“Dmitry, are we set my friend?”

The French air was stuffy and warm, too warm for early morning. A mist dripped from the gray clouds above, and Mohammed thought about brother Vinny and smiled at his American alias. He wondered if the weather was as strange in America as it was in Europe. The hailstorms had killed millions of animals and livestock in France and had wiped out several villages, pounding them into the ground.

The Russian arms purveyor had proven to be a friend indeed, at least for the enemies of the West. *The enemy of my enemy is my friend.* The café in Monaco was small and private, a single TV mounted to the cracked-plaster wall on the left.

“I hope so Mohammed. I have worked hard for you. It will be New Year’s Eve tomorrow, and I hope your plan works out for you.”

Dmitry referred to *The Preacher* by his Muslim name, which annoyed Mohammed greatly; but he made no comment.

“I hope in the coming year you will become a Muslim, Dmitry. You need Allah in your life.” Mohammed laughed.

“I doubt it Mohammed. I don’t believe in religion. You know that. I believe in money.”

The Russian smiled and sipped his mocha-vodka. Mohammed remained silent, as another CNN newsbreak flashed
across the television screen. The two men read the scrolling message along the bottom of the screen.

“The Mississippi River remains closed for shipping due to the continuing drought, the worst since records have been kept in the United States. The National Weather Service said there was an unusual shift in the jet stream and has issued a severe storm warning for numerous tornados and downdraft winds from the Midwest to the Northeast, and large hailstorms are again forecast along the Canadian-Minnesota border where several thousand cattle were killed yesterday from the large hailstones.

“The largest naval buildup since World War II continues in the South China Sea and the Pacific as world powers try to prevent war between China and Japan over disputed islands and the surrounding fishing rights as food is becoming more and more scarce, largely because of unprecedented red tides. Red tide algal blooms are highly toxic and often make the water look like blood.

“Yesterday a Russian destroyer fired four rounds over the bow of a Japanese ship as a warning, and the United States responded by sinking the Russian ship. Tensions are high, and World War III is the fear throughout the world as sabers continue to rattle to the north of Israel. Israel’s military remains on high-alert.

“Meteor showers have been forecast for eastern areas of Europe...”

It was early in the day, and the café was nearly empty as the two men sat in the window booth, watching the few tourists go by, most wearing surgical facemasks. Dmitry pondered the coming events but with no guilt in his soul. Smuggling the fifteen thermonuclear weapons into Europe and Russia from Iran and Pakistan had proven easier than he thought, but
Pakistan’s Taliban militants had made it simple. All it took was dinar, and Dmitry had lots of dinars.

“So what’s the plan?” the Russian asked.

The Preacher knew the arms dealer well, had become good friends over the past few years; but he had learned to never trust anyone with details, especially an infidel. *The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*

“We have plans, my friend. That’s all I can say.”

“They’re big ones,” Dmitry commented concerning the nuclear weapons, “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.

“You know, if you be patient the Russians and the Chicoms will take care of the United States and Europe for you.”

The Preacher wasn’t worried. He would surely sacrifice his life for Allah and Paradise, and the seventy-two virgins. Mohammed wished Vinny had been able to obtain one of the large-yield weapons, but his dear brother would have to make do with the numerous briefcase nukes. The Islamic Chechen Brotherhood had three of the large nukes, and St. Petersburg and Moscow would soon be no more. The new year would bring the beginning of a new world, Insha’Allah.

“What do you mean, Dmitry?”

“The Chinese and Russians are talking about taking the U.S. out, a joint venture if you will. They believe that the U.S. sent most, if not all their nuclear weapons to destroy the Dark Comet. They also know that half the U.S. submarine fleet is grounded because of the flu.”

“And this from Chili: *The ALMA observatory has reported two asteroids that appear on a close-encounter with Earth. It is believed these asteroids are relatively small, less than a half-
mile wide and came from the Kuiper Belt, well beyond our solar system.

“Dr. Chad Myers at Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland said in an interview yesterday with Kari Verme of OLNN that activity departing the Kuiper Belt was ‘disturbing’ and probably caused by gravitational tugs from planetary alignments. Stay tuned for updates and have a nice day. I’m Condi Zimmerman.”

“These are big-ass balloons, Vinny.”

Vinny laughed because they were. Nearly three feet in diameter, the flat-black balloons seemed huge when compared to the normal balloons one sees in parades, except Macy’s.

