

# THE DESPAIR

ASHES

A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE

The first thing that usually filled Jessica's room each morning was the pale shaft of light slipping through the thin white curtains. The fabric swayed faintly with the breeze, casting wavering shadows that danced across the posters pinned to her walls. In the corner stood a modest desk, cluttered with colored pencils and sketchbooks stacked unevenly atop one another. One of them lay half-open, its pages crowded with unfinished drawings: imagined characters, abstract shapes, and strange figures she often recalled from her dreams. The shrill beeping of the alarm clock shattered that fragile quiet. Seven o'clock. Jessica stirred, her eyelids half-open, yet she did not sit up immediately. The pleasant weight of sleep clung to her body, and the warmth of the blanket wrapped around her like invisible chains, holding her hostage. With a sluggish movement she reached out, silenced the alarm, and remained still for a few seconds, staring blankly at the cracks in the ceiling. Every morning felt like this—alarm, waking, school. Life itself often seemed no different: a repetitive rhythm, mechanical and unavoidable.

Eventually she forced herself upright and stood before the mirror. Her blond hair fell in loose tangles around her face, catching the pale morning light. Tucked into the frame of the mirror was a photograph: Jessica and her mother, smiling beneath a summer sun from a holiday long past. The sight coaxed a faint smile to her lips. Another ordinary day, she told herself. Or so it seems.

She slipped into her school uniform—white blouse, navy skirt—and fastened around her neck a small silver pendant. Her father had given it to her on her birthday. Brandon was rarely home, often consumed by his military duties, yet that necklace was a quiet reminder that his affection, however distant, was real.

From the kitchen drifted the mingling aromas of fresh bread and coffee. Jessica padded downstairs, where her mother, Adela, had already laid out the table: cheese, olives, jam, honey, everything in its place. Adela always said mornings shaped the soul of the day, and she approached them with meticulous devotion.

"Good morning, sweetheart," her mother greeted warmly as Jessica entered. Her smile was brighter than the sunlight.

"Morning, Mom." Jessica reached for the glass of orange juice and took a sip; the sharp tang stung her tongue yet left behind a refreshing sweetness.

"You had a test today, didn't you?" Adela asked.

Jessica shifted uncomfortably. "Yes... but it's not that important. I studied—well, a little."

Her mother narrowed her eyes, studying her. "A little? Jessica, talent alone won't carry you. You know that."

Jessica rolled her eyes, half amused. "Relax, Mom. I'm going to be a graphic designer, not a mathematician saving the world."

The empty chair at the table loomed quietly. Her father's seat. Brandon had left before dawn, uniform pressed, boots heavy on the floorboards. For Jessica, his absence was routine, yet that vacant space always reminded her of the distance between them. He was a man of discipline, silence, and shadows—present, but not always there. She never admitted it aloud, but she longed for more of him in her life.

When breakfast was over, Jessica grabbed her bag. At the door her mother stopped her, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"No matter what happens, take care of yourself," she said. A phrase that sounded like ordinary maternal caution, but in days to come it would echo in Jessica's memory like a curse.

On the way to school she met Amy, her closest friend. Amy was everything Jessica was not—vivid, energetic, curls bouncing as she walked, laughter spilling from her lips.

"Jessica, let's go to the new café tonight," Amy chirped. "They say the pastries are heavenly."

Jessica chuckled. "Maybe... if I can convince my mom. You know how protective she can be."

Amy rolled her eyes. "I adore your mom, but she's almost too sweet. Fine, but if you ditch me, I'll have to go alone, and that's no fun."

School unfolded with its familiar monotony: lessons, notes, the droning voices of teachers. Yet Jessica's mind strayed to her sketchbook. During break, she showed Amy a few drawings: rough poster designs, character concepts.

"One day I'll have my own exhibition," she said, her eyes shining. "People will see my world, not just the ordinary one."

Amy studied the pages with awe. "You really could. Your drawings feel alive in a way mine never do."

By evening Jessica returned home. The television murmured from the living room, the newscaster's tone grave: "...a mysterious virus emerging in parts of East Asia has already infected hundreds. Authorities urge calm, though its rapid spread has raised concerns..."

Jessica kicked off her shoes, frowning at the screen. "Mom, again with the virus stories? There's always something. It never turns into anything."

Adela muted the TV. A fleeting shadow crossed her face. "Let's hope you're right, sweetheart," she murmured.

That night, Jessica retreated to her room. She opened her sketchbook and let the pencil wander across the page, lines forming into unfamiliar shapes. A strange unease coiled in her chest, though she dismissed it as the residue of a long day. To her, it was just another evening. Just another page in her notebook.

She could not know.

Her "ordinary" days had already ended.



# Chapter II

The following days carried with them an almost imperceptible shift, a tremor beneath the surface of daily life. At first, it was barely noticeable—an awkward pause in conversation, a look exchanged between strangers, a headline glimpsed on the front page of the morning paper. Jessica felt it like one feels a change in the weather: subtle, intangible, yet undeniable.

At school, the unease manifested in whispers. Teachers lingered in the hallways, their voices low and clipped. They hushed quickly whenever students approached, the way adults do when trying to shield children from things too heavy for their ears. Jessica noticed their furrowed brows, the distracted way they scribbled on the blackboard, and for the first time she sensed that even the figures of authority were not immune to fear.

The cafeteria buzzed with speculation. A group of boys at the next table scrolled through their phones, arguing in tense voices.

"They shut down a whole district."

"That's fake news. If it were real, we'd know by now."

"My cousin's in the city—he said he heard sirens all night."

Amy plopped her tray onto the table across from Jessica, eyes alight with both fear and excitement. "It's spreading," she whispered, leaning forward. "People are saying it's already in the state."

Jessica stabbed her fork into a piece of apple pie. "People say a lot of things. Last year it was the 'killer bees.' Remember how that turned out?"

Amy smirked, but the smile didn't reach her eyes. "Yeah... but this feels different."

Jessica wanted to dismiss it, but the truth was Amy was right. There was something different. The laughter in the cafeteria sounded brittle, forced. Students checked their phones constantly, their faces pale with the glow of breaking headlines. Even the air felt tense, as though the walls themselves were listening.

That evening, the atmosphere at home mirrored the one at school. The television had become a permanent presence in the living room, its glow spilling across the walls like a restless ghost. The news anchor's voice grew graver each night. "...mysterious illness... rapid transmission... victims exhibit violent behavior..."

Jessica sat curled on the couch, her sketchbook balanced on her knees. She drew absentmindedly—shapes, fragments of faces—while her mother sat stiffly in her armchair, eyes fixed on the screen.

For once, Brandon was home. He stood by the window with his arms folded, the reflection of the television flickering across his face. His silence carried a weight that filled the room more than the voice of the anchor.

"People panic too quickly," Jessica said, flipping a page in her sketchbook. "The media thrives on fear. It'll blow over."

Her father's reply was low, but each word carried the weight of iron. "It doesn't always blow over."

Jessica looked up. "You really think it's that serious?"

Brandon turned from the window. His expression was hard, carved by years of discipline.

"People believe they're safe until they're not. By the time they realize the truth, it's already too late."

Her mother shifted uneasily, laying a hand on his arm. "Don't scare her," Adela said softly, though her own voice trembled.

But Jessica could not erase the image of his eyes—cold, steady, the eyes of a man who had seen too many storms.

The following morning, the world outside seemed altered in ways Jessica could not quite name. On the walk to school, the streets felt quieter, the faces of passersby drawn tight. A shopkeeper swept the pavement in front of his store, but his gaze kept flicking toward the end of the street as though he expected something to appear. A woman tugged her child along hurriedly, clutching the little hand so tightly the boy stumbled to keep up.

In the convenience store near the bus stop, shelves already showed signs of panic. Rows that once displayed bottled water and canned goods were thinning. Jessica frowned as she picked up a pack of gum. It's just people overreacting, she told herself. Yet when the cashier handed her the change, his hands trembled slightly.

At school, Amy greeted her with wild eyes. "Jess, did you see? Another video went viral last night." She shoved her phone into Jessica's face. Grainy footage filled the screen: a man staggering in the middle of the street, his movements erratic, jerking like a puppet with its strings cut. He collapsed, then convulsed violently as bystanders screamed. The camera jolted, catching only flashes of chaos before the video ended abruptly.

"It's fake," Jessica said, but her voice lacked conviction. The faces in those clips looked too real. Too raw.

Amy leaned closer, her voice dropping. "They say it's not far. Just a few towns away." Jessica laughed nervously. "You'll believe anything you see online." But her laugh was too sharp, too forced. The hollowness of it echoed inside her chest.

That evening, rain streaked across the windows, distorting the streetlights into trembling blurs. Brandon sat at the kitchen table with his old service rifle laid out before him. The metallic click of its parts filled the silence as he dismantled and cleaned it with practiced precision. Jessica lingered in the doorway, unsettled by the sight. "Why are you doing that?" she asked, forcing a smile. "There's no war here."

He did not look up. His hands moved steadily, cloth gliding across steel. After a long pause, he said, "Preparation isn't paranoia."

Jessica swallowed hard. For the first time, she felt her father was a stranger—less a parent, more a soldier staring into a horizon only he could see.

That night, Jessica dreamt of shadows pressing against her window. Faceless figures loomed outside, their breath fogging the glass, their hands leaving streaks across the panes. She woke with her heart racing, her sheets damp with sweat. The house was silent, oppressively so. Even the tick of the clock seemed intrusive, loud enough to shatter the stillness.

She sat upright, hugging her knees, listening to the dark. A thought coiled in her mind, heavy and inescapable: What if it's already begun?

The cracks had formed. And though no one yet admitted it, the world she knew was already beginning to collapse.



