

## 1 - A Leap of Faith

### Day One

Saturday 28th May 2065

The Trossachs National Park

Scottish Highlands

Paul Harrington was relaxing in the guide's seat at the front of the luxury touring coach. At some of the viewing locations, he would accompany the guide and passengers but on this occasion, he'd opted to stay with the coach. Paul wasn't interested in watching television, however, when it was close to the time for the mid-day news, he switched on the primary monitor.

He grinned. "I wonder if any of our hothead world leaders have calmed down yet." Days of public name-calling had made many politicians look immature.

Strangely, although situated on the southeast boundary of the national park and at a reasonable altitude, it wasn't a great place for radio or television reception. Even the signals for mobile telephones were hit and miss in this area, but it was worth a try.

The face of Nick Fowler, the newsreader and the studio backdrop were hazy at best, but the sound was clear.

"... and in the past half hour, President Daniel Stamp has once again issued a casual suggestion to the warring factions in the Middle East, and in the Far East. We have an excerpt of an interview conducted at the White House. The reporter is our very own, Carrie Myers." The newsreader turned to share the screen with a view of the Oval Office.

The outspoken President of the United States (POTUS), looked the part, in a smart suit, collar and tie. His excessive mop of blond hair was brushed to perfection. It was the man's blunt attitude and open condemnation which caused mixed opinions of his rightful place as an international statesman. He appeared relaxed as he grinned and nodded towards a young brunette reporter.

Carrie Myers: *'Thank you for allowing this interview, Mr President. Can you confirm that US envoys have failed in their attempts to mediate for peace in both the Middle East and the Far East?'*

POTUS: *'That's correct, Carrie. I'm personally frustrated with the ongoing situation in both regions. I've recalled our people and I'm considering a different approach.'*

Carrie Myers: *'Surely if the peace envoys have failed after many weeks of mediation there can't be much more you can do. The Russian leader, for example, has suggested stepping back and allowing the fighting to take its course.'*

POTUS: *'It's common knowledge that I don't pay heed to the opinions of my opposite number in Russia.'* He grinned. *'The United States of America has large naval fleets in both the Middle East*

*and the Far East. Late last night I authorised our naval commanders to move closer to the troubled areas in preparation for physical peace-keeping duties.'*

Carrie Myers: *'Surely you can't unilaterally send armed forces into a foreign country in conflict ... you are ignoring the sovereignty of at least one of the nations?'*

POTUS: *'Carrie, I'm sure that like me, the rest of the world is fed up listening to those people arguing among themselves and killing each other. They need to get back across their borders in the Middle East and the Far East and stop bickering about a few stretches of land.'*

Carrie: *'With respect, Mr President, isn't that a further public declaration that you feel superior to them?'*

POTUS: *'As my grandfather would have said when he sat in this office—get over yourselves. The leaders in those countries need to—'* The broadcast went silent and the picture faded.

Nick Fowler, in the London studio inhaled deeply and turned to face the camera. "I apologise for the loss of that report from the White House. Meanwhile, closer to home, Sofia Kleinhof, President of the Federation of European Nations has made an impassioned plea to President Stamp. Mrs Kleinhof has asked Mr Stamp to apologise and halt any military advance, but there has been no reaction forthcoming. Following the televised interview, there has been no response from the Middle East region, but Mee Mi Wae, a leader in the Southeast Oriental Peninsula has warned against what he sees as an invasion and he has insisted on an apology—we will keep you informed ..."

The broadcast faded, and when it returned, the topic was the renewed space-race. Having disassociated itself from the International Space Programme, the United States had launched a rocket with an advance crew of six engineers to land on the Moon. This followed the unmanned craft which landed on the Moon one week previously. The US stated it would establish a base to enable experimental habitation. America would be first and would claim lunar rights.

Paul poured himself coffee from his thermos. "We're finally going to have a couple of guys living on the Moon, and we can't be at peace with each other on Earth—well done, Mankind." Paul stepped down and walked around to the front of his vehicle to appreciate the majestic mountains and the Trossachs National Park.

The warmth of the sun played over the area and a light breeze fanned the masses of heather.

"Meanwhile, I'm happy to appreciate a world within a world." Paul sipped coffee and stared in wonder as a herd of red deer trotted along together on a hillside less than a mile away.

For an hour, the thirty-year-old was content to relax, sitting on a large boulder near the coach. Apart from seeing the deer, two kestrels appeared, hovering and diving like tiny missiles when they saw prey. A mountain hare ran past, chased by a fox. Paul marvelled at the abundance of wildlife to

be seen simply by sitting still in such a beautiful setting. The highlight occurred when a golden eagle soared overhead on the thermals, making delicate adjustments with its broad wings.

