

# Prologue

**December 26, 2020**

The towns that run along Highway 99, in California's Central Valley, are strung together like a cheap "Made in China" necklace. Their inhabitants are hardened, marginalized, blue collar workers who live their lives one day at a time, certain there will never again be opportunity in their horizon.

The words NO WATER FOR CROPS = NO FOOD FOR AMERICA are painted in a bold red on the sides of tractor trailers parked along the highway. Other hastily made plywood signs read CONGRESS CREATED THIS DUST BOWL. Even the homes are emblematic of the region's losing economic battle with their faded facades, graced by grassless, lifeless lawns, and their patched, tattered roofs that require the employment of buckets to supplement them during a rainstorm. But the most telling indicator of the region's growing distress is the number of cars, or lack thereof, that leave their driveway each morning.

Most blame the automation of the farming industry and Congress's inability to institute meaningful safety nets for the Central Valley's economic devastation. With stringent immigration laws, farming had no choice but to slowly mechanize its harvest. But mechanization didn't stop there. Today, the industry has mechanized and streamlined to the point that only a handful of humans are required to sow, grow, and then

harvest an entire crop—at a fraction of the cost, leaving farm hands, harvesters, even the small farmers at a disadvantage.

But there were other destabilizers that had equally devastating effects on the farming economy, such as the weather. Prolonged droughts, intense heatwaves, and sudden, unseasonal flashfloods, coupled with the demand for record quarterly profits by investors have disrupted traditional farming and forced it to urbanize.

The American pioneer of urban farming migration was Oakland, California. Within a short span of time, high-rise buildings were cored of their traditional white collar interior and converted into mechanized, vertical, hydroponic farms, adding truck drivers and warehouse distributors to the growing list of the unemployed.

For most in the region, as farming jobs become obsolete, all that remains for them are dilapidated homes, boarded up strip malls, and forsaken farms. They don't have the skills to do anything else *and* they don't have access to retraining programs. Opportunity has truly abandoned them.

## **Chapter One**

As he drove passed another abandoned farm, Gary's mind began to wander and draw a parallel. His eyes weren't seeing the fallen, lifeless, sun-scorched trees, but rather sun-scorched human bodies, hardened by rigor mortis. In the space of his thoughts, the long, endlessly intertwined and gnarled branches transformed. Twigs turned into knotted fingers. Branches became ungodly, bent and twisted arms and legs, with a split here and a snap there, and the landscape metamorphosed into a grotesque canvas of disparity and death.

The future Gary feared had arrived. There he was, driving to the butcher at six in the morning to avoid the sun. The homes in the neighborhood all appeared to be abandoned. Their tattered shutters were drawn against the rising sun and the inhabitants were most likely settling for their “nightly” rest. Those that remained would be out again sometime after nine, after the sun had gone.

Gary had foreseen this nocturnal shift several years back, but he hadn’t been the only one. He recalled an early visit to Chile where he’d met with a likeminded wealthy friend who financed research focused on understanding the effects of climate change. They’d spent the night discussing the future of mankind, agreeing that it would be forced to become nocturnal if it were to survive the sun’s solar radiation. “We’ve gone over the tipping point.” His friend, Entelo, had warned as he shared his vision for an off-grid, sovereign, underground community.

Two years later, the financier introduced Gary to the 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 hundred 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.

Last he’d heard from Entelo was that he was going 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, but that had little impact on Ivan's business since passerby consumers had become scarce in that part of the world. The building's yellow paint was cracked and peeling, swatches of it were scattered on the ground, exposing portions of the cement walls, blotching its exterior like sunspots on an old man's hand.

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 slowly." 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 yesterday and they haven’t delivered my recent order.” Ivan wiped his hands on his not so white apron and got to work slicing the pastrami.

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 next population transitioning to vegetarianism and eventually, veganism.

“I’m down to eating meat once a week. You?”

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.” As he leaned into the case to reach for a hunk of meat, he paused and looked up to Gary. “Did I tell you that they raised the prices on me... by sixty-five percent!? And... they also increased the cost to deliver out here.” He shook his head. “Really cutting into my margins. I’m barely staying in business anymore. 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.”

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 is changing, Gary.”

“Everyone wants to live in The City, where all the jobs are but not enough housing... and not enough jobs.”

“I know, it’s just heartbreaking to see so many friends and family leave only to come back destroyed.”

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 all 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.”

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 turkey 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 disappear 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. Convenience has cost us our jobs and our environment.”

“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 in Los Angeles 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.

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?”

“Tomorrow.”

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

“Any time.”

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 and he cursed the day’s heat index outlook. It was barely nine in the morning and it was already eighty-six degrees.

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 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've just hit our first milestone." He paused for effect then said, "The main cave is now 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 a few residences as well. We should be ready to receive our first residents in as early as eight months. The greenhouses are expected to take another two years to be completed so we'll still have to migrate above ground to the existing ones."

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

"He does. 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 would be 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 and leaned in to whisper into her ear.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t be here anymore. I have to live. I have to see the world. I love you.”