

Chapter 1: End of the Line

. . . what we so proudly hailed at the twilight's last gleaming. . .

The crawler stopped along the dirt road. To their left was a tall chain-link fence topped by razor wire. Beyond that, a large area of vacant animal pens separated them from the factory, half a mile away. The rear exterior of the building was dimly lit by halogen lights on each corner, making the ten dock doors look cold and foreboding. Agent John Simpson glanced at his watch. It was 4:30 AM. He looked at Agent Eva Billings sitting next to him. "Are you ready, Eva?" She nodded. He turned to Special Agent Frank Maxwell in the back seat. "Okay, boss, we're here."

"Let's go over the mission one last time," Frank began. "As now seems obvious, the Ottumwa Free City is operating some kind of factory without IRS approval. From the size of the structure, I have to imagine they're bringing in millions of dollars in untaxed revenue each year. The taxes owed could help feed the starving people in our own city. Our job is to determine the scope of activities performed and estimate the revenue so HQ can issue a demand for payment. The section chief advises that a column of agents is available within twenty-four hours if we encounter resistance. Any questions?" Both agents shook their heads. "Let's do this." They climbed out, set the alarm on the crawler, and headed toward the fence.

After checking the integrity of the barrier, they found an opening under the fence where rainwater had washed away the soil. Each of them squeezed under the fence and then they moved quickly to the south. There was a narrow path between the pens. John leaned over to his boss and whispered, "They must have had thousands of cattle here."

"Yea, it's too bad that global warming ended all of that. I used to love a nice, juicy steak." They hurried forward while trying to stay low to avoid detection. Soon they had reached a second fence separating the pens from the factory parking lot. After a brief search, they found a section of fence had been cut from the nearby post. They squeezed through and jumped down a two-foot retaining wall and onto the parking lot. Just then, a pickup truck came around the back of the factory and headed toward the loading dock. The three agents dropped to the ground and watched. Frank motioned for silence. The two men inside the truck did not notice them and continued toward one of the dock doors.

The pickup backed up to the dock. That was when the agents noticed that dock door was not completely closed. Just then, the head of a third man poked out from under the door. "Hey, Hank!" exclaimed one of the men in the truck.

"Shush, Billy," the other replied. "Quick, come on in." The other men exited the truck and climbed into the truck-bed and then under the dock door and disappeared.

"What do you think that's about, Frank?" Eva asked.

"Most likely, those three are stealing, but that's not our concern. Let's just wait here."

Five minutes later, one of the men crawled out and stood on the bed of the truck. The others pushed boxes under the door and the man put them in the truck bed. After they had loaded ten boxes, the other man climbed out. "We doing this again tomorrow, Hank?" a man asked the head again jutting out under the door.

"Georgie and I are working afternoon shift later. When the warehouse closes, I'll shove some pallets under this door so you can sneak inside. Stay in the warehouse unless you want to get caught." The head disappeared back under the door and it closed. The other two got back into their truck and drove away.

"The door's closed, Frank," John noted. "What do we do now?"

"I think that act of theft proves there's no alarm on the doors. Let's go!" They jumped to their feet and hurried forward until they reached the same dock door. "I'll push it up a bit. If an alarm goes off, we bug out." The others nodded. He pushed on the door and it slid up. They waited twenty seconds, but there was no alarm or other sound. Frank pulled himself up and under the door and the others followed suit. They held their pistols in their hands as they moved forward. There were a few racks of cartons and packaging supplies. The rest of the warehouse was filled with giant freezers. The group hurried forward to the first unit. There was a frosted-over window in the center of the door. Frank used his sleeve to brush away the frost and looked inside. A look of horror spread over his face. "I can't believe this is happening," he whispered. "It's like Merced all over again."

"You mean the Marshalls?" John asked.

Frank nodded and said, "You remember them too, don't you?"

"I don't think I'll ever forget that."

"What are you two talking about?" Eva asked.

Frank raised his hand to silence them. He whispered, "We need to get back to the crawler or we're as good as dead." Eva and John turned and headed back to the dock door while Frank guarded the doorway leading into the factory. After he saw them slip out, he rushed to the dock door, dropped to the floor and began to shimmy back out. As his feet touched the concrete pad, he felt an arm on his shoulder and the unmistakable feel of a pistol barrel against the back of his head.

"Fucking AFIRS bastard," a male voice said. "I should kill you right here."

"Whoa, stop right there, Steve," another voice said. Steve turned Frank around who then saw that John and Eva were trapped as well. There were ten armed men surrounding them. "You know we have better plans for these trespassers."

