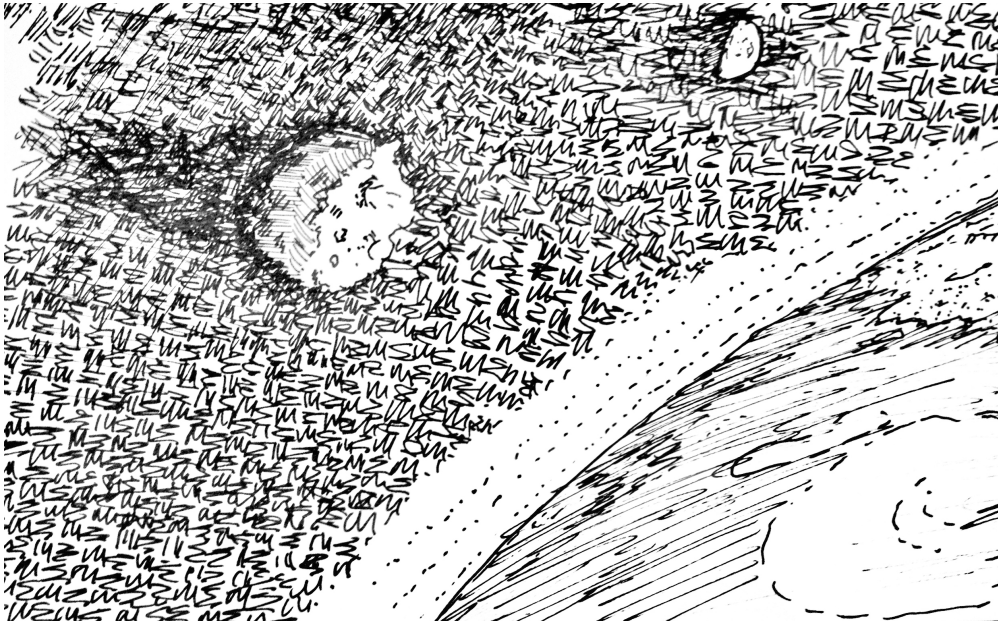

Chapter 1

Wilson



Asteroid Wilson

Ford Harris had never felt like this before in his life.

His mind and body were twisting and turning between panic, elation and the need to run to the toilet or drink something strong enough to put him to sleep until it was all over. It was probably the most incredible night of his life... so far.

However, Ford couldn't show anything but calm self-belief and confidence as he stared at the screens, his team behind him answering phone calls, checking calculations and scribbling indecipherable scrawls on reams of paper. As time moved on, they were edging closer to him, and finally followed him as he moved steadily out and found a space to stand on the observatory balcony, absolutely still. The team mirrored him with their own heads tilting towards the sky. No one made eye contact as they all stood either staring at the sky or scanning it with binoculars, everyone wanting the best view possible of what they believed was about to happen.

Standing below them was a field of astronomers, each with the

task to observe a specific patch of sky and record the exact time the asteroid crossed their field of vision, then relate it back to be recorded against the expected trajectory. One by one they signalled their sighting and joined Ford and his group in searching the sky with binoculars. Beforehand, people had seemed to be in a terrible hurry to do things with gadgets, but it was now really happening and they were witnessing it. The entire Near-Earth Object – NEO – observation operation had been temporarily moved to the disused Mount Peach Observatory, secretly prepared over the last few weeks. This was the team's opportunity to check the asteroid's final path as it passed directly overhead in this remote area of North America. It was the last chance to give the warning or reassurance that the world was or wasn't about to end.

