



MADDIE

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Chapter 1

As they walked hand in hand, they heard another explosion behind them. Neither bothered to look back in the direction of the blast. It had become so commonplace an event. Very predictably one became immune to the sound. He thought; "Another trekker bit it." But, this time he instantly heard the less jarring, dull thud of a smashing cantaloupe echo. This time he stopped and turned around to get a view. In the distance he saw something writhing on the ground. It appeared to be a legless human; of the heavy on the garish ketchup sort. He said; "Poor voyager didn't die from the blast. He's gonna suffer. With no medical help available, a wounded predator is a slowly dead predator." As usual, Maddie was silent and seemed dispassionate. Her eyes showed nothing but a glaze. A small sigh may have been heard by one with acute hearing. Maybe it was just one small part of her normal breathing process.

They again carefully walked. He heard a gunshot. He pushed Maddie behind him, crouched and pulled out his handgun. The man on the ground was not moving and had a revolver where his head once was. "Brave man," he said. "Dumb as can be. But, brave in the end. You've got to know what you're doing before you get into these bad parts." His life experience had led him to believe that it was impossible to know something without

experiencing it. But now life depended on having some sort of prior knowledge; as many first "experiences" had become deadly ones.

Michael "Conk" DeAngelo and Maddie held hands as they walked down the last of the remaining clear road. His huge football meat-hook of a left hand engulfed Maddie's elevated, little girl soft right one. He could see that just ahead the risk level was going to increase. The dirt roads would soon become overgrown dirt roads. The traps were shortly to become harder to detect.

He thought; "Likely, the faction who had mined all the roads was the same faction which had detonated the nuclear bombs. A number of competing terrorist groups had been threatening a devastating attack for some time. This one knew how to simultaneously take out the internet and make all communication devices inoperative. Its technical abilities were outstanding, but its genius was the precision co-ordination."

On the paved sections of road, the patches over the explosives were obvious to anyone paying attention. The problem was that the main roads were menaced by armed and dangerous lunatics; some with "official" appearing uniforms. It had been a few days since Conk last got reckless. He had been in a rush to leave the mushroom clouds behind and find out if the rumors were true. His car got blasted near Phoenix. His limping foot and

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anxious curiosity had been paying for it since then. But, if not for that he would never have seen Maddie.

The going was tough, hot and slow. Every day since was a mirror of the last. Flat, scorched land ahead. Flat, scorched land behind. Flat, scorched land to the left. Flat, scorched land to the right. The Superstitions and the Camelbacks appeared to be stoic in their distant, lofty perches. Periodic, toxic, black clouds spit from the earth. Browning of the century old Giant Saguaro. Blackening of the closer-to-the ground Prickly Pear and Peyote.

The sameness of the barren, blackened flatlands brought a mental despair. Oddly this also relaxed him. Some kind of fate had taken the upper hand in his life. There was nothing he could do about that; other than to take care of little Maddie as best he could. It was just a matter of how the cards had been dealt. This time it helped to make things clear. In good moments he settled into an "I don't give a damn" relaxation. He well knew the periodically helpful mindset from the football field. In bad moments he wanted to kill those responsible. He also knew that from the football fields. But, this time he didn't even know who they were.

Breezes were a visual delight. In them, what remained rooted of the lifeless brush would rush around. Like burnt out

tumbleweed they hurried to their place of final impalement. But, there had been no breeze for days.

This had become mere normality in 2052 USA after "it" happened. Maybe the entire world. Conk risked losing concentration when he glanced to his left. A piece of charred brush broke the ugly dullness. It showed a hint of green at the base. Or maybe that was his wishful thinking. Or maybe it had gorged on the formerly human carcasses rotting next to it. Maddie seemed to take no notice.

Conk heard the clip-clop sound of horses' hooves. From a mile behind Conk saw two riders approaching. Their horses foolishly galloped and the riders yipped like coyotes near prey. He took the automatic handgun out of his pants pocket. He checked it for ammo and cocked it. He said to Maddie; "Stay behind me. Ready for a clash today? No sweat. It's only two." Maddie closed her eyes. She seemed wary.

As the two neared, Conk fired his gun into a dirt patch ten feet ahead of the horses. The explosion caused the mounts to rear up high. When they settled Conk said; "Dangerous place, huh."

The two looked at each other. The talkative one in the dusty black, felt cowboy hat with brims pointed at the sky responded in an overly false demure way. The man with the

circling, silver plated amulets and a week's growth said; "Hey, we're the good guys."

Conk said; "Yeah, right. Me too. Want something here?"

"You look familiar."

Conk scowled and shrugged.

"You're that middle linebacker who was always in the wrong place."

