

# Part I

## Disintegration

**"I have a rendezvous with death."  
--Alan Seeger**

### Chapter One

Thursday, August 10  
Nationwide

Day One

The New York City brownstone stood sentinel to an abandoned street. The perpetually buzzing neighborhood, even at two a.m., was suffocated by an eerie silence. The city that never slept was taking its first nap.

"Mommy?" a small boy called out to the unforgiving darkness. He peeked over his blanket and sat up in bed. A sour stench floated into his bedroom, reminding him of soiled pants back when he was a two-year old baby and couldn't hold it. "Mommy? I'm thirsty."

Something broke downstairs, a loud shattering crash, then a door slammed. The boy yelped and threw the covers over his head. After a few seconds, he pulled the comforter down and listened.

"Mommy? I'm thirsty," he tried again. He brushed the blond stray hair from his straining

eyes. He saw shapes and figures in the blackness and prayed they weren't monsters. He didn't believe his mom when she said the bulb in his nightlight had burned out on its own; he knew the one-eyed green man under his bed had eaten it.

His three-year old ears listened for familiar sounds like Mommy's footsteps, the radio that made him dance like a monkey around the living room,

or his Big Bird See 'n Say. But only a scary silence engulfed his bedroom, confusing and frustrating him—no honking horns that he loved to count as he fell asleep. No screams from outside or thumping music, not a single roaring engine or squeal of laughter. Nothing. So he did what always brought him the quickest response.

"MOMMY, I NEED YOU!" he shrieked, and held the piercing pitch until his throat went raw. He knew if his mommy could hear him, she would break her neck to save him.

But no one came. After twenty minutes of chest-heaving sobs, he drifted off to sleep. When light filtered through his curtains, he woke wondering why Mommy hadn't gotten him up for pre-school.

"Where are you, Mommy?" he rasped from his sore throat. He wiggled into his sweatpants and tugged his smelly Yankees sweatshirt over his head.

He tiptoed down the stairs, flipping on every light as he went until he got to the living room. He stopped at the door, confused.

"Mommy?" But she didn't move. He took a few steps toward her, avoiding the shards of glass sprinkled all over the floor. She lay on the couch with her hand in the air as if she wanted a teacher's permission to speak. He reached out to touch her pale arm but couldn't bring himself to do it. Her skin looked like plastic, her eyes too dark, and flies crawled all over her. There was a dark brown stain on the couch under her bottom. He now knew what the awful stench was.

"Please get up, Mommy," he pleaded in a tiny voice. He wanted her to look at him, to turn her head and say, *It's okay, baby, my eyes are open because I'm awake.* But she didn't move, didn't answer.

Staring at his dead mother, he wet himself.

“What the hell is this shit?” Tito Marrero shouted to his seven-year-old son.

“Dunno, Daddy,” responded the happy-go-lucky boy just home from school. “It wasn’t like that when I caught the bus this mornin’.”

The two sat on their porch staring at trash someone had just dumped all over their neatly manicured lawn. The active neighborhood watch program had let them down. Tito started to pick up fast food cups, candy wrappers and miscellaneous junk. He smashed the stray garbage into the dented metal trash can. Then the headache came back with a vengeance.

“Dang it. I don’t know what the deal is,” he moaned as he massaged his temples. “I haven’t had a headache like this in ten years. If you don’t count your granny,” he said with a chuckle, but even the soft laughter sent a dull throb into the base of his skull.

“Let me, Daddy, I can make it go away. Come here.” The second grader led his father by the hand and climbed onto the back of their vintage Chevy Impala. He pulled his dad’s shoulders back where his small hands could reach. He kneaded Tito’s tight deltoids with savage aggression, knowing his dad liked it rough.

“Oh, yeah. Oh, there, yeah, I feel the knots. That feels so good, Marcus.”

“Mom! You’re home early!” Marcus squealed at his mother arriving home before *PB&J Otter*, *Rugrats*, and even *SpongeBob, SquarePants*. Her shift at University Hospital shouldn’t have ended until after his cartoons, dinner and *Wheel of Fortune*.

“Debbie, what’re you doin’ here, girl? You get off early?” Tito took his young wife in his arms and held her close, but she only stared at him.

With a swift motion, Deborah Marrero pulled out her Lady Smith and Wesson, her protection of choice for the late-night shifts at the hospital. She held it less than six inches from her son’s head.

“Mom? Don’t, you’re scarin’ me.” Marcus shrank back as his mother aimed the gun at him.

Her right hand trembled, but she braced it with her left. She cocked it, tears streaming down her face.

“Mom?” Marcus held his hands in front of his face, as if she meant to hit him. Her finger tightened on the trigger, and he burst into tears.