A faint buzzing had Paul reach for his mobile phone. He selected speaker. “Hi, Dawn—how’s it going with you guys up there?” He held the device out of the direct sunlight so he could see the tour guide’s lovely face while she spoke.

“Paul, have you been keeping up with the news?”

“I tried earlier, but it was a bit sketchy, so I’ve been sitting outside the coach to appreciate nature.” He laughed. “I couldn’t watch much more news anyway—that pig-headed windbag across the pond makes a great nation look bad.”

“Reception is better up here, and one of our group has just shown me a news clip on her tablet—that blundering fool Stamp is shit-stirring with the Middle East and the Far East.”

“Yeah, I caught part of the interview with Carrie Myers and Mr Stamp, and then the President of the EuroFed asking—”

“Paul, that was *ages* ago—please watch the news bulletin that’s on *now*—we’re on our way back down the mountain.”

“Whoa, Dawn, it can’t be *that* bad—you guys should be up there for a long while yet.”

“Please, just watch the bulletin.”

Paul got up and lifted his thermos. He climbed into the luxury coach and eased his light physique into Dawn’s regular seat. Paul switched on the TV monitor. The newsreader once again was Nick Fowler.

“... and further to the comments from the White House earlier, the Middle East and the Far East nations have issued the American president with an ultimatum.” The man at the newsdesk appeared visibly shaken. “The statement from the Middle East says, *‘You have addressed us and are treating our nations disrespectfully for the last time. You now have one hour to appear on international media to make a public apology. If you do not, the representatives of the Middle East Alliance will initiate strikes on your irksome fleets which are now in our waters so far from home. We do not make idle threats.’* An offer for the spokesman to be interviewed on camera was refused.”

The reporter’s eyes glistened, and he swallowed hard before continuing. “A statement from the Southeast Oriental Peninsula goes further. *‘If you do not make an apology and stand down from your supposedly exalted position, many of your countrymen will pay the price. Are you able to protect the fleet you have in our waters, and your latest manned spacecraft, Mr President?’* There is so far no response from the US.”

Paul shook his head. “You stupid, pompous bastard, Stamp. Get on TV and apologise.”

The British Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Grace Jeffries appeared on the screen, standing in Downing Street—as she had, only twice since her recent election win. *‘I will not lie to*

*you, my fellow citizens—we are in a dire situation. As I've stated before, we have tried like others, to mediate. More recently, we have continued to monitor the declining relations between three major regions of the world. My government now suggests that individual preparations are advised* —' The screen became a haze of colours and the sound distorted into unintelligible whining and whistling.

“Damn it.” Paul changed channels and found the same problem. Five different channels all had the same hazy image of the first black woman Prime Minister of the UK, but her words were swallowed up in the ether. Paul returned to the channel likely to give the strongest signal.

*‘...and so my friends, it grieves me to ask that you are prepared and resilient wherever you may go to protect yourselves. Please go to your safe havens, and may God watch over us all ...’* The sound faded and the Prime Minister’s tears were flowing as she was ushered away to her car by two men in suits. Media crews were leaving equipment behind and running from the famous London street.

“What the fuck—” Paul stared at the monitor in disbelief. “This has to be a well-acted rehearsal—it doesn’t end this way—it should take days and weeks more of protracted international discussion—”

A different newsreader appeared on screen in the London studio, and it was a face that any viewer would recognise from the man’s days as a front-line war correspondent. He was rarely seen in a studio environment. “Hello, this is Mark Harris taking over the ongoing bulletins. If you are still watching this programme for whatever reason, I’ll be staying with you for as long as we have the power to transmit.”

Paul had a strange sense of foreboding. He’d watched Mark Harris report from a dozen war zones. This was a reporter who had been shot twice doing his job and was never phased. He was now broadcasting from the comfort of a London studio and for the first time, his features bore traces of concern—something terrible must be on the horizon.

A glance at his phone told Paul that he’d had three missed calls from Dawn up on the mountain. Paul’s device was registering the incoming signal but giving no audio alert to the user. It was a sign that he’d have no sound if he tried to speak to Dawn. Not for the first time, he was astounded at being so high in altitude but not being able to capture a reliable phone signal.

On checking his treasured analogue watch his thoughts raced. Time was passing fast, as it did when everybody would have liked a little bit more. Paul had a superb knowledge of his surroundings and the journey time to the nearest towns and villages. For personal satisfaction, he pulled out his digital screen map. He measured the time and distance to those places closest to the present location.

If he didn't know at which point Dawn might be with the passengers, it was impossible to tell how long it would take before they reached the coach. The forestry was too dense on the lower slopes, and the drone kept on the coach had been damaged earlier in the day. There was no way to see if Dawn and the tourists were still higher up on the mountain. Paul tried to locate her with her personal transponder, which ought to show on the local area map—nothing. A great day for malfunctions—not communications.

