant Audry broke free of Samarra’s sweaty grip and ran toward the ailing man. Blood seeped from wounds on the small man’s face.

Samarra picked up Thomas and ran after Audry with a renewed adrenalin rush. She caught up with her just as the workman collapsed, only it was a work lady instead of a man. She would be easy to carry.

Samarra and Audry supported the bleeding woman, and Audry was in awe of their combined and sudden strength. It was as though the injured woman was made of straw. Audry wiped the blood from the lady’s face as she hung limp, but the blood reappeared quickly.

*Was she dead?*
The thought was scary, but then Audry heard the woman moan.

“We need to hurry, Audry.”

They turned the corner, heading toward the open security doors that would lead to the underground shelter. A gust of wind blew blue plastic trash cans across the parking lot.

Running and out of breath, Samarra didn’t notice the disappearance of the front lobby of the old Suwanee High School. It had been a maintenance repair shop; but rumors had it that it was a top secret research facility, or at least had been at one time.

“I hope Daddy makes it back today!” Audry shouted, a small piece of foam insulation now lodged in her long red hair. And she did; she missed him. Audry had known her mom would disappear that night in Jamaica. Mr Hutz had told her, and he was always right. *He can’t tell a lie.*

“He will honey, if it’s at all possible. Hurry.”

Out of breath, Samarra, the injured woman and the two kids entered the shelter, only to be knocked out of the way by three teenagers with the latest earbuds pumping noise into their heads. Samarra stumbled, dropping the injured woman to the ground.

One of the locals, Samarra guessed, saw the three kids shove the women out of the way. He appeared in his sixties, maybe seventies but did not hesitate. The man intercepted the kids and slapped one squarely on the back of the head, dislodging the small speakers from the teen’s ears and knocking his
backwards baseball cap off his heavily tattooed head. The three kids froze in fear.

“You didn’t see those people?” the man shouted, spittle coming from his mouth. “Get your sorry butts over there and carry that injured woman... or somebody’s gonna have to carry you!!”

Another explosion, this time smaller or further away, rattled the morning air and then silence as they all secured places in the shelter. Five minutes passed.

“Is that it?” someone asked out of the darkness.

“Stay put,” an authoritative voice called out. “App said it would last twenty to thirty minutes. It’s been six.”

Even with the heavy security door shoved completely shut, there came a faint sound from outside, more like the whine of an electric motor or kitchen blender. The hushed crowd looked around; but no one could tell from other’s expressions, because the facility was nearly dark except for a few red emergency lights here and there. The electric-blender whine quickly evolved into more of a mild rumble, and the decibels increased painfully.

Forty miles above the Suwanee shelter, one of the last meteors of the storm approached at less than ten thousand miles an hour, turtle-slow in the world of falling stars. The slow approach speed gave the small, thirty foot meteor ample time to heat up and let any liquids contained within convert to their gaseous states, building pressure. The surface of the giant rock slowly expanded like a huge pressure
cooker; and like a pressure cooker out of control, all hell broke loose.

“What is that noise?” someone in the crowd shouted, not really expecting an answer. The rumble increased, and Samarra held the children and the unconscious woman tightly, protecting all three beneath her body.

The bus sized meteor, now glowing brighter than the morning sun, plotted its course directly at the old Suwanee High School shelter, as though the facility was painted in laser, a target waiting for the end. The gases continued to expand; and the pressure release outlets on the meteor could not release fast enough, at least fast enough for those below. Like a pressure-release valve in the home water heater, if the pressure can’t be released fast enough, it go boom!

One mile above the old Suwanee High School the meteor did go boom. While there would be no crater to speak of, the heat and blast wave would destroy most standing structures, whether they be plants, animals or buildings within a half-mile radius; and damage would extend as far as three miles.

The thirty-seven people in the shelter had no idea that a meteor was headed directly at them and were confused at the noise and high-pitched whine that increased with each microsecond. It seemed like a lifetime.

“What the hell is that?”

The voice was familiar. There was no flash of blinding light in the underground shelter; but the
sound could not be hidden, followed quickly by the twenty-five hundred degree heat and then the blast wave.

The heavy, six-foot reinforced concrete roof shook violently and the victims below screamed out in terror. Samarra squeezed her eyes shut and prayed, and she wondered if this was what Luke meant when he wrote that verse 2,000 years earlier.