# Chapter III

The house no longer felt like a home. It was as though the walls themselves had grown suspicious, listening to every sound Jessica made, holding their breath whenever she moved. The silence was not simple quiet—it was dense, textured, oppressive. It seemed to have weight, pressing on her chest whenever she paused too long to listen.

She noticed it most sharply in the evenings. Normally, she could count on the household's little rhythms: the creak of the floorboards beneath her father's heavy steps, the scrape of her mother's chair as she sat at the kitchen table, the muffled chatter of the television filling the living room. Now, each of those sounds felt... tentative. As if her parents, too, were reluctant participants in their own routines.

At school, life carried on with a grotesque parody of normalcy. Teachers lectured, assignments were handed out, bells rang. But under it all ran a current of unease. Jessica could hear it in the strained laughter of her friends, in the way some students avoided sitting too close to one another, in the way every phone screen seemed to glow with the same headlines.

The word outbreak was everywhere. Some spoke it like a joke, others like a curse. Jessica pretended indifference, laughed when expected, nodded when the conversation demanded it—but inside, she was brittle, splintering. Her notebooks filled with sketches she couldn't explain: distorted faces, ruined buildings, shadows with teeth. Once, Amy leaned over and whispered, "That's creepy, Jess. What even is that?" Jessica snapped the notebook shut so fast the paper crinkled.

Walking home felt wrong. The air smelled faintly metallic, as though a storm lingered just out of sight. The streets had emptied of their usual rhythm. Traffic lights blinked faithfully, but fewer cars passed beneath them. Shop windows were dim. A man outside the hardware store stuffed bags into the trunk of his car, moving with frantic precision. He didn't meet her eyes.

When Jessica reached home, she pushed open the door and was struck by a wave of humidity, thick and stifling. The television was on again—her mother sat before it, rigid, eyes glued to the crawl of headlines. Brandon wasn't there.

"Where's Dad?" Jessica asked, trying to sound casual.

Her mother twitched, almost startled by the sound of her daughter's voice. "Work," Adela said quickly, too quickly.

Jessica frowned. "He's been out late every night. What's he even—"

"He's preparing," Adela cut in. "That's what your father does." Her voice faltered at the edges, like a record catching on a scratch.

That night, long after Jessica should have been asleep, the front door clicked open. She slipped quietly to her bedroom doorway. Brandon's silhouette moved slowly up the stairs, burdened by something long and wrapped in cloth. He carried it with the reverence of someone holding an infant, though the weight bent his spine.

Jessica's pulse quickened. She didn't move. Didn't breathe. He disappeared into the storage room, shutting the door with care. When the latch clicked, Jessica realized she had been clutching the frame of her doorway so tightly her fingers hurt.

The days smeared together after that. Her father left before dawn, returned after midnight. Her mother drifted through the house like a pale wraith, preparing food she barely ate, staring through windows as though expecting the horizon to split open.

"Mom," Jessica whispered one morning, watching Adela's trembling hands as she poured coffee she didn't drink. "You're scaring me."

The hours crawled by with unbearable slowness. Jessica sat rigid on the couch, the silence of the house pressing in on her until it became unbearable, like the weight of an ocean crushing her lungs. Each creak of the wooden floorboards overhead, each groan of the pipes in the walls, magnified her dread. She told herself it was nothing—old house noises, things she had heard a hundred times before—but tonight every whisper in the dark carried intent, as though the house itself were holding its breath with her.

Her eyes darted constantly toward the front door. She half expected it to burst open at any moment, her parents walking in with tired smiles and plastic grocery bags cutting into their fingers. She could almost hear her mother's voice—"Jess, we brought your favorite cereal, don't look so worried"—but the sound existed only in her head, a cruel phantom conjured by desperation.

By one in the morning, the battery on her phone had drained to a sliver of red. She had cycled through the same routine: calling her mother, then her father, refreshing social media feeds that refused to load, watching the signal bar flicker between nothing and one fragile bar before vanishing entirely. The helplessness of it gnawed at her. The world beyond the walls was crumbling, she knew that now, and her lifeline to it had been severed.

She stood abruptly, unable to endure the stillness any longer, and wandered through the house. Her footsteps seemed unbearably loud on the hardwood, each creak reverberating like a gunshot. She checked her parents' bedroom. The bed was untouched, the sheets cool and neatly folded back. A faint trace of her mother's perfume lingered in the air—floral, delicate—yet the absence of the woman herself made it almost mocking. Jessica pressed her face into the pillow, inhaled deeply, then recoiled as though the scent had turned sour in her lungs.

In the bathroom she stared at her reflection under the pale, unforgiving light. Her own face startled her: pale skin stretched tight over sharp cheekbones, eyes wide and bloodshot from exhaustion, hair falling in messy strands around her shoulders. She tried to smile, to reassure herself, but the image in the mirror only grimaced back at her. She snapped the light off quickly, unwilling to confront the stranger she was becoming.

The kitchen clock ticked relentlessly. She paced the length of the hallway, back and forth, her arms wrapped tightly around her body. Every so often she thought she heard something outside—dragging footsteps, low guttural sounds, the clatter of a garbage bin knocked over in the street. She pressed her ear to the window, straining, holding her breath until her lungs burned. The sounds would fade, swallowed by the night, but her imagination supplied horrors to fill the void: creatures crouching in the shadows, waiting, sniffing for the scent of her fear.

At two-thirty she finally broke. She couldn't sit still any longer. Her body vibrated with restless terror, as though her muscles themselves were rejecting immobility. She yanked open cabinets in the kitchen, pulling out cans of beans, packets of crackers, bottled water. Each item clattered into a pile on the counter, her movements frantic, irrational. She found herself whispering under her breath, half-lullaby, half-command: Stay calm, Jess. Stay calm. You're fine. You're fine.

When she dragged her father's old duffel bag out of the hallway closet, her hands hesitated. She remembered the last time she'd seen him carry it—returning from deployment, shoulders broad and proud, eyes softening when he saw her running down the driveway. He had laughed then, scooped her into a hug so tight it had stolen her breath. Now the bag was empty, lifeless, smelling faintly of gun oil and desert sand. With trembling fingers, she began to fill it.

She moved through the house like a thief, stripping it of what it had once given her freely. A flashlight. Batteries. The small hunting knife from the kitchen drawer. Her mother's first aid kit. Each object was heavy with meaning, fragments of a life that was no longer hers. By the time the bag was full, her arms ached, but the weight was comforting, grounding her in a reality that otherwise threatened to dissolve into nightmare.

At three a.m., she heard it.

A sound that didn't belong to the house.

It came from outside—low, wet, and impossibly close. A shuffle of feet, the scrape of something dragging across concrete. Her heart stuttered in her chest, then roared to life, pounding so violently she thought the sound alone might draw attention. She killed the lights with a frantic sweep of her hand, plunging the house into darkness. The silence returned, thicker now, alive with menace.

She crouched beneath the living-room window, her breath shallow, her hands clamped over her mouth. The sound grew louder. Slow steps, uneven, as if whoever—or whatever—was moving had forgotten how to walk properly. There was a pause, then a wet inhalation, as though lungs were straining through thick fluid.

Jessica's nails dug into her palms. Not human, she thought. Not anymore.

The steps scraped closer, then stopped.

For an eternity, there was nothing. Then—knuckles against glass. A single knock, deliberate and hollow.

Her throat closed. She wanted to scream, to run, but her body betrayed her, locking her in place. Another knock followed, slower this time, each impact vibrating through the glass and into her bones. Then silence again, broken only by the frantic thudding of her pulse.

When she finally dared to peek, the window was empty.

She remained curled on the floor until the sky outside lightened to gray, every muscle stiff and trembling. When dawn finally arrived, it felt less like salvation and more like mockery—daylight did nothing to chase away what lurked in the world.

Her parents hadn't come home. Her phone was dead. The house no longer felt like home, but like a tomb she had been foolish enough to lock herself inside.

Jessica rose, her legs unsteady but her resolve hardening. She could no longer wait. She would find Amy. She would find her parents. She would not sit here, alone, waiting for death to knock on the glass again.

She slung the duffel bag over her shoulder, adjusted its weight until it no longer threatened to topple her, and opened the front door.

The world beyond was silent, suffocating, and utterly changed.



The air outside was colder than Jessica expected. It clung to her skin with a dampness that carried the faint tang of smoke and rot. The street, usually buzzing with cars rushing to work and neighbors exchanging greetings, now lay abandoned, an open wound beneath a sky veiled in gray.

She tightened her grip on the duffel bag strap, shifting its weight against her shoulder. The silence was oppressive, the kind that didn't feel empty but watchful, as if unseen eyes lingered in every shadow.

Her sneakers crunched softly against the pavement as she stepped forward. The sound was too loud, echoing down the street, and she flinched at her own presence. Every instinct screamed to turn back, lock the door, and hide. But behind her lay only the same darkness, the same unanswered questions. Ahead, at least, was possibility.

As she passed the Johnsons' house—the one with the cherry tree her father used to curse every spring for littering blossoms all over their driveway—she noticed the front door was ajar. A faint smell wafted from inside, metallic and rancid, like pennies left too long in the sun. Jessica slowed, staring at the door. It swayed slightly with the breeze, groaning on its hinges. She forced herself to keep moving. Curiosity was dangerous. Curiosity was how people disappeared.

Further down, a car lay abandoned at the intersection, its driver's side door hanging open. The windshield was cracked, the steering wheel smeared dark with something she refused to name. A child's stuffed rabbit sat in the backseat, its fur matted, its head tilted as though listening. Jessica's throat tightened, her stomach threatening to heave. She pressed her fist to her mouth and hurried past, her eyes fixed on the sidewalk ahead.

