

Chapter One

As he drove passed another abandoned farm, Gary's mind began to wander and draw a parallel between the fallen, lifeless, sun-scorched trees he drove passed and the swath of rigor mortis stiffened bodies found in homes over the last several months.

Exceptionally brutal temperatures have become all too common in California's Central Valley. The mercury in the thermostat has been idling at 137 degrees Fahrenheit for nearly two consecutive weeks, and is expected to remain there for the foreseeable future. Except for the intermittent sand storm that whips and scathes everything in its path, there is the occasional, mind boggling hail storm, with golf-ball-sized hail that shoots out of a fast moving, dark gray sky, like bullets. The sheer volume of ice pounding the earth over several minutes leaves everything covered under a blanket of white, even plunging temperatures into the twenties before the clouds are rushed along and the punishing sun returns, turning the temperature back to broiling.

Both the population and the power grid have become overwhelmed by the heat. The people are dying, disease is spreading, and government resources are strained. The deteriorating infrastructure isn't fairing much better; in fact, it crashed just as the heat wave began to peek, leaving thousands of Central California residents to be baked alive inside their own homes.

Gary turned on the radio and listened as the female news anchor explained that the bodies of those not claimed would be given burial in one of several mass grave. He knew about the mass graves, he was on the board that determined they were necessary. People weren't coming forward to claim their dead relatives, the most common reason given during an outreach attempt was that they couldn't afford the burial costs.

The sight of the mass grave, nearly filled with bodies of people found dead in their homes for days, maybe even weeks, was haunting, even for an ex-FBI field agent.

In the space of his thoughts, the mass grave and the dead trees were one in the same. The long, endlessly intertwined and gnarled tree branches transformed to human limbs. Twigs morphed into knotted fingers. Branches became ungodly, bent and twisted arms and legs, with a split here and a snap there. And the landscape, one that was once so rich in minerals that it fed America, metamorphosed into the grotesque canvas of death and despair that have historically epitomized mass graves.

The future Gary has been fearing has arrived. The extremes of global warming and greed have conflated. The result is a promulgation of stark classism and the redlining of an entire class of fellow American citizens—the poorest of the lot.

“Moving on to other news... a bus full of senior citizens travelling from Los Angeles to Sacramento became overheated and broke down along highway 99 yesterday, during high noon...all passengers succumbed to the extreme heat before help could arrive.”

Gary shook his head, reached forward, and shut off the radio. He didn't need to listen to the news to know how disjointed daily life had

become. It was five in the morning and *he* was driving to the butcher to do his shopping before the sun's rays emerged and reached towards earth, scorching everything they touched.

It's a new world he thought to himself, saddened.

His left front tire plunged in and out of a pothole. The sudden jolt jarred him and jerked his thoughts back to the present. Reflexively, his eyes went to the rear view mirror, but it was too dark behind the truck to discern the pothole from blacktop of the road; besides, there were so many potholes, he doubted he could identify the culprit.

Forgetting the pothole just as quickly as the jolt came and went, his thoughts became absorbed by the shoulder to shoulder line of homes flanking his path. During daylight they were cheap, architecturally deprived iterations of the same doldrums design designed to derive maximum profit—not for longevity, and certainly not for curb appeal. But now, in the shroud of darkness, their dark silhouettes stood poised against the star lit sky, like sentries of the watch.

The streets going into Reedly were empty and the lack of electricity made the small community appear abandoned. The street lights that typically provided some illumination were dark. Every window was pitch black, not a wisp of light could be seen from within the homes. Usually, light from a lamp of some sort would peer around the drawn shutters and curtains, kept drawn against the rising sun, but there was no light today, not without electricity. Luckily it was bedtime for most. Gary knew that inside the walls, behind all of the windows he drove passed, the inhabitants were most likely settling in for their “nightly” rest, if any could rest in the sweltering heat. Few, if any, would dare to venture out

again until sometime after 9 p.m. tomorrow, after the deadly sun has gone down.

Hopefully the power will be back up by then. He thought it, but didn't have faith in it, given how uninvolved Government's response has been with each successive crisis. Like the population, they have become despondent.

He recalled an early visit to Chile, nearly two decades back. The visit was in response to an invitation from a particularly wealthy friend who financed research focused on understanding the effects of climate change. Others from all over the world were in attendance. He called it "an enlightenment symposium on the future of our species." The group spent the night discussing the future of mankind.

"We've gone over the tipping point." His friend, Entelo, had warned as he shared his vision for an off-grid, sovereign, underground community.

