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Influences

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Influences - Prolog

Big Billy Townsend loved the survivalist forums. He couldn't wait to use all the knowledge he'd gathered. It was all printed out and kept in three-ring binders. Big was good on organization. He'd done that in the Army, in a Logistics unit. But he'd been issued an M-16 and he practiced with it every chance they would let him. Later, when his M-16 was replaced with the M-4 he continued to practice every chance they would let him. It was just too bad he couldn't trick it out then like some of the guys on the forums.

But Big was out of the service now. He could do whatever he wanted. Stuff the guys on the forums did. Especially the gun forums. Especially Gunkid. Big couldn't understand why people always made fun of him and got him kicked off the forums.

He had good ideas. The Assault Wheelbarrow thing was a little bit off, but even some of the posters had suggested using garden carts and game haulers. Same thing, if you asked Big. He had a game cart to carry back stuff to the van when he collected it. It had been pretty simple to add some hard steel plate to the bottom, in case he had to use it for cover.

Big had tried keeping a small dog like Gunkid, but they kept dying on him. Usually for lack of water, or getting left locked in the van for two or three days at a time in the summer.

He wished he knew how Gunkid made his .22 rimfire conversion for the M-4 work. Big had one, like Gunkid suggested, but it only worked part of the time. Now the suppressor, or can, as Gunkid called it (so did Big), it worked great. It hadn't been that hard to make and install. The tax wasn't that much. He'd saved up a bunch of money when he was in service, and being a machinist in a union shop paid very well. And they let him make things on his off time. At least they did when they didn't know about it. That's how Big had made the can.

That was just one component of the tricked out M-4 he'd built, piece by piece. He'd thought about making it full-auto. It wouldn't be hard for him to do. He was a pretty good machinist. But BATFE wouldn't approve his application for the tax stamp. Since he'd asked, and been turned down, Big figured he was under the microscope now and walked the straight and narrow. Sort of. He'd made the parts, and made the changes to the lower receiver, but didn't install the parts. He'd hidden them well. From the outside, the M-4 looked semi-auto only. Only he knew that it would only take a few minutes after he recovered the parts to make it full-auto.

There was a Picatinny rail on the flattop upper receiver with a night vision scope. All four sides of the forearm had the rails, too. Big had added a vertical grip, Surefire light, and laser to them. He was set to go. Big figured Gunkid would be proud of Big, taking Gunkid's ideas and carrying them even further.

Of course Big had lots of magazines and the 10,000 rounds of surplus ammo many of the guys on the forums recommended. And he knew just where he would use some of the ammo, when the time came, if push came to shove.

Big had been coming home one afternoon, early because of a problem with the machine shop electricity. A delivery truck was unloading a bunch of five or six gallon buckets at the house on the north corner of Big's street where it met 9th. Big hoped it wasn't all beans and rice. He'd make them pay if it was. Everybody said Mountain House was the way to go. And MRE's.

Of course, he had a few cases of MRE's stored in the basement of the house he rented. He had 'liberated' them when he was in service. They should still be good when stuff happened, because that was going to be soon, the way Big saw it. He didn't have his fingers crossed, but was close to it.

He'd liberated a few more things while he was in Logistics. Some were in the basement; some were buried in the back yard.

Influences - Chapter 1

"Come on, Jill. You know you want to," Frank urged his wife to go to the range with him.

"I have to pick up Bobbie in a little while."

"I thought Tony was picking her up."

"No. She's mad at Tony at the moment. Now she has a crush on Eldon. And he's got a motorcycle. We laid down the law about riding motorcycles. If you remember, she threw a fit, but she's honoring the restriction."

"At least she is honoring something," replied Frank. "So okay. I'm going to go ahead then. If you want, bring her out. I'd sure like to get her to at least try the 10/22. She might actually enjoy it."

"I'll try." They touched lips and Frank headed for the door.

When he went out he noticed an old Dodge van driving by very slowly. It appeared that the driver was looking over the house. Frank sort of half waved and the guy quickly looked away and sped off.

"I don't think I like that," he muttered and went back into the house.

"Honey! You're back," Jill said, coming out of the kitchen into the living room.

"Some guy just now drove by. It looked like he was casing the joint. Be

extra careful and be sure and set the alarm when you leave.”

“I always do,” Jill said, a tiny frown on her face. “But I will be extra careful. It wasn’t a rusty looking blue van, was it?”

“It was, as a matter of fact.”

“I think he lives down the street. I’ve seen it before. Never paid it much mind.”

“Oh. Okay. But be careful anyway.”

They kissed again and again Frank went outside. There was no sign of the van and Frank shrugged it off.

He’d been at the range for an hour when Jill and Bobbie showed up. They’d brought Bobbie before, so she had the same shooting glasses and hearing protection that Jill and Frank used. She looked a little glum, Frank thought. “What’s the matter, Sweetie?”

“Boys!” she said. “Eldon doesn’t want to see me any more if I won’t ride with him, and I can’t.”

“I hope you understand why we don’t want you riding with someone at your age.”

“I do. Kinda. A couple of the other girls said they wouldn’t ride with him anymore, so I guess there really is a good reason not to.”

Jill and Frank exchanged a look. Their daughter seemed to be growing up, starting to make some good decisions on her own, with just a little guidance.

“I brought the 10/22 with me. I thought you might want to shoot it.”

“Sure. Why not. Nothing else to do here.”

She wasn't quite grown up yet, Frank decided, but she was definitely on the right track. He coached her through the safety aspects of shooting again. He'd taught her when she was twelve, but she didn't have much interest in shooting so he hadn't pressed it. She was sixteen now.

Bobbie was smiling at the end of their range time. “That is pretty cool, with the long magazines.”

“You're an excellent shot,” Jill told her daughter.

“Sure are,” added Frank. “Better than either one of us. I suspect it will be the same when you graduate to .223.”

“Really?”

Both her parents nodded.

“Cool.”

In celebration, though they didn't tell Bobbie that, Jill and Frank took Bobbie to her favorite restaurant. Both also caught Bobbie's look of surprise when one of the bus boys came over with a water pitcher to fill their glasses.

“Hi, Bobbie. These your folks?”

“Yeah. Mom, Dad, this is Denver Tremaine. We go to school together.”

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Constantine. It's nice to meet you.” He shook hands with Jill and then Frank and then filled the glasses with water.

“I didn't know you worked here,” Bobbie said.

“A month now. Just until school starts. You know. For spending money.”

Only Jill noticed Bobbie’s slight blush. She was still getting an allowance and just had a few chores around the house to do. None of her friends worked, either.

“That’s great,” Bobbie said.

Just then their server came up and Denver left the table. When the server had taken their orders, Frank asked Bobbie, “Seems like a nice kid. How well do you know him?”

“Not very well. We’ve had a couple of classes together the last two years. His family has only been here that long. I think he said once he was from Texas. Or Utah. I can’t remember which.”

Again it was Jill that noticed Bobbie’s eyes following Denver whenever he was close. He seemed to have a very good rapport with the customers. That, Frank did notice. Jill could tell he was impressed by the boy as much as Bobbie was.

While Frank was paying the cashier, Bobbie hung back and spoke to Denver for a moment as he began to clear their table. She was smiling when she joined Jill and Frank. As soon as they were in the car, Bobbie said, “I think I should get a job, like Denver.”

“Work is... Work,” Frank said, after a glance at Jill. “You sure you’re up to it?”

“Daddy! Yes, I’m up to it!”

“What kind of job, Sweetie?” Jill asked, turning in her seat to look at her daughter.

“I don’t know... bus person, I guess. Denver said they need a couple more. But just until school starts.”

Frank lifted his eyes to the rear view mirror. “Bobbie, if you want to, we’ll certainly support you.”

“That’s right,” Jill added, turning back around in her seat. “I’ll bring you down tomorrow so you can put in an application.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Jill and Frank had a long talk that evening, after Bobbie went to bed, about the merits of a sixteen year old having her own car. It was agreed that Jill would take Bobbie car shopping after she filled out the employment application at the restaurant.

Bobbie surprised Jill and Frank the next afternoon when Frank came in from work. She chose a 1981 LX model Volkswagen pickup truck. Not only was it a pickup, it had a manual transmission, and a diesel engine. When asked, rather incredulously, why she picked it, Bobbie said, “Pickups are cool. And with the bed cover on it, I don’t have to worry about more than one person at a time wanting to ride with me, plus I can lock my stuff up. And no one I know will want to drive it, since it is a stick. And the guy at the lot said it got really good mileage. Mother said it is in the right price range. And it’s red.”

“Well, I think you made a good choice. Even if it is red,” said Frank, with a laugh. “Come on, I want to get a look at this thing.”

Bobbie drove back home in her new used pickup. Fortunately, she had driven Jill’s car several times, so the manual shift wasn’t that big of a deal for her. She drove it to the restaurant the next day to start her new job as bus person. And then to school that fall. She also started spending

time with Denver, inviting him over to the house for dinner for a first date.

With fall came not only school, but heightened global political tensions. Two of the former Soviet Republics went communist again, and two more were on the verge. Russia itself, was having severe trouble feeding its population due to one of the wettest summers on record that had destroyed crops in the fields and caused billions in flood damage.

China had similar problems with its food supplies. And Taiwan was on the verge of announcing independence, with US support.

