Eleven

Three days later.
Jon felt as if he was about to shatter into a million little pieces from all of the bouncing around they were doing.

“Gary, are you sure there aren’t any better roads we can take? I’m completely rattled.”

Gary glanced over at Clarence for help. He had wanted to leave Jon behind, but Sarah had insisted he come along.

“All major highways and roads from Highway 1 to the North Bay have been barricaded by Zarant’s military. There are miles and miles of abandoned cars on the freeways that have accumulated over the years. Trust me, unless you have special permission, there is no way you’re getting through.” Clarence’s deep voice provided the response on Gary’s behalf. “The only way is through these fire roads.”

Jon closed his eyes tight and shook his head. “It seems impossible that every road is blocked.”

Again, Gary and Clarence shared a look that made him feel as if they thought him dimwitted.

“Have you heard about disease and severe storms wiping out entire communities of people whose number hasn’t come up?”

Not on the news he hadn’t, they only report on local SunSafe events, but he had come across the occasional survivor while
working in the triage center who had shared their harrowing tales with him.

“But then that guy…Cameron, how did he get to San Francisco?” Jon looked up towards the rearview mirror and caught Gary’s disapproving stare. Not knowing that he should be scared he shrugged it off. “It’s a fair question.”

“Someone dropped him off at your center. These military boys and girls that are doing their job, they have family too. For all we know, he was someone’s father.” Clarence spoke as if he knew a bit about the situation, and he did. His son was serving in Zachary’s military and it has cost them their relationship.

Gary’s eyes met Jon’s as he asked, “How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

“So you’ve been in the SunSafe most of your life?”

“Yes. My parents moved in very early on. Much before the lottery was instituted.”

“Do your parents work?”

“Not anymore. But they are financially sound, so I don’t worry about them.”

“What about your neighbors?”

“Some work, some don’t. But I get the sense that they are all pretty financially sound.”

“Now, look around you. These abandoned homes were owned by those considered as middle class families. They are part of the last lottery drawing, which we both know isn’t a drawing, right?”
Jon didn’t answer. He was busy trying to imagine how the people who had lived in these big homes now made up the ghetto of the SF SunSafe.

“Tell me something, Jon. When new buildings are released for move in, isn’t it like musical chairs? The wealthy move into the new, and then those of the upper middle class, such as your family and neighbors, you all move into their old buildings, and so on, and so on. Right?”

“Right.”

“So, when you move out of your home and into your new place, will you go by and visit the old neighborhood again?”

Jon shook his head slowly. He was getting the point.

“Why not?”

“Because it will be too dangerous for me.”

“Why? Because the middle class in your community is now in total poverty and they are angry because they’re being left behind?”

Jon nodded.

“So then, what do you think will happen if they are allowed to swell their ranks? And by they, I mean the disenfranchised and the poor in the SunSafes?”

Jon swallowed down his saliva.

“Zachary knows that his control of the future will be dictated by his control of the SunSafes. He’s doing whatever it takes to consolidate his power and he’s doing it successfully. If Yreka is a genocide, like we think it is, I can assure you that Zachary will do everything I his power to keep everyone away from there.”
“Sarah said that you’re FBI and you’re CIA.” Jon said to Gary and Clarence, respectively. “Why haven’t you stopped him?”

“Ex. We are ex-FBI and ex-CIA. And we tried. But early on, he had the Supreme Court and government on his side. Now, he’s nearly untouchable. The man is the power that runs the world’s economy. Governments bow to him.” Clarence’s disillusion was reflected in the note of his voice.

“I had the chance to take him down and I blew it. I underestimated him. Took three bullets for my stupidity.” Gary, not one to hide his failure, admitted.

No one knew how to reply to that, so they fell into silence as they meandered their way on the old forgotten towns of Northern California. Jon found it to be a lot like making your way through a maze, blindfolded. The sky was pitch black without its moon. Cars had been abandoned in the most random of places. Power lines had fallen over onto homes, cars, and in some cases, they blocked off entire roads. An overwhelming number of intersections had massive blobs of rubber mounds that were once a burning pyre of tires—it was a wonder any tires remained on any vehicles at all.