Vinny thought about Allah and the gifts of knowledge that Allah had bestowed upon him. It was Macy’s after all that gave him this idea. He reminisced and entered the world of his childhood when, as a young boy his parents took him to the Macy’s Christmas Parade.

He had fallen in love with the parade and dug into its history and how so many balloons became a part. He had been at the previous year’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, and he wondered why the stupid Americans changed the name from Christmas Parade to Thanksgiving Parade? Why would they shun Jesus? But once an infidel, always an infidel.

Vinny looked out the floor-to-ceiling glass windows of the luxurious penthouse suite and could see the new building in the distance.

The Grand Opening of New York City’s “newest office tower” would be tonight, New Year’s Eve; and the planned celebration would be “one of a kind” according to Condi
Zimmerman the news-babe. She would certainly be right about that, Vinny thought out loud.

“What did you say, Vinny?”

“Nothing. Just talking to yourself.”

“Myself.”

“What?”

“Never mind, Vinny. You just messed up the saying,” and the three men in the suite laughed loudly; because Vinny always messed up the sayings. This would be a day to rejoice, praise Allah. Several of the Great Satan’s major cities would not likely forget this New Year’s Eve fireworks show.

As the Sun crawled westward toward the horizon, New York City became the city of lights; and the festivities could be heard on the streets below. New York City continued to “move on” after the tragedy of the 9/11 Event as it was now known. Just six more hours, Vinny thought, until the midnight hour.

This would be the night that the world’s Christians would know the feared Tribulation had begun, at least as far as he was concerned.

Vinny scanned the large living room, dimly lit with window coverings closed, annoyed by the loud hiss of the helium tanks as the balloons filled to maximum capacity. Only a few of the large balloons would be needed. He had researched the helium lift effect and discovered it would take hundreds of regular-sized helium balloons to lift a sixty-pound bomb, the weight of the two briefcase nukes. It would only take sixteen of the large black, Mylar balloons. He smiled and was proud that he had researched thoroughly, had “done his schoolwork.”

Vinny turned on the Weather Channel to check wind speed and direction; but he had planned well and had all bases covered, no matter what the wind direction.
What was happening in the penthouse suite of the new eighty-story 5th Avenue Tower One was happening in three more penthouse suites surrounding Manhattan. No matter what direction the wind blew, one nuclear weapons package would surely explode in the night sky, possibly all eight, a quarter-mile above the New Year’s Eve celebrations.

With the sixteenth balloon finally inflated, the room was filled with large round, black objects, enough to carry the two briefcase nukes to the appropriate height, based on the current barometric pressure and wind speeds.

The packages were secured, the bombs wired to explode simultaneously at midnight unless the balloons reached an altitude in excess of 1,800 feet. The detonators would activate based on altitude. If the balloons gained too much altitude, the eight bombs would explode as programmed, regardless of the time. With an explosive force of sixteen thousand tons of dynamite raining down terror, debris and despair on the infidels below, there would be no Times Square or New York Stock Exchange opening tomorrow.

Vinny knew there was no assurance that all eight nukes would explode properly. Some of the trigger mechanisms may have reached the end of their shelf life, but only one would need to work. A single 2K nuke over Times Square and Wall Street would damage or destroy the bridges, and Manhattan would be a ghost town. Thousands would be dead. Vinny loved explosions and smiled, but he would not be around to see this one. Allah had other plans for him.

“Are we set?” Vinny asked.

“We’re set, Vinny. All we have to do is get the packages to the balcony.”
“The balloons will be no trouble. The French doors are two meters wide. Keep all the lights off. You know what to do. May Allah bless you Jamal, and your brothers.”

Vinny finished the final instructions to his fellow warriors, left the room and took the elevator to Parking Level Three. Exiting the elevator, he glanced around the parking garage. No one in sight. He remotely unlocked the rental car’s doors; but before he could reach the car, he heard the sound.

Mohammed sent the email from Viva Café, a favorite coffee shop just outside Naples. The brown vans, all painted to look like delivery trucks, were parked and ready.

“You need to get those things in the air,” the Russian had instructed Mohammed; but that had been impossible with the large thermonuclear weapons, now armed.

The multi-megaton bombs weighed far too much to lift by balloons or small aircraft, and they had no missile delivery systems. If the nukes could be a couple of thousand feet high when they exploded, the effect would be more devastating; but it wouldn’t matter. A 5-megaton bomb exploding on the top deck of a large parking garage in downtown St. Petersburg would still blow the Russian city to China. Like brother Vinny, Mohammed loved explosions. He continued to type.