Korea tested a new medium range missile with nuclear warhead. One shot went over Japan to detonate deep under the water in the North Pacific. Another test had a missile with nuclear warhead flying over South Korea to a deep sea detonation in the Philippine Sea. Both were highly successful, bringing immediate calls for sanctions and intervention by the UN from Japan and South Korea, as well as the United States, and several other countries.

The Middle East was heating up, too, with Iran testing a nuclear device and several other regional powers reportedly buying, or in the process of making their own nuclear weapons.

Brazil became a nuclear nation with their unannounced test, throwing South America into turmoil. Venezuela announced they were on the verge of having their own nuclear weapons.

South Africa announced, officially, that they were a nuclear power.

The new Mexican/American border wall was less than half finished and on hold due to political maneuvering in Washington. There were more and more calls for the southwestern states of the US to be returned to Mexico. Mostly by Mexicans, but it was a hot topic in California

legislature.

Due to the influx of illegal weapons into Canada from the United States, by those Canadians fearful of the world political climate, not to mention their own government, that border was being tightened by the Canadians. Also influencing the Canadians was the drug traffic coming from the United States.

Australia and New Zealand were in the same boat, with gunrunning into their countries becoming rampant. They were also becoming somewhat fearful of the dominance the Chinese were beginning to develop in the region. There was even talk of a nuclear arsenal for Australia.

Things were heating up again between Pakistan and India, with some suspected meddling by the Chinese.

France and Great Britain were both having significant problems with their Moslem and Arab populations. Great Britain was also having great backlash over the restrictions on weapons, all the way down to kitchen knives. France was again dabbling in recreating their former colonial empire in Africa, with many of the African nations suffering civil wars, many due to the weather and famines, but many of them continuations of old tribal grudges.

Germany, too, was getting colonial aspirations, and even some talk of direct expansion. Also rumors of nuclear weapons development.

Climatologists were saying that Global Warming had passed the critical point and the effects would grow at an exponential rate. The world was already experiencing more and more violent weather due to the warming. Deserts were growing in some areas and others were subject to massive floods caused by heavy rainfall, besides the floods occurring along coastline due to the rising sea levels. There were food shortages all over the world, not just in the traditional famine areas.

The world was a powder keg, all it needed to explode was a match. The match came in the form of a rogue asteroid impact in northern China. Not a planet killer, by any means, but large, none the less. The asteroid was discovered three hours before impact. By the time the President of the United States had been notified of the asteroid it had impacted.

Influences - Chapter 2

“Dad! Dad! Mother!” called Bobbie. “Come in here and see this! Something bad has happened!”

Jill and Frank hurried into the living room. “What is it, Bobbie?” asked Frank as they stood in front of the TV. Bobbie was sitting on the edge of her chair. Denver was sitting in another chair. They had been watching a movie.

“I don’t know. They just said the President had a message for the nation. Everyone looked scared.”

Jill, and then Frank, took seats on the sofa to watch the broadcast. Moments later the President walked up to the podium. He looked grim. “My fellow Americans... Citizens of the world. It is my sad duty to inform you that an asteroid has impacted...” He fell silent when someone in uniform ran up from off camera and whispered into the president’s ear. There was pandemonium as the president hurried off without another word.

The network announcer came on after a few seconds of video of people in the press room milling around. “It seems, from what little the president had said, that there has been an asteroid impact.” She lifted one hand to her ear as if to settle the earpiece a little more securely.

“Yes. We are getting reports of a huge explosion in northern China

approximately fifteen minutes ago. We will... What?" She visibly paled. "Ladies and Gentlemen. We are getting reports that missiles are being launched at this moment. Minuteman missiles from the Dakotas. It would appear that we have just begun... No wait! I'm getting more..."

She fell silent, one hand still at her ear. "There are reports that the Chinese have launched nuclear missiles at the United States and that we have responded in kind. Take shelter immediately! Take shelter immediately!" The screen went white with static and then black as the power died.

"EMP! Down to the shelter, quick!" Frank said, jumping up from the sofa.

"My parents!" Denver cried, leaping up and heading for the front door. Frank stepped over and took the boy by the arm.

"No! Denver! We have a shelter," Bobbie yelled.

"We don't," Denver said. "My parents..."

"Would not want you out at a time like this. They'll do what they can. That's all we can do ourselves. St. Louis is probably a target. If it is and you're not in shelter..." He looked over at Jill. She nodded. "We'll let them in if they think to come get you."

"Okay," Denver said. He was hanging his head. He looked up at Frank. "Thanks."

"Bobbie, show Denver the shelter! Jill, get the fresh food from the fridge and take it with you. I'm going to turn the gas, water, and electricity off."

"Hurry, Frank!" Jill called as she headed for the kitchen. Bobbie and Denver followed. Jill started to scold them, but let it go. She handed

each one several items from the refrigerator and sent them on down to the shelter. She had everything else she wanted in her hands when Frank came running back in.

There came a white flash, visible through the blinds on the kitchen window. It faced toward downtown St. Louis.

“That’s it!” Frank grabbed the gallon of milk sitting on the counter and they both ran to the steps to the basement. They were in the shelter before the ground wave hit. Then they felt the blast wave shake the house above them again. The simple, though heavy, metal blast door that Frank had mounted on the entrance protected them from the overpressure of the blast wave. Bobbie had instructed Denver to close it as soon as her parents came in.

All other penetrations into the shelter were kept closed if they weren’t actually being used.

“What do we do now?” Bobbie quietly asked.

“Wait,” Frank said. “We wait and watch the fallout meter. The remote sensor is out by the patio.”

“Is this the meter?” Denver asked. He was looking around the shelter with interest.

“That’s it. Is it showing anything?” Frank asked.

“No,” replied Denver.

“Okay. Check it every once in a while and let me know when it starts showing anything.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Constantine.” He pulled one of the chairs from the small table nearby and sat down where he could easily check the radiation

survey meter.

Bobbie helped her mother put away the fresh things they'd brought down. They had a 12v heater/cooler they used on camping trips. It was set for cool and the items placed in it. Frank started checking everything in the shelter, wanting to make sure everything on his checklist was there. He would have a few minutes before radiation became a problem. He could go outside and get anything he'd forgotten.

But the family had planned well. Everything was there and in its place. Suddenly the shelter shook again from a ground shock, and then they felt, more than heard, the already stressed house come down when a second blast wave hit it.

The four exchanged glances. "They hit us with two," Frank said after a moment.

"You think there will be more?" Denver asked.

"I don't know, Denver. I wasn't expecting two. Depends on who all targets whom. If that last piece of news is correct, it's the Chinese. But with the US retaliating, there is no telling if Russia hit us or the Chinese, or both. Or neither. Or..." Frank's words faded away for a moment. "We may never know exactly what happened today. I'm just glad we had the foresight to prepare."

Everyone fell silent, each lost in his or her own thoughts for a while. An hour and a half after the attack, Denver announced that the needle of the survey meter was trying to move. Frank checked it. It was on the lowest setting. There was very little radiation at the moment, but the needle was rising as they all watched. Frank switched ranges when the needle reached the halfway mark in the lowest range.

They took turns all through the evening and night, recording the outside radiation every hour, watching for a peak. The readings did peak at a

little over 100r, and started down, but it reversed and rapidly climbed back up to 100r and then past. "From the second device," Frank whispered to Denver. Denver nodded. Bobbie and Jill were trying to get some sleep.

Though the Constantine Family, plus one, didn't know it, the war raged for five full days, as first one, and then another nuclear power was dragged into it to 'protect their interests'. However, they were given some indication, when on the fourth day, with a small AM/FM radio hooked to an outside wire antenna the radio suddenly screeched and quit working.

Frank quickly unhooked the radio and grounded the antenna again. He began checking other electronic equipment in the shelter, but everything else was still working all right, including the laptop computer they kept in the faraday cage with the other sensitive electronics.

As far as they could tell, St. Louis took only the two warheads. The radiation had started to fade after peaking at 210r, but suddenly jumped to 300r on the third day as fallout arrived from targets to the west and northwest of them. But that was the final peak. The radiation continued to fall at the rate of one-tenth the radiation for every seven-fold increase in time.

They kept themselves busy in the shelter. Frank and Jill had prepared well, even with the extra person. There was plenty of food and water, including some comfort foods. Sanitation needs were handled by a chemical toilet in an alcove with a curtain. Bathing was sponge baths in the toilet alcove.

Two days after the destruction of the AM/FM radio, Frank took the computer out of the faraday cage and let Bobbie and Denver watch a few movies on DVD.

Five days after the peak reading Frank put on a Tyvek hooded and

booted coverall, rubber boots, rubber gloves, and a MSA Millennium respirator. The radiation was under 1.0r. He worked his way through the debris in the basement and took a look around.

There was a good foot of snow on the ground and it was snowing at the time. And it was dark. Very dark for two in the afternoon. And cold, despite very little wind. They had not realized the weather from inside the shelter. It had stayed more than warm enough without auxiliary heat. He didn't stay out long.

Frank had a grim look on his face when he decontaminated, unsuited, and went back into the shelter. "The house is a loss, but I think, if we are careful, we can salvage much of our stuff," he told the other three. "We can get out whenever we want, but by the seven-ten rule, we should stay in the shelter for another month or so. This late January. Early March and we should be able to go out and stay out, as long as we don't get more fallout from more attacks."