All the mayhem and old neighborhoods seemed to enthrall Jon. He’d never ventured out of the city before and had no idea that the world around him looked like a war zone. His eyes followed the homes that lined the streets and he wondered what it must have been like to be outside all day and come home at the end of a day to a home of that size, where your family congregated.

“Wait! Wait! I see people!”
Gary and Clarence had already spotted them as they ran for
cover when they heard the sound of Gary’s truck approaching.

“Holdouts.” Gary informed him and kept on driving.

“But shouldn’t we…?” He didn’t know what he was going to
say. He felt like they should stop and help them, or just do
something.

“No. They’re holdouts. They don’t want to be bothered. As we
get further out, away from San Francisco, you’ll start seeing city
lights. Those are the towns who are still waiting for their lottery
number to be called.” He looked into the rearview mirror again, at
Jon, whose eyes were still searching for the holdouts. “They are
the ones who will next be inheriting your ghettos. But we’ll be
driving around those communities because they won’t run and
hide. They’ll come at us assuming we’re part of the structure that
has abandoned them.” Gary’s tone was so flat and dry when he
spoke that it gave his words a sense of grieving.

“Last time we drove through an occupied city, over by
Bakersfield, the residents attacked my van, rocking it until they
flipped it over.” Clarence lovingly recalled his beautiful, souped-
up van as he recounted the story. Jon could hear the loss he felt in
his voice. “They lit my baby’s tires on fire... didn’t have the
decency to take them off before, either.”

“These people know that their numbers are left for last because
they’re the poorest of the poor. But they are educated poor and
that combination scares the bejesus out of Zachary, as it should.”

Gradually, the scenery outside the window left the tragedy of
the past behind them and transformed itself into an empty desert.
“Where are we?” Jon asked as he glanced at the odometer that told him they were moving at a thirty-miles-per-hour clip.

The slow pace and nothing but desert for scenery reminded him that he’d been in the truck for hours now. His bottom was sore and so were his back and neck.

“We’re in rural country now. The city is behind us. This is a good place to find shelter.” Gary spoke with his eyes squinted as he tried his best to keep the truck on the rough road. “Hang on.”

Clarence grabbed on to the overhead bar and steadied himself as the truck’s front right tire dove in and out of a large pothole. Jon wasn’t quick enough with the reflexes and his body went airborne until his head careened into the roof of the truck, instantaneously stopping his upward trajectory.

“Ouch!”

“I said hold on.”

“You sure we’re still on a road?”

“Sure of it, at least the parts that haven’t been washed away. They must be getting some freak rainstorms up here. Roads are half gone.”

Clarence had done this before and had already moved on to looking for a place to stop for shelter. An abandoned home was the most ideal, so that they wouldn’t have to resort to having three grown men sharing one insulated two-hundred-square-foot, isolated, solar proof tent for eight hours.

“There.” Clarence said, relieved. “Up ahead to the right of the road. Next to that boulder. That looks like a nice one.”
Gary put the truck in park and hung his arms over the steering wheel.

“That look occupied to you?”

Clarence leaned forward as if the few inches would give him a better look. “Hard to tell. Wait here. I’ll go take a look.”

Gary shook his head. “No, I’ll go.” He reached into the glove compartment for his gun and placed it in the small of his back when he exited.

“Is he always this bossy?” Jon asked Clarence, who clearly thought he was a funny guy.

“Always.”

The lack of moonlight made it difficult to keep an eye on Gary’s progress. His dark silhouette sauntered up to the home, not trying to hide in case there were occupants watching him. It was his way of sending a signal that he was safe and not a threat.

There must have been a sensor on an outdoor circuit that Gary triggered because a floodlight flipped on and they saw a man come out the front door holding a shotgun pointed right at Gary.

“Wait here.” Clarence said as he quietly exited the truck.

Gary’s hands were up in the air and Jon assumed that he was trying to talk his way out of the situation, but he was too far away to hear anything to know for sure.

Unlike Gary, Clarence made himself as small as possible, which wasn’t small at all, as he ran from shrub to shrub with his gun drawn. When he reached the backside of the home, he pressed himself up against it and slowly made his way around. When he reached the edge, he peeked around the corner and saw that the
shotgun wielding woman, not man, was only a couple of feet away. With celerity, he moved behind her and placed the cold nuzzle of his gun against her temple.

