FIRE & WATER

CHAPTER 1

Highway I-40

3 Miles West of Raleigh, North Carolina

August 3, 2017

0444 hours EST

One minute before the 40 Kt nuclear detonation near

The Harris Nuclear Plant

"Selma Langford, I am not happy with that girl of ours, not one little bit. We've been on this road for almost five hours and the traffic is barely crawling along. We could have walked faster than this," Will said, while slowing the wipers on his old truck from fast to slow.

"Now, now, Will! Amanda is just trying look out for us. At least the rain has cut back some. I could barely see out the front windshield a minute ago," Selma said, while reaching into the back seat and retrieving a sack filled with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

"Good idea, I'm about to starve," Will said, while checking the gas gauge.

"What do you want to drink? Water or a Diet Pepsi?" Selma asked, while unwrapping Will's sandwich and handing it to him.

"Water's fine," Will said, and then jerked his head to the left as the horizon exploded.

"Sweet Jesus, protect us!" Selma yelled, while clutching her husband's arm.

"Don't look at it, Selma! The flash will blind you," Will said, as all the highway lights went out and the truck stalled.

For just a moment the darkness disappeared, and it was as bright as a sunny day.

"Oh, God, Will! Our baby girl is out there!" Selma said, and began sobbing.

"Just pray, sweetheart! Just pray! She's a smart girl. She'd get under cover," Will said, as he clutched his wife's hand.

The darkness returned, but this time the darkness was complete.

"Will, start the truck . . . why are all the lights out? What just happened?" Selma asked, as the rain began to pour down once again.

She could see the worried look on her husband's face as the thunder, lightning and pouring rain returned, as if triggered by the massive explosion.

"The truck won't start. It's old, but not that old. The electronics are dead. I saw this once on the History Channel. It's called an END or EMP . . . something like that. The nuclear explosion kills all the electricity. I don't remember how it works. We either sit here or we get out and walk," Will replied.

"It's pouring down rain. I'll catch my death if I go out in this and get all soaked. Here, eat your sandwich," Selma said, noticing how much her hands were trembling as she handed the sandwich to her husband.

The sky on the horizon still glowed like a hot fire as they sat and ate their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Outside, some people were abandoning their cars and starting to walk up the highway toward Durham. Other people were walking the other way, back into Raleigh. Screams could be heard over the rumbling thunder and the occasional crack of lightning, as sodden families desperately tried to escape this living nightmare.

. . . .

Thirty minutes later Will noticed a different smell. People were still running or walking past their car, still going in both directions. The rain had slowed to a heavy drizzle.

"Selma, do you smell that?" Will asked.

"Yes, it smells like burning metal. What is that?

"I think that's the bomb. I think that's the fallout from the bomb. Selma, we can't stay here. We have to leave. The rain is washing that stuff from the explosion right out of the sky. That's what we're smelling. Remember when Amanda was going to NC State and she would come home on weekends and study that nuclear engineering stuff. She talked to me once about radiation and how nuclear plants were so safe. She said it wasn't like a nuclear bomb. That's what this is, Honey . . . we have to go. If we stay here we're gonna die in this truck," Will said, as tears began streaming down Selma's face.

"Will, we'll need our luggage."

"No, sweetheart . . . no luggage. We have to go as fast as we can. Button up your coat. We're heading back home," Will said, as he opened the door and ran around to his wife's side.

Ever the southern gentleman, he had opened the vehicle door for his wife for over 40 years. A nuclear detonation wasn't going to change that.

"That smell, Will . . . that smell . . . it's so strong," Selma said, while placing her hand over her mouth and nose.

Black streaks began to flow down her husband's face as she stared up at him.

"I know . . . I smell it. We have to walk as fast as we can. We'll head back up Wade Avenue, and then turn left on Glenwood. We'll be home in an hour or so. Then we can wash off and change into some dry clothes. We'll just lie in bed together and get some rest," Will said, while putting his arm around Selma and guiding her back toward Raleigh.

. . . .