Conk inwardly smirked. Five years ago he had been a top ten draftee out of Old Miss', an NFL rookie with "huge potential." He had been another saddled with the curse of expectations. Two years later he was a disappointment as everybody knew that he overplayed the run. At six foot three, two fifty he had little man's syndrome. He liked to hit. He liked to knock 350 pound, offensive linemen on their fat butts. He said; "Still am, I guess."

The talkative one snickered and derisively said; "Messed up that Super Bowl. Third and seven ain't a run situation."

"Least I was in one. You been on prime time?"

"Giants, right?"

"Yeah. Anybody know what happened yet?"

"Still dead screen. Not even blue."

"See many people heading this way?"

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"Some. A few think someone's got it started over in LA." He shrugged, as if to say; "Suckers. There's some mean hombres between here and there. Ain't too many makin' it."

Conk said; "I'll take my chances. I don't really care." Conk thought; "This is a slow death trap. I just want to do my best for Maddie. She so young and can't understand."

"Who does?" The horseman leered at Maddie and said; "She your property?" Maddie kept her eyes shut and winced.

"She's my god-daughter. I'm her protector."

"You can put that gun away. We're legitimate businessmen. You got any oil? We got some whiskey to trade."

"Do I look like an Indian to you? I could use a horse, though."

The talkative man looked to his partner and forced a laugh. The back-up-man with a gray beard down to his belly button responded in kind. Talkative said; "Badass dude, outnumbered, bum leg and all. Draw!" They reached for their guns. Conk fired first and hit both their hands. He picked up both of their dropped weapons and pocketed them. He took her hand, and said; "Come on, Maddie. These guys are a waste of time."

As they walked away the spokesman said; "You haven't seen the last of us. Next time we'll introduce you to our friends." They galloped away.

Conk was unhappy with himself. Again, he should have played the pass and not the run. He thought; "Idiot. I'm too much of a nice guy. I should have killed them and taken their horses." Maddie held his hand and skipped alongside him. She almost smiled. For the moment she was happy, but she knew that would change. She knew that next time there would be more. She knew that there was now only one path left. It would soon be more difficult on the overgrown dirt road. But, she was still unaware of the difficulties added by that situation. She just knew that something bad always happens. But, she knew that this big guy was there for her. She knew that he might not succeed. But, she was happy because she knew that he'd try. Maddie trailed Conk, making a game of stepping into his footsteps. She also thought it best to take the precisely identical route.

The sun was setting in front of them. Conk was thankful. He felt as if his left leg was no longer there. It was time to rest for the night. He led Maddie off the road. They sat behind a cluster of dead somethings. At one time they might have had a defining form, but everything in the world had changed. He took blankets from his backpack and spread them over the scorched earth.

He said; "I never knew that the earth itself could burn. Stupid, I guess. Here's another stupid one. Are you hungry?"

Maddie sighed and shook her head no.

Conk rubbed her cheek and said; "Brave girl. But, you have to have at least one." He handed her a strip of beef jerky and took one for himself. They washed it down with small sips from the half empty canteen.

He said; "It's going to be more dangerous than usual to be on the road. The traps will be less clear. Those guys can find us too easy. If there are a bunch of them we'll be in big trouble."

Maddie's brown eyes expressed a question.

"As long as we follow the late day sun we'll be going the right way. We'll just have to watch out for all the rattlers."

Conk had known that it was safer to avoid the major highways like I-40, I-10 and Route 66 as through a bit of experimentation he had learned that the main roads had become magnets for the dangerous lunatics. His problem was that he wanted to leave the east coast and make it to California as quickly as possible and didn't want to risk getting stuck behind a tree carcass on the back roads.

From a distance she appeared to be a tiny person, which was confirmed as when Conk got up close Maddie appeared to be about 9 or 10. He had found her sitting under a Mesquite Tree

somewhere near where Phoenix and his 2052 silver Benz SL-Class means of transportation had known better days. She sat just off Interstate 10 and moved only her head when she heard Conk's vehicle shatter from the blast. She appeared totally disinterested and resigned, as if she had given up all hope and was just waiting for death to pay its inevitable visit. She was calm and aloof. He gathered what things he could from the car and walked to her. He kept saying; "Hey." This calling just prompted her to look away from him; perhaps in her last hope. That being that the unwanted intruder might take the hint and just go away.

Conk kept approaching. He was not subject to subtle innuendo when there was a little girl in possible distress. When he got near her he squatted and said; "Where are your folks?" If he had heard a reasonable answer he'd have respected her wishes and moved on.

"

"Come on now. You can't be all alone out here."

"

"Can you hear me?"

She nodded, seeming very put upon to be required to make any sort of reply.

