

CHAPTER 8

HOW TO START A NUCLEAR WAR

Vinni would never know what led to the events that occurred later that day, but in an astonishing instant, everything changed. The war that V-48 was trying so desperately to prevent would not take place, but what transpired in the process of trying to avert the 2008 disaster came as a complete shock.

V-41 & V-48 were alone in their 2001 vault contemplating their next move when Vinni @ 48 cried out with entangled fear in his voice, "Oh no. I can't believe this." V-41 turned his attention to the alarm light flashing above. "Surely, this can't be happening again. Not now, not after all we've done to prevent a nuclear war. They can't be foolish enough to do it again."

"They are..." V-41 yelled as he gripped the table in a panic. "Those idiots have started another nuclear war. What do we do now?"

"What can we do? Get ready to jump," Vinni @ 48 declared. "It's our only chance. You've got to go back and stop it."

"How, like you did?" he sarcastically replied with an angry glare.

"C'mon, it's not like we have any choice."

"What went wrong?"

"I don't know, but the fact is, they've gone and done it and I have no way to stop it. But you do. You've got to go back and talk some sense into these fools."

"And if I can't...I'll end up getting stuck like you did."

"That's right, but if you stay here, you die. That means I die too. I'd rather be alive in the past as a spirit than be the last man left alive in a desolate world seven years after nuclear annihilation and that's what I've just become. There's no one left in my world, but me. You're the only chance either one of us have."

He looked at the computer screen. "Check it out." The display showed an array of incoming missiles targeting the immediate area. "Get all the data you can on where the first strike came from."

Vinni @ 41 switched on the outside cameras. "Holy shit!"

"You haven't seen anything yet. "They'll hit in about five minutes. Get your data and get ready to jump."

"And how do I prepare myself for this?"

"You don't," Vinni @ 48 said in a soft humble voice. "You just go back and do what you can. I go forward...and can only imagine what's waiting for me there. If you aren't successful..."

"I know. We're both screwed."

"I'm so sorry I got us into this," V-48 stated with earnest remorse.

"It's not your fault. There's no way anyone could anticipate the ignorance of opposition to peace and why they'd elect to destroy the world to spite a nation? I hope I can do something to prevent it."

"Even if you don't, you've got to admit one thing...We sure had a fun ride."

"Yeah we sure did. If only for a little while, we got to live like a king. It's been one incredible adventure."

"But..." He hesitated to finish the sentence. "If we do manage to get out of this mess, the portal goes away...forever."

V-41 paused to consider their options. "If we pull this off, I'll see to it that the mirror is taken care of."

"Here they come. I guess that's about it then." He was silent for a moment as they each moved toward their respective sides of the mirror. "It sure was nice getting to know you...you're a good man Vinni."

"Back at ya bro. Good luck Vinni."

"What a way to learn to love yourself. God's speed!" They both glanced back at the screen and, as the first flash lit up the sky, they stepped through into their respective times. V-48 was back in 2008 and V-41 had slid back to 1994. Unless V-41 was successful,

they would be separated by a fourteen-year gap that their mystical portal could no longer breach.

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Vinni @ 48 stepped slowly and cautiously through the portal and into the protective vault, where he experienced the purest form of silence. It would most likely take some time before Vinni @ 41 could achieve his mammoth task...if he were able to achieve it at all. But at least for the time being, he was relatively safe.

Though he wasn't too anxious to explore the new barren environment, he had to determine exactly what he was up against. He switched on the cameras to view the exterior atmosphere. A blizzard was blowing mounds of soot and snow across the rugged terrain. The sun had just begun to filter through the darkness that had engulfed the planet for the past seven years. The Yukon Territory seemed new-fangled and unexplored.

Seven years of nuclear winter had reshaped the vast uninhabited landscape. There were virtually no signs of life, not even a trace. Microbes were the only form of life to have survived and had only begun their million-year quest to eventually revitalize the process

of evolution. The majority of atmospheric dust had begun to settle and frequent thunderstorms were gradually cleansing the environment and washing away the scattered ashes from the planet's surface.