Denver started to speak, but Frank cut him off. "We'll make the occasional trip outside before then, of short duration. The first will be to check on Denver's parents." Denver smiled.

"Let's give it another two days. Hopefully it will warm up and the snow will stop."

"Nuclear winter, Dad?" Bonnie asked.

"Or asteroid winter," Frank replied.

Frank checked outside again two days later, in the early morning. A light snow was still coming down and there was two feet or more on the ground. And it was still cold. He came back in and unsuited, to put more clothes on, to Denver's great relief. Denver wasn't as chunky as Frank, and was a little taller, but they came up with some extra clothes for

Denver to wear under one of the Tyvek coveralls and respirator.

Frank insisted on the protective gear, not sure if there might still be some light fallout mixed in with the snow. He had checked the falling snow with another survey meter. It didn't really indicate any additional fallout, but he wasn't going to take a chance.

"Do you shoot?" Frank asked Denver after they had suited up.

"I've hunted rabbits with my Dad. I'm not a very good shot."

"Twenty-two or shotgun?"

"Twenty-two."

"Okay. Jill, get my PTR-91 and one of the 10/22's for Denver. And a couple of musette bags to carry magazines in. Never be able to move if I put on LBE bundled up this way."

"I need the keys to all the vehicles. I doubt any will run, with at least two EMP bursts, but we'll try."

Jill and Bobbie gave Frank their respective keys. Denver had to partially un-suit to get his car keys out of his jeans pocket. With keys in hand, Frank and Denver headed out. The snow was still about two feet deep, but was light and powdery. Frank tried each one of the vehicles. Only Bobbie's little diesel VW pickup would start, much to his amazement.

He checked the fuel gauge. Three-quarters of a tank. "Good," Frank told Denver. Get in and we'll be on our way. Keep your .22 handy."

They were flagged down twice on their way to Denver's home. Both times by men rummaging through damaged houses.

"Hey! Mister! You got any food? Why you wearing the radiation gear?"

It's been way over two weeks. The radiation is gone."

"I'm not one to take chances," Frank said. He decided it was a lost cause to tell the heavily bundled up man that there was still radiation, just lower levels. If he'd been going out scavenging after only two weeks he would probably come down with severe radiation poisoning.

The second man was armed, though he made no move to draw the pistol carried behind his belt. He too was bundled up against the cold and apparently scavenging for food. "You have a vehicle that works. I'll give you a thousand bucks for it, right now."

Frank shook his head. "No thanks. You seen anyone else out and about?"

"A couple of people. We're all looking for food. You have any to spare?" The man glanced at the bed cover of the truck.

"Sorry, no," Frank said carefully. His right hand inched toward the PTR-91 leaning against the seat, the butt on the floorboards. "We've got to go check on this boy's parents. Good luck."

The man nodded. Frank was watching in the rear view mirror. The man's right hand went to the gun in his belt, but he didn't pull it. Frank sighed in relief. "We're going to have to be very careful, Denver. As soon as we get out of sight of the guy back there I want to switch places with you. You can drive and I'll keep watch. I want to be able to react quickly if trouble starts and I can't do that behind the wheel."

"Yes, sir."

After a couple more blocks they made the driver switch. Denver was as careful driving as Frank had been. The front wheel drive VW was doing all right, pushing through the snow without much trouble. They had to double back and take alternate routes when the road was blocked with

debris from the damaged houses. This stretch was much more badly damaged than around the Constantine home.

They were getting closer to ground zero. Frank checked the survey meter. "Rate is climbing, Denver. Well over one, now. They got more fallout here than at home."

Denver gripped the steering wheel more tightly. They weren't far from his house now. Then they were there. Denver could only stare at the remains of the house in despair. It was knocked down flat, half of it in the basement, half out.

"Stay here, Denver," Frank said gently. "I'll go check."

"No," Denver replied, "I need to see for myself."

The two exited the truck and slung their weapons and musette bags and approached the house. It took several minutes of careful searching before they found the bodies. It looked like they had been caught totally unaware.

They were still in the chairs that had been in the living room, crushed beneath a portion of wall, with much of the ceiling and roof on top of it. Only their legs were showing. Denver turned away, a stricken look on his face.

"I'm sorry, Denver," Frank said, touching the boy on the shoulder in condolence. Denver turned and before Frank realized it, was hugging Frank and sobbing on his shoulder. Frank said a few consoling words and held Denver for several long minutes. Finally Denver lifted his head and stepped back.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Constantine."

"Think nothing of it," Frank said. "Let's go back to the truck and go

home.”

“But we need to get things from the house. You said so.”

“I’m having second thoughts about that, Denver. It could be dangerous. And with your parents...”

“I can deal with it now, Mr. Constantine. I want to at least get some clothes and things.”

“Only if you are sure you’re up to it,” Frank replied. Denver nodded and turned back toward the remains of the house.

They worked carefully, but steadily, taking everything they could find and get to that might have a use in the future. The pickup bed was nearly full when they finally gave up finding anything else. A front had moved in and it was again snowing and the temperature was dropping.

“Let’s go, Denver,” Frank called over. Denver cast one last long look at the point in the remains of the house where his parents were and then went to the truck. “Denver,” Frank said, as they climbed into the cab of the truck, “If it is at all possible we’ll come back in the spring and give them a proper burial. I just wish I could think of something to do now.”

“It’s okay, Mr. Constantine. This is just the way it is. Many things are going to be different now.”

They were silent the rest of the way back to the Constantine’s. They didn’t see anyone else on the way back. They stacked everything in the basement, except one large duffle bag they’d found and Denver had filled with his clothing.

They decontaminated and went into the shelter. Bobbie and Jill both looked at the door behind Denver and Frank when they entered. Frank shook his head. “Oh, Denver,” Bobbie said softly. “I am so sorry.” She

led him over to a chair and sat down beside him, holding his hand in hers.

Frank quietly filled Jill in on what had transpired. “I think we are going to need to be pretty careful,” he said after the explanation. “I think one of the men we met seriously considered trying to hijack us.”

They began to go out and salvage what they could of the household. It snowed often and for long periods of time. Twice Frank ran off scavengers, both times they were aggressive and he had to show the PTR to get them to leave. March finally rolled around and they didn’t have to worry about radiation so much. With the house destroyed they continued to live in the shelter.

Ever mindful of the consequences of a disabling injury, the four began to take apart the house, piece by piece. It was still cold with the occasional snow flurries, even into April.

Influences - Chapter 3

Big was sick. Big time. He’d started to get up from the sofa when the bomb went off and head for that house near ninth street, but the blast wave had done a lot of damage to the house he rented. He’d got banged up pretty good getting loose from the debris that had fallen in on him. The fallout was coming down before he got loose.

Scared now, Big worked his way into the basement and stacked everything he could around the deepest corner, including all of his MRE’s and two fifteen gallon water barrels. He was surprised that the radiation level was so low when he checked it with the old Civil Defense survey meter he’d found on e-bay. It didn’t occur to him that it might not be reading correctly, since he’d deigned to have it tested and calibrated after he got it.

He was receiving much more radiation than he thought. The symptoms began to show up three days after the attack started with the nausea and vomiting, and headaches. But he began to feel better a couple of days later, but was very weak. Big decided to wait for a while before he went up to the house near ninth street.

He slept most of the time, between meals and bathroom breaks during the first ten days. He noticed a lot of hair on the rolled up clothing he was using for a pillow and gave his hair a tug. It came out by handfuls.

All of his binders with survival information were still in the bedroom. He was afraid to try to get them, even though his meter now read well below 1r. Big hugged the M-4 clone to his chest and sat and rocked in the small shelter he had created until he fell asleep again.

A few days later he noticed a pink tinge to his urine. And there was blood on the spoon from the MRE entrée he was eating. He was bleeding internally. Big looked over at the M-4 that was close at hand. But he looked away from it and finished the MRE. "You'd better have Mountain House!" he muttered under his breath.

By mid-February Big was down to one MRE per day. He finally ventured outside, but hurried back in. It felt bitter cold to him. That small amount of activity had worn him out. He waited two more days, and then bundled up and went out again, M-4 at the ready.

He checked the house next to him. It was as badly damaged as his own. It was all he could do not to puke when he worked his way down into the basement. There were five dead people, frozen stiff. It was difficult, but he searched all five bodies and recovered almost three-hundred dollars and a couple of nice rings. He didn't find anything else in the basement worth taking.

The kitchen had the least damage to it than any other room in the house,

but it was bare. Not a scrap of food. Big cursed for a few minutes, and then went back to his basement, exhausted.

Doing the same type of scavenging of the houses close to him over the next month, Big recovered some food, quite a bit of money and jewelry, but no guns or ammunition. There were several more bodies. He'd yet to see anyone alive. A lot of the wet pack canned and bottled food items had frozen and burst. The cans he took, the glass he left behind, worried that he might swallow a sliver of glass and it would cut him up inside.

He was regaining some strength, but was still weak. Big did manage to get his van started and siphoned some gasoline from several cars after he'd found a container. By mid-March he decided it was time to visit the house near ninth street.

After loading his modified game cart into the back of the van, he started it up and pulled out into the street. He went slowly, the M-4 at hand, but he didn't see much. It was snowing. It suddenly dawned on him that he wasn't sure he'd be able to find the house. They all looked the same. But it was third in from ninth street. That should let him find it.