0600 hours EST

It was still dark as they walked along Wade Avenue. The heavy rain had ceased once more, replaced by a steady drizzle. A light fog now hung in the air like a shroud. Will and Selma made it to the intersection of Wade Avenue and Dixie Trail. They had been seeing clusters of bodies for the last half mile. Couples holding hands, children clutching their parents, entire families were sprawled in a heap, most with their eyes open. They appeared and disappeared as the fog swirled over and around their bodies. Lethal amounts of radiation exposure were killing them all. Will had been carrying Selma for several hundred yards when he had to put her down. He told himself that he still had the strength of a lifelong farmer, but that strength was gone.

"Stay with me girl. But I'm afraid this is as far as we can go for right now," Will said, after stepping aside and emptying his stomach for the third time.

The heavy amount of blood mixed with bile told him that they were both very sick. She had been passing in and out of consciousness. He glanced around, then groaned as he picked her up, and began heading for a nearby church. The handsome brick building had a large stone cross mounted on one end. A short brick wall surrounded some shrubs that had been planted below the cross.

"Community United Church of Christ . . . not our denomination, but I don't think He'll mind," Will said, while staggering up the grass slope toward the end of the church.

"Will, I'm so cold . . . everything hurts," Selma said, as Will laid her against the brick wall below the cross.

"I know, sweetheart. I'm not feeling too good myself. We'll just stay here and rest awhile," Will said, while removing his sodden coat and draping it over his shaking wife.

Blood was streaming from her nose. Welts and burns were starting to appear on her bare skin. Will stared at his hands and noticed the sores and swelling for the first time. The front of his shirt was blood stained from his coughing despite the rain.

"Why don't we just sit and talk a spell. I found us a nice church. It's not Southern Baptist, but I think He's still around to watch over us," Will said, as he sat and held his wife's hand.

"Will, I love you . . . now quit being so silly. I might not have watched all those shows on the History Channel, but I'm not stupid. We're going to die right here. I'm glad you found a church. That makes me feel better," Selma said, while squeezing Will's hand.

"I never could fool you, could I?"

"Nope, I always just let you think that you could. But I didn't mind. You've been a real good husband."

"Don't give up, Selma . . . please stay with me!"

"I wish that I could, honey, but I think I'm about spent. I can feel my soul starting to break free. I just worry about Amanda. This is gonna hurt her real bad. I know how she thinks. She'll think that this is all her fault."

Selma began coughing. Blood streamed from her mouth and nose as Will tried in vain to clean her face with his hand.

"Oh, Lord . . . Will, I'm going to miss the sound of you working in your shop, making something we don't need . . . and the smell of collards cooking . . . and apple pie . . ." Selma said, while glancing up into her husband's eyes for the last time.

She sighed once, a peaceful smile on her face, and was gone.

Will began to sob, as he held her hand and brushed her bangs from her face.

"Damn, girl . . . you better be saving me a spot," Will said, as his breathing became more labored and his heart pounded in his chest.

"Our Father . . . who art in heaven . . . hallowed be Thy name, Thy. . ." he began, then coughed once, sagged against his wife, and died.

CHAPTER 2

"Move swift as the Wind and closely-formed as the Wood. Attack like the Fire and be as still as the Mountain."

Sun Tzu (~520 BC)

August 1st Building

Central Military Commission Headquarters

Beijing, China

August 7, 2017

1830 hours CT

The members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) and the Central Military Commission (CMC) formed the power base of the People's Republic of China. Five senior politicians sat opposite ten senior officers at a long rectangular table deep below the August 1st Building, headquarters of the CMC. Each group sat in stunned silence after Admiral Wu Yaoyan's admission that he had procured two massive Soviet era nuclear weapons, and was in the process of installing them at locations to destroy the United States of America. Party General Secretary Li Xibin, the man to whom all had sworn their allegiance, sat at the head of the table. The politicians and generals awaited his explosion, and the execution of Admiral Wu, all except General Fan Shibo.

"That idiot Kung walked us all to the edge of oblivion, and you would hurl us all off the precipice!" General Fan yelled, while rising to his feet and pointing at Admiral Wu.