Steve laughed and replied, "That's right, Henry. Let's take them inside. They wanted to see it, so we might as well give them the whole tour."

At 5:00 AM sharp, flares burst into the sky over the sprawling encampment west of the metropolitan St. Louis Area, startling the residents from their slumber. But the Old Ones were not sleeping and they knew their time had come. Dozens of police wearing body armor, ballistic helmets and carrying high-powered rifles moved quickly through the narrow dirt roads toward them. The other residents stood by and watched; there was nothing they could do without being shot dead. It was just a part of life in the early twenty-second century, and over time, it had become the norm. As the last of the flares died out, the police had surrounded the Old Ones with their rifles still in firing position. A police captain pushed his way through his team and stood before the group. "Is everyone here?"

The woman standing closest to him replied, "Yes, your lordship. We are all here."

"Very well then," the captain said. "Let's go."

"Excuse me, your lordship," the old woman exclaimed.

He turned around to face her again and frowned, "What is it now, Mother?"

She put her hand on the shoulder of the man next to her and said, "Sir, I know it isn't protocol, but this man, George, is my husband and he is only sixty-eight. May he come with us?"

The captain smirked at her and said, "What makes you think I give a damn about one man who is two years younger than the limit?" He waved his arm around the filthy encampment and continued. "If he wants to leave this paradise for whatever is out there, that's his choice." He

turned and his men began to herd the Old Ones further to the west and the last fence line separating the city from the countryside.

At 5:30 AM, the bedroom door opened and Joe Kennedy said, "Jack, we have a code 30. Get your rifle and follow me." Jack jumped up from bed, slid his feet into his slippers and hurried to the corner of his room. He grabbed his rifle, slung it over his back and rushed out the front door to catch up with his father. The sky over Co-op M-125 was just beginning to lighten as the sun neared the horizon. Jack caught up to his dad as they entered the base of the neighborhood watchtower and hurried up the metal stairs. The structure was open to the air, like a radio tower, and so Jack could see many of his neighbors starting their day. He could see Simon and Alexis Johnson hurrying toward the tower and he smiled. Within two minutes, the four of them were standing on the lookout platform, scanning the horizon for signs of the drone. Joe raised his walkie-talkie to his mouth and said, "This is tower seven. We are in position. Over."

Another voice came over the speaker, saying, "Roger that, Joe. This is Kenny on the eastern section of the main wall. I can see you guys now. Jerry and I saw a drone not ten minutes ago. We're pretty sure it was AFIRS, because rather than flying over, it seemed to be checking out the perimeter for weaknesses."

"Damned AFIRS bastards," Simon grunted. Jack looked over at him and caught Alexis rolling her eyes. Jack smiled and Alexis winked back at him.

Yet another voice squawked, "Guys, this is Henry on the south main wall. I've got the drone in my sights, due south of my position."

The four on the tower raised their rifles and looked through their scopes in that direction.

"I've got it, Dad," Jack said. "I'd say it's definitely not AFIRS. I can see the insignia, but it's not theirs. Hey, isn't that the French flag?"

"Roger that," Alexis replied. "I can see two crawlers approaching from the east on the old highway. Both have the French tricolor on their sides. It looks like we have company."

Joe held up his radio and said, "There are two crawlers approaching the main gate. They should crown the hill in two minutes and then be visible from the wall. It seems they have the French flag painted on them. Does that make any sense?"

"Yea, maybe," Henry replied. "Doc said he heard some talk on the radio about a group of French people traveling around the country doing research. We'll send a couple of crawlers out to intercept them. Joe, if you and Simon are available, we can always use a couple of guns."

"Dad, I see another crawler!" Jack shouted. The others looked at him. His rifle was pointed west along the old highway. They raised their rifles to peer through their scopes. "That one is AFIRS, for sure. I can see the insignia on the hood, and it looks like the hazard lights are on."

Henry's voice squawked over the speaker, "Yea, I have eyes on it now. That's pretty strange to be lit up like that in the middle of nowhere. What do you think it means?"

"I know," said Crazy Tom, who had just arrived on the lookout platform. They lowered their weapons and turned to face the man. Tom was older, probably in his late fifties. He was almost bald, but sported a long silver ponytail. Joe shook his hand and gave him the walkie-talkie. "This is Crazy Tom. I was an AFIRS agent most of my life until they kicked me to the curb. If the hazard lights are on and it's moving at a slow speed, that means there is no one alive on board. The crawler is in homing mode, either returning to its home base or waiting for other agents to reach it."