Paul took several deep breaths and scrolled up and down, left and right on the map screen. “Nearest large town, Fort William to the north. Nearest small towns, Clifton to the east, and Oban to the west. There's nowhere within ninety-minutes, even if I was driving a bloody hover racing car.” The nearest big city was Glasgow, but Paul knew it would be grid-locked with thousands of people in panic. Besides which, it was too far away. He looked to the mountainside and forestry again—nothing. “Come on, Dawn, bring them back, please.”

Paul went through the coach and rapidly tidied the seats on both sides, lifting coats and other items and placing them in the overhead lockers. “Best be prepared for a worst-case scenario and a race to somewhere safe—but where?”

When he'd done all he could, Paul turned up the volume on the TV monitor when he saw the consummate professional addressing the camera. There was no sound. Beneath a worried Mark Harris on the screen were rolling headlines: *'Latest ... the United States 4th Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea retaliates as it is pounded by missiles from the Middle East ... the United States 5th Fleet in the Indian Ocean retaliates as it is bombarded from the Middle East ... the United States 7th Fleet is under attack from the Southeast Oriental Peninsula ... the United States manned rocket to the Moon has disappeared from scanners ... The United States declares war ... missiles have been fired ... Russia has warned of retaliatory strikes ... intercontinental ballistic missiles fired from submarines in both the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean ... European missile sites have been ...'*

The TV picture disappeared—no sound—no screenshot—nothing. It was as if it had no power, but the machine was solar-powered, and the little red light was on. The problem had to be at the source—the news station in London or the rebroadcast units.

Paul checked his watch. “No chance of reaching a town of any size now—where the hell are you, Dawn?”

“Paul ... Paul ... Paul.” The urgent cries were coming from the forest. It was Dawn, the pretty, thirty-year-old guide.

Paul looked along the two minor tracks across the road. Dawn was running toward the road from the left path. Behind her were a line of people in a variety of outfits. Most were dressed complete with hiking boots, ready for a day going up a mountain to sightsee and have a picnic at altitude. The

young woman at the front of the line looked unusually anxious, and those in her wake looked distraught. Some were crying as they ran.

Paul stepped out onto the narrow road to let them see it was clear to run straight to the coach. “Get onboard—Dawn, don’t try to talk—*please*, just check off the passengers. Remember, we’re looking for twenty-one people apart from us.”

“What ... are we ... going to ... do ... Paul?” Her question was based on logic, not panic, as she threw her backpack onto the coach between her seat and the driver’s seat. “Where can we go?”

“I have a plan—count these people and get the air conditioning on.” He turned to the passengers as they approached. “Please ... get to your seats and buckle-up.”

Some people were walking because they were now tired, and others supported them with an arm around the shoulders. The tourists were aged between twenty-five and fifty-five, and they were all British citizens, so at least no language barriers existed.

A tall, muscular black man in his twenties came out of the track with his arm around a woman in her fifties. He whispered something to her, and though she was crying, she nodded and tried to smile. She thanked her handsome companion and walked to the coach. The man stayed on the road at the rear of the coach.

“Hi, Paul, I’m Calvin, and I’m the last one.”

“Thanks, Calvin.”

Calvin glanced over his shoulders again, ensuring nobody else was around. He looked Paul in the eye. “Have we got any hope of reaching somewhere?”

“I’ll make a brief announcement when we get going, mate. Thanks for keeping your head and helping Dawn.”

The two men walked briskly toward the front of the coach.

“Dawn did a great job calming everybody enough to get them moving,” Calvin said. “We nearly had a riot up there, and we’ve got a couple of people who want to throw blame around locally. It’s not your fault. You and Dawn get them organised, and I’ll watch your back, mate.”

Paul briefly smiled and nodded his gratitude.

They climbed onto the coach, and as Calvin went down the aisle to take his seat, Paul half-turned. “If we can keep it together, Dawn, we’ll get through this. Is everybody onboard?”

“Yes, we’ve got all of them. I want to help, but what can I do now?”

“Buckle-up and switch the PA through for me.” Paul climbed into his seat and lifted the thin extendable arm of his mic so that it sat low between him and the windscreen. He started the engine, closed the door, and out of habit checked his mirrors before pulling out onto the road. Nothing had been on the route since they’d turned up early in the morning.

Passengers started shouting their worries before Paul got a chance to speak.

“Where are we going?”

“What are we going to do?”

“Are we all to die out here?”

Paul hit the air horn, and the verbal noise reduced to a murmur. “Please ... listen to me, and don’t interrupt.” He glanced at Dawn and shook his head. “I’ve tried to keep up with the bulletins, but we’ve lost the national media services—both radio *and* television. We’re at least two hours from the nearest town—” Shouting and screaming ensued until Paul slammed on the brakes.