"Yes, General Fan . . . the precipice . . . and the view is quite exquisite. But I am not alone. I have two beautiful dragons standing beside me. I call them Huǒlóng (Fire Dragon) and Shuǐlóng (Water Dragon). Behind us is servitude, where we continue to kowtow to the Americans. Before us is oblivion . . . or perhaps salvation . . . or even victory for the Chinese people," Admiral Wu said, as he bared his neck for the executioner's sword.

"General Secretary, this is insanity. We have been in this position before. Kung spoke these honeyed words of salvation of the Chinese people, and we were almost destroyed. We still don't know how the Americans are going to react. They have the high ground. Their space planes have the ability to destroy us, and we stand helpless. We must play the long game. We must be patient until we can strike them back from a position of equality," General Fan pleaded, as he faced the General Secretary and bowed.

"General Fan . . . who am I?" General Secretary Li asked, his voice quiet, but his tone, and the look on his face, filled all who sat at the table with foreboding.

"General Secretary . . . you are Li Xibin, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, President of the People's Republic of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. As such, you are the greatest living hero of the People's Republic of China," General Fan said, his bow growing ever deeper.

"That is correct, General Fan. I am your leader . . . in three different ways. I am the leader of Fan the citizen, Fan the communist, and Fan the soldier. None of your leaders are pleased with you. As commanding general of the PLA, you led us all down a fatal path that could have doomed all the people of China," General Secretary Li said, his voice the stern, but calm tone of an understanding teacher.

General Fan stayed in his bowed position. If not for the table, he would have been on his knees, with his forehead on the floor.

Four guards appeared in the room. They marched up behind General Fan and snapped to attention. On a signal from General Secretary Li, they secured General Fan, and escorted him from the room.

As General Fan was being led from the room, General Secretary Li turned, and stared at General Ma Haiyang, Commander of the PLA Air Force.

"General Ma, as I said previously, it has been six months since I lived through the indignity of having an American flag waved in my face in the courtyard of the Great Hall of the People. What have you done to prevent a similar occurrence?" General Secretary Li asked.

General Ma had been a senior member of the CMC for 15 years. He had seen generals disappear before.

"General Secretary, every effort is being made to find a way to detect these new American space planes, but as of today . . . we have not been successful," General Ma replied, his head erect and proud.

General Secretary Li sighed, studied his manicured nails for a moment, and then flicked his hand dismissively in General Ma's direction. Four more guards appeared, and escorted General Ma from the room.

"As you can see, my patience is at an end. I have been lenient for far too long. This has led to complacency and a lack of effort. At least Admiral Wu has brought something different to the table. Details, Admiral Wu . . . please provide us with the details of your plan," General Secretary Li said, as he smiled and faced the admiral.

"General Secretary, the Americans are a coastal people. The majority of their government, military assets and people live within 100 kilometers of their coastlines. Each of my . . . rather, our devices, is designed to destroy one of their coastlines. By destroy, I mean kill 90 percent of the people living within 100 kilometers of the coast," Admiral Wu said.

With the disappearance of General Fan and General Ma, none of the officers or politicians were willing to say a word. They all knew that a single glance or gesture from the General Secretary meant their death and the deaths of their extended families.

"Please continue, Admiral. As I said, I would like the details. If I am sufficiently impressed, you walk out of here alive and have a future. If I am not, you will be dead within the hour and your family within a day," General Secretary Li said, as calmly as if he were ordering fresh tea for the assembled men.

Admiral Wu did not flinch. He had been required to attend the execution of General Kung, and knew at the time that a similar fate awaited him if he could not convince the General Secretary that his plan was guaranteed of success.

"General Secretary, unlike General Kung, I don't intend to convince the Americans to do anything other than die. We will not play the same game as the Soviets. The Americans refer to it as, 'Keeping up with the Jones'. If your neighbor buys a car, you buy a better car. If your neighbor sends his son to a very good school, you send your son to a better one. This is self-defeating. Your rich neighbor will always have something better than you. In our case, it's ships, planes and tanks. There is no reasoning with such a neighbor. In the end you will be bankrupt. That is what happened to Soviet Russia," Admiral Wu said. He noticed that the General Secretary was drumming his fingers on the table.