"Mute?"

"

"Well, listen. All hell has broken loose. I just can't leave you here."

"

"Look. If you don't tell me who you have to protect you, I'm making it my job."

"

"Okay, you made your answer, whether you know it or not." Conk reached for the chain which hung to her breastplate from around her neck. He wanted to see if there was any information about her; like that contained in a locket. Perhaps thinking that this movement was some sort of attack, in fear, she rolled onto her side and stood up. She tried to run, but Conk got his arms around her belly.

"It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. It's okay. I'm just trying to find where you belong."

She relaxed as she laughed, covering her mouth with her hand. She then used both of her hands to pull back the shoulder length brown hair which had fallen into her face.

Conk was dumbfounded. He let go of her and said; "See; I'm a natural born comedian." He was simultaneously thinking; "This girl has the strangest sense of humor." He asked; "Okay, can I take a look at your chain?"

She again laughed. He took the triangular, silver medallion in his hand and read it out loud. "Madeline Moitiesaurian?"

She shrugged.

"Well, that didn't tell me much. I know one thing though. Madeline Moitiesaurian is just too big a name for a little girl like you. So, I'm going to call you Maddie. Any objections?"

"

"I didn't think so. Come on. You're coming with me."

She offered no resistance when he took her hand and led her to the road. He talked to her because he liked the company.

"We've got about 370 miles to go. Do you know how far that it is?"

"

"It's pretty far, but we can make it in about two weeks. Bum leg and all."

"

"When the big bomb went off in New York I hightailed it out of Old Canaan as quickly as I could. Took the stuff I needed and drove west."

"

"Well, what other choice did I have? Didn't stop all that much. Didn't have to. There weren't many cars on the road. Well, there were cars on the road; but most of them weren't moving anymore."

"

"Not too funny, huh? Guess it ain't. Anyway, I stopped once for this biker guy who was working on his Harley Electra Glide. Turned out he had things under control. To fix the wobble he just had to make an adjustment on the slop in the bearings. He was finishing up. But, he thanked me for stopping and told me some things. He didn't know exactly how extensive the bomb damage was, but figured it was the worst ever by a longshot."

Maddie chuckled once more and this time Conk thought he knew why.

"Yeah, I know. Gigantic revelation. Right? But, this guy was in Iraq when all that tonnage got dropped by what were said to have been hacked drones. I had a feeling something big was going to happen after that. You remember the news about that?"

"

"To get back to the story, he told me that he knew about a group called the "LA Wild Living Edibles Survival Syndicate;" LAWLESS; who had been predicting that this would happen for a while now."

Conk thought that he might have detected tenseness in Maddie's hand. He looked toward her and saw that she was staring at the Superstitions. He went on; "Like most survivalist groups they didn't do a lot of advertising as they didn't want everybody to descend on them when the big event came."

"

"So, when he got the bike going again, we parted and continued to head west. In my rear view mirror I saw that he hit a trap and he and the bike became one in little pieces spread all over Route 78."

"

"Too bad. Seemed like a good guy. At least it gave me some kind of a destination. LAWLESS."

Maddie looked up at him. It seemed as if she might have a question or comment. If she did, she decided to keep it to herself.

"Almost, eh? Maybe someday. But for right now, you're going to need some more clothing and a backpack. There are probably the remnants of some stores in Phoenix where we can find you some stuff. 'Sides, I could use some more supplies."

Maddie frowned.

"I might know what you're thinking. The place is rampant with gun toting looters." He pulled out his gun and held it in the air. He said; "So are we. We joined the club."

Maddie laughed.

"And there won't be any buried mines on the way."

Chapter 2

They covered no more than a quarter of a mile which was littered with dead and dying cactus remains before they came upon the signs of former civilization. The adobe and brick houses on the outskirts of town looked as if they had been sand blasted by a machine working in the gear of overdrive squared. What remained of the wooden trims was stripped and ready for a new paint job. Wooden frame houses fared less well. As in the aftermath of a tornado; some retained some semblance of their structure. For others the only evidence of them having been there was the concrete foundation and debris. In any of the cases, they all had one thing in common. The yards were strewn with the dead remains of that which once lived. Conk thought that the eeriest aspect was the absolute stillness and the lack of blaring emergency vehicles. Maddie showed no surprise; suggesting that she had seen it before.

Conk said; "It's one thing to imagine it and quite another to actually see it."

Maddie was stoic, unimpressed, and quiet.

Conk could not help but wonder what this little girl had seen. When the mental images appeared he shut them out. He started talking as a diversion. He said; "You know; I used to play for the Giants. Football, that is. Paid pretty good and I only had to work three days a week. And that's in season. Off

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