A crow burst from a telephone wire above her, wings slapping the air with violent force. Jessica staggered back, her heart lurching painfully, before realizing what it was. The bird circled once, cawing sharply, then vanished into the gray distance. She let out a shaky laugh—too loud, too brittle—and whispered to herself, Just a bird. Just a damn bird.

But when she rounded the corner toward Amy's street, the laughter died in her throat. The world there was wrong.

Garbage cans overturned. Windows shattered. Curtains flapping like torn sails from broken frames. But worse was the silence—deeper here, thicker, as if the air itself refused to carry sound. She stepped onto the cracked asphalt, her eyes scanning every doorway, every rooftop, her muscles wound tight as wire.

That was when she saw the first one.

It was standing at the far end of the street, half-shrouded in shadow. At first she thought it was a person—a man, maybe, slouched and injured. But as her eyes adjusted, she realized the posture was wrong. Its head lolled at an unnatural angle, chin brushing its chest. Its arms dangled too long, fingers grazing the ground as though the bones inside had melted. It swayed, slow and rhythmic, as though moved by some unseen current. Then, abruptly, it lifted its head.

Jessica froze.

The thing's face—or what was left of it—was slack, gray, the skin peeling in strips. Its mouth sagged open, and from that black maw came a sound not meant for human throats: a wet, gurgling hiss.

Her body wanted to collapse. Her mind wanted to scream. Instead, she backed slowly into the shadow of a rusted mailbox, pressing herself against the cold metal. Her pulse hammered so violently she thought the creature must hear it.

For a moment, the thing simply stood there, head twitching, as if sniffing the air. Then, without warning, it moved.

Not with the shuffling gait she expected but with sudden, jerking speed, stumbling forward several feet before lurching to a halt. Its hands clawed at the pavement, nails snapping, leaving streaks of dark residue on the asphalt.

Jessica's lungs burned. She clamped her hand over her mouth, desperate to stay silent.

The thing twitched again, then turned away, staggering toward a collapsed fence. Its form melted back into shadow, until it vanished entirely from view.

Jessica waited, frozen, for what felt like an eternity. Only when her legs trembled beneath her did she dare to move. She forced herself forward, one step at a time, her eyes locked on the direction of Amy's house.

She whispered Amy's name under her breath like a prayer, each syllable keeping her tethered to sanity.

Amy's house was only three blocks away. But with every step, Jessica understood that each block was going to feel like a lifetime.

## Chapter IV

Amy's house stood at the corner like a husk, a place Jessica had visited countless times in better days. She remembered sleepovers filled with whispered secrets, the smell of popcorn burned in the microwave, Amy's laughter bouncing against the walls. But now, the curtains hung limp, one corner torn loose and fluttering like a dying breath. The porch light was off, and the welcome mat—once cheery with Home Sweet Home stitched in cursive—was soaked with something dark that had dried into a stiff crust.

Jessica stood at the edge of the porch, her hand trembling on the rail. She might be inside, she told herself. She has to be inside. Maybe hiding. Maybe waiting.

The door wasn't locked. It drifted open under the gentlest pressure, a long sigh of rusted hinges filling the silence.

The smell hit her first. Not fresh death—not the copper tang she'd caught near the abandoned car—but a stale, clinging stench of rot mixed with mildew. She gagged, pulling the collar of her sweatshirt over her nose.

Inside, the living room was a graveyard of normalcy. The television sat dark. A bowl of cereal congealed into a stone-like lump on the coffee table, the milk a yellow crust around its rim. Magazines were scattered across the carpet, pages curling. One of them had a childish doodle scrawled in the corner: Amy's looping handwriting, flowers sprouting from the margins.

"Amy?" Jessica whispered.

The silence pressed against her. She tightened her grip on the flashlight in her hand, flicking it on even though the gray daylight streamed faintly through the windows. The beam cut through dust motes, slicing across family photos on the wall. Amy's face beamed back from a dozen frames—graduation cap, summer vacations, silly grins with ice cream smeared across her cheeks. Each smiling face made Jessica's chest ache.

She climbed the stairs slowly, each step groaning. On the landing, she paused. A door was ajar—Amy's bedroom. Jessica pushed it open.

The room was exactly as she remembered: the posters of bands peeling from the walls, the messy desk stacked with notebooks and glitter pens, the string lights dangling in a half-broken loop. But something was wrong.

Jessica pressed herself into the corner of Amy's bedroom, her breath burning her throat as she tried to silence it. The house, once filled with Amy's laughter, had become a labyrinth of creaks and echoes. Every sound magnified, every silence suffocating.

Don't breathe. Don't move. Don't let it hear you.

Her eyes darted to the closet. It was too late now—the door was already half-open, and the sound of the hinges would give her away. The bed, too low to hide beneath. She was trapped. Another step. The wood moaned beneath a heavy weight. Then the smell hit her—faint at first, but unmistakable. Rot. Stale breath. The odor of flesh that no longer belonged to the living. Her stomach turned.

The thing reached the landing. Jessica could hear it pause, as if scenting the air. The silence stretched until her pulse roared in her ears.

Then, the dragging shuffle began again. Closer. Toward Amy's room.

Jessica's hands shook so hard the flashlight nearly slipped from her grip. She switched it off entirely, praying the darkness would cloak her.

The door to Amy's bedroom creaked wider. Something entered.

In the dim light filtering through the shattered window, Jessica caught a glimpse: a figure, hunched and twisted, its head jerking unnaturally as though the neck were broken. Skin sagged in gray folds, lips torn back from teeth blackened with rot. Its eyes—clouded, milky—swept the room without sight, but the way it tilted its head made her certain it could feel her presence. Jessica's heart hammered against her ribs. She pressed herself lower against the wall, biting her sleeve to keep from gasping.

The creature sniffed. A wet, rattling sound, like lungs full of fluid. It staggered closer, one leg dragging, leaving behind a dark smear on the carpet.

It stopped by the desk. Amy's notebook lay open there, and with a grotesque twitch of its hand, the creature brushed against the page. Its cracked fingernail tore the paper, the sound sharp as a scream in the silence.

Jessica's body screamed at her to move, to run, but her legs were stone. She squeezed her eyes shut, mouthing words without sound. Please. Please. Please...

The creature lurched suddenly, its head snapping toward the corner where she crouched.

Jessica's breath caught.

It knew.

For a second that stretched into eternity, they stared—Jessica's wide, terrified eyes meeting its blank, decayed ones.

Then the thing shrieked. A sound not human, not animal, but something torn from the grave. It lunged forward, claws outstretched.

Jessica bolted.

She dove past the bed, her shoulder slamming into the wall as she scrambled for the door. The creature's hand snagged her sleeve, ripping the fabric. She screamed, wrenching free, feeling the burn of torn cloth against her skin.

She stumbled down the hall, feet pounding the floorboards, the creature crashing after her, its shrieks rattling the windows.

Down the stairs—nearly tripping, catching herself on the railing—into the living room, where the stench of rot clung thick in the air.

Her gaze locked on the front door. Freedom. Escape.

But the lock. She had to undo the lock—

Her trembling fingers fumbled, scraping metal. Behind her, the creature descended the stairs in a broken, tumbling lurch, bones snapping as it hit the landing and rose again with a grotesque persistence.

Jessica's heart seized. She twisted the lock, yanked the handle. The door resisted—swollen wood, jammed frame.

The shriek came again, right behind her.

With a desperate cry, Jessica threw her entire weight against the door. It burst open, and she stumbled out into the night air, crashing onto the porch.

The creature slammed against the doorway, clawing at the frame, its milky eyes burning with hunger.

Jessica scrambled backward, then turned and ran into the dark street, lungs searing, vision blurred with tears.

Behind her, Amy's house loomed silent again, the creature's shadow writhing in the broken window like a stain against the night.

Jessica's footsteps echoed against pavement cracked by weeds, each sound rebounding down the narrow street as though she weren't alone at all. She clutched her torn sleeve, the sting of fabric burn reminding her she'd been one second away from death—or worse.

Her lungs burned, yet the silence pressed heavier than her exhaustion. Every house loomed with vacant windows, like skulls with hollow sockets staring her down. Curtains stirred though no breeze touched her skin. Once-familiar porches now crouched in shadow, their rocking chairs still, their welcome mats choked with dust.

Jessica slowed her pace. Running would draw attention. She told herself that. Yet the moment her steps quieted, her ears picked up the sounds behind her. Or what she thought were sounds.

A scrape.

A shuffle.

The faintest suggestion of movement that dissolved when she turned her head.

Her phone was still in her pocket, heavy and useless. No service. No signal. But she kept checking the screen anyway, as if sheer desperation might summon a single bar. Each failure carved the isolation deeper.

She reached the intersection where the old gas station stood. Its sign flickered weakly, buzzing like an insect. For a moment she almost laughed—power still works?—but the sound caught in her throat, coming out as a strangled sob instead.

The glass doors were shattered. A display rack lay on its side, scattered with candy bars split open, their insides crawling with ants. Jessica stepped carefully over them, her shoes crunching glass too loud in the silence.

Inside, the stench of mildew and rot made her gag. Shelves were half-empty, as if scavenged in panic. She grabbed a bottle of water anyway, unscrewed the cap with trembling hands, and drank until her throat stopped burning.

Then came the noise.

At first, only a whisper—something brushing against metal. A shelf trembling. Then silence again.

Jessica froze, bottle still in her hand, her pulse a drumbeat against her temples.

It's nothing. The wind. A rat. Just... nothing.

But the sound came again. A dragging thud this time, followed by a low groan that turned her blood to ice.

She crept backward, her body screaming to run but her mind locked in place. Her eyes darted toward the corner aisle. The shadows there were thick, impenetrable.

Then, from the dark, a figure lurched into the pale fluorescent light.

Jessica's knees weakened.