Vinni clothed himself in heavy Alaskan attire and prepared to face the elements. He opened the vault door and stepped out into the general quarters. He pressed the button to fire up the emergency generators and light began to fill the large cavern. Vinni couldn't resist the urge to glance at the corner where he had last seen a group of friends huddled together in a frozen grave. The space was now tranquilly empty. While he had saved his friends from one death, he had also condemned them to another. The irony of that quandary played on his mind.

For the first time, he approached the large steel door leading to the outer tunnel of the cave. He took a deep breath and opened it, then shuffled across the rocky floor toward the dim light. There, on a cliff several thousand feet up on a mountain, he stood gazing out through wind swept clearings across the countryside. Flakes of filthy snow began collecting on the fur-lined hood that was snuggled around his face. Though his eyes were all that could be seen, his dismay and desperation were quite evident. He was all alone in a frigid world. It was an eerie sensation, the most helpless feeling a man could ever have experienced. He was reminded

of a familiar phrase that Serentine would often use, 'Not even if you were the last man on Earth'. Her words took on new meaning, for that is precisely what he had become.

He had nowhere to go, but knew that he couldn't remain there. It was time to move on. Vinni @ 41 had seen to it that he had all of the provisions required for just such a scenario. He was well prepared to deal with the elements and almost any situation. He walked back into the shelter and toward another huge set of steel doors. He pressed another button and they began to separate revealing a monstrous all-terrain vehicle, which resembled a giant caterpillar. Of course, though it was the first time he'd actually seen the contraption, he had all of the memories of its conception and fabrication.

The truck stood taller than most single-story homes, was nearly as wide as a two-lane highway and had the length of a tandem tractor-trailer rig. It had twenty-four oversized wheels on each side with ballooning tires that measured eight feet from the ground. The framework supported four individual attached sections. It had been well equipped with numerous technological luxuries, as well as, enough supplies and fuel to last for several months. The vehicle also had a state of the art self- defense weaponry system and plenty of artillery, just in case. At the nose was a protective steel armor

plate, pointed and angled to displace any debris in its path. It was well designed to serve its exclusive purpose, to get him anywhere and everywhere he needed to go.

There was only one other item to be loaded on board. Of course, that was the mirror, his only true lifeline. It had a special location in the main cabin for immediate access and it allow him to monitor any activity in the past. He spent his final night in the shelter resting before the long journey south.

Early the next morning, he gazed into the empty mirror before setting out across the land in search of a new life and with hope that his former self could somehow manage to alter their future. He fired up the engines and began maneuvering the vehicle toward the exit. One flick of a small overhead switch and the massive double doors leading to the unknown slowly swung open. He gripped the controls, which were set up like the handlebars of a motorcycle, revved the engine and released the clutch. Just where he was going, he still didn't know, but he was on his way.

The blizzard had subsided and the faint sun was still shielded by an atmospheric haze, but the break in weather had provided rather calm conditions for his departure. He stopped at the ridge to peer out over the vast barren landscape before beginning his descent

toward a new ambivalent adventure.

For two days, he trekked toward Vancouver through heavy snow and across rugged terrain. Though he passed several small villages that were for the most part still in tact, there were absolutely no signs of life. Aside from brief interludes of restless sleep, he pressed onward. Late on the second night, he came over a mountain to get his first glimpse of the fabulous city to find that it had suffered numerous direct impacts. The once beautiful buildings of the harbor town were now gray sepulchers adorned with monuments of massive rubble.

Vinni slowly rolled his vehicle down the main thoroughfare. The streets, once lined with beautiful tall buildings and a wide array of contemporary architecture, were now flanked with heaps of steel, stone and debris. His heart sank as he looked upon endless scenes of skeletal remains trapped in the tangled web of twisted structures that had been mangled like a child's toy caught in the blades of a powerful lawnmower. He was devastated at the sight of its disfigured landscape and the incomprehensible loss of life.

"Why?" he asked himself as tears trickled down his cheeks. "What in the mind of any man could justify such a meaningless atrocity?"

There was clearly no point in lingering and the morbid spectacle gave him a firm indication of what he could expect to see a great deal of as he ventured on.

Soon, he was faced with the first of many obstacles that would hinder his ability to travel. He came across the remains of a distorted bridge that once offered a convenient means of access to the peninsula on the other side. Like the pioneers of early America, he would be forced to explore a natural means of crossing its regions. His extravagant machine would offer tremendous advantages, but boundless obstacles would inevitably provide endless challenges.