**Mount Peach
Observatory**
Dexter Michigan,
USA
42.4N 83.9 W
Altitude: 1,033ft
Geology: Wooded,
glacial moraines and
lakes

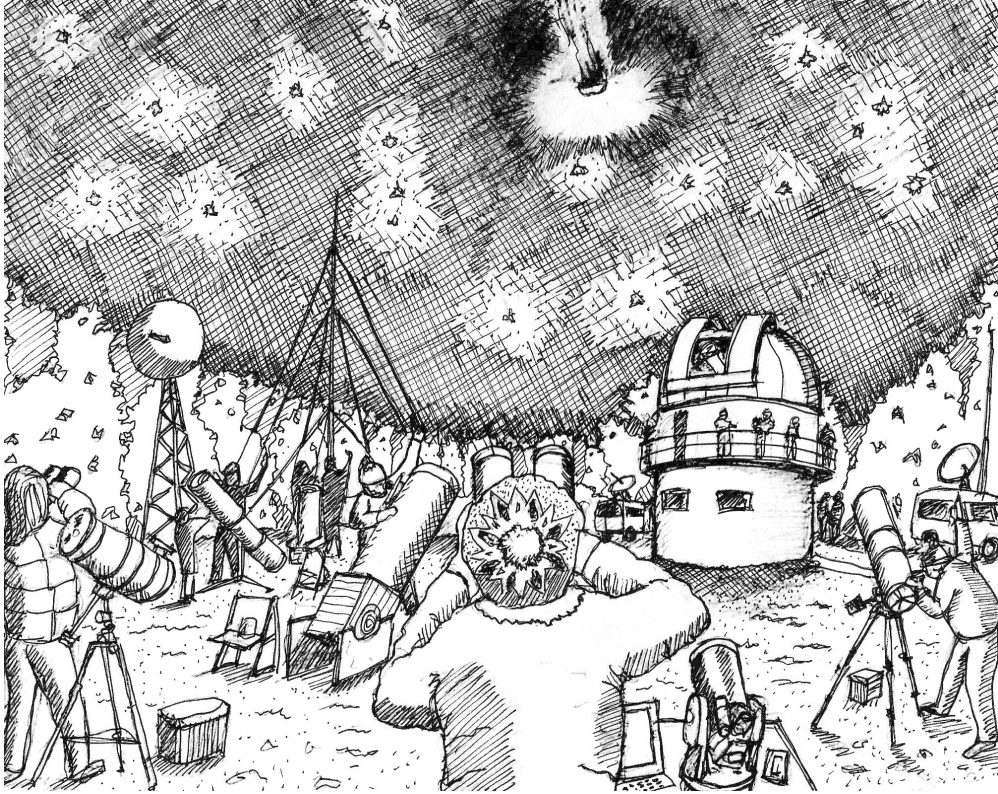
The president specifically didn't want a *War of the Worlds* scenario with all-out panic, anarchy and looting, so opted instead for secrecy and the inevitable backlash that would be sure to follow once this was over. 'There's no point having mass panic, violence and chaos if you're going to die anyway – may as well just be getting on with life, eating our greens, like the dinosaurs did.' This wasn't one of the president's best speeches, but luckily there had only been an audience of one – Ford Harris, and he had been on the other end of the phone.

Long ago, with meagre government funding, NASA had launched Project Jukebox – looking for hits – and Ford had enlisted a growing band of trusted amateurs with telescopes and computer software – the NEO team. There are millions of asteroids and comets out there, but they were looking for the rogue ones that might be heading towards Earth. Thanks to social media and the internet, Ford's team co-ordinated this vast network of contributors, without whom they couldn't do their job.

It was an email that had set this whole thing off; Jackie Wilson, its author, was with them tonight in this remote forest in Michigan. He had understood the initial need for total secrecy and was an able and enthusiastic member of the team. Being here was a fitting reward for being the first to spot the asteroid and sending the code 'ONE'. He had seen it when observing Mars and tracked it over several nights. When Wilson had realised it was moving suspiciously and was fairly large, he fired off his warning.

Ford had arrived very late into work that day after dropping his

grandson, Buzz, off with his mother. He went straight to his computer and checked his mail. ‘Dolores, there’s a ONE code.’ Ford beckoned and she moved quickly towards him. ‘It’s from Wilson, and he’s got a big one!’



Field of Astronomers

So now there they stood, straining upwards at the sky – because that was all they could do. The news of the asteroid’s existence had been kept secret until they had felt reasonably certain that it would not impact the planet. False news reports warning of an unseasonal hurricane had allowed for evacuations, but many people had refused to move until finally the real news of it just skimming the Earth was revealed. There would be loss of life, destruction and chaos, Ford was sure. Yet, if their calculations were wrong, it could be absolutely catastrophic.