It wasn't like the one in Amy's house. This one was smaller, thinner—its body wasted, bones jutting through skin. Its jaw hung open, unhinged, tongue swollen and black. When it breathed, its ribs shuddered like brittle sticks.

But it didn't lunge. Not immediately. Instead, it swayed. Its head tilted, listening. Jessica's heart thundered so violently she thought the creature could hear it.

The bottle slipped from her hand, clattering across the tile.

The sound tore through the gas station like a gunshot.

The creature snapped its head toward her, and in that instant she saw its eyes—clouded, yes, but wet, reflecting a glimmer of fluorescent light. Almost like tears.

Jessica stumbled backward. Don't scream. Don't scream.

The creature shuffled a step forward. Its foot dragged, leaving a dark streak of something thick behind. Another step. Closer.

Her back hit the doorframe. Outside was darkness, empty streets—but at least they were open.

Here, the air was suffocating, the walls too close, the stench unbearable.

Jessica bolted.

The night swallowed her again, colder this time, as if the world itself was aware of her flight. Her breaths came sharp and ragged, her vision tunneling. She didn't look back. Couldn't. The moment she did, she knew she would see it, stumbling after her, relentless, just like the one in Amy's house. But the silence behind her didn't comfort. It felt worse. Because in silence, anything could be waiting. The shadows stretched longer, twisting into shapes that suggested movement. She imagined footsteps behind her even when none fell. The night pressed against her ears, whispering doubts, weaving illusions. She wasn't just running from them. She was running from the crushing truth: Her parents were gone. Amy was gone. The city was dead. And she was alone. The word hollowed her out more than the silence ever could.

Jessica's lungs screamed for air as she staggered into a narrow alley, clutching her side. Her shoes slapped against wet concrete, splashing through puddles that reflected nothing but the trembling glow of a streetlamp at the far end. She leaned against a brick wall, dragging her breath in shallow gasps. Her throat was raw from running, her eyes burning from the acrid smell of rot that seemed to permeate the entire city. I can't keep this up. I'll collapse. I'll... A sound cut through the haze of her thoughts. Not the guttural moan of the infected. Not the scrape of something dragging itself across asphalt. This was sharper. Quicker. Footsteps. Jessica froze. Her pulse spiked again, panic rising. She pressed herself against the wall, straining to hear. Yes—definite footsteps. Light but deliberate. They weren't shuffling. They weren't clumsy. Someone else was out here. Her throat tightened. She'd dreamed of this moment since the first night her parents hadn't come home—that she'd find someone, anyone, to prove she wasn't alone. Yet now, when it was real, she couldn't move. Fear outweighed hope. The footsteps drew closer. Shadows shifted at the mouth of the alley. Jessica's nails dug into the brick behind her, the rough surface biting her palms. Then, a figure appeared. A person. Tall, wiry, wrapped in a filthy jacket too large for his frame. His face was half-hidden under a hood, but his eyes glinted in the dim light. He carried a crowbar in one hand, his knuckles white around the metal. For a heartbeat, they only stared at each other. Jessica's lips parted, her voice trembling. "You're... you're not—" "Infected?" The man's voice was low, gravelly, almost a whisper. "No. Not yet." The way he said it made her skin crawl. Her body screamed to run again, but her legs wouldn't move. She wanted to cry, to collapse, to cling to him, beg him not to leave her—but there was something in his stillness, in the way his eyes measured her, that rooted her to the ground. "Alone?" he asked. Jessica nodded slowly. Her voice came out broken. "My... my parents... they didn't come back. My friend—" She stopped herself, the memory of Amy's hollow stare searing behind her eyelids. The man tilted his head. "Then you won't last long."



It wasn't said with cruelty. It was flat, like a weather report. Jessica swallowed hard, her mouth dry. "You—do you know what's happening? The news—there were reports, but—" He cut her off with a sharp gesture. His eyes darted toward the alley behind her, scanning the dark. "They follow noise," he muttered. "And you're too loud." Jessica hugged herself tighter, realizing her breaths were almost sobs. She tried to quiet them, to force the air out silently. The man stepped closer. His presence was overwhelming, carrying the faint stench of sweat and rust. The crowbar gleamed faintly under the streetlamp. "You have two choices," he said. "Stay here. Wait for them to find you. Or follow me." Her heart hammered against her ribs. Can I trust him? Every instinct screamed no. The crowbar, the way his voice held no warmth, the dead calm in his eyes—he could be as dangerous as the things outside. Maybe worse. And yet—she couldn't deny the truth in his words. She wouldn't last another night alone. The shadows were already unraveling her mind. Jessica's lips trembled. She forced herself to speak. "Where?" The man's mouth twitched—not quite a smile. More like the ghost of one. "Somewhere they don't go." He turned, walking toward the far end of the alley. His footsteps were soundless, practiced. He didn't look back. Jessica stood frozen in place, staring after him. Every nerve screamed it was a mistake. But the silence pressing in around her felt like a predator with its teeth at her neck. Her body moved before her mind decided. One step. Then another. She followed.

## Chapter V

The man led her through the winding veins of the city like someone who had memorized every crack in its skin. Jessica trailed him silently, her shoes scuffing against broken pavement. Every step felt like a gamble—her body wanted to believe this was salvation, but her mind whispered it was a trap. They moved in silence for what felt like hours, slipping through alleys drowned in shadow, past abandoned cars, and past windows that flickered with nothing but candlelight before being snuffed out as if the people behind them feared even being seen. Finally, he stopped in front of a squat concrete building—windowless, heavy metal door, graffiti clawed across its surface. Jessica hesitated. It looked less like safety and more like a bunker that could double as a prison. The man didn't wait. He dragged the door open with a groan of rusted hinges and slipped inside. Jessica's feet stayed planted on the sidewalk. She stared at the darkness yawning beyond the threshold. Her chest rose and fell quickly. What if I walk in and never come back out? What if he shuts the door behind me and that's it? Her hand twitched toward the doorframe. Before she could decide, his voice drifted back out, flat and impatient: "Choose." Her breath stuttered. Then, forcing her legs forward, she stepped inside.

The air was heavy, damp, carrying the smell of metal and mildew. Dim light glowed ahead, a single bulb swaying on a cord, revealing a room littered with scavenged supplies: cans stacked haphazardly, blankets spread across the floor, maps pinned against the wall with crude marks scrawled over them.

Jessica's eyes flicked from corner to corner, searching for threats—chains, locks, bloodstains. She saw none, but the unease only deepened.

The man dropped his crowbar against the wall with a dull clang, then pulled back his hood. His hair was matted, his face gaunt, skin stretched too tight across bone. Stubble shadowed his jaw, but it was his eyes that pinned her in place—sunken, restless, darting toward her then away again, like he wasn't sure if she was real.

"Sit," he said, gesturing toward a crate.

Jessica sat, perching at the edge, every muscle taut. Her fingers twisted in her lap, knuckles whitening.

The man busied himself at a battered camping stove in the corner, pouring water into a dented pot. The hiss of a flame filled the silence. He didn't look at her when he spoke.

"You're loud when you walk. Careless. You'd already be dead if I wasn't the one who found you."

Jessica's throat tightened. "I didn't... I didn't ask you to—"

He turned, eyes flashing with something sharp. "No. You didn't. That's why you're still alive."

Her breath hitched. She didn't know what that meant, not really, but the weight of it pressed down like a hand on her chest.

Minutes stretched thin. He handed her a cracked mug of lukewarm water. She stared at it before drinking, half-expecting it to burn or choke her.

Finally, she whispered, "What's your name?"

He looked at her for a long time before answering. "Ethan."

The name landed heavy, final.

Jessica clutched the mug tighter. Her voice came smaller. "Jessica."

Ethan gave a single nod, as though filing it away. Then his gaze lingered on her—calculating, dissecting.

"You're scared of me," he said simply.

Jessica froze. She couldn't speak, couldn't deny it. The silence was enough of an answer.

Ethan leaned back against the wall, folding his arms. His voice dropped lower, steady but edged.

"Good. Stay that way."

Her stomach turned.

The bulb above them flickered, plunging the room into momentary darkness before sputtering back to life. In that brief blackout, Jessica swore she felt the weight of his eyes more than the light revealed.

And for the first time since the outbreak began, she wondered if being alone had been safer after all.

Jessica barely slept that night in Ethan's so-called shelter. Each creak of the building set her nerves alight, each shift of his weight against the wall made her heart jump. By dawn, the single bulb had gone out entirely, leaving them in thick darkness.

She woke to find him already awake, crouched by the maps pinned to the wall, muttering under his breath as he scratched lines with a stub of charcoal. His lips moved too fast, words blending into nonsense—names, places, warnings.

Jessica hugged her knees, the dread growing heavier. He's unraveling. If I stay, I'll unravel too.

When Ethan turned his back, she slipped out. The door groaned, and her heart leapt into her throat, but he didn't stop her. Maybe he hadn't noticed—or maybe he didn't care.

The streets felt different now. Colder. She kept her pace steady, though her legs begged her to run.

Hours later, her throat raw with thirst, she stumbled into what had once been a small marketplace. Stalls stood broken and overturned, fruit long rotted into black husks. A crow flapped away from a carcass as she approached.

That's when she heard the sound. A human voice. Low, rough, carrying from behind one of the collapsed stalls.

She froze.

Then, a figure emerged. A man, older than Ethan, early thirties perhaps, his face marked by dirt and exhaustion but his movements sharp, deliberate. He carried no weapon in hand, but a rifle was slung across his back.

He stopped when he saw her, eyes narrowing.

For a heartbeat, silence stretched taut between them. Then he spoke.

"You're alive."

Jessica swallowed, her voice cracking. "So are you."

A flicker of something—surprise, then faint relief—crossed his face. He stepped closer, slowly, as though not to scare her.

"I'm John," he said. His tone was steady, but his eyes scanned her like he was cataloguing details: her torn clothes, her trembling hands, the wariness in her stance.