Find it, he did, only it wasn't a house anymore, even a damaged one. It was several big piles of material, carefully sorted. Suddenly a man stepped out from behind one of the piles. He was aiming a big, black rifle at Big.

"We don't want any trouble," Frank said. "If you're friendly, kill the engine and drop the keys outside the window, and then keep your hands on the window where I can see them."

Caught totally by surprise, Big didn't think. He reacted, flooring the accelerator and grabbing the M-4. He'd put in the full auto conversion parts and the .22 rimfire adapter. He let go a long burst, but the thing jammed on him. He dropped it and put both hands on the wheel. The van was trying to fishtail.

Frank jumped back behind the pile of lumber when he saw the barrel of the gun appear in the open window of the van. He had no clue where the rounds went, but none landed near him. He saw Jill, Bobbie, and Denver cautiously raise their heads above the level of the hole in the new roof for the basement. All three were armed.

He waved them back and eased around the lumber pile to look down the street. The van was making a zigzag path through the melting snow on the street. "Okay," Frank called and the others came out.

"What went on?" Jill asked, looking in the same direction as Frank. Denver and Bobbie turned around and watched in the other direction, as they'd been trained to do while all of them were out of the basement.

"I don't know," Frank said. "When I gave the standard speech he pulled an M-16 it looked like and fired on me. Sure didn't sound like a 5.56, though. But it was full auto."

"Drats!" Jill said. "We're going to have to start keeping a guard, aren't we?"

"I'm afraid so," Frank replied. "I think it was that van from down the street. I guess it is old enough not to have engine electronics. Kids, you keep a watch. I want to get back to what I was doing."

"Okay, Dad."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Constantine."

Big took a round-about way back to his house, shaking the entire time. He laid the shaking off to the cold, and not fear. "I'll make them pay for ambushing me that way," he muttered over and over. "And they'd better have more Mountain House, too."

It took some time and he was exhausted when he finished, but Big dug out the caches he'd buried in the back yard, of items he'd taken from the military when he was in service.

He waited another full week before he decided to try again. He was feeling marginally better but was almost out of food, and he was melting some of the remaining snow for drinking water.

This time he was more careful. He drove most of the way, but then pulled around behind another of the destroyed houses and parked. Taking the key, Big went to the back of the van and unloaded his armored game cart.

He wheeled it behind him down the street until he was closer to the house near ninth street. Then he started moving toward the house using the back yards of the houses until he was one house over. He flipped the game cart onto its side, to put the armored bottom toward the house. He went prone behind it and sighted in the house, waiting.

The cold began to penetrate his clothing, but he held position. Someone would have to come out sometime soon. They just had to. Big was hoping for it to be the father, and not the mother or daughter. He had other plans for them. If he took out the father, he was sure the women would do whatever he told them.

Finally, catching him by surprise, the father came up out of the hole in the top of the basement. Sighting hurriedly, Big yanked the trigger instead of a steady squeeze. It was enough to throw his aim off even more.

The modified M-4 clone let go with a ripping sound, the suppressor keeping the sound down, but it jammed almost immediately. Big cursed and tried to clear the jam, but wasn't having much success when he had to duck down behind the hard steel plate on the bottom of the game cart.

Big grinned for a moment as Denver's 10/22 poured round after round of .22 long rifle at Big. Gunkid had been right. Many hit and pinged the steel, others whizzed overhead. When the firing paused, Big took a quick look. There was a kid behind one of the lumber piles with a 10/22 it looked like to Big. No way it was going to penetrate the armor.

Suddenly Big ducked down again. A much louder report had come from the PTR-91 that Frank now had in firing position at the corner of the basement wall. Big flinched when the heavier gun fired again and a small hole appeared in the hard steel plate.

"That's not supposed to happen!" Big cried. It was the last thing he said. The next round Frank fired also penetrated the plate, right in line with Big's temple. He slumped down in death, his head and upper torso falling from behind the concealment of the game cart.

Denver put at least three rounds of .22 into Big, and Frank another 7.62 round, before Frank stopped firing and called for Denver to cease fire, too.

"Did you see anyone else?" Frank called over to Denver.

"No sir!"

"Are you guys all right?" the frightened voice of Bobbie came from the access hatch to the basement. "Can we come out?"

"Hang on a minute," Frank said. "Keep an eye out, Denver. I'm going over to check on this guy."

PTR at the ready, Frank climbed to his feet and moved toward the house next door and the dark object behind it. Seeing Big's face damaged by two 7.62 rounds and three .22 rimfires almost made Frank sick. He grabbed the M-4 clone and set it out of reach before he began to check

the body, noting the relatively tiny magazine it contained.

He found Big's driver's license and learned his name. He found the keys to Big's van. Frank worked Big's coat off his torso and covered Big's head with it. Frank saw the tracks in the ground, soft from the melting snow. "I'm going to check this out," Frank called over to Denver. "Have the ladies come out and help you keep watch."

Denver waved, and looked over at the basement. Jill had heard and was trying to get out of the basement to tell her husband in no uncertain terms that he wasn't leaving them. But Frank was already out of sight, beyond the house next door.

"He's going to get a piece of my mind when he gets back!" she said, not wanting to call after him loudly, in case someone else was out there. The three spread out, each watching in a different direction, under cover, weapons ready.

Frank found the van in only a few minutes, approaching it carefully. He made sure it was empty and then unlocked it. It started right up and Frank took it back to the basement, parking it beside Bobbie's VW pickup. He realized that Jill, Denver, and Bobbie had all had him in their sights when he drove up unannounced. "Hey! It's me!" he said, getting out of the van slowly.

"Don't you ever go running off like that again!" Jill cried, running up to him. She grabbed him and hugged him, fighting back the tears.

"Uh... Sorry... I just... wanted to check it out. Make sure there weren't any more. Look at the van. It was that guy from down the street."

Bobbie and Denver walked over to them. Denver's head was hanging and he looked like he was about to cry. "I'm sorry, Mr. Constantine. I didn't see him until he shot. He could have killed you. I'm sorry."

Bobbie took his free hand and looked as pained as Denver.

“It’s all right, Denver,” Frank said, putting his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I didn’t have a clue, either. You did okay. You returned aimed fire and kept his head down until I could get set and bring the PTR-91 into play. He must have been some kind of nutcase. You should see that contraption he was trying to hide behind.”

“Really?” Denver said, his head lifting.

“Really,” Frank assured him. “Now, I think we need to move the body. I don’t want to just leave it there.”

“I think I know where he lives,” Denver said. “Maybe we should check it out. What if he has a family or something.” Denver went from looking relieved to a bit sick.

“I guess we should, at that,” Frank said slowly. “But what if they are like him? Ready to fight?”

“Then just dump the body and get out of there,” Jill said. “If not, then ransack his place and take everything useful. These are hard times. Think about what he would have done to me and Bobbie, if he’d had the chance.”

Frank and Denver both paled at Jill’s words.

“Okay,” Frank said after a moment. He extricated himself from Jill’s embrace. “Come on, Denver. Let’s get this done. Bring your rifle.” He looked at Jill and Bobbie. “You two hole up in the shelter. Shoot anyone that doesn’t give you the password.”

“And what is the password?” Jill asked.

“Open Sesame?” Frank said, a slight grin on his face.

“How about ‘I Give Up’?” Jill responded.

“That’ll do.” Slinging their rifles, Frank and Denver went to work. And it was work. Handling a dead body always is. Thankfully for both of them the coat stayed in place over Big’s face when they lifted the body and set it on the upright game cart. That was when they discovered some of Big’s cache items. Two fragmentation hand grenades and three smoke grenades. They used the cart to haul him to the van. They put the body in the van, and then the cart.

Denver was a bit unsure of exactly which house it was, but it became obvious when they went by it. The van’s muddy tracks were there, and the place showed some attempts at clean up. Frank drove past, and then parked. “Let’s check it out before we dump the body.”

Approaching cautiously, they found the path that Big had made to and from the basement. “Man! That smells!” Denver said as they approached the basement.

“Should have brought the respirators,” Frank added. But they toughed out the smell and went into the basement, weapons ready. They were gagging at the smell by the time they pulled out the ammunition Big had stored, the other cache items, the two fifteen gallon water containers, and the last few MRE’s. There were also a large upright tool cart and three large tool boxes containing Big’s personal set of tools, many of them acquired while he was in service. It was a struggle to get them out of the basement, but they managed.

With Big’s body back in his cubby hole, Frank and Denver left the place behind them, leaving the windows of the van open to get all the fresh air they could.

They were barely able to eat the Mountain House Lasagna with meat and sauce Jill had prepared for them.

Influences - Chapter 4

April brought not showers, but pouring down rains, with the occasional day of sunshine between. The temperatures never got above the low seventies, even on the prettiest days. Frank, Jill, Bobbie, and Denver had worked hard to get a ceiling put on the basement, using the pieces and parts of the house they had dismantled. It now had a roof over the ceiling that kept the rain out of the basement.

Frank called a family meeting during one of the rain storms. He included Denver without a second thought. "I thought we were going to be able to make it here," he said. "Put in a garden, maybe get some of the small game that is always around the suburbs. But the weather isn't cooperating. And from the shortwave radio broadcasts we are getting, it doesn't sound like it is going to get much better. It is beginning to look like nuclear winter or asteroid winter, or both, are realities. And will probably get worse for a couple more years before it even begins to moderate.