*Is the chicken prepared?* Mohammed waited.

*It’s finger lickin’ good,* came the response.

Mohammed repeated the procedure until confirmations came in from all outposts. *This has been too easy,* Mohammed thought and smiled. Allah was willing.

Leaving the late-night coffee shop, the only other customer recognized him.
“Preacher!” the lady shouted in French.
Mohammed stopped and turned to face the lady. He liked being called The Preacher.
“Buon giorno, signora!” The Preacher answered in near-perfect Italian and gave the lady a warm smile, but he had little time to spare and explained that he was on his way for a children’s New Year’s benefit. It was already January 1 in Italy.
Mohammed apologized and hurried out the door of the dank coffee shop, the TV still spewing news about meteor showers in Indonesia. Approaching his bicycle, the ground suddenly but gently shook beneath his feet. In the distance a plume of smoke rose from the top of Mt. Vesuvius.
Mohammed wasn’t worried, because the volcano had been dormant since 1944; but still... he recalled what Vesuvius had done to the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79 A.D. Sixteen thousand dead in a flash. The city was buried under thick ash until 1748 when explorers rediscovered the ancient metropolis. The ash flow had happened so quickly, buildings and skeletons remained intact underneath, some in the fetal position.
Just three hours until midnight in New York and the beginning of one of Paris’ biggest shopping days.

 Vinny knew the sound all too well as a shell slammed into the chamber of the shotgun.
“Gimme the keys, a-hole.”
The two olive-skinned men approached Vinny, their pants nearly dragging the ground; and they reminded him of Atlanta’s infamous Pants-on-the-Ground Gang. He didn’t try to stifle his laugh.
“Perdóneme?” Vinny answered in Spanish. “Hey man, what’s with your pants. They look so stupid dragging the ground.”

Vinny laughed out loud.

“Pardon this kemosabe. Gimme the keys.” The assailant’s partner stayed in the shadows as kemosabe-man raised the shotgun. In a flash, Vinny disarmed the young man and slammed the gun into his skull three times, hard. The kid hit with a sickening thud and blood poured from his ear. Vinny took the stiletto out of his holster, slammed it through the man’s neck and repeated, “Kemosabe this.”

The assailant’s friend disappeared into the darkness of the garage, and Vinny decided not to pursue. He entered the nondescript automobile and drove the white Hyundai out of the garage, turned left and headed for the southbound freeway. He would be well on his way to Atlanta before the nukes exploded in New York City, Charleston, Miami and San Diego.

Six hours until midnight.

Vinny began to sing out loud the Wilson Picket tune... *I’m gonna wait ’til the midnight hour*. He merged onto the freeway, aimed the small car south and sang like a rock star.

The young mother, tall and thin in stature and dressed in a blue running suit was anxious with anticipation and held her daughter’s hand tightly. Like mother-like daughter, they were blessed with the same hair, brown with golden highlights and lots of curls and ringlets. She wished so much her husband could be with them for the night’s celebration; but he was one of New York’s finest, and the Port Authority would be busy tonight. In less than a minute the large crystal ball would begin its descent.
in Times Square and the din of the New Year’s Eve crowd nearly drowned out the approaching sirens.

“Look at all the balloons, Momma?”

The small girl, maybe eight, tugged on her mother’s sweatshirt adorned with Notre Dame across the front. The weather was almost muggy for New Year’s Eve in the Big Apple.

“They’re everywhere, honey!”

“No, Momma, I mean those balloons. Way up there!”

The small girl pointed skyward toward the new office tower. The mother looked up but saw nothing, when suddenly one of the streaming search lights briefly lit several large, dark balloons floating high above the vibrant crowd. She was amused at the large size but thought nothing of it.

“There’s more over there, Momma,” shouted the small girl, again pointing skyward but in the opposite direction. Momma looked up and counted two more, at least it looked like two; and then the balloons disappeared as they ascended into the night sky. The sirens grew louder, approaching from every direction.

“Three… Two… One…” The noisy crowd was the largest in history, and they jubilantly shouted the countdown. At the strike of twelve, the crystal ball began to move.

Goddard Space Flight Center
Greenbelt, Maryland

The gray walled laboratory wasn’t stifling but close as the Maryland temperature had hit yet another record high, eighty-seven degrees on a windy New Year’s Eve. The winds were
blowing at a constant forty to forty-five miles per hour because of the unusual dip in the jet stream.