"God," he said to himself as he considered his situation. "Will there ever be anyone to talk to besides you? If this is the life I have left to look forward to, I'm not too sure I want to live it. If Vinni doesn't pull it off, what am I going to do?" He popped a local GPS map of the area up on the computer screen and proceeded to reposition the vehicle, then headed off in another direction and with a new outlook on life.

His next destination was now New York City. If there were any signs of life left in the world, there was a slight chance of finding it between here and there. From New York, he would steer

south where at least the regions had a better chance of providing a somewhat suitable climate. There were plenty of small towns on that route with canned goods and fresh water to replenish his supplies. The one thing he was still lacking was the one thing he knew he'd never find; companionship. It had only been a few days and already the loneliness had begun to consume him. If he had been stranded on a dessert island, at least he would still have hope of one day being found.

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He followed Interstate 90, but his path was constantly impeded by one obstacle after another and limited by a maximum speed of about forty miles per hour. The elongated trip to New York took nearly three weeks. The occasional glances over his shoulder at the blank scene in the mirror were far less frequent now. His faith in the potential for restitution was dwindling rapidly. If Vinni @ 41 was successful, evidence of his success would be immediately discernable. If he wasn't successful, it would more than likely be years before he could pass back through to 2001 and he had no idea what he would find there when he did.

At noon on October 28th, Vinni celebrated his birthday by

approaching the outskirts of New York and was quickly faced with the inevitable. There would be no point in jeopardizing an attempt to continue east. Not one shred of a familiar landmark remained on the frozen tundra and in the massive ruins. Access across the frozen river would have been too dangerous and next to impossible.

The only alternative now was to start southward and find a place to settle. Like a pioneer on a lonely trail, he pointed his obscure wagon south, cranked up his stereo and began singing along to one of his favorite songs by the Eagles:

"I=ve got a peaceful....easy feelin'. And I know you won=t let me down. Cause I=m al----ready standin' on the ground."

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After another weeklong trek, Vinni eventually ended up in Key West, Florida. In comparison to the normal climate, it was still considerably cooler. The sun was still masked behind a thick yellow haze, which kept the temperatures in a modest 50 degree range, but it was slowly warming. It didn't take long to find himself an elaborate home with a boat dock where he had kept a large sailboat, a cabin cruiser yacht and several other watercrafts, which helped to keep him amused. Most of his time was spent teaching himself to play

guitar and writing a lengthy journal.

He revamped the land rover's generator to provide ample electricity, which allowed for operation of all the necessary devices. A local music store provided him with enough sound equipment to create a makeshift stage, complete with elaborate lighting. With an extremely powerful amplification system and access to a seemingly unlimited supply of music, he spent many a night on the patio of his new residence entertaining himself with lavish performances. Though he lacked any real ability in the early stages, after months of haphazard practice, he had actually begun to develop a rather intriguing talent.

After nearly nine months in the Keys, hope for any change in his situation was all but exhausted. Vinni @ 41 had obviously failed. The future looked very grim. Though he still practiced good hygiene, the desire to maintain his outward appearance had diminished. It was no longer worth the effort. He had let his hair grow long and shaggy. A full beard now covered his face and a new very poor attitude replaced the old one on a daily basis. Currently, he lived more like a beach bum. He would wear the same clothes for days at a time, but since he had a limitless supply, never wore the same clothes twice.

Then one day, while he was sleeping in a hammock stretched out between two lifeless palm trees, he was suddenly awakened by an unusual sound. He focused intently on what he was sure was the faint blast of a ships horn blowing out at sea. He sprang up so fast that he nearly fell out of the hammock. He raised his hand to shield the bright sunlight from his eyes. The sunlight was the first of many clues, but he was so attentive to the sound that the intensity of the sunshine on his unaccustomed eyes was momentarily overlooked.

Like a modern day Robinson Crusoe, he froze in place to listen more intently while his eyes twitched fiercely. As if by reflex, he attempted to adjust his eyes to the glare of the sun shining brightly through the now green leaves of the palm trees swaying in the breeze. It was then that he realized something had drastically changed. The leaves...there were leaves in the trees! Soon another familiar sound caught his attention. A young couple was racing their wave runners over the ocean swells. He began to smile as brightly as the hot sun beat down on his pale skin.