“People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

Then she fainted in terror.
Two Months Earlier
St. Petersburg
New Russian Federation

Dmitry stood three feet from the double-window in his high rise luxury apartment, and the January 1st sky was gray and dreary. There was no global warming happening in Russia this day.

A light snow fell from the grayness to the ground below, and he could barely see the historic Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood in the distance, arguably the most magnificent building in St. Petersburg. That would soon change.

Dmitry Ustinov wasn’t a church-going man but an international exotic arms dealer. Still, he had always admired the ornate building as well as St. Petersburg’s other historic churches. He held little respect for his motherland, but the architecture was phenomenal.

However, though the beautiful churches and historic buildings were nice, denarii were nicer; and the Chechen Rebels were great customers, a cash business, on time every time. Their plan to draw Russia into the coming war appeared flawless, and
Dmitry found himself wondering if Allah *might* be involved. Planting the bomb had been way too simple.

*I need to get out of here,* he said quietly as he glanced at his expensive but gaudy Swiss timepiece. The black, leather briefcase lay on the desk in the far corner of the room, and Dmitry glanced there as well. No one else shared his luxury apartment, and he walked nearer to the window wearing only his bright red boxer shorts. His more than ample belly flowed easily past the elastic waistband.

The clear window seventy feet above ground, was now coated lightly with fresh snow. Three busloads of pilgrims or missionaries lined Nevsky Prospect, the main street far below; and the buses were some of the few vehicles out on the Russian holiday. Most businesses were closed but not the churches. They would be full in another hour.

Dmitry took the Zeiss Victory digital binoculars from the small desk by the window and focused on St. Petersburg’s newest high-rise office tower, blurred in the distance by the lightly falling flakes of white.

Scanning to the left of the tower through the gray, flaky sky, the powerful binoculars homed in on a white utility van parked on the upper level of the building’s parking deck. He was amazed at the viewing quality as the electronics quickly adjusted the binoculars, almost eliminating the snow. The bomb-laden van looked a foot away rather than nearly a mile.
Dmitry the arms broker laughed out loud, proud of his late night accomplishment. The white van with multiple ladders mounted on top looked like any other painter’s van, but this was not a painter's van at all. Three hours earlier, Dmitry had personally changed the back license plate of the van under the snowy darkness, exchanging it with an Israeli plate. The falling snow would quickly hide his espionage.

He laughed again, knowing the exchange was futile. The Israeli license plate and the Israeli manufactured drive shaft in the van would surely point fingers toward the Jewish troublemaker; only Dmitry knew the evidence wouldn’t survive the coming firestorm. The 5-megaton thermonuclear weapon would go off precisely at 8:00 AM, the same time the nuclear weapons in Times Square, Paris and Miami detonated. Midnight New Year’s Eve in New York City would be memorable.

“Dmitry, my friend,” and the man had slapped Dmitry on the back, too hard. He recalled the conversation a year earlier as his mind briefly wandered from the task at hand; getting as far away from St. Petersburg as possible.

“They’re big ones,” Dmitry commented that day, stressing to The Preacher that these were no ordinary bombs.

“These are much larger than the ones used on the Japs. Be sure and show them respect. One of these bad boys, from the right altitude, can flatten a city. Every man, woman and child within 5 miles will be vapor, along with a shipload of other animals.”
I’ll be vapor too, he thought silently, if I don’t get the hell out of here.

He moved quickly toward the black briefcase, probably now the most expensive briefcase in the world. Imbedded inside, behind the fabric liner, were the codes. With those and a trip to Grand Cayman Island, he would become one of the world’s richest men, thanks to The Select, his young Japanese funders. These Japs hated Americans more than the Muslims, which was good for his offshore account.

Dmitry thought about that, his funders. He still didn’t know exactly who the discreet group of rich Japanese was; but he did know they had the big dinars, financed the hijacked nuclear sub and the five multi-megaton nukes. He also knew they were descendants of the victims killed in Japan by the world’s first nuclear attack in 1945, and their obsession was great: Destroy the United States of America, no matter the cost.

Grabbing the briefcase and keys to the Dartz Prombron SUV, Dmitry’s plan was simple. Head southwest from St. Petersburg to the private aerodrome and fly by private jet to Tallinn Airport in Estonia. From Estonia he would take a circuitous route to Cuba and then to Grand Cayman. A life of luxury on a warm beach with beautiful women awaited him somewhere in the Caribbean. After the Cayman tsunami, good land deals were easy to come by.

