

War of the Planet Burners
A First Contact alien invasion novel
by DENNIS HERRICK

BONUS: About 350 First Contact titles at end of book

3

Now he'd returned to Iowa to sleep in a Realtor's abandoned house in a small town. Sleep was what brought him peace, even though he would never escape the memories and dreams of Fort Hood and his endless personal war against Raiders.

Joel awoke when morning sunlight streamed through a window onto his face. He thought the sun woke him until he realized he'd heard a door creak.

Then came a soft knock on the bedroom door. "Don't shoot," a woman's voice said from the other side of the door.

He thought it might be a trap. *Could be Raiders. They think I won't shoot a woman.* Even while thinking that, he leaped from the bed, grabbed his M4, and jumped behind a dresser that he'd pulled away from the wall the night before in case he might need cover.

"I saw you come in here last night," said the woman behind the door. "But I didn't dare come until daylight."

He didn't answer. Instead, he holstered his pistol and trained the M4 on the door. He could fire a grenade from its launcher when the door opened. The grenade would hit the wall in the hallway and explode, killing everyone around it. He kept glancing toward the window to make sure no one was there.

"I'm coming in now. I'm alone."

Joel flipped the assault carbine's selector level to automatic. If she was leading a charge into the room, he could take out several Raiders once the shooting started.

She pushed the door open slowly and shoved both hands through the opening to prove she was unarmed. She looked around the door's edge, and her eyes widened at the sight of the M4 barrel aimed at her.

He waited with his finger near the M4's trigger.

She entered the room. She was a trim woman about his age with straight black hair cut uneven and down to her shoulders. She wore jeans and a short-sleeved green shirt.

She raised her hands above her head. "There's no one else," she said.

He motioned with the M4 for her to step away from the door. She sidestepped a ways, and he pointed for her to go all the way to the corner. He aimed the carbine at the door and watched her in his peripheral vision.

He waited five minutes, taking more glances at the window every few seconds and listening for the slightest sound. She stood in the corner, where she lowered her hands to alternately ball them into fists or wring them in front of her.

He came out from behind the dresser and pulled the pin from a hand grenade while holding the spoon on with his left hand. He approached the door at full alert with his carbine in his right. If anyone did shoot him, at least the grenade would take the shooter out when it fell from his hand.

When he was sure no one was in the hallway, he reinserted the pin in the grenade and stared at her.

"What are you doing here?"

"I watched you check the town. You seemed to be looking for the wild men."

“Raiders.”

“Okay, whatever.” She talked with firmness. “I knew you weren’t one of them because you were alone. They always travel in packs like wolves. It took me all night to work up the nerve to contact you. At first I wanted to hide until you left, but finally I decided I needed your help. I have some shotguns I’ve taken from homes, but that’s all. I wouldn’t have much of a chance if those wild men found me.”

“You’ve been here for two years? Ever since—”

“I call it the Fatal Fog. Hardly anyone in town survived. People at the farms and other towns are dead.” She spoke through lips drawn in a tight line, looking at his M4 instead of his eyes.

He lowered the weapon, and she exhaled in relief. “I could tell some Raiders had been here, but not for a while,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean you might not be one of them.”

“Different groups have come three times. But I always hid until they left.”

He nodded.

“I’m Mary,” she said.

“Joel Birchard.”

She smiled with compressed lips. “I’m very glad to see you.”

He believed her story of living alone when he saw where she’d buried cans of food under a playground’s sand and showed him other places where she buried her trash.

“They never stay long,” she said. “They search the small towns and countryside for food and for any survivors they can enslave or recruit. But here, I’ve hidden all the edible food from our grocery store. There is still food in the houses, but I don’t like to go into them. Livestock is dead or escaped from the farms.”

They talked all day walking around the quiet town. She showed him where she’d hidden food and water caches.

They sat on the steps of some bone people’s silent house and wondered to each other what happened.

Two years ago the sky had clouded over and all electricity ceased. That afternoon the cloud cover descended. Fog covered everything so thick that visibility was cut to a few feet. People died wherever they breathed the cinnamon vapors—on their walks, at their offices and stores, in their cars, and in their yards where they collapsed over flowerbeds and lawn mowers.

The fog didn’t seem to affect birds, animals, or plants. Without humans, nature rebounded. Wildlife increased in numbers. Trees, bushes, and grasses reclaimed everything, from cracks in sidewalks and streets to swaths of idle farm fields, parks, athletic fields, and lawns.

Mary said she’d been one of at least four survivors, all relatives, in her town of five thousand. Joel told her that he thought he’d been the only survivor on his Army base. Now, after fighting Raiders and meeting her, he realized there might have been others. He hadn’t seen anyone, however, when he’d grabbed weapons and supplies and fled the base.

Joel and Mary recalled their shock from walking among the dead in those days.

Each had since decided that a few people survived because of some genetic fluke that made them immune to the fog. “Lucky freaks of nature,” Mary called them. She theorized that breathing in just one molecule of the fog killed almost everyone like a bullet to the heart.

