

# Nine

**February 1, 2037**

The bus rocked like a small boat in rough waters as it rumbled over the neglected roads and forgotten highways. Parts of the road were missing and others were buried beneath mountains of debris. On occasion, a tire plunged into a pothole deep enough to swallow half of it before spitting it back out, jolting both bus and passengers.

“I can’t believe it’s really empty out here.” Wonderment couldn’t begin to describe what she felt as she looked beyond the reach of the headlights, to the dark and abandoned world surrounding them. “Such a great big swath of land stripped of human activity! I mean, look around, it’s absolutely... completely void of human life!”

Throughout the years, Michelle, her sister, would lament the mass exodus affecting the Central Valley; and, although she had never knowingly doubted her, she now realized that she had never quite believed it. That the entire central part of California could empty out to such a degree that not one home, business, or car had life within had simply been too much for her to grasp.

Gus studied her profile for a brief moment before having to bring his attention back to the road. Had he not witnessed the

complete and utter disbelief in her expression, he would have thought that she was just making conversation.

“I’m confused. You seem indubitably baffled, yet this vast emptiness before you has been in the making for the last twenty, maybe thirty, years. It’s been repeatedly decimated by poverty, joblessness, and disease.”

Claudia gave a nod as her thoughts traveled back in time, to the night she left Lazador’s nest. Her father had been in conversation with Clarence and Michelle, having a discussion about grain supplies when she walked in to say goodbye. The last thing her father said to her was that he hoped that someday she would find a way to stop being so angry at the world.

“I once lived here, about seventeen years ago.” She paused, debating just how much detail was necessary. “Back then my parents were actually working towards preparing us and the people of our community for...this.” Her hand gesture told him *this* referred to the complete void of people everywhere she looked—every home, street, storefront they passed was nothing but a darkened silhouette under the dim moonlight. “I was young and naïve and I resented him for it.” *As if it had been his doing.* “I was just seventeen and I thought that if access to the world was going to be taken away from me, then I’d better get out there and see it. So I left.” Her eyes were focused downward, on her cuticles, as she tried to suppress the shame she felt for having been so callous towards her father. “It’s actually a story of irony. I left here to get away from my father’s bleak outlook of the future only to fly across the Atlantic and make friends with

people that were just like him. As I quickly learned, it wasn't just my parents who were preparing for life in confinement. So, sixteen years later, here I am again."

"Hmm. This is your first day at work and here you are."

"Here I am." Her lips were smiling but her heart was aching.

"No offense, but who do you know?"

Gus was clearly impressed. No one. Absolutely no one got a job without a strong recommendation from someone at the upper echelons of Zarant.

She hesitated, but then decided that she had to answer the question or risk making him suspicious.

"My father's friend, Steven, works at Zalt." She left out the part where her father was the founder of the rebel group, Lazador, and that Steven and Yesenia were members.

"Lucky you. So, where does a woman who just got back from..."

"Spain."

"Spain? Nice. Where do you find housing? Your parent's home?"

Housing was presently the scarcest commodity in the SunSafes. As the population grew, the poorest of the poor were being pushed out of their homes to make room for the more "desirable" population. Claudia's eyes glanced up at the mirror and she couldn't help but wonder how many of the passengers were on the bus because an entitled little prat took an interest in their home.

“I live with the same people who helped me get my job. You wouldn’t know them, they are really private.” She pushed herself back, towards the back of her bucket-seat, until her back reached the backrest, giving her a better view of the mirror above the passenger seat. From it, she peered at the passengers and fought back the tears when she saw the top of the children’s heads.

“I bet your parents are happy to have you back.”

As it happened, she had yet to see her parents. Claudia’s seventeen year runaway adventure to Spain had an unforeseen perk for Lazador: it kept her off Zarant’s radar. Unlike Michelle, and the other Lazador members, she was not in Zarant’s database, which meant that she could move freely about the SunSafe without fear of being arrested. It also meant that she was hireable. All she needed was a reputable sponsor, and she had two—Steven and Yesenia.