With briefcase and keys in hand, Dmitry took one more look out his apartment window toward the magnificent Church of the Savior in the distance. He
was a smart man and knew the history of the marvelous styled church, built on the exact spot where Alexander II was assassinated in 1881.

He again glanced to the street below, blurred by the falling snowflakes; and the churches were filling. Lines of people filled the sidewalks to the various church doors; and Dmitry thought it such a waste that so many lived for a myth, an invisible god. The world would be a better place without those idiots making rules for everyone else, he thought. He preferred Russia the old atheist way, not the new Russia and the rebirth of religious zealotry. It wouldn’t matter soon though, and he checked the time. He needed to hurry. In an hour St. Petersburg would be a wasteland.

Dmitry squeezed his keys subconsciously when suddenly, in a flash of intense but brief pain, he recognized the symptoms: another heart attack.

Breathless, Dmitry fell to the floor; and his heart beat erratically. His face and head broke out in a thick sweat that felt like glue; and he released his grip on the world’s most expensive briefcase, dropping the keys down the heating vent recessed in the deep red carpeted floor. The blood now running from Dmitry’s nose blended well with the carpet. As his vision slowly returned, Dmitry regained his senses and wondered how long he had been unconscious; then he remembered the nuke.

Still weak, he pulled himself up to the window sill, looking around the floor for his keys. He wiped the blood from his nose, now dried, on his sleeve. He
would have to hurry, but his legs just wouldn’t function.

He again looked out the window, and only a few were lining the sidewalk, waiting to enter the churches. The tower clock on one of the historic buildings said it all. Six minutes ‘til eight.

Then he noticed something oddly different. The few remaining pilgrims disappeared. There were still a couple of policemen and the bus drivers standing around scratching their heads, but the people waiting to get in the churches had simply disappeared.

Dmitry rubbed his eyes with both hands and tried again to focus, still not believing what he had seen. On the street below, a taxi slammed into a building, a driverless taxi. Even through the closed, snow-laced windows, Dmitry began to hear screams from the people who remained below.

“It’s the Rapture! It’s the Rapture!” one of the policemen began shouting, but the others standing around had no idea what the Rapture was. Neither did Dmitry.

As the large 18th century clock struck 7:55, time froze in St. Petersburg that morning. A malfunction in the timing circuit of the large nuclear device caused a premature explosion; and Dmitry finally saw the light.
Chapter Three

Miami Beach

“Pretty big crowd!”

The Miami night air was stifling as the New Year’s Eve crowd quickly grew.

“Bigger than I thought it would be,” the elderly man in blue seersucker shorts and Jimmy Buffet T-shirt answered. His white hair was long but thin and flowed in the 96-degree night breeze. The moon glowed pink in the dark sky, surrounded by rings that remained almost white, an amazing sight, a sign in the sky for sure.

“Isn't it beautiful, Grandpa?”

“Isn't what beautiful?” the old man answered with a question.

As midnight approached from the east, a large crowd of New Year’s Eve celebrants lingered in anticipation in downtown Miami. It was a different Miami than years past. After the hurricane, most of the remaining who survived moved inland to the mountainous regions of Georgia and north Alabama
or to Central and South America. Rebuilding was in progress but would be slow.

“The moon!” the young boy said, pointing skyward. “It’s beautiful.”

The annual celebration wasn’t nearly as large as in the past, primarily due to all the disasters that had befallen the Southeast coast, especially the unprecedented hurricane Abigail from the year before. Most structures less than four stories high had been destroyed, and beach cleanup would continue for years. Piles of debris lined some of the streets for miles.

The two new high-rises by the park entrance were unoccupied, a one hundred million dollar waste; and what window glass remained after the hurricane, had been removed for safety. The buildings were now referred to as the Two Beach Zombies. Like dark gray skeletons of steel, the two 60-story buildings stood alone in tribute to the economic collapse of the past few years.

“Well, it’s not Times Square,” the boy’s mother said, squeezing her six year old son’s hand, “but there are a lot more than I thought there would be! That’s good for the Bayfront Park neighborhood.”

The Florida community along the coast of the Atlantic hadn’t been much since the Cayman Tsunami and Hurricane Abby invaded their land and ravaged the real estate, beaches and the people. Some had given up and moved, many to Panama, Costa Rica and Belize. Warm climate, rain forests and few hurricanes. The general feeling among most
was that America was goin’ to hell in a hand basket. Sometimes she thought that was surely true.