Jessica hugged herself. "Jessica."

John nodded once, then glanced at the empty streets around them. "It isn't safe here. Not anymore. There's a place, north of the river. A camp. VineVillage. People. Real people. Food. Walls. Safety."

The word safety clung to her like a spark of warmth. But doubt quickly smothered it.

Ethan told me to stay scared. He said trust was a weakness. What if this is another trap?

John must have seen it in her eyes, because his voice softened. "You don't have to believe me now. But if you stay out here, you won't last long. Not alone."

Jessica's chest tightened. She thought of the empty house. The silence. Ethan's mutterings. The dreams of fists pounding on doors.

Her lips parted, breath shaky. "VineVillage..."

John extended a hand. Rough, calloused, steady.

"This way."

For a long moment, Jessica hesitated. Then she took his hand.

They moved together, weaving through dead streets. Unlike Ethan, John walked with purpose but without madness. His pace was measured, his eyes sharp, checking rooftops, windows, alleys. He spoke little, but when he did, it was calm, practical.

"We'll need to reach the bridge before sundown. After dark, they gather near the water."

"They?" Jessica asked.

His jaw tightened. "You'll see."

As the day dragged on, Jessica found herself watching him more closely. The way he carried himself, the quiet strength in his movements. He wasn't kind exactly, but he wasn't unhinged either. And for the first time in days, she let herself breathe a little deeper.

Ahead, the skyline broke, and through the haze, she saw it: the faint outline of a barricade, wooden towers rising above the ruins. A cluster of smoke trails drifted upward. Her heart lurched.

"Is that it?" she whispered.

John followed her gaze. "VineVillage."

The word settled heavy, final. Hope tangled with fear in her chest.

The camp was real. But was it salvation—or another kind of prison?

The river cut the city in two, its waters thick and dark, churning with debris. From where Jessica and John stood, the bridge loomed like the ribcage of a dead beast—metal beams rusted, planks missing, entire sections sagging into the current.

Jessica's stomach turned. We're supposed to cross that?

John crouched near the edge, scanning the structure. His eyes narrowed. "We don't have a choice. The long way around will take days, and nights aren't survivable out here."

Jessica swallowed hard, clutching the straps of her bag. The wind carried a stench with it—wet rot, copper, and something sour that made her throat tighten. Then she heard it: the faint, guttural moans drifting from under the bridge.

Her blood froze.

Shapes shifted in the shadows below, pale limbs dragging, heads twitching upward toward the sound of their voices.

"Don't look down," John murmured, standing. He checked the rifle on his back but didn't draw it.

"Noise will only make it worse. Stay close. Step where I step."

Jessica nodded, though her knees already felt like water.

The first planks groaned under their weight, every creak a thunderclap in her ears. Jessica forced her gaze forward, fixing on John's shoulders as he moved. His steps were careful, deliberate, as if every inch of the bridge were a trap.

Halfway across, the wind rose, rattling loose metal. A shard of glass clinked against the ground and tumbled into the river below.

The moans grew louder.

Jessica bit down on her lip so hard she tasted blood. Her palms slicked with sweat, slipping against the railing as she balanced. Her mind whispered Ethan's words: Trust no one. Stay scared. Fear keeps you alive.

Her breath hitched. She almost stopped, almost turned back. But then John's voice cut through the panic, low but firm.

"Keep moving."

She forced one foot forward, then another. A sudden crack split the air. One of the boards snapped beneath her heel, plunging into the water. Jessica cried out, grabbing the rusted railing. The sound echoed across the river, sharp and final.

From below, the shadows erupted.

Dozens of bodies swarmed from beneath the bridge, clawing at the supports, their shrieks piercing through the night air. The bridge shuddered under their weight, a chorus of snapping tendons and scraping nails rising from the depths.

"Run!" John barked.

Jessica's legs obeyed before her mind could. She sprinted, the boards rattling beneath her, her chest heaving as the sounds rose closer, louder. From the corner of her eye she saw them—gray faces, mouths gaping wide, fingers reaching through the gaps in the planks.

One hand caught her ankle.

Jessica screamed, stumbling, nearly pitching forward into the dark. But John was there in an instant, dragging her up with a single, brutal yank. His other hand drew the rifle, firing once into the mass below. The shot cracked like lightning, the recoil echoing through her bones.

The creatures shrieked, their frenzy redoubling.

"Go!" John shoved her forward.

By the time they reached the far side, Jessica's lungs were fire, her legs trembling so violently she collapsed to her knees. The world spun, and the sound of the river mixed with the echo of her pulse.

John slammed the butt of his rifle against a final straggler's skull before grabbing her arm. "On your feet. We're not safe yet."

Jessica forced herself upright, every muscle screaming. She glanced back once at the bridge.

The creatures still swarmed, their eyes gleaming in the dark, their howls carrying across the water.

She turned away quickly, bile rising in her throat.

For the rest of the walk, silence pressed between them. Jessica's thoughts churned—images of pale faces, grasping fingers, and Ethan's warning replaying in her head.

Finally, John spoke. His voice was steady, almost calm.

"That was the easy part."

Jessica's heart dropped.

The word easy didn't belong anywhere near what they had just survived.

And yet, in the distance, the wooden towers of VineVillage rose taller, clearer, promising something that almost felt like salvation.

Almost.

The sun had begun its slow descent when the trees finally parted, revealing wooden watchtowers looming above the horizon. Their silhouettes cut jagged lines against the blood-orange sky, sharp and purposeful, like teeth guarding a throat.

Jessica stopped in her tracks. Her chest tightened at the sight. After days of wandering through abandoned neighborhoods and empty roads, the towers looked... impossible. Civilization. Order. Safety.

John didn't stop walking. His stride was steady, eyes fixed on the gates ahead. "Don't look so relieved yet," he muttered.

Jessica frowned, forcing her feet to move again. "What do you mean? It's... it's people. Finally." "Exactly," he said. "And people can be worse than the dead."

As they drew closer, Jessica saw the details: sharpened logs forming a wall nearly three times her height, barbed wire coiled along the top like a crown of thorns. The gates were reinforced steel, wide enough for a truck but shut tight.

Two figures appeared in the watchtower above, rifles glinting in the fading light.

"Halt!" a voice barked.

Jessica froze, her hands instinctively rising. John raised his too, though slower, his face unreadable.

"We're alive," John called back, his voice carrying. "We're not sick."

The man in the tower didn't lower his weapon. "Prove it. Hands where we can see them. Don't move."

Jessica's pulse thundered in her ears. She stayed perfectly still as another guard appeared, this one climbing down from the tower and approaching the gate. He carried himself with practiced precision, his rifle slung across his chest. His face was scarred, his hair cropped short. His eyes locked on them with the cold efficiency of someone who'd seen too much.

John leaned slightly toward Jessica, his voice a whisper only she could hear. "Say nothing. Let me talk."

She nodded quickly, swallowing down her questions.

The guard stopped a few feet away, studying them in silence. His gaze lingered on Jessica a moment too long, then shifted back to John.

"Names," he demanded.

"John Hale," John replied evenly. "She's Jessica Moore."

The guard's expression didn't change. "Where are you coming from?"

"West side of the city," John answered. "Looking for passage. Heard you're still taking people."

The man's jaw twitched. He turned, signaling to someone on the wall. The gate groaned as it began to open, the sound of heavy chains clanking in the dusk.

"Search them," he ordered.

Jessica flinched as two more figures emerged, rifles ready. Rough hands patted down her arms, her legs, her bag. She bit the inside of her cheek, keeping her eyes fixed on the ground as they rifled through her things.

One of the guards found her phone—dead for days now—and turned it over curiously before tossing it back into her pack. Another found the locket around her neck, tugging it hard enough to make her stumble. Jessica's breath hitched, but she didn't protest.

Finally, the scarred man gave a curt nod. "They're clean. Let them in."

The gates yawned wider, revealing what lay beyond.

Jessica's breath caught.

Inside was a settlement of wood and canvas, buildings cobbled together from scavenged metal sheets, tents stretched between beams, smoke rising from controlled fires. Lanterns flickered along the paths, casting long shadows across faces—dozens, maybe hundreds of them—moving with weary purpose.



Children darted between legs, their laughter faint and hollow, as though forced. Men and women bartered over supplies. Armed sentries patrolled with grim focus. It looked alive. It looked organized.

But the air felt wrong. Heavy. Controlled.

John stepped forward, and Jessica followed, the gates clanging shut behind them with a sound like a coffin lid sealing.

She flinched at the finality of it.

The scarred man walked ahead, gesturing for them to follow. "Welcome to VineVillage," he said.

His voice carried no warmth. "You'll meet the Overseer soon. He decides who stays."

Jessica's heart pounded. She forced herself to breathe evenly, to ignore the way every pair of eyes seemed to follow her as they walked deeper into the camp.

She had dreamed of finding safety.

But something inside her whispered: This is not it.

The scarred guard led them through winding paths, the murmurs of camp life trailing after them like a low, persistent hum. Lantern light flickered against the patched walls of makeshift huts, the shadows of guards shifting as they passed.

Jessica's stomach coiled tighter with every step. The place was alive—far more alive than any neighborhood she had seen in weeks—but there was no comfort in it. The eyes that followed her weren't curious; they were measuring. Weighing.

They reached a long building at the settlement's center, sturdier than the rest. Its walls were reinforced with steel plates scavenged from trucks, its windows covered with heavy curtains. A single light glowed within, muted and steady.

The scarred man stopped at the door. "Wait here."

He disappeared inside.

Jessica hugged her arms to her chest, leaning slightly toward John. Her voice was a whisper.

"He said the Overseer. What kind of name is that?"

