

Chapter 1: The Bad News

Washington, D.C.

Everyone will be dead in two months.

Carl Borzowski, Science Advisor to the President of the United States, sat at his government issue, brown metal desk, head in his hands and tried desperately to think of some way to save humanity. A tall, slender, good-looking man with thinning blonde hair, devoted to mathematics, physics and Jack Daniels whiskey since the split with his fiancée, Monica, he knuckled his eyes and sighed--a long, deep, weight-of-the-world gust that left him drained. Somewhere in the back of his mind he realized it had only been twenty minutes since he'd learned the world was going to die. He wished he could toss back a shot right now but he never brought whiskey to work.

"Riiiiiing!"

Carl stared at the retro-style phone on his desk like it had leprosy. Beads of sweat formed on his upper lip. He knew he had to pick up, but what if it was Harry calling again, probably confirming the worst.

"Riiiiiing!" The tone was intrusive, strident, annoying, jarring and, above all, demanding. His hand trembled slightly as he reached for the receiver.

"Borzowski," he announced. At least the tremor hadn't reached his voice. Yet.

"It's Harry Garrison, Carl. I'm sorry, but it's going to hit. And it's bigger than we thought."

"Extinction Level Event?" Carl asked. *Please, no.*

"The asteroid is almost twelve miles wide, Carl," Harry explained gently.

"Extinction Level is putting it mildly."

"Jesus!" Borzowski whispered.

"I need to see the President, Carl. ASAP."

Carl stared at the pewter gray carpet, then at the oak-framed photograph of him with the President. His heart galloped like a Kentucky Derby thoroughbred. He wiped the sweat off his palms on his pant legs. He wondered if this was how combat troops felt when bullets started flying, because he wanted to find a hole.

Instead, he took a deep breath to steady himself and said, "Of course. I'll set it up. How soon can you get here?"

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The White House

Donna Markwright, personal secretary to the President of the United States answered the phone on the first ring.

"Markwright." She was all business; the kind of woman who wore severely tailored business suits and her hair pulled back in a tight bun. The President depended on her and she took that very seriously.

"Donna?"

She winced, the too-familiar greeting grated on her nerves like an off-key soprano. Some people had no sense of decorum.

"Yes, Doctor Borzowski," she replied with what grace she could muster.

"I need to talk to the President."

The President? Her eyebrows arched. Borzowski usually referred to him as The Man. She hated it when people called the President, The Man. It made him sound like a cop.

"Dr. Borzowski, the President is still at breakfast. And from there he's going straight into a crisis meeting with..."

"Me," Carl interrupted. "Listen, Donna, there is nothing, you hear me, nothing more important than this. Put me through, right now."

For the first time, she heard the strain in his voice and wondered...he did sound a bit shaky.

"Carl," she said, softening a bit for her niece Monica's sake. "If you've been drinking..."

"I wish."

Two words, so raw and anguished they hit her like a slap in the face.

It was her job to run interference, but all her years of experience told her this was BIG.

"Hold one," she said and keyed the intercom. "Mister President?"

Hammond Powell lowered his fork into his scrambled eggs and flicked the intercom switch.

"Yes, Miss Markwright?"

Her lips twitched in a fleeting smile. The President always treated her with respect, though in her heart of hearts she would love for *him* to call her Donna.

"Doctor Borzowski on line one, Sir. He says it's urgent."

The President sighed. Everything was always urgent. "Put him through."

He picked up the phone and said, "Carl, what's up?"

Blood drained from his face as he listened.

As soon as Carl was off-line the President toggled the intercom. "Miss Markwright?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Get Farley up here. I want the Security Council, the SecDef, the Joint Chiefs, and Eli Cohen from NASA here in one hour: no excuses. I want Salazar from FEMA and Winthrop from Homeland. Tell them all to come in through the tunnel in the Executive Office Building. I don't want to stir up a fuss with the press. And notify my Secret Service detail that Carl will have a Dr. Garrison with him, so get Garrison on the 'approved' list now. And hold any call that isn't from Carl."

He disconnected and leaned back to think, absently pushing his breakfast away. Eggs were cold anyhow.

Thirty-seconds later White House operators were frantically dialing, texting and dispatching runners.

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The Situation Room

The President, flanked by Farley Moffat, his Chief of Staff, and Morgan Hamilton his National Security Advisor, walked swiftly into the room and took his seat at the head of a long, dark walnut table. Arrayed down both sides were the Secretary of Defense, the Joints Chiefs and the rest of the National Security Council and Eli Cohen from NASA. At the opposite end from the President sat Carl Borzowski and Harry Garrison.

The silence was deafening.

The President cleared his throat and said, "Carl, why don't you bring us all up to speed."

Carl Borzowski ran a hand through his thinning blonde hair and rose to his feet. "Gentlemen," he began. "I'd like you to think back to 1994 and the concerns raised by the scientific community when Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 slammed into Jupiter. You might even remember several "impact" movies that were made shortly afterwards."

Men shifted in their chairs and exchanged uneasy glances as they realized the direction this was heading.

Carl continued. "For a while we beefed up Star Wars spending, seeking a solution in case we discovered an object headed for Earth." He looked away from them. "We failed to find that solution, but Dr. Garrison's Spacewatch Program has found an asteroid that will hit Earth in about two months."

Frightened eyes spotlighted Harry Garrison.

"Are you sure it will hit?" Eli Cohen's words overrode others who had all tried to speak at once.

The bleakness in Carl's eyes answered him.

"How big will this...ugh, event be?" Farley Moffat asked.

"Remember the Extinction Level Impact Studies?" Carl replied.

Farley nodded. "The E.L.I.'s," he said. Eli Cohen covered his face with his hands. He understood.

"Mid-range, is the best we can hope for," Carl answered.