"Hey, asshole!" a man's stern voice shouted out from behind him. "This isn't a hotel. Pack up your shit and get your nappy ass off of my beach!"

"Who are you?" Vinni asked with distinct curiosity and an

exuberant smile. Not that he cared, but he wanted to hear the man's voice again.

"Who I am is none of your damn business. Now, I'm giving you thirty seconds to get your ass and that God forsaken train of yours off my property before I call the police." The man was now inspecting the elaborate stage Vinni had erected. "And what the hell is this?"

"Sorry, sir," Vinni humbly, but cheerfully replied. "I thought this placed belonged to someone else. I've obviously made a mistake. I am very sorry."

"Your damn right you made a mistake...a big one," the burly well-tanned man proclaimed. He was uncertain of Vinni's intentions and cautiously remained at a safe distance as he continued to harp. "I've had it with you freaks...think you own the world. And who's fucking boat is that parked in my slip...And where the hell is mine?"

"Hey," Vinni defended with raised arms, "I don't know nothing about any boats." Suddenly, he realized one very significant fact. His mirror was still in this man's house. "I'm really sorry about the mix up, but if you'll permit me to gather a few things together,

I'll be on my way."

"I don't think so," the man with a hairy bear belly hanging over his flowery bikini-style swimsuit informed. "You damn sure aren't going in my house. I can assure you of that."

"All I want is my mirror. Let me get that and I'm out of here. I promise."

The man was startled by his wife who appeared on the patio and immediately began nagging. Ironically, she was dragging the strange mirror behind her. "Where the hell did this come from? Another one of your damn toys?"

"That would belong to me mam," Vinni apprised as he began running toward her. "Let me get that for you."

"Who the hell are you?" she snapped.

"Hey, you little twerp," the man growled and began following with his arms flailing. "Get away from her."

Thankfully, Vinni had placed a sheet over the back, which prevented her from seeing the dreadful sights on the other side. And

its new contemporary frame was made of lightweight aluminum, so it was easy to carry. As far as she was concerned, the mirror was disgusting eyesore. "Sorry, mam," Vinni proceeded to explain. "It was a special delivery and I must have gotten the address mixed up." He carefully began wrapping the sheet around the frame to make sure the back was kept well covered. "I'm really very sorry for the inconvenience. I'll have this old thing out of your hair in no time."

By now the woman's husband had joined them on the porch. "See that you do, boy." As Vinni was wrestling the large mirror out to pick up truck he had secured, the man yelled again. "Hey! Isn't that your... 'tractor' parked on my lawn?"

"No, sir," Vinni smartly avoided. "I thought it was your house."

"That does it. I'm calling the police."

"If that big ass bus isn't yours, then whose is it?" He thought for a moment. "You don't have any friends hiding around here, do ya?"

"No sir. That, I can assure you."

By now, a group of neighbors had begun to gather and a small crowd had circled the strange large vehicle that they suddenly found parked in their community. They were curious as to what it was and how it got there. In the confusion, Vinni loaded the mirror and made a hasty getaway in a late model Chevy pick up he had acquired. It was a narrow escape. He wasn't sure how he would have explained any of these bizarre circumstances to anyone. The only logical conclusion he could come up with was to leave them with an unexplained mystery and 'get out of Dodge' as fast as he could.

It would seem that Vinni @ 41 had managed to achieve his objective and the war that separated them had somehow been prevented. Life, at least to some extent, was back to normal. V-48, who was now 49 years of age, couldn't wait to find a secluded location and slide back to talk with V-41. Surely he had returned to his time as well. He turned off down a relatively deserted side road, stood the mirror up in the back of his truck and pulled the sheet from the back to look through. The mirror was back in Vinni @ 41's vault in Hawaii. He promptly stepped through.

"Hey!" he shouted gleefully. "Anybody home?"

A welcome voice soon answered from the outer room. "In here."

Vinni worked his way in. "Damn, I was getting worried. I thought maybe you didn't make it."

"You were getting worried? You should have been in my shoes. It took a little doing to get out of there," he said without going into any details. "I gather things went well for you."