“Well then, since you’ve been gone for so long, I guess I have to give you a history lesson about beautiful Madera County.”

“Oh, I’m going to get a history lesson...from you?”

“Don’t doubt my abilities. I know my history. For example, did you know that there is a wild rumor about this area?”

Claudia played along and asked, “What area, Los Banos?”

He gave her an “oh, come on” look before playfully scolding her. “No. The Central Valley, of course.”

“The Central Valley?” Staring at him across the aisle she waited for him to indulge her with more details, but when he failed to elaborate further, she protested. “Oh, come on. You have to tell me.”

Although she was certain she'd already heard the rumor, she egged him on, preferring the conversation to the guilt she felt for making him her unwitting accomplice. Unbeknownst to Gus, he had risked his life and aided her in extracting Kenneth Montes, a man Zachary is fervently searching for, from the SF SunSafe. In fact, the man was sitting on the inside seat of the second to last row, pretending to be sedated with the other passengers.

“Hold on. First I want your word.”

“My word? Why?” Then she saw it. Right then, when he squirmed in his seat. It was a small, but existent fissure of insecurity in his perfect, confident armor. “Oh, I see. You believe this *wild* rumor.”

She too believed the rumor, but that was because she knew that it wasn't a rumor at all.

Gus was blushing, and although he didn't know it, the incandescent lighting in the bus's cabin masked it.

“I don't necessarily buy the whole enchilada,” he qualified, still blushing. Both his tone and his posture seemed to slump, conveying his self-consciousness.

“Go on.” She prompted with mild amusement.

“It's just that there are aspects of it that...well...they don't seem too farfetched, if you ask me.”

“Okay. Like what?” She leaned across the aisle, nearly falling out of her seat, and bestowed him with an expectant smile.

“Well.” He paused, giving her one last hesitant glance before repeating what he'd heard from some of the security guys and other drivers. “They say that there are people surviving out here.

Some say that there are whole brand new cities underground. Others say communities were formed using the existing infrastructure by tunneling between homes and networking them together. But all agree that people live out here on their own, and that they have become nocturnal to avoid the sun.”

Claudia was temporarily stunned. He was correct on both counts, and according to her father, there were several communities surviving off the grid, some better off than others.

“Really? Who are *they* that speak such wild rumors?” she grinned teasingly, trying to hide her surprise.

“People.” He glared at her. “Just people.” He was becoming defensive again.

With a slight giggle, she said, “Don’t worry. You’re not the first one to bring it up. Sal,” their boss, “has already shared this rumor with me. He thought I should know about it before I came out here with you. Said no one has been able to prove that such a community exists.”

“Nope.” He agreed, with visible relief that someone else had corroborated the rumors. “Not even Zachary. But you have to admit that if Zachary is expending resources trying to find these *nonexistent* communities, then there must be a possibility that they exist, right? That’s the part that gets me.”

It was a good thing that the only light in the bus cabin was the blue hue from the dashboard instruments; otherwise, he would have seen her pallor.

“What do you mean, Zachary is expending resources? He actually bought into the rumor?”

Gus was nodding his head up and down slowly as if he too couldn't believe it when he'd heard it. "Sal confided in me that a few months back they were flying drones out with ground penetrating sonar capabilities, which in my opinion gives the rumors some serious validity."

"Ground penetrating sonar?"

"Yup. And, according to Sal, they've found and destroyed a couple already, but those are rumors too. No one has any proof."

"Wait a minute. Let's back up just a bit."

"Okay, but why are you pinching your eyes shut like that? Do you have a headache?"

Claudia exhaled slowly to clear her thoughts then shook her head. "No, no headache, just disbelief. Why would Zachary, the wealthiest, most powerful man who technically commands the global economy, care so much about an unfounded, unsubstantiated wild rumor?"

The expression on his face told her that he knew the answer to her question.