“Listen—we’re all in this together, so if you want to stand a chance, shut up and *listen*.”

A man in his forties stood up. “Who gave you the right to say what we do?”

Paul unclipped his belt, left his seat and stood in the aisle. “Do you have a better knowledge of the Scottish Highlands than me?”

“No, but—”

“Well fucking sit down and *shut up*—I’m trying to save our lives—*all* of them.”

“I don’t think I like—”

“Hey,” Calvin said, standing. “Do as Paul says—he has a plan.”

Paul got behind the wheel, buckled-up and set off again. He addressed the passengers as if it were a regular rerouting service call. “I’ve checked all the possibilities, and we have to be prepared to improvise regarding a safe haven. I repeat ... we are two hours from the nearest town. Any village out here will not appreciate a coach-load of people trying to break into their safe place—none will be large enough.” He swallowed. “I’m taking us to a location which will be big enough to take all of us, but I need you to trust me and not panic—it will do no good.”

As the coach speeded up, Paul used every available inch of road, leaning the big luxury vehicle into bends. As they climbed gradients the task was made slightly more manageable because there was no traffic to negotiate in either direction.

Paul could hear mumbling and cursing in the rows of seats behind him. Occasionally there were screams from people realising the full impact of what they were trying to escape from.

There was a blinding flash, and for a few seconds, their world was intense white light—no colour and no shade. Paul was temporarily blinded, and at sixty miles per hour in a coach on a mountain road, that was not good. He bluffed for a few seconds by holding a course in what he hoped was the middle of the road. What did he have to lose?

A man shouted. “Oh my God—look over there at the sky.”

Paul glanced to his left or as he knew it—westward. “Oh, shit,” he murmured.

Dawn turned to him. “What *is* that, Paul?”

“It’s the rising mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion.”

“How come we haven’t felt anything?” Dawn looked from Paul to the distant column and back again. “It’s huge.”

“What we’re seeing is the column of the explosion as it rises into the stratosphere—it could be miles out in the Atlantic. We may not feel any effects at this distance, and the head of the mushroom cloud has already disappeared beyond the cloud base.”

“Why would anybody send a missile into the Atlantic?”

“To take out submarines or other naval shipping which is carrying missiles.”

“Oh ... I don’t know if I can handle this—” Dawn shook her head.

“You’ll be okay, and I need you, Dawn. We *all* need you. I know you can handle pressure, and this will be a testing time for all of us.”

Dawn nodded and briefly closed her eyes, taking several deep breaths.

“Jesus Christ—look at that wave out there!” The voice was an older man, and his tone expressed his fear.

The wave was many miles away to the west, but even as it rose high and raced toward the land, it told a story in itself—a gigantic tsunami ... unheard of on the west coast of Scotland. It could only be more terrifying if you knew how many towns and villages were in its path and would succumb to the water.

As he slowed a little and steered around the next right-hand bend, Paul knew he should be able to look north and see the Great Glen between the peaks. From the altitude they’d reached, he could now see there were fewer lochs, but they were much more significant than they should be. The watercourses were reacting fast to the displacement of the eastern Atlantic.

As the coach straightened onto the next section of road, the nearest mountain loomed ahead, and the passengers were in a fresh panic regarding why the vehicle was travelling so fast. The murmurs, screams and shouts started again. Now they were ignored by the driver who was on a mission. Paul accelerated as best he could, and then the road levelled.

“Everybody ... hold on ... brace yourselves for a bump.” Paul’s shouted warning didn’t require the PA system.

Dawn gripped her armrests. “What is that up ahead ... that thick black line across the road?”

“It’s a gap in the road surface ... wherever the explosions are ... no matter how far away, they’ll cause earthquakes.”

“Paul ... the black line ... the gap ... is getting ... wider ... Paul ... *Paul!*” Dawn continued to grip her armrests and raised her legs, bending them at the knee to place her feet on the dash.

Paul took the coach up to a speed never intended for such a machine, except on a test track. The black area on the road ahead was getting wider and at eighty miles per hour, Paul was approaching

at a non-negotiable rate. This had become a do or die choice. Paul was making the call on behalf of himself and his passengers.

When they were less than one hundred metres away, it was apparent that the fracture in the road was at least three metres wide and still expanding. Paul briefly contemplated that the distant side of the road was descending as it moved away.

Paul took the massive, but powerful machine and its passengers onward, accelerating with every ounce of energy available to him. At less than fifty metres away from the widening crevasse, the accelerator was pressed firmly to the floor and the coach was travelling at ninety miles per hour. The only thing blocking out fear for the young man behind the wheel was the level of panic and noise inside the vehicle.

Paul kept his eyes open, and his foot down—focusing on the far side of the increasing gap.

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