Juan Salazar, from FEMA, grunted.

General Roland Mabry, Secretary of the Air Force, caught Carl's eye. "Want to refresh my memory?"

Carl gestured to Harry Garrison, who cleared his throat and said, "The Earth itself will survive...lower orders...possibly a few vertebrates."

"Jesus!" Farley Moffat swore. "Isn't there something..."

"This is ridiculous," Morgan Hamilton interrupted, glaring at Harry Garrison like he wanted to kill the messenger. "You honestly expect us to believe some...some rock is going to kill us all. Pure Hollywood."

Dr. Harold Garrison, a small, dark man who, second only to his family, loved Chicago Cubs baseball and old Marvel comic books, climbed slowly to his feet. The concern in his eyes, the grave expression on his face silenced the bickering in the room. "That 'rock', Mr. Hamilton, is a mountain twelve miles wide moving at forty-three-thousand miles per hour. It's a cosmic bullet and we're the bull's-eye."

"Dr. Garrison?"

"Yes, Mr. President?" Harry welcomed any escape from the irrational denial of the National Security Advisor.

"If I remember correctly, an asteroid like the one you are talking about would cause a nuclear explosion like an atom bomb?"

"No, Sir. Not exactly. But any object that big and that fast is going to lose a lot of mass when it hits."

"Lose mass?"

"The force of the impact will convert a significant percentage of the asteroid's mass directly to energy, $E = mc^2$, a non-radioactive nuclear explosion of several hundred million, possibly billions, of megatons."

Stunned silence greeted that statement. Eyes widened among the Joint Chiefs.

"That's right, gentlemen, an explosion so vast it will make setting off all the world's nukes in one place at the same time look like popping a pimple!"

The President asked, "What about fallout?"

"Unless we nuke it beforehand the fallout won't be radioactive, and I stress the word 'radioactive' because there will be fallout of a different, and extremely deadly sort."

"And what might that be?"

"May I?" Garrison asked, keeping his eyes on the President, while pointing to a large globe he had brought in for the meeting.

"Please do." Some murmurs from members of the NSC drew a sharp glance from the President.

Instant silence.

Harry strode over to the globe. As he spoke his fingers traced the outlines of continents, beginning with North America. "Almost 80% of the world's population lives in coastal areas. An Impact such as this will literally shake the world, triggering massive, catastrophic, earthquakes, seaquakes and landslides on a scale previously unknown. And quakes cause tidal waves, tsunamis, proportional in size to the strength of the earthquake. But worse will be the wave generated by the strike itself. Theoretically there is no limit to the size of such a tsunami. Imagine a wave fifteen hundred feet tall, stretching from horizon to horizon, smashing into New York City at 200 miles per hour. Boston, New York, Baltimore, Washington, every city all the way to Miami will be gone in an instant. The wave will inundate Florida and could breach the Appalachians and flood into the Ohio River Valley.

“Now multiply that by every coastal city in the world. Fifty to eighty percent of the world's population would die within 24 hours. Most of the survivors will be left homeless, shell-shocked, injured, wandering or scrambling amidst the ruins in search of friends and family. Tens, and if we're lucky, hundreds of millions of survivors will need food, water, shelter, and medical attention. And where will it come from?”

His audience stared at him like deer-in-the-headlights.

He took a sip of water and pointed to the West Coast of North America. “As anyone in California can tell you, earthquakes are quite capable of destroying highways and buildings. But these quakes will trigger volcanic eruptions, wreck dams, releasing horrifying flash floods, collapse bridges, cause landslides and avalanches, snap power and phone lines, rupture gas mains. Fires will ignite and rage unchecked, because water lines are broken and useless.

“No firemen, no policemen, no way to call for help. No power, no food, no water, no shelter and no way in or out...and that, gentlemen, will be just the beginning.”

The President and others in the room sat forward, leaning toward him, listening hard.

“At the point of impact a mushroom cloud will form. Billions of tons of superheated pulverized rock, dirt, plants and animals will be ejected into the upper atmosphere where some of it will combine with smoke from burning cities and forests. The rest will fall back to Earth. It will rain magma, gentlemen, burning those cities and forests, flash-drying plants to the point of ignition...broiling people and animals. The debris that reaches the stratosphere will form a cloud, eventually blanketing the Earth, shutting off the sun.

“Temperatures will drop as darkness falls, water will freeze, plants will die. The cold and dark could last for months, more likely years, we just don't know. It is possible every living thing on our planet above the level of amoebas could perish.

“If we don't destroy or divert this rock...” he swept the globe off the table, smashing it on the floor.

Alexander Winthrop from Homeland Security was the first to find his voice. “Won't any place be safe?”

Harry Garrison shrugged. “Maybe interior mountain areas, a few caves, deep mines or prepared shelters like Mount Weather, but it is extremely unlikely any human being will survive for more than a month or two after impact.”

When the meeting broke up, two hours later, every resource the government had was being mobilized to avert the disaster.

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But all over America a small percentage of the population, dismissed as crazies by the press and often by their own relatives, had been preparing to survive what they believed was the coming societal collapse. Known as Preppers, many had gone back to the land and built small self-sufficient homesteads, complete with solar, wind, mini-hydro or other alternative sources of power. They grew heirloom vegetables so they could save seed and preserved their food by freezing, canning, dehydrating or pickling it. They kept chickens and other fowl for eggs and protein, raised rabbits and hogs for meat and goats and cattle for milk and cheese.

Others, trapped in cities and unable to have large gardens and livestock, developed container gardens for fresh food. All, whether urban or rural, stocked up on canned, freeze-dried or dehydrated food and barrels of water, communications equipment, medical supplies, guns and ammunition and other useful items. All of them had prepped for the disasters they thought most likely to occur. Some of them thought they were ready for anything.

They were wrong.