"Boy, you really have been away for a while, haven't you?" He didn't wait for her to reply. "Well, it turns out that many people like believing in mythological worlds, so much so that there hasn't been a day in the last eight months where an ad wasn't taken out pleading for acceptance into "the community." Some people are even declaring their refusal to move into the SunSafe on social websites, hoping that their public repudiation of the SunSafes will somehow gain them entry. Worst of all, people are leaving the SunSafe in search of these communities,

and they are dying within days of their departure from sun exposure.” A shiver began at the nape of his neck and shimmied down, towards his feet. “I’ve seen the corpses. It’s like human jerky afterwards... and the smell... oh, just awful.”

“That’s really sad.”

She’d seen quite a few sunburnt corpses herself during her last few years in Spain. It was a daily exercise to remind herself that there would always be people who believed that the world was wrong. Sadly, they usually learned they were wrong once it was too late, after they’d lost their vision and developed severe blisters and boils, or just as the sun licked the last bit of moisture from their desiccated skin as they took their last breath.

“It is. And officially, that’s why no one should try to locate or believe in the existence of an underground community. But I much prefer the less politically correct reason.”

He really had her attention now.

“Which is?”

“Power! The existence of any competing community undermines Zachary’s grip on society. The SunSafes are his creation and he insists that we become dependent on them, and by extension, on him. If we accept our confined existence in his SunSafe communities globally, and without an alternative we have no choice, then by extension we are accepting his rule.”

“They would be a threat.” Claudia was slowly nodding her head as it all came together for her.

“Bingo.”

“So he only looks for them to destroy them... if they exist. He doesn't care about the people.”

Gary, her father, she needed to warn him. He'd taken protective measures for such a thing, but she felt that she still needed to warn him.

A flash of guilt struck her. The night before she left for Spain she'd complained to her sister about being tired of their father's FBI paranoia crap—it turns out that everything he'd planned for had come true, only much sooner than he had anticipated. That two meter thick concrete ceiling he had built into the Nest probably saved their lives.

“Yeah...of course. I mean, why else would he care?”

Pushing her anxiety aside and bringing a smile back to her lips, she took the opportunity to study him while he dedicated his attention on driving. Indulging her visual senses by cruising his physique, she made a few notes: handsome face, strong and fit, manly hands, and kind temperament. Every time the guy looked at her, butterflies fluttered in her stomach, making her flush with embarrassment. She had misjudged him. He wasn't a cony.

Moving on to a different topic she asked, “Is it true that the Central Valley is one big graveyard? I mean, it's rumored that a high number of the residents who refused to leave are entombed in their homes.”

“I've heard that rumor too, but again, no one has ever verified it. Apparently, Zachary's feelings on this one are nonexistent. I think that as far as he's concerned it is good riddance.”

“So they've made no effort to look for the missing people?”

“Nope. Maybe they’re not missing. Maybe they joined one of the underground communities.”

Teasing him a bit, she laughed and said, “Wait, so you really do subscribe to that rumor, don’t you?”

His confidence wavered a bit before he answered. “Let’s just say that it’s very hard for me to accept that absolutely everyone who hasn’t died from Ebola...or sun exposure...or whatever else that has devastated our numbers, has moved into a SunSafe. I mean, it’s a big world. What if people did find a way to survive out here?”

Her quirky grin resurfaced. As the words left his lips she was visualizing Lazador’s nest, which confirmed that people are industrious when it comes to their survival.

“My father thinks that the rumor was started by Zarant’s own people, wanting to instill fear in those who wanted to come back and search for their missing family members.”

His face went slack. “Well, there are a lot of missing people. They either have to be dead or surviving in some unknown way on their own.”

They’d circled back to the original conversation topic and Claudia wanted to focus on something different.

“Can you even see the road?” Claudia asked, changing the subject. There was no longer a discernible road ahead of them, which caused a slight, unexpected panic to rise within her. “Seriously, can you see the road?”

The panic in her voice made him smile.