"Now, we have another two years worth of food, but I think we need to talk about changing locations. Moving further south to get someplace with a better growing season."

"After all the work we did on this place?" Bobbie lamented.

"It's not wasted," Jill said. "It's keeping us housed for the mean time." And then to Frank, "Where do you have in mind?"

"All the way down to the Gulf of Mexico. Where we can fish as well as hunt."

"I have an idea," Denver suddenly said. "My Uncle John's place. It's a

long ways from the Gulf, but it is near the Mississippi River, outside of Dyersburg, Tennessee. He has these big green houses he grows fresh vegetables for the Memphis restaurant market. I think he'd take us in, if he is still alive."

"Really?" Bobbie asked.

"I think so," Denver said. "He and my dad were pretty close. And with the way you've helped me, I think he'd help you, the best he could. And he's a ham operator. Maybe we could get hold of him on the radio."

Frank had an unlicensed Amateur Radio set up, besides the shortwave radio, but he'd only been listening, not talking. There seemed to be surviving Amateurs all over the US, though none in some places. "I guess we can give it a try. Put it on the air and see if anyone knows him."

They put further discussion of moving off until Denver had a chance to try to reach his Uncle via Amateur Radio. They'd been running the shortwave radio on just a long wire antenna, but for transmitting Frank brought out the Amateur rig and an antenna tuner. They would use the long wire antenna, but match it to the frequencies they would be using.

Denver tried for a week, with no success, even some very angry, negative responses about Denver being on the air without a license. But finally an Amateur responded. "Yes, sir, son. I know old John. Right good man he is, too. Hear him some on twenty meters right about Friday night. I'll give him a shout this Friday and have him try this frequency for you."

Denver thanked the man profusely. It was Wednesday. They'd have to wait for two more days. Denver got on that Thursday, just to listen, but no Uncle John. Friday, however, was different. Denver barely had the radio turned on and tuned up when Uncle John's voice came booming out of the speaker.

“You out there, Denver Boy? This is your Uncle John calling!” Denver quickly adjusted the volume. It seemed Uncle John was running full legal power. Or better.

“Yes, sir, Uncle John. I’m right here. You guys all okay?”

“Sure are. Put your Dad on. I want to talk to that scoundrel.”

“Uncle John. I’m sorry. Mom and Dad died in the blast.”

“There was silence for a few moments, but the voice came back, just a bit subdued.

“Sorry, boy. That’s a shame. You making it okay by yourself?”

“I’m not, Uncle John. I’m with my girl friend’s family. I was hoping you’d let us come down there. We don’t think we can grow enough food here to get by.”

“I see. Weather is staying pretty nasty. My greenhouses came through without a problem, and me and a neighbor fellow have one of the MAG things going. He gets fruits and vegetables and protection and I get beef, pork, chicken, and eggs and milk. Got another guy that brings us fish to trade.

“But I got to tell you, Denver Boy, that we’re in something of a war here. Got us some dry land bandits working with some river pirates. You could be walking right into a shootin’ war.”

Denver looked over at Frank and Jill. They looked at each other and nodded. “We’d like to come anyway,” Frank told Denver. “Maybe we can help out.

“Uncle John, they said they’d like to come. I don’t want to come if they

can't."

"Of course, Denver Boy. Wouldn't expect anything else. They make you family, means they're my family, too. Get back to me on when you plan to leave. When you get close we'll meet you and escort you in, to protect you from the bandits and pirates. They're probably listening to us right now. Listen you lowlifes, you try and hurt my only nephew and his family and you'll regret it. Talk to me again this next Friday and let me know what is going on."

"Yes, sir, Uncle John."

Another voice, almost as loud as Uncle John's came through the speaker. "Tremaine, you give up that place by the time they get here or you'll never see your nephew alive. You know I mean what I say."

Neither Uncle John nor Denver replied. Denver was looking at his adopted family. They all exchanged looks. Frank was surprised that Uncle John didn't reply to the bandit or pirate, whichever he was, but there was only silence from the radio. Denver finally powered down.

"Maybe this wasn't a good idea," Denver said.

"Yes, it is," Frank said. "We will have a very hard time making it on our own, just the four of us, even if we were to go to the Gulf. We'd still need to hook up with some cooperative group that can produce what we can't. It sounds like your Uncle already has that set up. All we really need to do is decide how we're going, overland or by the river, and what to take with us."

The type of transportation was going to determine what they could take with them, so that came first. They had the two vehicles that were running. They would probably make it, if they could continue to find fuel. On the other hand, if they took a boat of a good size, they could

take everything with them they wanted. That was the preferred method, so Frank and Denver did some scouting along the river, looping south of St. Louis to get to the river to stay out of the hot zone downtown St. Louis had become.

After they searched for a while they found something they thought would work, as it would be a onetime trip. It was a small 26' Utility Towboat and a single 20' x 30' float barge run aground near Sulfur Springs, Missouri.

Since the deck of the barge was clear, Frank thought that it was probably getting ready for the next job when the war started and was abandoned by the crew. They searched until they found a small boat with a motor that would run and then ran it out to the Sally Sue and barge.

There was no one aboard, or any signs of anyone. Frank checked the fuel tanks. They were almost full. Since they intended to float on the current and just use the engines for maneuvering, it would be plenty of fuel.

After checking the lashings holding the barge to the Sally Sue, Frank climbed up to the one man cockpit that was mounted on a short tower at the center of the boat. Frank had to crank the engines a couple of times before they started, but start they did. Shifting into reverse, Frank tried to back the boat off the sandbar. With little success. He tried working the boat forward and then back several times, and was finally successful.

Denver hurriedly played out more line from the small boat so it could be towed. They cruised north, having passed a likely looking spot where they could beach the rig and have access to load it. There was nothing to do but leave it there while they went back in the small boat to transfer the VW pickup to the location.

Denver drove the VW and Frank took the small boat back to the landing point. Hoping no one would take the boat and barge, they headed back home, but stopped to pick up a class-C diesel motor home that would

run that they'd found while searching for the boat and barge.

They wasted little time when they got back to the basement. Jill and Bobbie had been preparing things while Frank and Denver had been out searching the past several days. They attached trailers to all three vehicles. The trailers, like the motorhome, had been recovered during their searches.

The trailer for the VW was a small one, but those for the van and motorhome were both good sized box trailers. All had come from the same rental lot. They had no trouble loading everything they were going to take with them in the vehicles and trailers. As soon as the VW and its trailer were loaded, Frank headed back to the boat. He'd stand watch and make sure it wasn't taken before the rest got there.

For the same reason, Bobbie, Jill, and Denver slept in the motorhome, taking turns to make sure nothing disappeared in the night. The next morning, Denver led off in the van, with Bobbie in the cab beside him, while Jill followed with the motorhome.

Denver set a slow pace, since neither he nor Jill were skilled trailer pullers and they had to work around quite a bit of stalled traffic from the first day of the war. But they made it fine.

It took most of the rest of the day to get the heavy ramps the barge carried placed and load the vehicles. It was a tight squeeze getting all three vehicles and trailers aboard the barge. Apparently the barge had carried vehicles as part of its work, for, besides the ramps, there were plenty of chocks on the barge to secure the vehicles.

Frank backed them off the beach after the ramps were reloaded, and headed down river. He took each of the others up to the tiny cockpit and let them get familiar with controlling the boat and barge. Then Frank went to the motorhome for some well earned sleep. He'd been up since the previous morning.

Jill was at the helm as they traveled down the river, with just enough power applied to keep the small boat being towed from running into the Sally Sue, letting the current carry them at its own speed plus just a little.

Denver and Bobbie each took a turn at the helm, keeping the Sally Sue and barge near the center of the river. Well before dark they found an isolated stretch of heavily forested shoreline and tied off to a large tree, fore and aft, to keep the rig in place during the night. It took Frank and Denver both to handle the heavy lines. There were no anchors on board.

Jill fixed supper in the motorhome and they all gathered to eat. Frank and Denver strung the long wire antenna out and hooked up the Amateur gear to contact Uncle John. Denver was able to get him at the appointed time and reported that they were on the way.

“You remember that spot where we used to go fishing?”

“Yes, sir, Uncle John.”

“Let me know when you’re a day out and what time the next day you’ll be there. I’ll have a group to meet you and escort you home.”

“Yes, sir, Uncle John. I’ll call you tomorrow night.”

“Okay. Don’t say where you are, though. The pirates may be listening.”

“Okay, Uncle John. Tomorrow night, then.” Denver shut down the radio.

“Where do we meet him?” asked Frank.

“Right there at the river bridge. We went fishing once when we visited, but it was a fiasco. The motor quit on the boat right there at the bridge. We tied up and waited for help. Didn’t catch a thing while we waited.

Denver took the first watch, it having been decided that it was better to be safe than sorry.

They traveled two more slow days, with the rain pouring down all day and all night both days. They hadn't seen a soul in all that time. The evening of the second rainy night Denver made contact with his Uncle John again and told him they would meet him at 1:00 PM the next day.

Heeding the warnings of Denver's uncle, Bobbie was in the pilot house, controlling the Sally Sue, while Frank, Jill, and Denver kept an armed watch around the rig. When they rounded an oxbow bend in the river, Bobbie called out a warning. There were five boats spread out across a narrow spot in the river just past the bend.