"People will be forced to become nocturnal to avoid the sun's perilous rays. We are already having record skin cancer rates and now solar retinopathy rates are through the roof." Gary, as others in the group, noted that there was no longer any urgency in Ian's cadence. He spoke as if he'd conceded the fight, tired of ringing the same alarm bells for years and no one listened.

Towards the end of the gathering, the financier, Entelo, shared with them his concept of the self-sustaining nest. Under the guise of a research project, he had excavated his own village deep within the heart of Patagonia, where he owned several thousand acres. It had been intended to be a social experiment, but it became much more meaningful for its residents who slowly began finding reasons not to leave,

especially after the election of their eccentric, dictator-like leader. Below ground they had jobs and were contributing members of their community. Above ground they were poor and marginalized by their government.

Two years later, Entelo had gone underground himself.

Blinking away the memory, Gary parked his truck in front of Ivan's Deli. The shop's windows were coated with a film of dust that made it difficult for Gary to know who was behind the counter. Was it Ivan or his employee, Sam, a scraggly high school kid that reminded him of a squirrel?

The deli's curb appeal had long ago stopped appealing to the passerby consumer. An irrelevant concern, since passerby consumers had become scarce in that part of the world. No one ventured far from home anymore. Everyone was afraid of getting caught by the elements.

The building's façade is an attestation to the harshness of the elements. Sand storms have repeatedly sanded and worn down the yellow paint. Wind storms have fought to shove the building off of its foundation, taking chunks of the roof with it as consolation. And then there's the unforgiving sun, killing the vegetation and any effort towards landscaping.

As he got out of the truck, he heard the emergency power generators working hard to keep the lights on.

Inside, the bell tied to the door's handle announced his arrival.

The small man behind the counter paused what he was doing to glance up.

“Hey, Gary,” Ivan’s smile spread all the way to his eyes. He was in the process of pulling a piece of saran wrap from the thick roll against the wall.

“Ivan.” Gary reciprocated with a nod. When he reached the counter, he saw Ivan taking the hunk of pastrami to wrap it then stopped him right there. “I’m going to want some in a minute, so you may as well save the plastic.” He took out a list and placed it on the glass case that kept the meat the right temperature: 1lb. Black Forest ham; 5lbs. pastrami; 5lbs. turkey; 3 lbs. corned beef; 2lbs. prosciutto; 1lb. sliced pepper jack cheese and 2lbs. provolone.

“Aren’t you supposed to be going vegetarian?”

Gary’s eyebrows arched. “I have a few people who are having a little difficulty. That’s what this is... to help wean them off.” He tapped the list. “And aren’t you supposed to be throwing some fresh paint on this place? It’s looking pretty rundown.”

Ivan stood over the list, glancing back and forth between it and the slabs of meat in his refrigerator case as he shook his head to say, never.

“Why should I bother? The sandstorms have their way with it every time.” His attention was still locked on Gary’s list. “I can get it all for you except for the corned beef. Ran out of it a month ago and they haven’t delivered my last order.” Ivan wiped his hands on his not so white apron and got to work slicing the pastrami. “It’s like customer service no longer matters to the suppliers.” Ivan shook his head.

Gary liked Ivan and looked forward to chatting him up on his weekly grocery run. The guy always looked as if he had just woken up from a long night of sleep. His clothes never matched, favoring the traditional chef’s black and white checkered pants with often exuberantly colored

and patterned button-down shirts. His wife, Ling, who was the exact opposite of him, always impeccably dressed, never seemed to mind her husband's disheveled appearance; in fact, Gary believed that she found it endearing.

Like his clothes, so went his personality. Ivan's personal life seemed to be a scattered mess, but when it came to his business and intelligent conversation, the guy was sharp and always right on.

"So what are you down to?" Ivan asked, keeping his back turned to Gary as he worked with the meat slicer.

Gary knew what he was asking. He'd been asking ever since he'd mentioned the nest population transitioning to vegetarianism and eventually, veganism.

"I'm down to eating meat once a week. You?"

Ivan was set to be one of the first residents to move into the nest that was nearing the final stage of construction.

With an embarrassed grin, Ivan answered, "Let's just say I'm working on it."

"Alright." Gary agreed as he looked to see what else was in that refrigerated case. "You don't have much of anything right now, do you?"