“Nope. Everything is buried under an inch of dust and debris.” He pointed to the GPS screen that was projected just above the steering wheel. “Without this we’d never get back to the SunSafe before daybreak. We’d drive round and round until we were seared to a crisp.” He could see the worry in her face. “Claudia, don’t worry. I’ve done this before.”

That wasn’t a good enough response for her.

“Claudia, seriously, don’t freak out on me.”

Her eyes dwelled on him for a minute. There was a kindness about him that made her fall in love with him, even though they had just met a week ago. She wanted to tell him everything, about the underground communities in Portugal, Spain, France, especially the one her father built right here in the heart of Madera County, but she couldn’t. The fewer people that knew the safer he and the nest were.

“Honestly, this is an awful job, driving out to the middle of nowhere to deposit unwanted people with no supplies, far away enough from civilization so that they have no chance of getting back. I feel like you can’t help but lose your soul after a while.”

His demeanor turned defensive.

“It is, but what choice do we have? When you order a burger, you order it from a holographic entity and a machine makes it. Hell, a machine *grows* our meat! When you go to the mall and buy shoes, you make your purchase from what amounts to a mall-sized vending machine. Our entire world of needs is satisfied by some form of Artificial Intelligence. And before that, we had outsourcing. So yeah, this is a crappy job, but I’ll take it

because it's one of the few that Zarant deems as more cost effective to have a person making the deposits rather than a robot."

Boy, she thought to herself, he took that personally.

"Hey, I didn't mean anything by it. I mean, I'm out here with you, aren't I?" Claudia's seat was right in front of the protective cage that separated her and the driver from the other passengers. She turned and looked over her shoulders at the sedated faces that filled the seats behind her. There were three families with children amongst the group, their only crime had been to have become homeless. In the mix was one passenger who was not sedated, but was pretending to be. Kenneth Montes was his name, and he was very important to her father, who had arranged his escape and planned to collect him after the "deposit". "It's just hard on my conscience, that's all...and I know it is on yours, too. But you've done this longer and have had time to acclimate."

Gus had been feeling guilty for his harsh tone until she accused him of acclimating to what amounted to murder.

"Acclimate. That actually sounds inhumane to me. You think I've acclimated to dropping people off in the middle of nowhere so that they die rather than be a burden on our society? No, you don't acclimate, you just do what you have to do to survive."

Although that's exactly the mentality she blames for allowing someone like Zachary to rule for so long, she knew she had to get back into his good graces.

"Gus, that's not what I meant."

He knew it, but he was in such a state of sudden self-hate that he needed to bring her along on his self-pity ride. She didn't know it, but he was a living rollercoaster of self-loathing and depression, all thanks to his job of dumping people considered obstacles or burdens on society.

"I'm sorry. I get it. But it's hard for me too...much more than I let on." He paused, letting his thoughts grab some sanity back from the darkness beyond the bus's headlights. "They tell us that they sedate them to make it easy for us to haul them off the bus. But according to a few of the more seasoned drivers, it's also a precaution to prevent us from talking with them and sympathizing with them. Honestly," she saw his eyes glance towards the rearview mirror, at the slack faces as he spoke, as if he were ashamed that they might hear him. "I can't get their faces out of my head, especially those of the children. I mean...they're innocent, guilty of absolutely nothing. But we dump them just the same." The pain he was sharing with her was real. She could hear it in every enunciation. "On the bright side, Sal shared that after June of this year we won't be making any more deposit trips. Do you believe him?" Without letting her answer he went on. "It will be bitter sweet for me. No more deposits on my conscience and no more paychecks."

Sal had made a similar comment to her, and at first she thought it was a good thing, but then later she overheard him mentioning something about the transport portal technology.

"I don't think we'll be making any more trips, but we will definitely still be making deposits. I overheard Sal discussing

transport portals as the preferred method for making the deposits. ‘More efficient’ is the term he used.”