“Clarence, it’s alright. She’s alright. She’s just protecting her family.” Gary turned his attention back to the woman whose blood had drained from her face. “Ma’am, like I said, we mean you no harm. We just need shelter from the sun. I promise you, we will leave tonight and you and your family will remain unharmed. “Clarence, I said put it down.”

Clarence backed away but kept it pointed, impressed that the woman held her ground until she saw Jon, the third one, walking up her drive, holding a bag. She knew she would be no match for them so she lowered her gun.

“What do you all want up here? No one has come up these roads in years. Most don’t even know they exist anymore.”

Gary saw no harm in being honest with her.

“This gentleman here works at a triage center for the San Francisco SunSafe. Recently, a man from Yreka arrived with a strange illness. We’re headed there to investigate.”

“So you all work for that…that—”

“No, ma’am. He’s the only one who works for the multinational.” Gary gave his head a slight tilt towards Jon. “You can keep him if you’d like.”

Jon couldn’t tell if he was kidding from his tone so he swung around to look at Gary’s face, but that wasn’t very helpful, either.
“Clarence and I live off the grid, just like you, with about sixty other people. We’re doing this as a personal favor for a friend who happens to be his boss.”

The woman’s hair was in a bun, she was slender, attractive, but Gary could see that she was tough as nails, much like Claudia, his youngest daughter, who went missing after the Kenneth Montes drop.

“There’s twelve of us here, but you’d never know it. Everyone keeps to themselves. A few would rather we forgot they’re even here. That’s all that’s left of our small town. Most have gone off to try and get into the SunSafe before their numbers came up. Not sure if they got in or not. I figured they don’t want us there and the lottery is just a way to keep us out.”

Gary looked at Jon.

“Anyway, you’re wasting your time going up there. Everyone’s dead. Some kind of disease. Probably what your guy has, which means he’s dead too.”

She knew she was right. She could see it in Jon’s face which seemed to betray his every emotion.

Gary’s mind had latched on to the fact that she knew about the virus and had to ask her how she had learned of it.

“We were going up there for supplies after the Shasta community was murdered. They were murdered, you know.” She was looking at Jon when she said, “By that CEO’s military. Fumigated like rats.”

“What about Yreka?” Gary said, taking her back to his question.
She closed her eyes and took a moment, reminding herself that it wasn’t the kid’s fault.

“Well, the last time we were up there, about a week ago, there were quarantine signs everywhere.”

“Did you have a look around?”

She looked at Clarence as if he was crazy.

“Now why would I do that? There were warning signs and dead bodies, everywhere. I have two children who depend on me; I can’t risk dying on them. So I hightailed it out of there as fast as I could and took a thorough hot shower the minute I walked in the door. After that, all I could do was pray to the stars above that it wasn’t an airborne transmission type of disease.” She looked up to the sky and said, “We should go in, twilight’s approaching.”

When they walked in, Gary noticed that the home was modern on the inside, a sharp contrast to its log cabin facade. On the far right of the room there were two boys sitting at a table doing some type of homework. They seemed to have a softening effect on Gary.

Jane caught the paternal change in Gary’s mood when he spotted her boys and was finally truly able to relax.

“We homeschool. It’s the only way left. There are no more schools out here for our kids.”

Gary nodded sympathetically. “I’m Gary by the way. This is Clarence and that’s Jon.”

“Are you hungry?” Their slackened jaws let her know that they were. “I’ll cook up a steak and some potatoes.”

Jon’s eyes peeled back so far that it seemed cartoonish.
“You have steak?”

“Not for long. In a couple years I’ll have none. Right now we only eat the older cows, the ones that don’t produce any milk. But it’s getting harder to keep them fed and disease free. We use an old warehouse to keep them in during the day, but they’re dying anyway. It gets too hot in there for them. We have basements and cellars but none big enough to house them.” She shrugged. “It’s irrelevant. Soon we won’t have enough grass or shrubs for them to forage on and we’re already low on water.”

“Our community subsists on a vegan diet for the same reason.”

A curious look came about her.

“How do you grow it all? And where? Everything I plant dies. I have an indoor garden downstairs, in the basement that is just enough for us, but that’s it. Like I said, light isn’t my problem. I have plenty of plant lights and seeds, but water…now that’s going to doom us all. We get the occasional, thunderous, flash floods, but no real substantial rainfall anymore. Not enough to fill our water wells.”