"Nope. You're pretty much going to wipe me out." Ivan looked around the case, picking up and putting down different hunks of meat to give Gary a better look at his alternative options. There was salami, head cheese, roast beef, and a few sausages. "Most of the meat is going to San Francisco and San Jose because the bigger cities command a higher price." He said, as he leaned into the case to reach for a hunk of meat, then he paused and looked back to Gary. "Did I tell you that they raised the prices on me... by an average of a hundred and twenty percent!?"

And... after that, they had the audacity to tell me that they were increasing the cost to deliver out here.” He shook his head. “Really! I’m barely staying in business as it is. And to make things worse, my customers are moving to the cities...at least those that can afford to eat meat.” He had moved on to slicing the turkey as he spoke. “Can’t say I blame them for leaving our Podunk jobless town, but their departure is really putting the squeeze on me.” Gary hated hearing it, but he knew that people had to make their own way. “Hey,” Ivan unexpectedly changed the topic of conversation. He did that every so often. A butterfly moment. One of the reasons Gary found him so interesting. “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but last night an unmarked bus, one of them double decker buses, pulled into Los Banos and dropped off a load of people who had been evicted from their homes in San Francisco.”

Los Banos was a small town, like Reedly, few people knew of.

“Why Los Banos?” Gary shook his head. He hadn’t heard about the bus load, but he’d heard about the evictions. Demand for living space in the cities had outpaced inventory and at the premium price a square foot was fetching, property owners were finding all kinds of legal loopholes to undermine their obligation to their tenants. The cities themselves were partaking in the windfall, using eminent domain to confiscate property from poorer, non-lawyered homeowners on behalf of the wealthy and, in the process, ensuring their re-election.

“The landscape in our communities is so different that I barely recognize it anymore. Have you seen how many abandoned homes we’re up to? Entire portions of our city are empty of people!”

Gary could hear the lamentation he felt in the way his voice carried each word.

“I see it too, Ivan. But the cities are where all the jobs are.”

“It’s just heartbreaking to see so many friends and family leave, only to come back destroyed. If you ask me, there aren’t enough jobs for everyone that’s going. Soon they’re going to shutter the city gates to keep more people from flooding in.” Ivan rested his right arm on the glass case, in his fist he had a lump of meat that looked suspiciously like ham, and declared, “I’ve seen the chaos of the city. The streets are so full with the homeless that you can’t walk on them.”

There was a lot of emotion behind his words. His children were some of those that chose the city over their small, deteriorating town. They tried in vain to get their mother and father to join them, but Ivan stood firm. He had no desire to start over again in the overcrowded and overpriced city of San Francisco. Instead, he chose to cast his lot with Gary and his nest.

“People have to survive, Ivan. You and I can’t change that.” Gary knew that Ivan’s boys had both found jobs with a financial conglomerate in the city known as Solvent, but he could see that his friends was still worried about them.

Busy again, unwrapping another hunk of meat to slice, Ivan reasoned out loud, “This right here that we’re talking about, it’s a poor man’s problem. The rich, their kids don’t have a problem finding a job.” Ivan glanced over the mountain of sliced ham before him and began wrapping it in butcher paper. His small hands worked feverishly, moving along from task to task: slice the meat, stack it, place it on paper, wrap it, tape it, label it, throw it onto the stack of packages and start on the next one.

“That’s because you’re ability to get a job comes down to who you know and what your last name is. It’s almost incestuous.”

Ivan was nodding just as a thought struck him and Gary smiled, knowing the subject was again changing.

“See this here beautiful prosciutto I’m about to slice up for you? I’ll wager that in a few years it will come from a cloned lump of meat in a lab. No more mad cow... bird flu... swine flu, or whatever it is that we worry about these days. Diseased food will be a thing of the past.”

“And so will the remaining farming jobs. It’ll take fewer lab coats to produce what is produced today by many farmers, vast swath of land, grain suppliers, etc. Delivery jobs will decline further because they’ll urbanize the process... build the clone labs in the cities where the only people who can afford meat will eventually live.”

Ivan groaned as he wrapped the nub of prosciutto back up and dropped it back into the case before starting on the cheese. As he got it ready for the slicer he stole a glance at Gary who had become quiet.

“I guess we should be careful of what we ask for. In my opinion, the price for convenience has cost us dearly... jobs, community, and family.”

“Boy is that the truth.”

“So when are you going to let me move into that nest of yours? Ling and I are ready to be done with this depressed way of life.”

Gary grinned and said, “Soon, my friend. Very soon.”

“Good, because I am most certainly not moving to The City.” Imagining himself trying to make a living there, he let out a flat whistle and said, “I’d be poorer there than I am here.”