“Really? More efficient? I don’t get it? How are we supposed to survive without jobs? How do we pay our utility bills? Feed our families? Pay our taxes?” He ran his hand through his hair with evident frustration. “Fuck efficiency, already.”

She looked out the window towards the darkness at a silhouette of an abandoned home just off the road. It was a small doll house: square structure with the front door flanked by a window on each side.

“It makes it hard to believe that we won’t one day find ourselves sedated in the back of that bus, just like those three families back there, for becoming homeless.” She let out a big gulp of air in such a dramatic fashion that Gus had to look over to make sure she wasn’t sobbing.

“What was that for?”

“Oh, I just had the most morbid realization. It is now a government mandate to migrate to a SunSafe community where we have limited space and limited resources. I bet we’ll be making more deposits than ever. Transporting deposits via transport portals would just make it so that we could do more, faster, because they’re anticipating that we’ll need exactly that with the droves being herded in on a nightly basis.”

Gus shook his head at her. “You’re right. That is morbid.”

As the headlights approached what used to be Los Banos High School, right off Highway 99 that ran smack through what

used to be a farming town, Michelle, Gary, Clarence and Jim ducked down behind the old rusted bleachers.

“Okay. We have confirmation.” Gary said, putting the binoculars down. “It’s the school bus.” He reached into his bag and handed them four photographs to pass amongst themselves. One had a family of three: husband, wife, and daughter. Another had a mother and her son, and the third had a man and two infant children. “These should be sedated. Clarence, Jim and I will load them into the vans. Michelle, this one is Ken. He’ll drive back with you and Clarence.”

He rubbed his beard and asked, “Any questions?”

Silence.

“Good, now get ready. They’ll be pulling into the parking lot within the next ten minutes. We stay put until they drive off.”

They watched as the bus abruptly stopped several yards before it reached the designated drop zone.

“What the hell?”

“Give them a minute. Let’s not blow our cover unless we have to.”

As they watched the bus, the door swung open and the driver climbed out of the bus and began pacing back and forth across the length of the illuminated headlights. A few seconds later Michelle’s cellphone rang. When she looked at it she saw that it was Claudia’s number. Confused, she answered and said hello a few times, but her sister never responded. Instead, she heard her arguing with a guy, presumably the driver. When she looked up she saw her sister standing before him, saying something.

“Michelle, who is it?”

“Wait, Dad. It’s Claudia. I think this is her way of letting us in on what’s going on. I need to listen.”

“Gus, we have orders. We have to deposit them. If we don’t, we’ll both be arrested for dereliction of duty.”

“I hate this. I had forgotten how much. Thanks for reminding me.” He began pacing again. “I can’t leave those children to die. Because we both know that’s why we brought them out here. I won’t.” He was holding his head and began pacing again.

Claudia stood aside, giving him the space he needed. She was chewing on her thumb nail, trying to think of the words that she needed to say to motivate him to follow through with their task. Tonight was not a good night for him to get a conscience. She had people waiting for the deposit and they were soon going to run out of time if they were going to get back to SF before the sun came up.

“Gus.” She began, tepidly. “You have parents, right?”

Gus paused. “Yes, but I only speak to my mother.”

“Oh, I’m sorry about that.”

“I’m not.” He turned his back to her, brought his hands to his waist and took a deep breath of the cold air. “I miss this, you know. Our temperature is so constant and unalive in that rat maze we call home.” Turning to face her once more he said, “I have a little sister, too. I know where you’re going with your questions. No, I don’t want anything to happen to them and I certainly don’t want to cause them any grief.”

He was torn. She could see his agony. But they had no choice.

“Then we need to make that deposit because you and I both know that Zachary will decimate us both if we don’t do our job. Please, it’s my first trip out. Don’t cost me my job.”

Her pleading worked. He relented, took her in his arms for a second, and apologized for his behavior before leading them back into the bus to make the deposit.

“Okay, dad. Claudia handled it. They’re coming now. Here we go.”