"The kind that makes people obey," John murmured back. His tone was unreadable, but there was something in his eyes—something that told her he'd seen this sort of thing before.

The door opened again. The guard jerked his head toward them. "Inside. Now."

The room smelled faintly of leather and smoke. Maps lined the walls, their surfaces scarred with pins and scrawled notes. Shelves held stacks of notebooks and boxes labeled with faded handwriting. At the far end of the room sat a man behind a heavy desk, his posture perfectly straight, his hands folded neatly before him.

He was older, though not frail—his hair streaked with gray, his face lined, but his presence filled the space like iron. His eyes were sharp, unblinking, and when they lifted to meet Jessica's, she felt stripped bare in an instant.

"So," he said, his voice calm, deliberate. "New arrivals."

Jessica shifted, resisting the urge to step back. John stood rooted, his expression carefully neutral.

"Yes, sir," the scarred guard replied. "Found them outside the perimeter. No infection signs. They claim to come from the west."

The man behind the desk nodded slowly, dismissing the guard with a wave. The door clicked shut, leaving only the three of them in the room.

"John Hale," the man said, his gaze flicking briefly over the pages on his desk. "And Jessica Moore." He let her name linger a little longer, the sound of it heavy in the stillness.

Jessica swallowed, her throat dry. "How do you know—"

He raised a hand, silencing her.

"Nothing happens in VineVillage without my knowledge," he said. "Every name is written down. Every task assigned. Every consequence delivered."

Jessica's breath hitched. She tried to meet his stare but faltered, her gaze slipping to the maps instead.

The Overseer leaned forward slightly. "This is not the world you remember. Out there, chaos devours. In here, order sustains. And order requires obedience."

The words struck her like cold water. He hadn't smiled once. He hadn't blinked.

John finally spoke, his voice steady. "We're not here to cause trouble. We just need safety."

The Overseer studied him for a long moment, then shifted his gaze back to Jessica. "Safety is not free. Every soul within these walls pays their due. You'll work. You'll follow the rules. If you don't..." He paused, his lips curving ever so slightly. "You'll learn."

Jessica's heart hammered in her chest. Something about the way he said it, quiet and measured, was far more terrifying than if he'd shouted.

The Overseer leaned back in his chair. "Rest tonight. Tomorrow, you'll be assigned duties." His eyes lingered on Jessica once more. "We'll see how useful you are."

Outside, the night air felt heavier than before.

Jessica's legs trembled as she followed John back toward the small quarters assigned to them. Her mind swirled with questions she didn't dare speak aloud. The Overseer's voice clung to her thoughts like smoke: Order requires obedience.

For the first time, she wondered if the gates of VineVillage were meant to keep the dead out—or to keep the living in.

Jessica woke to the clang of a bell. It wasn't the sharp, digital tone of her old alarm clock, but something older—metal striking metal, deep and resonant. The sound rolled through the camp like a command.

She sat up, disoriented, her body aching from the hard cot. A thin blanket slipped from her shoulders. The small wooden room she'd been given smelled faintly of dust and old smoke. No photographs on the walls, no hint of warmth—just utility.

John was already awake, sitting on his own cot with his boots laced. His eyes found hers, calm but weary.

"That's the morning bell," he said. "Means everyone gathers."

Jessica rubbed her eyes, her throat dry. "Gathers for what?"

"For the Overseer's orders," John said quietly. "And for assignments."

Outside, the camp was alive with movement. Dozens of people emerged from their shelters, forming lines without complaint. No one lingered. No one dawdled. Even the children—small, gaunt, wide-eyed—moved in silence, as though they had learned early that hesitation was dangerous.

Jessica stayed close to John as they followed the flow of bodies toward the center square. At the front, raised on a platform built from scavenged wood and steel, stood the Overseer. His posture was as rigid as it had been the night before, his hands clasped behind his back. Guards flanked him on either side, rifles in hand, faces blank.

The crowd hushed at once.

"Another day begins," the Overseer said, his voice carrying effortlessly across the square. "Order keeps us alive. Order keeps us safe. Each of you has a duty, and each of you will fulfill it."

His gaze swept the crowd, sharp and unyielding. Jessica swore it lingered on her for just a fraction of a second too long.

"Work teams will be posted. Fail to report, and you will be corrected. Contribute, and you will be rewarded."

The word rewarded sounded hollow, like a ritualistic chant more than a promise. After the announcements, slips of paper were read aloud by one of the guards. Names matched to duties: guard shifts, water hauling, food rationing, wall repairs.

"Jessica Moore," the guard called.

Her chest tightened. She stepped forward.

"Kitchen rotation. Afternoon through evening. Report to Supervisor Haines."

Jessica nodded stiffly, retreating back into the crowd.

"John Hale," the guard continued.

John was assigned to outer patrol—dangerous work, but the Overseer didn't so much as glance his way when the order was given.

Jessica's pulse spiked. Separate duties. Separate spaces. Was it deliberate?

Later, as she walked through the camp, she saw more of VineVillage up close. The walls loomed high and unforgiving, patched with scrap metal. Watchtowers rose at the corners, guards scanning the distance with binoculars.

Inside the walls, the atmosphere was tense, orderly, but joyless. People moved with the precision of a machine, their voices kept low, their eyes often cast down. Even laughter—when it occasionally flickered—died quickly, swallowed by the weight of watchful eyes.

Jessica's stomach twisted. This place was safe, yes. The walls were strong. The dead hadn't breached them. But there was another kind of suffocation here, one that pressed invisibly against her chest.

As she passed, she caught fragments of whispered conversations.

"Three gone last week... no announcement..."

"...took him to the shed... didn't come back..."

"...better not ask questions..."

Her skin prickled. She didn't dare slow down, but the words rooted themselves deep in her mind.

That evening, when she reported to the kitchen, the Supervisor—an older woman with sharp eyes and a permanent frown—set her to work scrubbing pots blackened with soot. The air was thick with the smell of boiled grains and stale vegetables.

Jessica worked silently, her hands raw and trembling. Across the room, a boy barely older than her chopped carrots with mechanical precision, his eyes never lifting from the cutting board.

"Keep moving," the Supervisor barked whenever anyone faltered.

Jessica obeyed, but her thoughts churned.

VineVillage was safe. Safer than the world outside. But beneath its order was something darker. Something that whispered of control, punishment, and secrets locked away.

That night, when she lay awake on her cot, she couldn't stop hearing the Overseer's voice:

Order keeps us alive. Order keeps us safe.

And she couldn't stop wondering—

At what cost?

The second night in VineVillage was colder. Jessica lay awake on her cot, staring at the wooden beams overhead. Sleep refused to come. The walls seemed to breathe around her, creaking with every shift of the wind.

John hadn't returned yet from patrol. That absence gnawed at her. He had told her not to worry, that he'd been on worse assignments before—but something about the Overseer's eyes when John's name had been read still replayed in her head.

Outside, the camp had gone quiet. The guards on the watchtowers shifted occasionally, lanterns burning in yellow halos above. Beyond the walls, silence stretched across the ruined land. Too silent.

Then came a noise.

A muffled shout. Sharp, urgent, then quickly silenced.

Jessica sat up, heart hammering. She pressed her ear to the thin wooden wall. Voices. Low, commanding. Heavy boots on dirt.

She crept to the window. Through the crack in the shutters, she saw two guards dragging a man across the square. His wrists were bound, his mouth gagged. Even in the dim torchlight, she recognized him—the boy from the kitchen, the one who had been chopping vegetables without ever looking up.

Her stomach dropped.

The guards didn't lead him to the gates. They didn't take him outside the walls. Instead, they hauled him toward the far corner of the camp, where a structure stood apart from the others: a squat shed of corrugated steel, padlocked and windowless.

The boy thrashed weakly. The guards didn't flinch. One of them opened the lock. The other shoved him inside. The door clanged shut.

Then silence.

Jessica backed away from the window, her pulse thundering in her ears. Her first instinct was to wake someone—John, anyone—but fear clamped her throat shut. If the Overseer knew she had seen... what then?

Don't ask questions... she remembered the whispers.

Three gone last week... no announcement...

She sank onto the cot, pressing her hands over her mouth. The shed loomed in her mind long after the guards had vanished.

What was inside? What happened to those taken there?

Sleep never came. By morning, her eyes burned with exhaustion, but she forced herself into the rhythm of the camp, her lips sealed. Around her, the others moved as if nothing unusual had happened. No one spoke the boy's name. No one even looked toward the shed.

It was as though he had never existed.

That evening, Jessica spotted John near the outer wall, his face drawn and pale after hours of patrol. She almost told him. The words almost spilled out. But when she opened her mouth, she saw the Overseer standing not far away, speaking to a cluster of guards. His gaze swept lazily across the camp—cold, watchful.

Jessica swallowed her confession.

Instead she whispered, "John... something's wrong here."

He looked at her for a long time, then nodded, his voice barely audible.

"I know."

The moon hung low over VineVillage, a thin silver blade slicing through clouds. Jessica waited until the camp had settled into uneasy sleep—fires dwindling, guards' lanterns swaying in slow arcs on the towers. Every creak of the wooden floor beneath her feet felt like a scream as she slipped out of the shelter.

The air was sharp, carrying the faint smell of rust and damp earth. She moved in silence, hugging the shadows between huts, her breath shallow and measured. The shed stood across the square, its silhouette darker than the night itself.

Every step closer, her chest tightened. She could almost feel the cold steel door breathing against her skin.

When she reached the corner of the square, she froze. Two guards leaned against the wall, their rifles resting loosely in their hands, heads bowed in hushed conversation. Jessica ducked behind a water barrel, pressing her body into the dirt.

"...another one tonight," one of them muttered.

"... Overseer says it's necessary. Keeps the order."

A pause. A laugh—short, bitter. "Order? We're feeding it, not keeping it."