"Put it to the floor, Bobbie!" Frank called. "And look behind us every once and a while in case they come from that direction, too."

Jill and Denver went forward, and got down behind bollards, the way Frank was. Jill had her Ruger Mini-14. Denver was using Big's M-4, minus the rimfire adapter.

Sally Sue picked up speed slowly. Frank began to fire at those in the boats ahead. Jill and Denver held fire until they were a little closer. The pirates began to fire back and the boats began maneuvering. All three on the barge could hear the impacts of the pirate's bullets on the steel of the barge and the bollards.

One of the open boats that Frank was concentrating his fire on went off course and soon was grounded on the bank. He began to fire on the closest boat, and it too swerved away, out of control. It turned sideways and was drifting with the current.

Bobbie had crouched down when bullets began to whiz past the pilot station, and two holed the glass. The Sally Sue was picking up speed.

The other three boats were almost on them. Jill and Denver were pouring round after round into the small cabin cruiser coming toward them on their side of the barge. The firing from it stopped and there were several loud screams, which were cut off when the fuel tanks exploded.

One of the other boats sheared off and was headed back down stream at a fast pace. The other one Frank continued to fire on, with Jill and Denver crawling over to lend their fire to his. The barge was taking heavy fire. When Bobbie suddenly screamed, "Daddy!" Frank, Jill, and Denver all turned to look at her. They couldn't see even her head through the windshield opening that was now missing all its glass.

Frank and Denver redoubled their fire. Jill ran between the vehicles, on her way to help Bobbie. Only when a boat came around the bend downstream of them did the other boat shear away. It began taking fire from the approaching boat and Frank and Denver ran back to the Sally Sue.

As much as he wanted to see about Bobbie, when Frank ordered him up to the helm, Denver went while Frank and Jill tended to Bobbie. Jill was running back to the vehicles to get the first-aid kit, while Frank held pressure with his bare hand on the hole in Bobbie's left thigh.

The approaching boat turned and matched speed with the Sally Sue. "That you up there, Denver Boy?" came the booming voice of Denver's Uncle John.

"Yes, sir! Do you have a doctor with you? Bobbie is hurt!"

"I do, for a fact! Hold'er steady there and he'll come over."

The other boat maneuvered toward the Sally Sue. The boats bumped hard a couple of times, but a man wearing a backpack was able to clamber from Uncle John's boat to the Sally Sue. He began to check Bobbie, who was crying, her eyes closed. Jill made it back with their

first aid kit, but the doctor was already opening his pack.

Pulling a Blood Stopper bandage from the pack, he quickly wrapped it around Bobbie's leg when Frank moved his hands.

"That will hold her till we get to shore," the doctor said. "Bullet is still in there. I don't want to operate until we get back to the farm."

"Will she be all right?" Denver called down from the pilot house.

"She looks healthy. I have antibiotics. She should be okay."

With those words Jill went into Frank's arms. He held her for a few minutes, but then knelt down beside Bobbie.

"You did great, Bobbie. I'm sorry I got you shot."

Jill knelt down as well, when the doctor stepped aside. "You did, Sweetie. You were very brave."

"I don't feel brave. It hurts."

Frank and Jill looked up at the doctor. "No pain killers until I have more equipment available. "Do you have a blanket? I don't want her to get shocky on me."

Jill ran to get one from the motorhome and Frank replaced Denver at the helm of Sally Sue. Denver sat down beside Bobbie and took her hand in his, shading her face when it started to rain again. He held on to her until Frank had run the barge up onto a sloping bank where John indicated for him to land. There were several other boats tied up there. Four men ran from concealed positions and took up sentry positions. One went out to the blockade on the bridge.

Denver and Jill went with Bobbie when four men came aboard to carry

her off to a Suburban that one of the men said was the farm's ambulance. Frank wanted to go, but knew he had to stay behind and get things situated.

With John's boat tied up to the Sally Sue, John boarded her. "Thanks," Frank said, shaking John's hand. "I'm Frank Constantine, Mr. Tremaine. I'm really glad you have a doctor in your group."

"Call me John," said John. "Yep. Got three of them at the farm. One always goes out on these little expeditions with us."

"John. Thanks for letting us come down here with Denver. I hope we won't be in the way."

"No, Frank, you won't. We've lost a few people over the last few months. Every good guy we can get is a help. But I'm not going to lie to you. Everyone at the farm works hard, every day, so we can make it. And, as you've seen, and from what I mentioned on the radio a few days ago, there is an ongoing war between us, the good guys, and the bad guys. Pirates on the river and a group of roaming bandits. I think they've hooked up, now. More than doubles their dangerousness."

"Must say, though, you brought their numbers and operating equipment down some. Saw the drifting boat and the one aground, plus the one you blew up. Nice work."

"Not work I like," Frank admitted, "But work that had to be done."

"Come on. We'll get those ramps down and your gear off the barge and up to the Farm so you can check on your daughter. Uh... What are you planning to do with this thing?"

"I don't know. Probably just tie it up somewhere. Don't want to set it adrift."

“Well, if you want to, you can consider it a full buy in for the MAG. We can use this thing in our fleet.”

“In that case, it’s yours!” Frank held out his hand. John took it and they shook.

With John’s crew it didn’t take long to get the ramps down and unload the vehicles. Frank hadn’t thought through the unloading. It was very tricky backing the trailers off. Fortunately one of Frank’s men was an experienced truck driver and got all three vehicles and trailers off the barge without incident.

“How do you keep this place secure?” Frank asked John.

“As you can see, it’s cropland, with just a few trees along the edges. Hard to sneak up on us from the land. And we keep sentries at the bends just north and south of us. Mancuso had a lot of nerve setting up where he did. Must have sneaked past in the dark last night, running blacked out on the far side of the river. His boats were just out of our sentry’s sight where he waited for you. Our sentry heard the shooting and called it in.

“We keep a twenty-four hour presence here, to keep an eye on the place. No one can get very close without our knowing. The bridge is blocked. Would like to put the blockade at the other end, but we’re too short handed. Got the travel trailer here and a couple of fuel wagons. Everything can be pulled if the river gets high.

“With all the rain we’ve had, I’m about ready to pull out. The river is rising. “I didn’t know where to take the boats where they’ll be safe, when the river gets a bit higher and we pull out, but we can equip the barge and use it as a mobile marina.”

“Great. I’m glad we’re able to be of some use, right off the bat. Where do you get all the fuel for everything?”

John grinned. “We were the first ones out and about in the area. Snagged twelve tankers, six of them with pups, before anyone else got to them. Bunch of other stuff, too. I’ll fill you in more, later. Let’s get you up to the farm so you can see your daughter. Don’t worry about her too much. If Doc Blankenship says she’ll be okay, she will.”

“Thanks. That makes me feel better.”

Frank drove the motorhome and two of John’s men drove the VW and Dodge van. John headed the column, and then came Frank’s three rigs, and finally two more of John’s vehicles. They were soon on I-155, heading west towards Dyersburg.

They went north off the interstate just at the edge of the hills that lay between the river and Dyersburg, and then climbed up into the hills on side roads. Finally they reached what John and his men had referred as the Farm.

Frank decided it was some farm. There were three large homes and at least twenty manufactured housing units scattered around the property. Three tall watch towers, reinforced with sandbags on the walls commanded the entire compound. Frank saw two people in each tower. He was pretty sure one person in each of the towers had a scoped rifle and the other a semiautomatic of some type.

As soon as John had shown Frank where to park in the compound, he led him over to one of the largest of the manufactured housing units. “Your girl will be in there. This is Doc Blankenship’s and his wife’s place. She’s his nurse and they have the treatment center here.” John’s face took on a grim look. “We’ve had to use it a lot more than I thought we would. Lost some good people to these bandits and pirates. One of my best friends and his entire family.”

“I’m sorry,” Frank said.

“Don’t worry about me,” John said. “Go see about your daughter, come over to the big house when you’re done and we’ll see about getting you settled.”

“Thanks again, John,” Frank said and bounded up the stairs. He knocked, but was opening the door as he did.

“You must be Frank,” said a woman in a nurse’s uniform. She looked to about thirty. She had bright red hair. “Mrs. Blankenship?”

She nodded. “Call me Betty. Come along. Your daughter is this way. We just took her in from the operating room. It went just fine.”

Jill and Denver were sitting on opposite sides of the bed, each holding one of Bobbie’s hands. “It’ll be some time before she wakes up,” Betty said.

When Denver made no move to get up, Jill did, so Frank could sit down and take hold of her hand.

“She was so brave,” Denver said, his eyes never leaving Bobbie’s face.

“Yes, she was,” Frank said. “I never should have put her up there,”

“It should have been me,” Denver said in reply. “I should have been the one that was shot.”

“You two stop it,” Jill said, quietly. “Don’t beat yourself up over this. You both needed to be where you were. We needed the firepower and Bobbie has never handled anything more than a twenty-two.

“When I took her into the bathroom before they started on her leg, she told me not to let either of you take the blame. It was the pirates that shot her.” Denver and Frank both stayed silent. Jill doubted her words had

influenced either one the least little bit. Both of them would carry the guilt around for a long time.

Influences - Chapter 5

The three didn't leave Bobbie's side until she awakened. "How you feeling, Sweetie?" Jill asked.

"Kinda fuzzy," replied Bobbie. "Is everyone else okay?"