And now, above the south-western horizon, there was a growing primrose dot. There was a gasp from the crowd. The asteroid was moving at an immense speed against the backdrop of stars. One by one, the hunched shapes peering through their telescopes signalled a thumbs-up as it passed through their lens and relayed the exact time through a phone app to Celeste in the dome.

Then, in one accord, they all rocked back as it tracked overhead,

changing and growing into an orange beacon – the brightest thing, save the sun and the moon, that any of these seasoned sky watchers had ever seen.

The air was full of expletives and words like ‘amazing’, ‘incredible’, ‘awesome’. As the crowd on the balcony rushed around to the other side of the dome, Ford was reluctant to break off from this spectacle, but he had duties to perform. He rushed in to check with Celeste, who was huddled by the great telescope mounting, the glow of the computer screen lighting her intense expression. Ford, still within earshot, had rushed to the opposite window.

The intense orange crescent, now hanging like a Cheshire cat’s smile, appeared to float to the north-eastern horizon.

Celeste, without looking up, shouted, ‘It’s bang on track, Ford! I’ve sent the signal. I’ve got Reykjavik online.’

Kirsten Gunnarsdottir stood in the cold and windy Harpa – the concert hall overlooking Reykjavik’s majestic harbour. She had worked through the night as a special volunteer, organising the storage of thousands of sheets of glass from its crystalline facades. This beautiful building had been built as a gesture of Icelandic self-confidence in the wake of the notorious banking collapse, which had blighted the country since the start of the millennium. Kirsten was one of the trusted few who had been informed early of what was to come today. The cold glow of dawn was starting to light up the snow-covered peaks across the dark and peaceful water. It was time to leave and gain higher ground. They had barely half an hour before asteroid Wilson was about to change their lives forever. ‘*Flytir!*’ she called to her companions, as they wound their way through neatly stacked piles of glass, leaving behind the filigree temple to the arts, and moved up the Skólavörðustígur, towards the Hallgrímskirkja.

Reykjavik
Faxaflói Bay, Iceland
64.1N 21.6 W
Altitude: 0ft
Geology: Volcanic,
glacial, coastal

At this moment, all she could think of was Elin, her daughter. When they’d heard the news, torn between duty and family, Kirsten had stayed in Reykjavik to help. After much anguish she’d decided that Elin was safe with her grandfather, and in any case, what could Kirsten do to protect her against a million tons of rock and ice? At least she could be useful here.

If a major calamity were to happen anywhere, Iceland was the best place for it. Constantly on the alert for the next major volcanic

eruption and with the sparsest of populations, it had many of the contingencies in place and an organised and stoic spirit. As Kirsten reached the top of the shopping street, her back against the lightening sky, she turned and peered to the western darkness. '*Va otrulegt,*' she whispered to herself. It was like a second moon had appeared in the sky, except this was moving, growing and shining with an intensity of light that was both beautiful and frightening.

Asteroid Wilson was now entering the atmosphere and the red morning rays were mixing with the intense light of friction on its perimeter. This was no time to stand and stare. She had to make it to the great church for shelter.

She was met at the doors by her colleague Magnus, who handed her a pair of dark glasses.

'*Einhverjar frettir?*' she demanded, her normal calm broken for a moment. Any news?

The wildly grinning Magnus, who had been working with the American team of observers, had heard the latest update from Peach Mountain and gave the thumbs-up.

Kirsten surveyed the small, brave crowd who were still outside. Sunglasses adorned each head, with some already in place over eyes. The moment had come. She thought she was going to throw up – she hadn't eaten properly for days, no 'last supper' for her. Rigidly still, she held her stomach, her eyes fixed on the sky. There was no time for any further thoughts as the heavens appeared to unfold in a blinding streak of light, no longer white now but coloured. Still in absolute silence, some of the team dropped to their knees, clutching their heads; others ran screaming into the building, but Kirsten never moved. She wanted to feel it, hear it, see it, taste it. If she was going to die on this day, she wanted to know about it and damn well be there for it.