"*Ahh . . . he is contemplating summoning his guards and adding me to the list of tomorrow morning's executions,"* Admiral Wu thought, while removing a remote control from his pants pocket.

"General Secretary, the Americans have had the benefit of having themselves protected by two oceans. It has kept them safe since 1812. Any nation foolish enough to attack them with ICBMs or SLBMs would be annihilated. Another approach is needed. An approach that would leave them devastated and unable to respond until it was too late," Admiral Wu said, while activating the monitor mounted on the wall opposite General Secretary Li.

"As you can see, the Canary Islands sit just off the coast of northwest Africa. They are a province of Spain, and of volcanic origin. One island in particular has a rather delicate nature. The island of La Palma is approximately 30 miles long and 15 miles wide. It has a dormant volcano at the northern end and a somewhat active caldera at the southern end. What few people know is that a major seismic fault connects the two approximately 2000 feet below sea level. If that fault was stimulated . . . say with a high yield nuclear device, the western half of the island would fall into the sea. The resulting tidal wave would cross the Atlantic in seven to eight hours. This event has been postulated and modeled by the West for many years based on a partial collapse of the western slope of La Palma," Admiral Wu said.

"And neither the people who live there nor the Americans have noticed you drilling a massive hole a mile deep to install this device?" General Secretary Li asked, while reaching below the end of the table.

"General Secretary, the People's Republic of China is building a world class observatory on the island. Such construction requires the removal of a substantial amount of surface and sub-surface material," Admiral Wu responded.

General Secretary Li smiled, placed both hands on the top of the table, and said, "Continue, Admiral Wu. What about the West Coast of the American mainland?"

"The Republic of Mexico is in dire financial straits, General Secretary. The Americans have torn up NAFTA. After recent events, their border with the United States has slammed shut. We have managed to provide enough financial resources to gain permission to establish a drilling station in the far north of the Gulf of California. Such positioning gains us access to a very fragile fault line that extends up the West Coast of the United States. The Gulf of California exists because the Pacific Plate and the North American Plate are sliding past each other. This process is gradually moving part of North America away from the continent. In a million years, Los Angeles and San Francisco will be on an island. I only wish to hasten the process," Admiral Wu replied.

"Once again . . . the Americans will say nothing?" General Secretary Li asked.

"It is only a drill rig, and it is in Mexican territorial waters. There is nothing to see. The rig has been modified to drill a hole adequate for insertion of the device to a depth of three miles. At that depth, it will rip the fault apart. The Gulf of California may extend as far north as Los Angeles. All the naval bases on the West Coast will be torn apart," Admiral Wu said.

"Admiral Wu, you and your two dragons have piqued my interest. You will provide all your data to my staff. If they agree with your conclusions . . . we will proceed with your plan. If not . . ." General Secretary Li said, and shrugged.

None of the other generals or politicians in the room said a word. But they all knew that they were either watching the end of the People's Republic of China, or the beginning of a global Chinese Empire that would last for 1000 years.

CHAPTER 3

North Carolina State Emergency Operations Center

1636 Gold Star Drive

Raleigh, North Carolina

August 7, 2017

0630 hours EST

Brian Madison, Emergency Operations Director (EOD) of the North Carolina State Emergency Operations Center, groaned as he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the cot. The lights in the room were turned down for the crew sleeping, but he still had to squint as he bent down and removed his glasses from the shoes resting under the cot. Twenty other people slept around him. Some were starting to stir. A large coffee pot was percolating, and filling the room with the smell of normalcy and hope.

He glanced at his watch, an old Casio that his wife often chided him for wearing. He smiled as he remembered her words, "*Brian, you make over 500K a year and you wear a $25 watch!*"

"Yeah, but at a glance I know the time, the day, the date and the year. Plus, it has alarms, and I can switch it to 24-hour mode," Brian said aloud, while raising his head and looking around. He hadn't been able to find her location in the last three days. She had fled to the west with their youngest son.