"Yes," Frank said. "You were the only one hit. Baby, I am so sorry..."

"Didn't Mom tell you not to worry about that? It wasn't your fault. Sometimes things just happen." She looked over at the hang dog look on Denver's face. "That goes for you, too, Denver."

Like Frank, Denver only nodded in reply.

Bobbie looked back at Frank. "Do we have a place to live, or will we be in the motorhome?"

"Not sure yet," Frank replied. "I guess I should go check on that."

"I'll go with you," Denver said, finally letting go of Bobbie's hand.

Frank and Denver left, to seek out John, leaving Jill behind with Bobbie.

They were pointed in the direction of the biggest house. John knocked on the door and they were admitted by a petite older woman. "Aunt Cara!" Denver said, "Hi!"

"Good to see you, Denver. Come on in. And who might this be?"

“This is Mr. Constantine. I’ve been staying with him and his family since the war.”

“It is a shame about your parents. We’ve all lost many loved ones, both close and far away. I take it you want to see John?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Frank said. “And call me Frank.”

“Come along. John is in the study.” Cara led the way down a short hallway and knocked on the door before entering. “It’s Denver, and Frank Constantine, John.”

Cara stepped aside and Frank and Denver entered the study. John was getting up and coming around the desk. “How’s the girl?” he asked immediately.

“Going to be okay, according to the nurse,” Frank said. “She’s awake now. Jill is with her.”

“Glad to hear it. Take a seat and we can get down to business.”

After Denver and Frank had seated themselves in the comfortable leather chairs facing the desk, John resumed his seat behind it.

“Since we’re calling this a full buy in, due to what you brought us, you are entitled to a few things from the farm. Everyone gets an equal share of the items we produce ourselves, and things we trade for as a group. You’ll be expected to lend a hand in any way you can. What was your profession, Frank?”

“Not a useful one for this situation. I was an accountant. But I’m young enough and healthy enough to do just about any kind of unskilled labor. And smart enough to learn skills that are useful. So is my wife. Bobbie will help when she’s able.”

“Don’t count out your skills as an accountant. We do a lot of number crunching here keeping track of things. I’ve been doing most of it, and I don’t really have the time. If you are of a mind, you’ll take over logistics tracking. Your wife can help with that as well. It’ll free up a couple of people I can really use elsewhere.”

Frank nodded. “We can do that. We work well together. About Bobbie...”

John interrupted Frank. “She’ll not be asked to do anything until she’s well healed. How old is she?”

“Sixteen,” Frank said.

“Almost seventeen,” Denver added. “Same as me.”

“How is she with kids?”

“Never really been around them much,” Frank admitted. “Never did the babysitting thing.”

“I’ve seen her in the restaurant where we worked. She does really well with the kids that come in with their families.”

“Well, then if she is able, and willing, she can help out with the nursery. We have a preponderance of older adults, and very young. Not too many in their teens and twenties. If she isn’t comfortable with that, we’ll find something she can do. Besides school. All the school age children are being given lessons. We have a couple of teachers and several experienced home schooling parents. We aren’t going to let education slide if we can help it. That goes for you, too, Denver.”

“Yes, sir. What else can I do?”

“What do you want to do?”

“Security. I want to help with security.”

Frank and John both looked unsure. “I don’t know about that,” John said. “Everybody helps if there is an attack on the farm, but external security is handled by several of our people that have military training.”

“I want to do something to help. Maybe one of the river look outs the guys were talking about.”

“I’ll think about it,” John said slowly. “I don’t want you going off on a tangent because of the girl. I take it she is your girlfriend. Security is a serious business with us. Can’t let personal feelings influence your actions.”

Denver nodded. “She is my girlfriend. I guess that is why I wanted on the security team. I want to get back at those pirates.”

“You did a pretty good job on them, as it is,” Frank said quietly.

“I’d still like to do it,” Denver insisted.

“I’ll take it under advisement,” John said. “My security expert will have the final say. We can talk to him tomorrow. Your school schedule is going to affect how much you can do. Now. About living arrangements. There is a room here in the house for you, Denver. I’d prefer you stay here. I don’t want to tie up one of the unused housing units with one person. There are the dorms, but they are already pretty full. And to be quite honest, I could use a runner to help me get things done.”

“If that’s what you want me to do, Uncle John, consider it done. I’ll make sure my school work doesn’t suffer, and work security when I can. The rest of the time I’ll be your runner.”

“Going to have some pretty busy days, there, Denver Boy.”

“I can handle it, sir.”

“Yes. I believe you can. So, Frank, You have the motorhome. We have a use for it, if you want in one of the small housing units for your wife and daughter.”

“Like Denver said, ‘If that’s what you want me to do, consider it done’.”

John laughed. “Like that attitude. I surely do. Then so be it. The motorhome is what we’ll use for housing on the barge, like you did coming down here. That will leave the trailer available to keep at whatever landing point we use while the water is high.

Frank nodded. “Any particular housing unit we should take?”

“One of the small ones. Might as well make it near one of the storage barns. That’s where you’ll be doing much of your work.”

“Okay. If it is okay, we’ll go get moved in.”

“I’ll help, and then move my stuff,” Denver quickly said.

“We’ll issue some food...” John was saying.

“We’re okay today,” Frank said. “That can wait until we get settled in and start contributing.”

“Well! I must say, Excellent! Most of our newer residents have come with their hands out. It’s a nice change to see someone with preparations. Rest assured, what you brought with you remains yours. Someone will show you the supply barns and you can pick your dwelling.”

Frank and Denver both took John's last words as a dismissal and got up to leave. "Welcome to the farm," John added as the two went out the study door.

Bobbie was asleep again when Frank went to get Jill. He explained what was going on as they walked to where they had parked the vehicles. It took the rest of the day to get their belongings moved into the manufactured housing unit they picked.

It was very nice, but definitely not extravagant. Two bedrooms, one and a half baths, kitchen with small pantry, dining alcove, and living room. Wood cook stove, two wood heating stoves, and a wood burning water heater. There was already a wood box outside, full of wood.

Fortunately, the unit came furnished. Again, nice, but nothing to write home about. When they were finished unloading, every room had its pile or two of the numerous supplies they had brought with them.

Frank went with Denver to help him move his things from the VW pickup, while Jill started supper for them. Frank suddenly realized that he was hearing either a very quiet generator, or a well muffled one, when lights began to be visible in many of the farm buildings.

"Electrical power for three hours morning and evening, six to nine," Cara said when Frank asked her about it. "We run the bigger generator a few hours a day when the sun doesn't shine, for the grow lights in the greenhouse, but it is strictly for the greenhouse."

"This is yours," Denver said, starting to hand Big's M-4 to Frank.

"No, Denver. You should have that. And the ammunition we found in that guy's stash." Frank grinned thin. "I am, however, keeping the other things. I'd appreciate you not letting anyone know about them, except perhaps, your Uncle. If the subject comes up. They could be an ace in the hole, particularly if they aren't common knowledge."

“Don’t worry, Mr. Constantine. I won’t say anything. Uncle John said what we brought with us is ours, not the community’s.”

“Thanks, Denver. And Denver, you’re welcome anytime. To see Bobbie, or just to visit, if it doesn’t work out.”

“It’ll work out, Mr. Constantine. Bobbie loves me and I love her. When we’re old enough, we want to get married.”

“I see,” Frank said.

“You don’t have to worry. It was kind of hard before, to not get together... well... you know. Living apart it will be easier.”

“I’m glad you told me, Denver. And thank you for being the gentleman you are.” Frank held out his hand and Denver shook it, man to man.

Frank told Jill what Denver had said. “Bobbie said something similar, when I told her Denver would be living in the main house.”

“We raised her right. And Denver was very straightforward. I think we can trust them not to do anything too foolish.”

“Our baby is growing up,” Jill said, stepping into Franks arms for a long hug.

The four newcomers fell easily into the routine of the Farm. Denver got his wish of being put into the rotation of river lookouts. Bobbie, despite her leg, began helping the teachers with the younger children during their classes, as well as attending her own classes with the few other high school age young adults, including Denver.

Frank and Jill had their work cut out for them. There had been a pretty

good inventory of the Farm's equipment and supplies at the start of the war. Between the consumption of the stores already on hand, and the acquisition and use of post war acquired items, the inventory was way off.

It took them several days to complete the initial inventory. In doing so they met just about everyone associated with the Farm, including several of the outlying farms and organizations that were part of the Farm's mutual aid group, which was formed well before the war. It had a few additional members after the war.

The MAG had done a very good job scavenging for supplies as soon as the radiation had dropped low enough to get out. There were still semi-truck loads of stuff that had yet to be inventoried. I-55 was a major north-south truck route, and with the bridge intact, the MAG had gone hunting and came up with several treasure troves. Of course, there were items they couldn't use, but everything acquired was stored for future use or barter.

Frank and the others had been at the Farm for just less than a month when the alarm sounded right at dark one evening. With practiced ease those assigned to the defense of the Farm took up defensive positions. That included Frank, Jill, and Denver.

The attackers never made it past the outer perimeter. When a team went out the next morning, wearing body armor, they discovered six dead and two seriously wounded. The bodies of the dead were stripped and buried in a common grave outside the compound. The two wounded were stabilized enough to be cognizant of what was going on during their trial. Neither had much to say in their own defense. They were wearing the tattoo of the bandit gang. The verdict was guilty and the sentence was death by hanging.