Two great hands grabbed her and pulled her through the church's mighty wooden doors just as they were shut and barred. Any gap in the boarded windows now streamed with the intense light. In the packed nave, dwarfed by the soaring white arches, people linked arms and waited in silence. Then came a deafening, terrifying noise and a shockwave that assaulted all Kirsten's senses. It felt as if her chest, ears, whole body had been hit with a thousand sledgehammers.

To the north, high above the stark volcanic interior of central Iceland, asteroid Wilson was enjoying its brief visit to Earth, powering its way through the stacked layers of atmosphere. The pressure was creating an immense bubble of superheated ionised

plasma, which now enveloped it like an iridescent cloak. The air in front, unable to accommodate its velocity, was stacking up as a massive shockwave with a vacuum tunnel in the great trail behind it. The deep boom of the shockwave, mixed with the continuous ear-splitting crack of the atmosphere closing behind the speeding body, had created the loudest sound ever heard by humankind.

Wilson's encounter lasted all of three minutes, travelling through 1,500 miles of our precious atmosphere. For all but the very closest observers, it did so in majestic silence, an awe-inspiring and beautiful sight. However, no one could anticipate the power of what was to come. That shock and noise was spread over the whole length of its track and was only travelling out at approximately 750mph, thus producing a two-hour cacophony of such power that it could be heard rolling around the whole world, not once but twice over the next three days, as it resonated like a great discordant bell.

The shockwave took three hours to reach Ford and his team near the Great Lakes, where it was still the middle of the night. After the asteroid disappeared over the horizon, there had been an anxious wait, and the crowd shivered in the cold night air. Suddenly a slight glow could be seen above the trees, spreading out as a false dawn, starkly lighting the few high-level clouds present, then brightening the sky as if it were day. Many of those watching instinctively reached out to hold hands, not wanting to break their gaze but needing to share this moment of sublimity.

As the light and colours finally started to fade, Ford stood and watched with a profound sense of relief. 'It can't have hit us,' he muttered to himself, pushing past his colleagues.

He re-entered the dome, where Celeste was still collecting data and reports on her various screens. There were emails, texts and tweets coming in from the epicentre, and live coverage from ships in the Greenland Sea and the Atlantic, where Wilson could be seen in all its glory, like a streaking sun flashing through the morning sky, its long trail of vapour tracing its path through the heavens. Small pieces could be seen breaking off, exploding and disintegrating. Luckily Wilson was a dense and rocky body with enough clout to barrel its way towards its next encounter – with the sun itself.

For Kirsten at the epicentre it had been immediate and not just deafening, but positively bowel-loosening. The erstwhile members of the congregation of the Hallgrímskirkja were in a state of deep

shock. A fine layer of dust covered them, and one by one they slowly took their hands from their ears, finally sure that the noise was subsiding. It still cracked and resonated, though now from a distance. Their ringing eardrums added an extra high note as the wall of sound diminished. Kirsten wanted to get out and see what had happened. She helped Magnus, a fellow lecturer at the university, open the door. The sight that met them was extraordinary: Reykjavik looked as if it had been peeled open like a thousand empty sardine cans. Multicoloured corrugated sheeting was everywhere. Roofs and wall claddings had been peeled off the buildings by the force of the shockwave. Even the famous acid green house was now naked, its sheets joining in a great square pointillist work laid out over the city.



Kirsten Gunnarsdottir

Above, the sky looked as if it had been ripped from horizon to horizon. The meteor trail was so vast that its collapsing vacuum tube had sucked out any moisture in the morning air into a deep, dark, swirling mass. Wilson, moving at 30,000mph, had pushed the air into rolling billows, a series of tight and endless smoke rings moving east, as if still drawn to their creator. The morning sun lit the underside of this vast tube with a yellow hue. The rest was the ethereal clear-blue sky that is particular to the northern climes.

‘*Va!*’ Wow! was the only word issued, again and again but all unheard due to the Icelanders’ temporary deafness, which would soon affect half the population of the rest of the world. Magnus was