Jessica's blood turned to ice. Feeding it?

The men shifted, one lighting a cigarette. Smoke curled lazily upward, breaking against the pale light of the moon.

Minutes dragged by before they wandered off, boots crunching gravel. Jessica remained still, her heart hammering against her ribs. Only when their footsteps faded did she crawl from the shadows.

The shed loomed in front of her now. Up close, she could see scratches around the doorframe—deep, desperate grooves carved by fingernails. Her stomach lurched.

The padlock glistened faintly, solid and unyielding. She reached for it, her fingers trembling, but the icy metal burned against her skin. No key. No way inside.

Then—

A sound.

Not from outside. From within.

A muffled thud, followed by a rasping, wet breath. Something shifted, scraping against the floorboards. Another noise—a moan that didn't sound entirely human.

Jessica staggered back, slapping a hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp. Her knees trembled.

The shed's walls seemed to pulse with the sound, vibrating through her bones.

She wanted to run. Every nerve screamed at her to turn and flee. But her feet rooted to the ground. Her mind spun. The boy. The others. Were they... still in there?

Her vision blurred as hot tears gathered, fear mingling with guilt. She backed away slowly, careful not to make a sound, her eyes locked on the steel door as if it might burst open at any second.

By the time she reached her shelter again, her legs nearly gave out. She collapsed onto the cot, heart still rattling in her chest.

Sleep didn't come. Instead, the echo of that moan replayed in her mind—low, broken, and hungry.

# Chapter VI

Jessica hadn't slept. Every blink brought her back to the shed—the metallic rattle, the broken moan clawing at her spine. When the first pale strip of dawn pushed against the horizon, she gave up trying.

John found her sitting outside her shelter, hugging her knees, the fog settling over VineVillage like a damp shroud. He crouched beside her, eyes narrowing.

"You look like hell," he murmured. "Bad dreams?"

Jessica shook her head, then stopped. No—it wasn't just a dream. She needed to tell someone. Someone she could trust. Her throat felt tight, words caught behind fear, but she forced them out.

"I went to the shed last night."

John froze. For a long second, he didn't even breathe. Then his jaw tightened.

"Jessica... that was reckless. If anyone had seen you—"

"I heard something inside," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Not an animal. Not— not empty. Something was alive in there."

John's gaze flicked toward the square, toward the silhouette of the shed half-hidden in mist. His hands flexed against his knees, restless.

"You shouldn't talk about that," he said finally, voice low and sharp. "Not here. Not where they can hear you."

"They?" Jessica's pulse quickened. "John, what is going on? What are they keeping in there?" He didn't answer. Instead, he scanned the village—the guards changing shifts, Overseer's men pacing the watchtowers, eyes sharp even in the early light. Then he leaned closer, his breath a whisper against her ear.

"I've seen things too. People taken inside. People who never came back."

Her stomach dropped. "So it was a boy... last night?"

John's silence was confirmation enough.

Jessica clutched his sleeve. "Then we have to do something. We can't just—pretend it isn't happening."

John's eyes were tired, haunted. "Do you think I don't want to? But this place... VineVillage isn't what it pretends to be. It's not a refuge, it's a cage. And the shed? That's the lock on the door."

Jessica's skin prickled cold. She wanted to ask more, but footsteps approached—two men, rifles slung across their shoulders. John straightened immediately, his expression shifting into something unreadable, almost indifferent.

"Later," he said quickly under his breath. "When the sun sets. Meet me by the eastern wall."

Jessica nodded, though her chest felt hollow, scraped clean by fear.

The guards passed them without a glance, muttering to each other. But Jessica couldn't shake the sensation of being watched, as though the shadows themselves had ears.

And somewhere, behind the locked steel door, something shifted again—waiting.



The village slept uneasy. By midnight, the fires in the square had burned low, casting only skeletal light against the walls. The guards rotated slower now, lulled by fatigue, their boots crunching gravel in measured rhythm.

Jessica slipped through the narrow alleys, her breath fogging in the cold. Every creak of wood and rustle of leaves made her heart stutter. She clutched her jacket tighter, praying she looked like nothing more than another sleepless girl wandering the camp.

John waited by the eastern wall, a shadow barely distinguishable from the timber planks. When she approached, he raised a finger to his lips. His eyes gleamed in the dark, sharp, restless.

"You came," he whispered. "Good. Follow me."

They moved along the edge of the wall until the shed loomed ahead—silent, squat, wrapped in mist. The metal door glistened faintly, padlocked and chained. Even from a distance, Jessica felt a pressure radiating from it, like a pulse in the air.

John knelt, pulling something from his jacket pocket. A thin piece of metal, bent into a makeshift pick. His hands moved with the confidence of someone who had done this before.

Jessica crouched beside him, her breath shallow.

"You've done this?" she asked.

"Too many times," he muttered. Then: click. The chain loosened. The padlock sagged open.

The silence that followed was heavier than before. Jessica's stomach twisted, but John pushed the door just enough for them to slip inside.

The air hit her first—thick, rancid, humid. It smelled like rusted iron and rot. Her hand flew to her mouth, choking back a gag.

The shed was dark, except for a faint green glow bleeding from a cracked monitor against the wall. Wires dangled like vines, snaking into the shadows. And then—she heard it.

A rasp. Low, guttural. Almost human.

John grabbed her wrist, his grip firm. "Stay behind me."

They stepped deeper. Jessica's eyes adjusted slowly, and what she saw froze her blood.

A boy—no older than fifteen—sat chained to a chair in the corner. His body twitched with unnatural spasms, his skin pale, veins darkened like ink beneath glass. His eyes snapped open, glowing faintly in the green light, and when he exhaled, the sound was a wet rattle between a groan and a growl.

Jessica staggered back, hitting the wall.

"Oh my God..."

The boy's head jerked toward them, teeth bared. The chain rattled violently as he lunged, the sound echoing like a gunshot in the small space.

John grabbed her shoulder, shoving her toward the door.

"Quiet!" he hissed. "If anyone hears—"

But Jessica couldn't look away. The boy wasn't a mindless monster. Not fully. His eyes flickered with something—fear, confusion, a desperate plea. He clawed at the air as though begging them not to leave.

Her chest caved. This wasn't just containment. This was... experimentation.

Before she could move, John slammed the door shut again, locking it with trembling hands. His face was pale, his breath ragged.

"You saw it," he whispered. "Now you understand."

Jessica's voice cracked. "Why—why would they keep him like that?"

John looked toward the Overseer's tower, a shadow rising over the camp like a predator watching its prey.

"Because VineVillage isn't saving us," he said. "It's studying us."

Jessica woke to raised voices drifting through the camp, sharp as broken glass. A woman cried out about her husband who hadn't returned from the night patrol. Another whispered that two children were gone from the sleeping quarters, their blankets left neatly folded, as if they'd never existed.

Everywhere Jessica turned, faces looked tighter, paler, eyes darting at shadows and neighbors alike. The Overseer's voice eventually boomed through the crackling loudspeakers, smooth and commanding:

"Remain calm. Those missing are being searched for. There is no threat within our walls. We are united, and we are safe."

But Jessica had seen the boy in the shed. She knew those words were lies.

John kept close to her, silent, his gaze cutting across the camp like a blade. When a group of guards dragged a bloodied man through the square—his arms bound, his lips swollen—John leaned close and whispered, "They're silencing anyone who asks too many questions."

Jessica's throat tightened. "How long before they silence us?"

That evening, the Overseer himself appeared on the balcony of the tower. He was tall, draped in a dark coat, his voice carrying like a sermon.

"We are chosen," he said, his words weaving through the crowd like poison sugar. "The world out there has collapsed, but within VineVillage we endure. Do not believe the whispers of traitors. Fear is the true infection, and those who spread it will be dealt with accordingly."

The crowd muttered in unease, but no one spoke. No one dared.

Jessica's pulse thundered. The boy in the shed wasn't just an anomaly—he was proof of something terrible. Proof that VineVillage wasn't sanctuary, but laboratory. And now the Overseer was tightening the cage around them all.

Later, when night fell and the camp lights buzzed low, John pulled her aside into the shadow of a crumbling wall.

"They'll notice us soon," he whispered. "We either stay quiet and die with the others—or we act."

Jessica swallowed, her hands trembling. "Act... how?"

John's eyes burned in the dark. "We find out what they're hiding. We expose it. Or this place will devour us."

Jessica didn't answer immediately. Her gaze drifted upward—toward the Overseer's tower, its windows glowing faintly like the eyes of a beast watching from above.

And for the first time since she had entered VineVillage, she realized: safety was an illusion.

That night, the village seemed to hold its breath. The usual murmur of voices, the occasional laughter of children, even the coughs of the sick—all of it was gone, swallowed by a heavy, unnatural silence.

Jessica followed John through the back alleys between the huts, her heart hammering so loudly she was certain the guards would hear it. John moved like a shadow, every step precise, every pause deliberate. He had done this before. She hadn't asked him how many times. When they reached the base of the tower, the stone looked blacker than the night sky. Floodlights swept the ground at intervals, cutting across the dirt like blades of light. John pulled Jessica down just as one beam sliced past them. She pressed herself flat, lungs screaming for air.

"Stay close," John whispered. His voice was barely a thread of sound, but she felt it run down her spine like ice.

They waited. One guard passed, then another. When the pattern faltered—two beams leaving a pocket of darkness—John slipped forward, dragging Jessica with him.

Her palms scraped against the cold stone as they reached the wall. She looked up. The tower rose impossibly high, windows glimmering with faint, sickly light. Somewhere inside, the Overseer was watching. Somewhere inside, the truth was hidden.

They found a service door half-buried in shadow. Rust ate at the hinges, but the lock was new, steel and unyielding. John pulled a small piece of bent wire from his pocket, worked at the mechanism with steady hands. Jessica kept watch, every muscle tense.