“Yes,” the young-at-heart grandfather replied, “but Panama is lookin’ better all the time. Plus, since the crazies blew up the Panama Canal, real estate’s a deal. Saw a three bedroom beach house, two thousand square feet, for less than sixty thousand dollars.”

He paused, scanning the crowd; and his smile became more scowl than smile. His young grandson’s blond hair dripped in perspiration, and he found himself wondering again how high will the temperatures go? He figured the heat was another reason people stayed home to celebrate. A few feet away, two men in black suits, tall and well built, were holding signs; and Grandpa wondered why they weren’t sweating and why they were so pale.

“Look at all these cops,” Grandpa continued. “Remember when we didn’t need all this dadgum security? Yeah, I’m thinkin’ Belize.”

The din of the beach crowd grew, not just from conversation and excitement but applause. The sound of people applauding, even before the giant orange began its ascent, was puzzling to the old man and did not go unnoticed by J.J., the 6-year old grandson, his mother’s hand tightening around his out of reflex.

“Hmmm... Wonder what that’s all about?” Grandpa asked, beginning his walk toward the cheering crowd. He checked his Timex as the digital display moved closer to the New Year, and 11:58
rolled into 11:59. He turned to the left out of curiosity, hoping to see what message adorned the black-suited men’s signs.

The Towers of Babel Have Fallen Again

They topped the landscaped hill, pink bougainvillea in full bloom; and the hot night breeze picked up. The sweet smell of Jasmine blessed the warm air. As the crowd continued to applaud, the top floor of one of the steel skeletons jutting skyward was now fully lit, six-hundred feet above the park.

The bright white glow of the top floor made the tall building look like a large candle; and the harsh light clearly showed six men standing in what once was a floor-to-ceiling window but was now a large hole in the skeletal steel structure, six silhouettes waving jubilantly to the crowd below.

Now a hundred feet above the building, six large Mylar balloons slowly rose into the dark night. Each balloon had a thin LED light trail around the circumference and a large numeral in the center, reading 46… no wait, 45.

“Grandpa, that’s awesome!! The balloons are doing a countdown to the New Year! Wow!”

“That’s pretty impressive,” the young mother said, staring skyward, mouth agape. The large balloons were beautiful sights; she’d never seen anything like it. These were no ordinary balloons.
“What’s that strapped below the balloons?” Grandpa asked.

“It looks like a basket!” J.J. shouted and laughed in glee.

Christmas had been good to J.J., and his first bike, shiny and blue, waited on the patio at home. The countdown continued, 9... 8... and the crowd chimed in, 7...

The large balloons, when combined, had a lift capacity of sixty-eight pounds; and the briefcase nuke only weighed thirty-four. With a weight half its capacity, the balloon sextet easily lifted the package into the night sky.

“Not sure J.J.,” Grandpa replied, puzzled. “Prob’ly part of the show.”

The night, breezy earlier, had become calm and the nuke rose higher. The package’s altimetrically controlled switch was programmed for 1,500 feet, and the ignition sequence would not occur until the programmed altitude was reached.

A gust from nowhere caught the balloon sextet, and the heavy package seemed to lose altitude rather than gain. The crowd below groaned loudly in disappointment as the balloons drifted away toward the Atlantic. The air became calm again, and the balloons slowly rose, gaining height with each second.

At six seconds ‘til midnight, the 59th floor lit brightly; and the crowd’s attention temporarily turned away from the rising Great Orange. The large, vacant window space no longer framed the six
waving men but was replaced with a large banner that now covered the 59th floor’s windowless frames. The bright white backlight made the letters on the unfurled banner easy to read, only the loudly applauding crowd didn’t really have to read the banner. The six men suddenly appeared in a vacant window frame, each with an electronically enhanced bullhorn.

5... 4... 3...

The six men shouted in unison, and the bullhorns made their words loud and clear as the crowd stopped applauding:

“Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!”

The balloons slowly rose toward the 1,500 foot altitude barrier, only a few seconds away. In the distance, a shooting star-storm painted cosmic streaks across the darkened sky, God’s fireworks show.

2...

In an instant, the area and crowds below the six large balloons began to glow in a light as bright as midday in a desert. The blinding light washed the crowds; but not before they all read the message on the unfurled banner hanging from Beach Zombie One’s 60th floor.

**God is Great**

1...