They were three stories underground, the sub-basement of the EOC. The backup Operations Room was one floor up. The radiation levels in the floors above were uninhabitable. They now worked in a shielded bunker, isolated from the poisoned world that had been their home. The backup Ops Room wasn't pretty, but it worked. All the fancy monitors were gone, but they had PCs at each work station. Communications were still up, but lacking the detail they were used to. The outside electrical grid was gone, and they were running on diesel generators. They had enough fuel for five more days. Enough food and water had been stored for two weeks, as long as you liked surviving on MREs.

Four days ago, when the nuclear weapon detonated near the Harris Nuclear Plant, the ground shook and a new sun rose in the west despite the massive thunderstorm that was passing through the area. A few people had been outside the EOC when the weapon detonated. They stared at the bright star that seemed to burst through the storm. One man was blind, his retina damage permanent. Others had been prudent enough to look away. Some still felt a dry, burning itch, or still saw spots. Most of the civilian staff within the EOC reacted well. A few began screaming or ran from the building in panic. They were probably dead by now.

. . . .

"Brian, glad to see that you're awake. I'm about fried, and that cot you're sitting on is calling me," said NC National Guard General Dave Moore.

After the explosion, there were more than a few people who had cracked under the pressure. They refused to do their jobs or participate in the handling of the disaster. Most of them had left the building despite warnings about radiation levels. The Assistant EOD was one of those people. The remaining staff had been divided into two 12-hour shifts. General Moore became the night-shift EOD.

"So, what's happening? What's changed?" Brian asked, while slipping his feet into his penny loafers and standing up.

"The Feds have expanded their drone coverage. Late last night they flew along Interstate 40, heading west. It's bad, Brian . . . devastating. With normal wind conditions, the worst of the fallout would have been spread up to the Virginia border, almost 90 miles away from the blast. The storm washed it out of the sky before you reach Wake Forest, less than 25 miles away. It all concentrated in Apex, Cary and North Raleigh. Interstate 40 cuts right through the middle of the most heavily contaminated area," General Moore said, then looked away.

"Dave, what are you telling me? What's new? We knew all of that yesterday," Brian asked.

"Interstate 40 was packed with cars, bumper-to-bumper . . . both sides were flowing west . . . six lanes. Tens of thousands of people were on that road. Thirty minutes after the blast, the fallout started sweeping across a 15-mile wide section. Because of the concentration caused by the rain, initial dose rate estimates were over 1500 Rem per hour," General Moore said, as he slumped down on the cot.

"Maybe . . . maybe the rain washed it away fast enough that people survived," Brian said.

"The drone . . . flew along the highway . . . and it looked like . . . like the Highway of Death, back in '91. I was active duty back then, a Major in the 3rd Armored Division. When the Iraqis knew they were getting their asses kicked, they packed up their loot in Kuwait City and started fleeing back home. I was there. I saw the aftermath after the Air Force and Navy got through with them. There were blown up vehicles and the bodies of men everywhere, for miles," General Moore said, as he paused and began wiping his eyes.

"I-40 looked just like that, but it was worse. The vehicles weren't blown apart, just sitting there. Bodies everywhere . . . thousands and thousands of bodies . . . men, women and children . . . everywhere . . . mile after mile," General Moore said, as tears began to stream down his face.

The cot creaked as Brian sat down beside General Moore. He thought about his wife and his son . . .

"We'll get through this, Dave. We just have to stay strong. Lie down and get some sleep," Brian said, as he stood up, forcing the nightmare image of his wife and son possibly lying dead on I-40 out of his mind.

"*If you let your mind go there, you'll go insane. Just do your job. Set an example for everyone else*," Brian thought, as he watched General Moore lie down on the cot and immediately fall asleep. He removed the general's shoes, tucked them under the cot and turned away.

As he walked by open boxes of MREs stored against the wall by the stairs, he was tempted to pick one for breakfast, but he had no appetite. Instead, he pulled a mug labeled EOD out of the sink and wiped it out with a paper towel. Sheila Warren, one of the Liaison Specialists, had given it to him as a gift. The white mug had the logo for the NCSEOC on one side and 'EOD' on the other. Sheila had snapped and fled the building the morning after the blast. She had left her husband and two small children at home. They also, had fled to the west.

"Coffee . . . I hope we stored a lot of coffee," Brian said, as he filled the mug and began trudging up the stairs.