“We all would.” Gary concurred, “And quite possibly in more ways than we can imagine today.”

“Hey.” Another butterfly moment.

“What’s up?” Gary leaned in, meeting Ivan’s timorous expression.

“You know Jack, over on Harder Road?”

Gary thought for a moment then nodded. “I heard he filed for bankruptcy. I tried to call him, but I haven’t been able to reach him.”

Even though the deli was empty, Ivan went to a whisper.

“Suicide.” He placed his elbows on the counter and leaned in. “A few days ago. His wife was visiting family down in LA with their two boys and she just found him last night. She’s staying with us now.” With uncertainty he added, “She was so desperate and afraid. She can’t support the household by herself and Jack’s life insurance is barely enough to pay for the funeral arrangements.” He was visibly concerned for her welfare. “Gary, Ling and I told her about the nest and we invited her to come live there when it’s ready.” He nervously searched Gary’s face for disapproval and saw it for a split second before Gary visibly swallowed it down. “I’m sorry, Gary. Marta is like family. Ling and I just wanted to give her hope. She’s desperate. They’ve lost it all.” Hoping to ease the frown on Gary’s brow, he added, “Don’t worry, she won’t tell anyone. She has no one to tell. Her family has basically slammed the door in her face. Besides, she knows Marco and Yesenia and some of the pot crew. She’ll fit right in.”

After a few minutes of silent contemplation, Gary relented. “It’s fine.” It certainly wasn’t a problem. They did need more children to come into the nest for there to be a future generation, but he couldn’t have people openly talking about the nest. It could jeopardize the entire endeavor. “The truth is, we do need more children. And Marta is a sweet woman. But next time run it by me first. We just can’t go telling everyone about

the nest. The fewer people that know about its existence the better the likelihood that we can remain a sovereign people.”

Ivan nodded sheepishly.

“Thanks.” Ivan’s relief was on full display as he busied himself with bagging up the remaining items. “It’s all here.” He held the bag out over the counter. “I’ll make sure she never mentions it.” As he closed the refrigerator door, it looked as though a thought occurred to him. “What about all of those people that were dumped in Los Banos? There may be electricians and construction workers in there. These people were evicted and dumped, which means that they don’t have any family.”

Gary was nodding. Ivan was most likely correct. He had already thought to have his daughter, Michelle, go and check them out and see if there were any in the group whose skills were of value to the nest. Gary wouldn’t deny it, they needed more people, but it was hard to recruit because everyone was moving away to The City and many who stayed behind couldn’t be trusted to keep the secret.

“Thanks.” A sanguine Gary replied. “I wish we could invite everyone, but we simply can’t. I’ll send Michelle to check them out.”

“They’re keeping them in the old gymnasium, the one in the Boys and Girls Club.”

It sickened Gary to see what was becoming of so many small farming towns. With so few jobs and even fewer citizens remaining to occupy their homes and pay their taxes, they were desperate for revenue. For the right fee, people-dumping was becoming a business and activists couldn’t complain. Small farming towns had numerous vacant homes needing residents and the small towns needed revenue—clearly a win-win situation—except those dumped had no income.

He placed the cash on the counter and turned to leave. “It is awful about Jack. Tell Marta I’m sorry for her loss.”

“Will do.” Ivan said, as he wiped down the countertop. “Same time next week?”

“You can count on it!” Gary paused at the door and asked, “When’s your next shipment come in?”

“Well... last I know, it’s supposed to be here tomorrow.” He was clearly doubting that the delivery would be made.

Gary nodded his approval and said, “I may have to come back tomorrow, see what else you got.”

“Do, if you’re in town. Either way, I’ll leave message with Michelle.”

On his way home from the deli, Gary did his best to ignore the boarded up storefronts and homes that he passed. The bad news about Jack was more than enough for one day. When he got to the street with the home that has the gargantuan dead walnut tree in the front yard and a rotting tire swing hanging off of it like an ugly earring, he turned onto it and drove on until the road ran out.

About thirty minutes into his drive on that bumpy dirt road, wavy fingers of heat began dancing off the hood of his truck, swaying with the rhythm of every thump and bump along the rough, undefined road. The heat was beginning to singe his thighs through the front window and he cursed the day’s heat index outlook. It was barely eight in the morning and it was already intolerable outside.