The two were hung at the designated hanging tree just outside the outer

perimeter the next morning. They were left there for three days and then the bodies were removed and buried.

“How often does this happen?” Jill asked another of the witnesses.

“Every month or so someone tries it. The attacks are getting fewer and further apart,” she said. “The bandits are just chipping away at us. No one on the Farm was hurt, this time, but that’s not always the case. And the losses are higher when they attack one of the outlying encampments.

“They seem to be getting new people about as fast as they lose them. Estimates are there are at least twenty of the bandits and fifteen to twenty of the pirates, even after what your family did to them.”

Jill just nodded, trying to control the nausea she was feeling from witnessing the executions. The names of six people to be witnesses had been picked out of a hat. When she got back to their house, Jill relayed to Frank what she’d learned. He studied on it for a few days and then requested a meeting with John.

“John,” Frank said, when John invited him into the study, “I think I may have a solution to the pirate and bandit problem.”

“Lord, man! Let’s hear it! They are the only things keeping us from prospering, despite the weather.”

“Has an ambush been laid for them before?”

John’s face fell. “Of course. We’ve tried ambushes. We just never know where they’ll be and when they’ll be there.”

“Do you think they would combine forces and attack a place that had just about everything they could conceivably want, except perhaps, women?”

“That is this place, and it does have women.”

“But you are well defended here. I was thinking of setting a trap with the bait a report of a treasure trove. A mythical government underground stash of food and ammunition. Enough to outfit an army.”

“There is no such thing.” John was silent for a moment. “Have you found one?”

Frank quickly shook his head. “I don’t believe there are any, except perhaps those set up for government officials. But if we make it believable, do you think they would react? Preferably with both groups joining up? Especially if the find was right on the water.”

“They would definitely check it out. Probably in force, if it wasn’t too far away. But an ambush like that would take every one of our trained people. We can’t afford to take the risk.”

“I have some equalizers,” Frank said, his voice dropping to an almost conspiratorial level. “There was a guy that attacked us at our home. He was some kind of nut, but he left behind some useful items. I can only think that he didn’t want to use any of them on us, because he wanted the women alive.”

“Come on, man! What did he have?”

Frank told him. “Thirty Claymore mines with remote detonators, Forty-eight fragmentation grenades, twelve incendiary grenades, two M-79 grenade launchers and over a hundred M-79 grenades of various kinds. Plus a lot of various colors of smoke grenades.”

“Holy Mackerel! You brought all that with you?”

Frank nodded.

“Why didn’t you use some of them on the pirates when they attacked?”

“About the only thing that would have been useful were the M-79’s. And to be frank with you, I’m a little scared of all of them. I’m hoping you have someone trained in their use.”

“We do. Me for one. You know, this just might work. Let me talk to those in charge of security and I’ll get back to you.”

“Okay. I’ll help in any way I can,” Frank said.

“I think supplying the munitions will be enough.”

Three days later John sent for Frank. “We have a plan,” John said, “and you are a big part of it. You brought us the word that there was a cache up river. We’ve started the rumors. We know there is someone at the Farm passing information to the pirates and bandits.

“We will also let slip that we are sending a small team to confirm or deny the existence. They will be taking your supply of armaments and will find a good spot for an ambush, set it up and radio back they’ve found it, but can’t get in. It will be in code, but it’s a code we know that they have compromised. We should be able to lead them right into a trap.”

“Sounds good,” Frank said.

“If anyone starts asking questions, try to tell a slightly different story, and write down what you told whom. We may be able to ferret out who our spy is, too.”

Frank nodded again. “Okay. I think I can make it believable. I’ll clue Jill and Bobbie in. I’ll just have them nod knowingly, and send anyone to

me that really pries for more information.”

“Okay, Frank. Good. I have a good feeling about this. Your presence may be the best thing that’s happened to the Farm since we got so lucky with our scavenging.”

Frank found it a little more difficult keeping track of those that were asking about his information than he thought he would. The rumor mill of the Farm was going full swing. Many people asked him about the rumors. He did his best to downplay the story, without denying it. Most of those that asked were satisfied that they were in on a good secret and willing to let John’s team handle things.

There were a couple of exceptions. Bobbie sent one of the doctors treating her, that had a lot of questions, to Frank. Frank let him think he was getting quite a bit more details than the basic rumor contained.

Dr. Callahan wasn’t the only person that pressed Frank for more details. Hillary Smith, one of those that helped with issuing supplies also quizzed Frank

Frank let John know about every inquiry that wasn’t a simple one. A team left by boat up river and things quieted down. They had been gone a week when Denver ran from the main house to one of the barracks units to fetch the head of their security detail.

It started tongues wagging, especially when no call for everyone to prepare for an attack came. An hour later John and his head of security headed for the river, taking only one extra man. Denver hurried to find Frank. “It’s on,” Denver whispered to Frank.

Frank immediately told Hillary Smith that they needed to figure out how to make more room for additional supplies that would be coming in after a few days. Frank noticed that as soon as she could slip away, Hillary did.

While Frank and Jill were at lunch, Dr. Callahan stopped by their place to give them an unneeded update on Bobbie. Rather ineptly, Frank thought, the doctor asked about the sudden activity at the Farm.

“Can’t really say much,” Frank said. “It’s top secret, you know. The best I can tell you is that one of the rumors we were hearing a couple of weeks ago is true.”

“Really?”

Frank nodded and Dr. Callahan excused himself and hurried away. Frank and Jill exchanged looks. “I bet it is one or the other of them,” Jill said.

“I think so. Both are naturally nosey, I’ve seen, but both have sure been nosey about this. Let’s just hope the two slightly different stories I told them will give the culprit away.”

Those in the know were on pins and needles for four days. That lasted until John came riding back into the Farm parking lot with all those that had left with him, and the ones that had gone out first.

John got out of the Suburban and went over to Frank. Slapping Frank on the back, John then shook Frank’s hand vigorously. “Worked like a charm, I tell ya’! Like a charm! There wasn’t a single survivor. The only bad thing was we wound up completely destroying all the pirates’ boats, except two that we took intact.

“You, Frank, have made it possible to eliminate the last remaining manmade danger to our future. I don’t know how to thank you, but to say, Thank you.”

Frank turned red and Jill laughed. A huge crowd was gathering and

Frank had to listen to the same speech from John, given to allow the others know what had happened. Suddenly John's voice faded and a hard look came on his face.

Frank and Jill turned around to see what it was that was drawing his attention. They saw Dr. Callahan and Hillary Smith standing separately at the edge of the crowd. Suddenly four of the security team that had just come back were surrounding the two.

"There are our spies," John bellowed. "Get them out of my sight. Trial is tomorrow morning."

Frank and Jill turned back to John. John stepped down from the back of the pickup in which he'd been standing while addressing the crowd. "Both of them?" Frank asked.

"Yes," John responded, his voice low, as he guided Frank and Jill out of the dispersing crowd. "You told the doctor that the suspected site was in Cairo, and Hillary it was south west of the city. We made sure the group could follow us, until we got close to the ambush site. When we turned to the Illinois side of the river and disembarked, the team that was already there watched as the fleet went and landed on the Missouri side and sent two teams to search for us.

"Then we made sure we were seen, without being obvious about it. They followed, in a hurry and walked right into the ambush. It was both groups, together. They'd left a few guys with the boats, who put up a pitched battle from them, but the M-79's and hand grenades took care of them, finally.

"Those that walked into the crossfire of the Claymores never had a chance. It was a charnel house. Mancuso was right in the middle of it. We never could determine who the leader of the bandits was. We might have killed him in their last attack on the Farm, and the others joined the pirates. Probably never know.

“Do wish we’d been able to recover more of their armament, but the shrapnel from the claymores did as much damage to it as it did to the people. Did recover most of their ammunition and a few weapons. Shouldn’t need them now. Same with the stuff you brought that we didn’t use. I’d like to keep them in safe storage, just in case.”

Frank nodded. “Like I said, I’m a bit afraid of it, but knew it might come in handy.”

“It sure did, buddy. It sure did!” John slapped Frank on the back again and then left him and Jill to their own devices.

As the true story became known, people came over to congratulate and thank Frank for his part in the operation. He finally hid out in one of the supply barns, much to Jill’s amusement.

Influences - Epilog

Frank and Jill decided not to go to the trial. They heard second hand what came out when the doctor and Hillary broke down and told their stories, hoping for leniency.

Hillary’s husband had been one of the bandits killed early on. She had come into the camp claiming to have been stranded in the area during the war. The death of her husband had left her destitute, and she wanted revenge. She’d been feeding information to the bandits all along.

Dr. Callahan, on the other hand, had a serious morphine addiction. The medical supplies were kept under lock and key by Dr. Blankenship, and he approved every dose given out of all their supply of medications. One of the pirates had been the doctor’s supplier before the war, when he

couldn't get things through his practice. The doctor traded information for morphine the pirates had taken from their raids on pharmacies.

Neither got any sympathy. Both were hanged the day after the trial.

Frank finally traded away Big's armored game cart to one of the Farm's hunters, in return for venison. The same with the tools they had taken from Big's place. They were put to good use by one of the mechanics at the Farm, in return for help keeping the van and VW running.

After forty years in storage, unneeded and unused, Big's munitions were destroyed.

End *****

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