Joe took the walkie-talkie back and pressed the talk button. "I think the French crawlers will pass our gate before the AFIRS crawler intercepts them. I think it would be a good idea to have them come inside. We don't know what the AFIRS crawler will do."

Tom smiled and said, "If anyone who isn't AFIRS gets too close, it will attack, at least that's what I was told."

Joe pressed the talk button and replied, "Okay, Simon and I are on our way to help out."

"Dad, I can go too!" Jack chimed in.

Joe patted him on the head and said, "You and Alex have to get ready for school. You know the midyear harvest starts in just two days."

"Dude, it's okay. It's just going to be some boring shit." Crazy Tom replied. The group headed down the tower.

By 6:30 AM, the police and Old Ones had passed through the final gate in the steel and razor wire fence that marked the edge of the city. George and his wife, Irene, looked back at their home. Only a few blocks away, the massive slum began. The encampment they had lived in was more than a mile to the north, nearer to the banks of the Mississippi River. After several miles of slums, the real city started, with thousands of rundown tenements, dirty factory districts and the filth of fifteen million residents. Almost too far to see, in the center of the city was a glass domed region where the leaders and elites lived in splendor. They had seen it all happen in their lifetimes. While local clergy and charities moved through the crowd providing fresh water, food and heavy clothing to the Old Ones, policemen provided each with a shotgun, rifle or pistol and a few dozen rounds of ammunition. The rest of the police held their weapons at the ready in case any of the Old Ones decided to turn the weapons on them.

Society had already begun to crumble by the time George Foster had been born far to the north in a place once known as Minneapolis. The advancing mini-Ice Age forced his family to move south when he was five, and the Fosters left the home and neighborhood they had known all of their lives. They had settled in St. Louis before 2060, and George had been sent to the mandatory six years of school. He was fortunate that his father was a baker and able to pass the trade down to his sons. He had worked in a massive state bakery his entire life until he was forced to retire at the age of sixty-two. Without social security or any savings, he and Irene were forced out of their apartment and into the slums. Now, even the slums were in the past. A policeman stood in front of him, breaking his recollection. He pushed a shotgun into his hands and a box of shells into his backpack. As the police headed back toward the fence, a clergyman walked up to George and patted him on the shoulder. "Father, I am so sorry about this."

"Pastor, it's okay. This is the society we built and now we all have to live with it."

The pastor smiled and said, "Bless you, Father, and may the peace of Christ be upon you." He turned and walked back toward the fence line.

Irene took his arm and said, "What are we to do, George?"

"I think we should head north," he replied.

Another Old One shouted, "Are you mad? We have to go south where it's warm. When the winter comes, we'll freeze to death." Many of the others nodded their heads and cheered the man on.

"Listen to me!" George shouted. "What are there, about a thousand of us? We are not a herd and each of you can do whatever you want."

A woman interjected, "I have family in Dallas. I'm going that way."

“You see what I mean?” George said. “I know there are free cities in most directions, including north. I’m a baker; have been my whole life. There are grain co-ops north of here. Maybe I can help them make bread. It’s worth a lot more to the Elites than bags of wheat. I know the co-ops need skilled workers to train them and their children. I’m not ready to give up on my wife and my life yet!” After several minutes of quibbling, the group broke into three groups: one headed east, one south, and George, Irene and about twenty others headed north. After another thirty minutes, George said, “Let’s head to the river. That’s our best way make sure we’re going in the right direction.”

Mary Foster stood in front of her class of twenty eighth-grade students and smiled. “As you all know, we have the day off tomorrow for Independence Day.” The class cheered. “And the midyear harvest starts on Monday, so we will take the whole week off!” The kids cheered again. She motioned for silence. “Finally, we have an assembly at 2:00 PM. It seems a group of scientists from France is traveling across the country on some kind of research project. Principal Steve wants us to meet them. Now, in the meantime, our subject today is the War of 2081. Why don’t we start with Alexis? Her assignment was to find out why the war started. Alexis?”

Alexis glanced at her best friend, Jack, and he smiled back and gave her a thumbs-up. She stood and came to the podium near the teacher’s desk and cleared her throat. “Okay. The War of 2081. The collapse of the global economy in 2038 began when the United States deficit hit \$45 trillion and the dollar devalued 90% in less than a week. Without a functioning global economy, countries around the world changed almost overnight as militaries took control of most European and East Asian nations in order to restore order. Governments in the Middle East and Africa collapsed and the nations became tribal again, which ultimately led to the African Empire and the Arabian Caliphate. In 2041, the mini Ice Age began. By 2055, most regions of the world above fifty degrees latitude became uninhabitable.”

The teacher interrupted, “Okay, who knows which regions were spared?”