“We have a similar operation.”

Jane could see that Gary wasn’t keen on sharing much more about his community. He told her enough to earn her trust and that was all he was going to say.

Jon was salivating.

“Oh my God, Clarence. I want to come live with you. Either of you. In the SunSafe all we have is cloned meat and processed foods that come out of jars in the form of a blob.” He saw Gary
wince. “That’s it. I haven’t had a vegetable since…since…I can’t even remember when. I’d kill for a fresh, crisp apple.”

Gary looked at Clarence who went over to the front door and picked up a duffel bag, from which he fished out a bag full of apples and placed them on the counter.

“You’re in luck. We just happen to have some with us.”

Jane looked at the apples as if they were gold.

“May I?” she asked, glancing at her boys.

“They’re yours. We completely understand if you don’t want to share with Jon.”

Again, Jon became worried. He was still unable to tell if Gary was kidding or not. Luckily, Jane didn’t seem to mind sharing.

Later that evening, as they were preparing to leave, Jane leaned into the cab of the truck and said, “Perhaps on your way back, you’ll take us home with you. I’m worried about my two boys. I don’t know how long I can take care of them out here by myself.”

Gary had already thought about coming back through and offering to take them to the nest with them.

“We’d be glad to, Jane, but we can’t take more than the three of you. Is that clear?”

She nodded gratefully and backed away, watching them until they disappeared into the darkness.

They spent one more day in an abandoned home a mile south of Yreka. The home had a wraparound porch that, aside from the accumulated sand and dirt piles, featured beautiful hand crafted wood furniture.
As they inspected the property for occupants, Gary noticed that the home had a private water well and a propane tank, which meant they would have access to hot water.

Clarence insisted on looking for a key before resorting to breaking a window to gain access, reasoning that the home hadn’t been abandoned too long ago, which meant the occupants might still return. He preferred it if they didn’t have to walk into a home full of dust, sand, or critters.

“I found it!” Jon proclaimed triumphantly. The spare key had been placed on the top of the porch light.

“See Gary? I told you. People out here are not like city folk.”

“Don’t get cocky, Clarence. Jon, let us in.”

Clarence grinned as Jon placed the key into the door knob. When he opened the door he got a huge whiff of lavender potpourri. It turned out that it was left in bowls all around the home. Perhaps the owners had put it out with the intention of not coming home to a stuffy home.

“Wow! Look at how nice this place is. It’s perfectly…immaculately kept. And it’s huge!” Jon was bouncing around. He’d never seen such a big home with so many windows. The huge L-shaped kitchen took his breath away.

Perhaps the owner had every intention of coming back, but for the moment, the home was clearly abandoned. The food in the refrigerator had gone rancid and the dirty dishes in the dishwasher had grown mold. The windows, except for a small one to let the light in, had thick beige honeycombed shades between the window and a layer of what looked like thick cotton mats stapled around
the trim, which Gary surmised did an excellent job of keeping the heat out.

The basement was a masterpiece. Clarence summed it up to being about eighteen hundred square feet. It was very well stocked with airtight bags of beef and turkey jerky, water bottles stacked from floor to ceiling, canned fruits and vegetables, cases of cheap whisky, and a wall covered with all sorts of guns and ammunitions.

“Hey, check this out.”

They all looked over and saw Jon holding individually wrapped Twinkies. There were boxes and boxes of them, along with chocolate cream filled Cupcakes.

“Oh man. I want one.”

Just like at Jane’s home, they slept the day away in the basement, where it was coolest. Then, at about eight p.m., they started walking towards town. They didn’t have to walk too far before they started seeing bodies.

“Look somewhere near the head. Whatever it is that killed these people, if it’s the same thing that killed that guy Cameron, then it crawled out of their nostrils, curled up and died nearby.”

“If it’s a bug, then it was probably blown away by now, or carried away by a bird.”

“Clarence, I don’t think it’s a bug. I saw the hologram.” Gary was using a small, handheld flashlight to look around. “We’re looking for something that looks like a metal marble. If I’m right, then it’s not a virus that killed these people, although it’s easy to jump to that conclusion.”
“Like this?” Jon said, pointing at an imperfectly round metal marble.