"Oh my God!" he said with a huge sigh. "You wouldn't believe what we had to go through."

V-48 chuckled out loud. "And you wouldn't believe what a lonely place this world is without people in it. You saved my life, man. Thanks!"

"It was the least I could do, considering..." He was now laughing. "...considering where I would have been trapped. I really didn't have a choice. Fixing my predicament meant fixing yours. We're both pretty lucky."

"We sure are! Listen, I've got to get back. I left the mirror unguarded on the back of a truck on the side of the road somewhere in the Florida Keys."

"The keys?"

"I had to go somewhere." They both laughed. "I'll contact you after I get situated back in Hawaii. We can start making plans to get rid of this damn thing."

"That sounds like one hell of an idea."

"Thanks again!" he said with an obvious air of genuine sincerity. "Oh, please arrange for a team to meet me with the Leer at Key West Airport...in about five minutes from now."

"You're welcome and you'll have a team standing by. We'll talk again soon."

Vinni was about to step back through when he noticed the sheet blowing haphazardly in the wind. "What the...?" Someone had stolen the truck and was driving down the road with the mirror lying face down in the bed of the truck. He pulled the sheet to the side and poked his head through first to inspect the situation. The pass through window to the cab was open and two young surfers were in the cab laughing. Vinni pulled himself up through the portal to a sitting position on the side.

He edged his way up to the cab and popped his head through.

"Hi, fellas." The startled driver began swerving and then hit the brakes sending the truck into a sideways slide. It came to a stop in a cloud of dust on the side of the road. "Nice reflexes son," Vinni said with a smile as he fanned the dust from his face.

"Where the hell did he come from?" the driver said to his buddy with a look that expressed both astonishment and fear.

"Got me," his friend replied with only a quick glance of the eyes in Vinni's direction. "We're busted, dude."

"That's a fact," Vinni stated with another bold smile. "If you guys are finished with your joyride, could I have my truck back?"

The driver looked mysteriously at his passenger with a cold hard stare. They sat quietly for the longest time attempting to surmise their situation. Finally, the driver slowly looked back over his right shoulder. Vinni was sitting with his arms folded across the base of the rear window. "Where the hell did you come from, dude?"

"Dude?" Vinni humorously questioned. He responded in a similar dialect. "Well dude, you guys took my truck and I wanted it back. So, I chased ya down."

"Huh?"

"I know a shortcut."

"That must have been one hell of a shortcut. This is a straight road."

Vinni was in too good of a mood to argue. He just kept smiling as he began to formulate a plan. "Look guys, the only thing I really want is to get home." He was dangling the keys like a carrot. "So, if you 'gentlemen' would be kind enough to drop me off at the airport, you can keep the truck. Is that fair enough?"

"Are you serious, dude? You'll give us the truck?"

"Serious as a heart attack."

"And all you want is a ride to the airport?"

"That and my old mirror."

The two teenagers began smiling and bobbing their heads up and down to one another in silent agreement. Then the driver spoke.

"Awesome!" He put the truck in gear and headed off down the road not knowing who was in the back and neither seemed to care. In his current condition, Vinni certainly didn't appear to be much of a threat and though his credibility was somewhat blemished, the boys found the prospect of a new truck rather intriguing. Of course, Vinni had failed to mention the fact that the truck was stolen. They'd eventually be stopped by authorities and most likely arrested.

Key West is a small island and the airport was only a few miles away. When they arrived, one of the boys elected to help Vinni unload the mirror. As he reached for it, his hand accidentally slipped through to the other side. The sensation sent him reeling. "Woe, dude," he said to his friend. "Did you see that?" he asked in astonished awe and with a startled look on his face.

"See what?" the other replied.

"Yeah," Vinni reiterated with an evil smile, "see what?"

"Nothing dude, I didn't see anything. Let's break wind, Sam."

Vinni tossed the keys to the truck in the air. "Enjoy."

"Excellent," Sam declared with a cocky smile. "Later dude."

"Much later boys."

Vinni had plenty of cash and several no-limit credit cards in a small duffle bag, but he wouldn't need it. There at a charter flight terminal he could see the VC logo projecting upward on the tail of his private jet. He wrapped the mirror in a blanket and boarded his private plane. He would soon be home and ready to start his new life.

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