Tony, another of Jack’s friends was called on and replied, “Those areas warmed by ocean currents like the Eastern Seaboard and the western edges of Europe.”

“Very good, Tony,” Mary smiled. “Please continue, Alexis.”

“Due to the encroaching cold, Russia, Scandinavia and Canada were hardest hit. While we accepted all Canadians and Western Europe allowed the Scandinavians to immigrate, Russia wasn’t so lucky. They moved their people south and eventually invaded China and the Arabian Caliphate. In 2063, nuclear war erupted there. Eventually, Russia gave up on those regions and signed peace treaties, but not before Turkey and several European countries had been absorbed into the Russian Empire. Knowing the frigid temperatures and the amount of oil in Alaska and Western Canada, Russia invaded those regions in 2081. Fortunately, Russia had used most of their functioning nuclear arsenal on their neighbors, so the war was conventional. Alaska and most of Western Canada were taken over. Then the Big Dip of 2083 struck. The Russian fleet was frozen in their harbors and the thick ice crushed the hulls of hundreds of ships. Russia and the United States signed a peace treaty in 2084, and we allowed their surviving troops to come south where they boarded other vessels and sailed home. The end.” As she walked back to her desk, her class gave her a standing ovation.

There was an underground bunker beneath Tower 7. It housed the radio equipment and situation room for the co-op. Doc Watson was sitting in front of the radio as usual, but was facing away from the controls. Mayor Anthony Wright stood facing Doc, and Joe Kennedy and

Simon Johnson stood on either side of him. "Okay, you really want me to contact AFIRS? I'm not sure I've ever done that. I mean who really cares if one of their crawlers is missing?"

"Doc, please," Tony replied. "That thing could open fire on anyone stupid enough to get in its way."

Doc looked at the other men for arguments, but they did not show any emotion. "Okay, then," he began and spun his chair around. "I've got to dial into their frequency, so hang on."

Tony touched Joe's arm and said, "Maybe you should go get Crazy Tom. If he really worked for them, it might help." Joe nodded and stepped out of the radio room, closing the door behind him.

Doc raised his hand for quiet, pressed a button on his microphone and said, "This is Co-op M-125. We are trying to contact AFIRS. AFIRS, do you read me?"

"Co-op M-125, this is Agent Ben Carson of AFIRS. What do you need? This frequency is for official Internal Revenue Service use only."

"Yes, Agent Carson, I recognize that. One of your crawlers, unit Tango 1272 passed by our facility less than an hour ago. It was traveling fifteen miles per hour and its lights were flashing."

"Did you say crawler T-1272?"

"Yes, sir."

"And its lights were flashing?"

"Like a Christmas tree, sir."

Joe and Tom walked back into the radio room. "That is very unusual," the voice over the radio said.

Tom walked over and put his hand out as though he wanted to speak to the agent. Doc ignored him and said, "That's what we thought too, Agent Carson."

Tom dropped to his knees and pulled the microphone away from Doc. He pressed the button and said, "Hey, Ben, it's Tom Wainwright here."

"Crazy Tom, this is a surprise!"

"Ben, we both know the crawler would only go into homing mode if the agents had not returned after several hours or if they were incapacitated or dead."

"What's your point, Tom?"

"First of all, you might want to intercept it before it starts blowing shit up. Second, we need to know where it had been. Maybe we can find those agents, if they're still alive."

"Why the sudden compassion, Tom? You walked away from the Armed Forces of the Internal Revenue Service years ago. Are you trying to reenlist or something?"

"Ben, why do you always need to be such a dick?" Tom growled.

"Tom, this is Gladys," a new voice interjected. "Ben's just following protocol. That crawler was sent to the Ottumwa Free City. The leadership there wanted to make a deal to pay their taxes with goods, so the team was there to negotiate."

"Shit!" Mayor Wright shouted, causing everyone else to stare at him.

Tom pushed the talk button and said, "Well, now they're either captured or dead. That hardly seems like negotiations to me."

Gladys replied, "You are right, Tom. Something definitely isn't right there, but it will take us several days to build and dispatch a retrieval team. What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know for sure," Tom answered. "I think I need to go there and check things out."

"Tom, you aren't with AFIRS anymore, so you're on your own if you try anything."

"Yeah, I know that."

By noon, Bill Tompkins and his group of Old Ones had traveled fifteen miles east of the St. Louis metropolis. They walked along old Highway 160, staying off the old Interstate which was frequented by fast-moving crawlers full of bandits and terrorists. The farms and small towns in the area were abandoned due to frequent attacks, and as long as the attackers stayed away from the city, the police and AFIRS chose to ignore them. "What do we do now, Bill?" one of his fellow travelers asked.