The bag of sandwich meat was in the passenger seat absorbing the direct sunlight that he so keenly felt on his thighs. Figuring he had at least forty minutes more to go, he reached for the bag, held it up, out of the sunlight as he debated whether or not to toss it onto the back seat.

Ultimately, he dropped it onto the floor board of the passenger seat where he wouldn't have to exert himself too much to retrieve it.

As he pulled up to the barn he noticed the two cars haphazardly parked. The first one he saw was his engineer's car, a comical, super compact E.V. for the six-four, 240lb. man. To see him exit that tiny car was like watching a magician pull a rabbit out of a hat. The other vehicle was a beast. A candy-apple colored F350 with mud flaps featuring a woman reading a book. That was his petite daughter's choice of transportation. She couldn't weigh more than a buck and a quarter and she chose a truck that dwarfed her. Watching her climb into the truck's cab was like watching her scale the face of Mount Shasta.

"Good morning," he greeted them as he entered the room and shook Clarence's hand, his chief engineer, then proceeded to give his daughter a peck on the cheek meanwhile placing the bag of sandwich meat in her hands. "Is there progress?"

A change in Clarence's posture told Michelle that he wanted to answer, so she let him while she walked over to the refrigerator and placed the meat on the middle shelf.

"We're really close." He paused for effect then said, "The main cave, or community area, is fully dugout and reinforced, along with the first round of honeycombs encircling it." His huge ebony hands were at his waist and he was grinning from ear to ear. "The basic infrastructure is in for the entire nest. Now it's all cosmetic. We should be ready to receive our first residents in as early as eight months. The greenhouses are already producing, although, we'll still have to migrate above ground to the existing ones until we can get them to maximum output."

"Marco's going to hate that," Gary voiced.

“He does.” Michelle injected, letting her father know that Marco has been informed, “But he’s on board,” Michelle added.

“The water and sewage treatment plants are all ready to go. All residents on this list should be moved in by the end of next year.” Clarence said, holding out the list for Gary to peruse. “And as we discussed, the design was conceived so that we can expand as needed.”

A grand smile spread across Gary’s lips. Michelle and Clarence couldn’t help themselves and joined in.

“That’s excellent news.” The nest was his baby, and like his daughters’ lives, its growth has been measured one milestone at a time. “That is really exciting news.” He allowed everyone to bask in the moment before moving on. “And the grain silos?”

Michelle would take this one. As she looked down at her clipboard a swath of her long, black hair spilled down her face. Tucking it back, behind her left ear, she flipped some more pages over. When she found what she was looking for she bunched her lips and shoved them to the left side of her mouth. “Well,” she finally began. “We’re getting there, but we still have a lot of work to do. We’re at thirteen percent of capacity, a seven percent delta from target.” She flipped back one page. “We’ll have to make it up with next year’s grain acquisition.”

Gary furrowed his brow. “Twenty percent of our grain storage capacity is not an unreasonable target, what am I missing? Why couldn’t we hit the target?”

“Nature. We couldn’t account for the fact that the entire Indian crop would be wiped out by the floods or that our Kenyan vendors would lose their crop to the fires. Complicating things further are the global governments who have appropriated their rice, beans, and wheat crops

for the next few years. Feeding global populations is becoming incredibly difficult.”

“And expensive,” Clarence topped off.

The good mood left Gary’s face. “So we may very well be worse off next year.”

Michelle brought the clipboard to her chest and said, “There’s a chance, but it’s not a…”

A mousy, tall, thin, attractive young woman, with pouty lips and jet black hair that grew straight down to her waist made her way into the room that had fallen silent.

“Claudia.” Michelle’s tone conveyed the love and warmth she felt for her little sister. “This is a pleasant surprise.” Claudia always stayed away from the barn, knowing their father would most likely be there.

“Michelle.” Claudia looked at the two men in the room, acknowledging their presence with slight tilt of her head in their direction. Her father looked away. “Michelle.” She said again as she walked towards her big sister.

Their eyes met for a moment. Michelle could see the worry in Claudia’s as she approached, took her by the hand and led her away. As she was being pulled, Michelle looked back at her father and she thought she saw pain in his eyes, but he looked away from her to Clarence.

When they were outside, Michelle spotted the dark SUV with tinted windows, idling, and she knew what was happening. “Dad already knows.”

“He already tried to stop me and failed. So please, let’s just say goodbye.”

Michelle's eyes welled and her lips trembled as she gave her sister a slow nod and a tight hug. "I love you." She whispered in her little sister's ear as she pulled away, wiped her own tears and kissed her cheek before running off, towards the car.