The two large windows in the laboratory let the darkness stream in, fought off by the numerous LED lighting fixtures recessed in the white-tiled ceiling. To Chad Myers, the night’s darkness wasn’t so dark, highlighted by the dark blue but transparent colors of the jet stream high above. Sometimes his ability to see the wind was more burden than gift from God.

Wall-mounted monitors surrounded the space, tracking several newly-discovered near-Earth objects approaching from the Kuiper Belt beyond the solar system. Chad and The Admiral stared at the NEO data, mesmerized by the dismal analysis; but both knew the immediate problem was the large rock heading their way from the Moon.

When and if the large, lunar space rock hit the Ross Ice Shelf as predicted, the Antarctic would never be the same; and all indications were it would be a direct hit in less than five days.

“I’m glad it’s a small one,” The Admiral whispered, mostly to himself. He was surprised this asteroid hadn’t generated all the hype that the Dark Comet had; but then, they just discovered this space rock two days earlier. Not much warning. “At least we have all the base personnel evacuated, thanks to calmer-than-usual weather in the southern hemisphere.”

“It ain’t that small, Boss,” Chadbo said matter-of-factly. “Nearly a hundred meters. That’s a football field, a lot of mass.”

“Well,” The Admiral continued and glanced at the large flatscreen on the wall that monitored the Moon and her evolving set of rings. “I’m just glad Antarctica is uninhabited.”

“How many ships are in the Pacific?” Chad asked. “The news says it’s the largest naval buildup since World War II. Looks like China’s gonna get even with the Japs.”
The animosity between Japan and China wasn’t new news. It had been going on since the end of the Second World War.

“A bunch, why? Four aircraft carrier groups in the Pacific and South China Sea.”

Chadbo Myers had always been a little on the wild side, especially for his age and was known to occasionally imbibe in illegal smokable substances and vodka tonics; but he was a brilliant scientist and specialist in the world of near-Earth objects, those large and larger rocks floating through space, potential disasters for Earth and her moon. Most of the NEOs came from the asteroid belt, a cloud of various-sized orbiting rocks between Mars and Jupiter, but nearly all of the newly-discovered objects were coming from well beyond Jupiter, a long way from Earth.

The Admiral and Chad had been friends for many years and were both old enough to get senior discounts at the grocery store on Wednesdays. Everyone who knew Chadbo knew he was about as laid back as laid back could be. Today however, he looked worried, his ever balding head amiss with a few gray hair sprigs aiming for the facility’s tiled ceiling. He was restudying the data when the power went off again. The UPS backups kept the electronics going until the generators cranked up.

“That’s becoming an everyday event, Justin.”

Chad never called The Admiral by his first name unless he was distressed, and Justin made note.

“And we’re gonna have a hell of a disaster when and if.”

“At least no casualties, Chadbo. McMurdo Station is empty, so there’s no one left. What are you getting at?”

“The wave. If this asteroid hits the Ross Ice Shelf, it could possibly collapse. That would mean almost four hundred miles of solid ice falling into the sea, ker-plunk. The tsunami will be
enormous, you can bet on that. It will not be a good day for the beach.”

The lights flickered, and the winds tried to find an opening into the lab.

“I hadn’t even thought about that,” The Admiral said, rubbing his chin; and lightning flashed outside the window, in the distance. “You don’t think it will just penetrate the ice shelf, like a straw can go through a potato if it hits fast enough?”

“Oh, it will definitely penetrate the ice; but remember, ninety percent of the ice is under water. The part we see is the ten percent above water. It’s the largest ice mass in the world. If it collapses, there could be a tsunami of…”

Chad’s voice faded in thought.

“How big?” The Admiral asked.

“Oh, I don’t know, Justin; maybe a mile?”

“What? You’re kidding.”

“Afraid not. The massive displacement of water would send a gigantic wave from Antarctica through the Pacific, South China Sea and Indian Ocean. Hell, it could theoretically cause tsunamis all over the world. Hawaii will be completely swamped except for the mountains, as well as Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, any island community. You wouldn’t want to be vacationing in Bora Bora.”

“Should we be evacuating the islands? Has Hawaii been warned?”

“Are you kidding? How would we evacuate the Hawaiian island chain in time; and what if it goes straight through the ice and there is no tsunami. This is one of those ‘damned if you do; damned if you don’t’ kinda things I guess, know what I mean?”

“But if the Ross Ice Shelf does collapse, a lot of people will die.”
“Yeah Admiral, you’re right. And every ship in those oceans will sink, even the aircraft carriers. They will sink or wash inland, possibly for miles.”