“I love you, baby,” she whispered, then squeezed the trigger gently. The report brought a yelp of surprise from Tito, who watched with his mouth hanging open. His son crumpled to the ground like a discarded ribbon. Blood mixed with brain matter splattered all over the side of the Impala.

Tito stared at Deborah, his eyes clouded with confusion. She knew the look—she’d seen it in the mirror, and it had ridden on the coattails of an excruciating migraine. Somewhere far away, the voice told her to hurry up and finish it.

“Make it easy, Honey. Give me a better target. You know I have to.” S tried not to look at her son’s dead body.

Tito didn’t object, because it sounded so logical. He dropped to his knees and raised his head to the business end of the gun.

*Put him out of his misery....*

She obliged the voice by planting a bullet into her husband’s right temple, killing him instantly. Staring at the two people she loved most laying motionless in their own blood, she did what she thought was the only logical thing to do.

Placing the gun carefully in front of her, she opened her mouth and stuck the barrel between her teeth. She rested the hot muzzle on her tongue, the metallic gunpowder burning her lips. She shivered. What the hell was she doing? She closed her eyes wondering what the voices

and visions in her head meant. They didn't make any sense, but then neither did the sight of her son and husband dead in the middle of the yard with what looked like ketchup on their foreheads.

Could this really be happening to the world, all these scenes flashing before her? One of the voices whispered that she could be a survivor if she chose to.

“Shut up!” She didn't want to hear any motivating thoughts that meant she had to work hard at a life that no longer included the two men she loved.

When the gunfire echoed for the third time in the neighborhood, a few still functioning friends came out onto their front porches. A startled but lucid Karen Smithton dialed 911, unaware that what Deborah Marrero had done might have been the best decision of all. Smithton carefully replaced the receiver when no one answered at emergency services and went to find her cat. An hour later she remembered she had never gotten one—she was allergic.

\* \* \*

The horde of shopping maniacs lining the streets of Chicago stopped abruptly along Michigan Avenue, State Street, and Superior. Heads turned to the sky and eyebrows lifted in question. Did someone up there just say something? They didn't know the majority of them would be issued a one-way ticket out of Dodge by midnight. *Don't wanna ride that train*, many of them would whine.

But about eighty-percent of those within the contaminated area didn't know what they wanted. Famous people would forget they were somebody, rich folks wouldn't remember that they could buy the world, and the poor had no clue they were inferior to anyone. They all had one thing in common that day. Those who woke to fight the mysterious battle against an invisible foe would wish for a ship, a train, a bus, even a cab to take them on a trip out of town. But no dice. They learned the hard way that some people are chosen and others eliminated. What they couldn't comprehend was who chose? And why?

*No deposit, no return*, one old coot shouted in downtown Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. Ironically, a seventeen-year-old high school quarterback punched him so hard in the face the senior citizen passed out cold.

All across the country, strange moods, altered personalities, and confused Americans went to bed for their final rest.

A mother of three somewhere in the suburbs of LA forgot to feed her infant son who screamed for her life-giving milk. She thought she might be missing a step of her late night ritual, but it eluded her. She even considered checking to see if her dog needed water. But then she remembered he might have died earlier that summer.

He had.

An elderly man forgot to take his insulin. When he retreated to his bedroom, he had the strangest inkling that he might just be the Pope.

He wasn't.

In the Hollywood Hills, a couple forgot about their combating affairs and the sticky separation that caused more trouble in the media than it was worth. They consummated their newly revived relationship. He even thought it might make a difference in their future.

It wouldn't.

A small jet carrying a professional baseball team had a pilot who just happened to think he was Evil Knievel. The dive that sent many of the players reeling would wake the team only thirteen minutes before Stage 1 began in earnest.

The ball players shouted, wondered why life had to be so cruel as to wake them just in time to die. Frantically, they faltered for seatbelts as if a flimsy strap of woven canvas could save them.

It couldn't.

In a nightclub in downtown San Antonio, a smattering of people stood hanging around after a local band left stage. One drunken fan screamed for Mick, while another tried to pay tribute by urinating on the stage. Various onlookers debated whether the two men standing on the pool table had actually ripped their shirts off, or if their eyes deceived them. One blinked to make sure his eyes hadn't gone funky.

They hadn't.

Stripped to the waist, a woman near the back screamed, but not a single person made a move to help her. Within moments, an inebriated bartender unbuttoned his jeans and tried to rape the woman. She screamed and clawed at his eyes, drawing blood. But he pried her hands and held them above her head. He yanked her jeans down just as another woman came up behind him and slammed a Jack Daniels' bottle over his head. Unlike its depiction in Hollywood, a hard liquor bottle packs a fatal punch when delivered with enough force.

And it had been.

Similar scenes took place in the nation's fifty largest cities. By morning, America would be in the grip of a sinister master plan—orchestrated by four geniuses without a conscience. Or a way to stop it.