“At first I thought I was the only person left alive,” Joel said. “Then the Raiders came, and I realized there were others. They came out of cities in gangs. They are armed and led by what I call warlords. They loot stores and houses for food and supplies and fight each other.”

“The first two groups that came here were like that,” she said. “They executed my uncle

because he wouldn't join them. His skeleton is behind city hall. I didn't dare bury him, because then they'd know someone was still here. They'd captured and enslaved my sister, a niece, and a cousin here. I guess the protective gene was in our family so there were more survivors in our town than in most. After that, there was only me left, hiding in the high school."

She hesitated, as if she'd regretted telling him where she sought sanctuary. Then she told him how she and her uncle had ridden bicycles soon after the fog to the four nearest towns and hadn't found anyone alive in the towns or the farms in between.

Joel asked her questions about the fog and loss of electricity that he'd been asking himself. "Was it a chemical and electromagnetic pulse attack on the United States? If so, why is there no invasion?"

"Not only the U.S. The whole world."

He looked at her, astonished.

"A group came here last month and had radios they talked on. They camped right outside the school. I crept up close and listened to them. They said some ships had traveled to Europe and Asia. Everyone everywhere experienced the same electrical annihilation and fog."

"I always thought it was another country's attack," he said. He frowned at the puzzle of how radios could have worked without electricity. "The lack of an invasion afterward puzzled me. It still does."

"There seems to be these roving wild men and nothing else. It's the same all over the world. That's what I heard them say anyway."

Joel looked out at the cinnamon haze that now just obscured distant houses and trees. "When it first came, the fog was so thick you couldn't see much," he said. "It keeps thinning. You can't even smell it any more."

"Some natural phenomenon. Freakish. Like you and me."

He thought she probably was right. They both sat for a minute with their own thoughts. Birds chirped in trees around them. In the distance several coyotes yapped and howled. He wondered if they'd caught a meal.

"I think the last group will defeat the other wild men gangs," Mary said.

He looked at her. "Why?"

"They're organized. They wear uniforms. And they must have recruited an engineer who figured out how to make radios, so they have communication. Strange thing. They had an elongated balloon tied above the radio. And they drove into town—"

"Drove?"

"Yes. They drove into town with some older diesel trucks with machine guns in the truck beds. A large group of them went down to our town's used dealership. I wondered what they were doing, so I snuck down there one night. I watched and listened the next day while they worked on the biggest four-wheel drive diesel pickups they could find. They refitted the trucks with compressed air tanks they'd brought. I heard one say they could start the diesel engines without electricity by using compressed air. And that diesels don't use spark plugs. They modified the engines and added metal plates. I heard them complain, saying they wished they could use the newest trucks, but the new ones had too many electronics to work around."

Joel was shocked. He hadn't seen any Raiders except on foot and on horseback. If Mary's third group had figured out how to make diesel vehicles run, they would become a threat impossible to stand against.

Joel ran back to the east side of town, and with a rope he lifted his bicycle into the canopy to better hide it. When he returned to her, they worked to ensure there was no evidence of their presence. No opened cans or bottles, no footprints, no indication that the community was

anything but a dead town.

“They consider this part of their territory now,” he said. “They’ll be back.”

“You’re probably right,” she said. “Every few months lately one gang or another seemed to show up. The first two groups camped out or went inside the houses. But the last group stayed on the campus of the small college on top of the ridge.”

“The ones with the diesel trucks? And they were here a month ago?”

He rubbed his mouth and chin. “I expect they’ll be back soon.”

She showed him other parts of the town. He thought she would stay with him in the model home, but she went back to the school and spent the next two nights there.

“Don’t try to find me,” she said in a low voice. “It’s dangerous.”

But then she spent the next two days with him. They explored the town, and she talked about people she’d once known there. She took him to more food caches and into the bone people stores.

She stayed with him at the model house the third night. She intended to sleep in an adjacent bedroom, but in the middle of the night she entered his room. They’d kept their doors open so they could hear each other. She always wore the most colorful pajamas she could find to keep her spirits up, although they looked plain in the moonlit room.

Joel pulled aside the sheet from the bed’s other side. No blanket was necessary in the summertime temperature.

She laid in the bed on her right side, her back to him. After a few minutes she reached back for his left hand, and set it on her waist. “There,” she said. “Only there.”

He lay there and reveled in her waist’s warmth and softness on his hand. He listened to her quiet breathing. When he finally fell asleep, it was with a sense of relaxation he’d not known for a long time.

On the fourth night, he awoke to find her arm draped across him.

On the fifth night, they lay clinging to each other. They comforted each other with the first affection either had known for two years and vowed to stay together. They felt they were the world’s last two lovers. *(Chapter 4 will be posted in a few days. Reach author though website’s “Contact” tab if you missed the Prologue and Chapters 1 or 2.)*