"We keep going, Dale," Bill replied without looking at the other man. "We all know how this ends, for Christ's sake. George was right about that. This is the world we built and now we have no choice but to see it through. I only hope we live to see tomorrow." Dale only sighed and moved away, resigned to his fate.

"I think you're giving up too easily, Bill," a woman noted. "I know I don't look like it now, but I fought in the War of 2081, when I was just a kid. We have to have a plan. Most of these groups of hoodlums are sloppy. They think we're all going to give up and make their jobs easier. We need to be prepared to kill as many of those bastards as we can."

Bill stopped and turned to face her "Hope, you seem to know everything. What should we do?"

"Listen everyone!" she shouted and was soon surrounded by the large group of Old Ones. She stood on a nearby boulder so everyone could see her. Hope smiled and said, "We all know our odds aren't good. But I can tell you that most of these gangs have only a few dozen members. From looking around, I'd say we're close to four hundred. That's a lot of fire power."

"We're not soldiers, Hope!" a woman cried out.

"I was," another shouted. A loud murmur moved through the crowd.

"Quiet!" Hope demanded. "It's been common knowledge that most Old Ones die within two days after being exiled. If we can beat that, the odds move into our favor. Now, each of you has a pistol, rifle or shotgun. Make sure it's loaded and the safety is on. We don't want to start shooting each other, do we?" She jumped down from the rock and shouted, "Everyone sit down for a minute so I can show you what to do." When they were seated, she continued, "If you have a rifle, you are our first line of defense. I want all riflemen to be on the outside of our group. If we are attacked, you need to get into the prone position, which I'll show you in a minute. Your job is to take out their command and control. That means, look for the guys acting like they're in charge. Shoot them first."

"But we don't know how to shoot!"

"We're not soldiers!"

"Listen to me!" Hope exclaimed. "This isn't about being a soldier; it's about living to see tomorrow. If we try, we will probably die anyway. If we don't want to try, we might as well kill ourselves right now." It had become deathly silent. "Okay, now shotguns and pistols are not very accurate at long distance, so don't use them until the enemy is within a hundred yards. And try to aim, don't just fire randomly. Only God knows if any of us will survive, but we have to try!"

In the early afternoon, Alexis and Jack sat with their friends in the auditorium. The principal entered along with four men the students had never seen. Principal Steve stood at the microphone and said, "Good afternoon, students, and thank you for your attendance today." He motioned to one of the new people and said, "This man is Alexis de Tocqueville, a scientist from France. He is on a journey across our country and would like to share some thoughts with you. Mr. de Tocqueville, you have the stage." The children applauded politely.

Jack leaned over to Alexis and said, “Hey, he has your name. I thought you were a girl?” She elbowed him in the ribs.

“Bonjour and a good afternoon to you all! As Principal Abernathy said, my name is Alexis de Tocqueville. Have any of you heard that name before?”

Jack stood and raised his hand. When the man pointed to him, he replied, “My dad has a book by a man with that name. It’s called *Democracy in America*.” He sat down.

The man’s face lit up and continued, “Yes, that is exactly correct, young man. That man is one of my ancestors who traveled to this country in the mid-1800s. When I graduated from university, I thought what better way is there to remember him than to write a new version of the book. As you may know, one of his predictions came true here. To quote him, ‘The American Republic will endure until the day Congress discovers it can bribe the public with the public’s money.’ I wish I could say that all the world’s ills are the fault of the American government, but that would be false. My own country did the same and more, as did many of our European neighbors. But the one thing I’ve learned from my country and yours is that the people are still great. Even though our governments never seem to learn, the people continue to forge alliances for the betterment of their neighbors and themselves. This place is just such an alliance and I am amazed at the quality of life you have here. You should all be very proud. After a couple of days rest in your fine co-op, my friends and I are heading west to learn more about democracy in America. We know there is a town not far from here which calls itself a free city. We are keen to see how that works in such a mad world.”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot allow that,” another man said as he walked over to the podium. “I am Anthony Wright, mayor of this co-op, and we need to discuss any contact with the Ottumwa Free City.” The mayor and visitors walked out of the room.

Principal Steve returned to the microphone and said, “Sorry for the interruption, students. You can have the rest of the day off.” He hurried out of the room to catch up with the others.

As they moved down the bleachers, Alexis said, “So, you want to go hang out?”

“Sure, Alex,” Jack replied. “Where do you want to go?”

“Let’s grab our rifles and go up on the wall.”

“Cool.”