“Stop! Don’t touch it.”

Clarence and Gary came over and looked at it.

“Gary, is that what I think it is?”

“Sure is. Zachary acquired Infidom. He’s putting Ken’s technology to use.”

“But this robotic parasite was designed to keep people alive.”

“Wait, so what killed all these people is a manmade micro-parasite?”

Gary nodded. “Body heat is what activates it. It gets into a body through pores. It’s supposed to swim its way towards the heart, providing a live video feed of the veins, looking for damage or blood clots. If it finds clots, it’s supposed to chew them down. If a stint is needed, its tail is supposed to serve as one by extending then detaching itself into place.”

“Then it exits and becomes this ball, ready to be used again.”

Clarence added.

Jon was looking back and forth between them. He seemed scared. “How is it that you guys know so much about this stuff?”

Gary and Clarence looked at each other. For a minute it seemed as if they were actually communicating without speaking. Then, Clarence shrugged as if to say it was up to Gary, and Gary nodded.

“We didn’t cause this, if that’s what you’re asking. A friend of ours developed this technology years ago. Zachary bankrupted his company and stole it along with other, very valuable technology
that could have kept us out of his SunSafes. Anyway, it seems as if he’s modified it to serve his own needs.”

“This is a genocide. Why would Zachary need to kill all these people?”

“He’s culling the population so he doesn’t have to pay the stipends.”

Jon was walking behind Gary and Clarence, in complete disbelief of what he was seeing. Everywhere he looked there were bodies of all ages. He was a doctor. His entire purpose in life revolved around saving lives, but he was too late.

“We got what we came for. Why are we still walking into town? Let’s just turn around and go home.”

Neither Gary nor Clarence responded. They were walking hunched over, with their guns drawn, ready to shoot.

“Guys?”

“You need to be quiet right now. We need to go through town and hope for survivors.”

The night became darker, making it difficult for them to see too far ahead, but still they refrained from using any flashlights. Once they reached Main Street, Gary tilted his head to the left for Clarence to break off in that direction and he went in the opposite direction. Jon hesitated for a moment then peeled off towards Clarence, since he was nicer to him than Gary.

They went from home to home, looking for survivors. As they went through, Jon took a sack of chocolates and assorted sweets from the abandoned candy store. At the moment he was too
distraught to have any, but he knew that the day would come when he’d wished he’d brought some home with him.

Next they walked through a grocery store. It smelled badly inside so they decided that no survivor would stay in there if they didn’t have to. But as they were walking out, they heard a clattering noise somewhere in the back storage room. Clarence brought his finger to his lips for Jon to stay quiet and they made their way in the direction the noise had come from.

When they got back there, all they saw were rats scurrying about. Clarence shook his head and they turned around, back towards the front door.

“Is that man with you?”

Clarence swung around and saw a young man of about thirteen standing before them. Jon was so startled he nearly passed out.

“Which man?”

“The military men took him. They’re staying in the empty hotel down the street. They don’t know you’re here.”

Clarence brought his gun down so that it was no longer pointing at the boy.

“Thank you.” The boy said in response to the lowered gun.

“So they’re in the hotel?”

“Not your friend. They took him. Probably already gone in the helicopter.”

Clarence crossed his arms. His gun was still in his right hand, but the boy was clearly not scared of him. Besides, Clarence noticed that the boy had a gun of his own tucked into his little waistline.
“Tell me something, young man. How do you know so much about my friend?”

He shrugged.

“I watched you guys come into town. At first I couldn’t figure out if you were good guys or not. But then when he threw up,” he nodded towards Jon with a sympathetic look. “And you actually consoled him, I just knew that I could trust you.” Apologetically, the boy added, “By the time I realized your friend was headed towards danger, I was too late. I fell into the dumpster outside the hotel when I was trying to climb up to the porch roof.” He shrugged, “I do it all the time and they never even know I’m there listening to them. Anyway, I heard one of them say that they had an iris match and that he was high value. That’s when the phone rang and the guy on the phone told the other guy to take him to the helipad right away.”

Clarence was rubbing his face. “We need to get back to SF. That’s where they’re taking him. That’s where Zachary is.”

“Then let’s go,” the boy said as if he were in charge.