

On the TV screen, a smartly dressed man and woman sat behind a conference table in what looked like a schoolroom.

“Good afternoon. I’m Dennis Spaulding and this is Melanie Kearns, with Channel Eleven News. We’re reporting from the Chantilly Elementary School in Chantilly, Virginia, about twenty-five miles from the capital, and our studio in Washington D.C. We have a crew in the Channel Eleven Skycam helicopter as well, currently getting in position for a firsthand report.”

Melanie continued the narrative.

“If there’s a nuclear explosion, and we’re told it’s still *if* and not *when*, the mushroom cloud would spread downwind, with radioactive particles dropping out of the cloud as ‘fallout.’ With today’s weather, we would expect the cloud to spread to the northeast.”

Dennis took over again.

“That’s right, Melanie. And now we’re told that our Skycam team is in position, so we’ll hand off our coverage to Mr. Justin Chase, our reporter in the sky. Hello, Justin, what’s going on up there?”

The picture on the TV split so that Dennis was on the left side of the screen. The right side now showed a young man with short, unruly hair and a pair of wraparound sunglasses propped on top of his head. The creases from his smile stretched nearly to his ears, and his tanned skin looked wrinkled where his headset touched his cheeks just below his ears. He was holding a microphone and there was a banner under his picture that read: Justin Chase, Channel Eleven Reporter in the Sky.

“Hi Melanie and Dennis,” Justin said seriously. “It’s beautiful up here. Clear sky. Gentle breeze from the southwest. It’s hard to believe we’re actually contemplating a nuclear explosion that could totally destroy the Washington, D.C. area. Wow.”

“I agree Justin,” Dennis said. “Hard to believe.”

“Okay,” Justin continued, “we’re in the Channel Eleven News Skycam helicopter, ten miles west of Washington, D.C., at five thousand feet.” He looked briefly at his watch. “It’s 2:52 p.m. We’re told the military still has teams in the area, checking for a bomb and watching for terrorists who might try to use the confusion of the evacuation to carry a bomb into the area.”

“Our pilot says he can see a military helicopter now,” Justin continued.

The camera panned away from his face and to look out a side window, where a military helicopter flew rapidly from the right to the left below the news helicopter.

“Wow,” Justin said. “He’s really hauling. It must be show time.”

The camera panned back to Justin’s face, which was turned to the military helicopter. He wore an easy grin, a dimple in his cheek. It was obvious that he liked flying and speed, maybe picturing himself at the controls of the military helicopter.

“Can you tell if anyone’s still in the city?” Melanie asked.

That brought Justin back to the present. As he turned toward the camera, he dropped the smile and the dimple disappeared, but his eyes still sparkled.

“It’s hard to tell, Melanie. It’s been eleven days since the president mentioned voluntary evacuation, and nine days since he confirmed that the terrorists have a bomb and plan to set it off in Washington, D.C. We’ve been watching people stream out of the capital and surrounding cities for days now, but we’re told that there are likely thousands of people still in the city for one reason or another.”

“That’s amazing! Are the police and military helping with the evacuation?”

“We’ve seen them helping with traffic control, but whether or not they’re going door-to-door telling people to get out is hard to say. Remember, they’re also trying to find a bomb.”

“Thanks Justin. It’s 2:57. Do you want to take over and show us what’s going on?”

“Thanks Melanie.”

The view of Melanie in the schoolroom disappeared, leaving Justin and the helicopter to fill the entire screen. The camera panned right for a view out the side window and zoomed in on the National Mall.

“If you look closely at the spot where our camera is aimed, you can see the National Mall, with the Capitol building and reflecting pool on the left, the Washington Monument on the right, and the Smithsonian buildings running down both sides of the Mall in between.”

What the camera couldn’t detect from this distance were the people walking on the Mall and working in offices around the city. There were those who didn’t believe the threat was real. There were young families on vacation who didn’t want to lose their vacation time and the money their trip had cost, who were betting their lives that the bomb wasn’t real. There were business men and women who didn’t think they could afford to miss a day’s work. And there were those who didn’t hear the warnings, didn’t understand, or didn’t care, like many in the homeless population.

“I’ll give you a second-by-second rundown of what’s happening from our perspective,” Justin continued. “We’re putting on special dark glasses that we’re told can withstand extreme changes in light, just in case we see a fireball. Whoa, it’s like I’m in a cave. I can’t see anything now.” There was muffled laughter in the background. “We’re waiting for the 3:00 p.m. deadline, which is coming up right... now.”