A sound broke the silence—a low groan, wet and animal-like. Jessica froze. It wasn't coming from outside the walls. It was inside.

Her eyes darted toward the tower's base. A barred grate covered what looked like a drainage tunnel. Behind it, something shifted. Pale fingers curled through the bars, nails split and bloody. Then another hand. Then a face, pressed against the iron, jaw trembling, eyes milky white.

Jessica's breath caught in her throat. "John..." she whispered.

The creature snarled, teeth snapping at the air, its voice a broken rasp that once might have been human. More shapes moved in the dark behind it.

John's lockpick clicked. The service door opened a fraction. He glanced toward the grate, then back at her.

"They're keeping them here," he said, his voice grim. "Not outside. Not beyond the walls. Here." Jessica's stomach turned. The Overseer's speeches, the disappearances, the boy in the shed—it all connected.

"Why?" she asked, her voice breaking. "Why keep them alive?"

John's eyes were cold. "We're about to find out."

He pushed the door open. The darkness inside the tower yawned wide, swallowing them whole.

The air inside the tower was damp, metallic. Jessica's shoes sank slightly into the stone floor, as though the ground itself had absorbed years of blood and decay. The door shut behind them with a muted thud, sealing the outside world away.

The silence was crushing. Not the silence of an empty building—this was the silence of something listening.

John gestured for her to stay low as they moved down a narrow corridor lit by flickering bulbs overhead. The light buzzed and hissed, throwing broken shadows across the walls. Jessica's hand brushed against the cold surface of the stone, and she jerked away. It was slick, as if sweat seeped from the walls themselves.

They passed rooms with doors of iron mesh. Jessica forced herself to look only once. Inside, she saw shapes slumped against the walls, wrists bound, faces pale and wasted. At first she thought they were corpses—until one of them stirred, raising its head.

A pair of hollow eyes stared back at her, wide and desperate, mouth opening in a silent plea. She almost screamed, but John's hand was on her shoulder instantly, steady and firm. He shook his head.

"Not yet," he mouthed.

They moved on. Every step echoed. Every corner felt like the edge of a trap.

At the end of the corridor, a door stood slightly ajar. From inside came the faint scrape of metal, the sound of glass shifting. John held up his hand, signaling her to wait. He slipped inside first. Jessica hesitated, then followed.

The room was a laboratory. Long tables lined with jars, syringes, and surgical instruments gleamed under the sickly yellow light. The air stank of disinfectant and something rotting beneath it. Along the far wall, chalkboards were filled with notes and diagrams—sketches of human anatomy, but twisted, incomplete, some marked with Xs and frantic scribbles.

Jessica stepped closer, her stomach knotting. One drawing showed a human figure, but its mouth was split wider than possible, jaws unhinged, throat blackened. Beside it were numbers, measurements, formulas she didn't understand.

Then she saw the cages.

Stacked against the wall, covered with sheets, they shifted slightly, as though something inside still moved. A low whimper leaked from beneath the fabric. Jessica's breath hitched.

John was at the chalkboard, scanning the notes. His jaw tightened. "Experiments," he muttered. "They're experimenting on them. On people."

Jessica shook her head, her chest tightening. "But why? What's the point?"

John's voice was bitter. "Control. Fear. Power. Take your pick."

Before she could respond, a soft voice came from the shadows.

"You shouldn't be here."

Jessica spun, heart in her throat. From behind one of the tables, a figure rose—a young woman in a lab coat, her face pale, eyes ringed with exhaustion. She raised her hands, not in threat, but in surrender.

"I'm not one of them," the woman whispered. "I... I want to help you."

The young woman kept her hands raised, trembling. Her voice was steady, but her eyes darted to the door every few seconds, as if expecting someone—or something—to walk in at any moment.

"My name is Dr. Elara Voss," she whispered. "I worked here before it... changed. Before they forced us to continue what should have been abandoned."

Jessica's throat felt dry. "What do you mean, forced?"

Elara took a step closer, careful, like she was approaching frightened animals. "This tower isn't just a refuge. It's a cage, a laboratory, a proving ground. People are brought here under the promise of safety. But once inside... they're subjects. Every scream you've heard outside, every whisper in the halls—it's all part of the trials."

John's hand tightened around the knife he carried. His voice was low, sharp. "So you're one of them. A scientist. Part of this."

Elara shook her head fiercely. "I didn't choose this. They locked us in, too. I did what I had to do to survive, but... I've kept records. Hidden files. Proof. I can show you."

Jessica studied her. Pale face, trembling lips, eyes wet with tears that hadn't fallen. She seemed sincere—but then again, sincerity was easy to fake.

The silence stretched until the building itself seemed to breathe. Somewhere above, a heavy metallic clang rang out, echoing down through the halls. Jessica flinched.

Elara's face drained of color. "We don't have time. They monitor everything. If they know I'm speaking to you, we'll all end up in the cages."

Jessica's heart pounded. She looked at John. His jaw was tight, suspicion written in every line of his face.

"Why should we trust you?" he asked coldly.

Elara hesitated, then pulled something from the pocket of her lab coat—a small notebook, bound in cracked leather. She handed it toward Jessica with trembling fingers.

Jessica hesitated before taking it. The cover was stained, the edges frayed. Inside, cramped handwriting filled the pages: lists of names, dates, sketches of strange mutations. And then she saw something that froze her blood.

Her own surname. Clarke.

Her father's name was written beside it.

Jessica's vision swam. The room seemed to tilt, her knees weak. "What... what is this?" she whispered.

Elara's gaze softened, pained. "You were never supposed to come here. Your family... they were already marked."

Jessica could barely hear her own breathing over the rush of blood in her ears. The leather-bound notebook felt heavy in her hands, as though every name written in its pages carried a piece of the tower's darkness. Her father's name stared back at her, etched in hurried ink like a curse.

John leaned over her shoulder, scanning the page. His brow furrowed. "What the hell is this? Experiments? Subjects?"

Elara's voice cracked as she answered. "The Clarke file was... one of the earliest. They wanted resilience. A way to breed immunity. But they underestimated the contagion, underestimated how it changes the mind before it changes the flesh."

Jessica's lips parted, trembling. "Are you saying... my father—?"

Elara didn't finish the thought. Her silence was answer enough.

Jessica staggered back, clutching the notebook to her chest. She wanted to scream, to demand answers, but the words tangled in her throat. Her father, strong and unyielding, who had promised to protect them... part of this?

The lights flickered above them, humming with an unnatural buzz. A warning.

John's grip on Jessica's shoulder steadied her, grounding her before she collapsed entirely. "We shouldn't stay here," he said sharply. "Whoever's running this place already knows too much. If they find out she gave us this—" he shot a glare at Elara— "we'll end up on their lists too."

Elara stepped closer, desperation etched into every movement. "No—you don't understand. If you run, you'll never make it out alive. The tower is alive with watchers. But there's a way. A sublevel below the records room. It's where they keep... the failures. If you can see what they've done, if you can bear it, you'll know the truth. About your father. About VineVillage. About why you were brought here."

Jessica shook her head, whispering, "I wasn't brought here. I just... ended up here."

Elara's eyes locked onto hers, wide and almost fevered. "No, Jessica. No one ends up here by accident."

The air thickened with tension. Somewhere in the walls, a faint metallic groan echoed, like chains shifting under enormous weight. Jessica tightened her grip on the notebook.

Her world had already unraveled once. But this—this was a deeper unraveling. A realization that maybe her survival, her very presence in this nightmare, was planned.

John pulled her toward the stairwell. "Enough. We move. Now."

Jessica hesitated, caught between the man who had kept her alive this far and the woman who held the key to her father's fate.

Elara whispered one last thing as the door creaked open:

"They marked you, Jessica. Long before the outbreak began."

Jessica could not sleep that night. Not in the tower, not with Elara's words crawling like insects beneath her skin.

They marked you. Long before the outbreak began.

She lay on the cold cot in the dimly lit dormitory, staring at the ceiling. The fluorescent light above flickered occasionally, each pulse like a heartbeat in her skull. John was asleep against the wall, rifle balanced on his lap even in slumber, but Jessica felt a crushing solitude despite his presence.

Her mind replayed every small detail of her life with a new, poisonous lens.

The medical checkups her father insisted on when she was younger. The injections she couldn't remember the reasons for. Her mother's nervous smile whenever Jessica asked too many questions. The way her father used to say, "You're stronger than you realize, Jess. You'll understand someday."

Was it all part of this? Was her childhood nothing but preparation for a catastrophe she hadn't even known was coming?

Her stomach twisted. She pressed her palms over her eyes until she saw red and black bursts of color.

"Stronger," she whispered to herself. "Or marked."

The two words felt interchangeable now.



When she finally drifted into a restless sleep, her dreams betrayed her. She was standing in a white room, sterile and endless, her reflection staring back at her from mirrored walls. Except the reflection wasn't her—it was versions of her. Dozens. Hundreds. Each one slightly different: one pale, one hollow-eyed, one smiling too wide, one covered in blood.

"Which one are you?" they whispered in unison. "Which one did they make?"

Jessica backed away, hands over her ears, but the chorus of voices burrowed inside her skull. One of the reflections stepped forward, breaking through the glass like water. It leaned close to her, its eyes black voids.

"You were never born, Jessica," it breathed. "You were chosen."

She woke with a strangled cry, drenched in sweat. John stirred, instantly alert, gripping his rifle. "What is it?"

Jessica shook her head, hugging her knees to her chest. "A dream. Just a dream."

But it didn't feel like a dream. It felt like memory.

Later, as dawn bled weakly through the cracks of the boarded-up windows, Jessica stood by herself near the stairwell. Elara's voice echoed in her thoughts.

If you can bear it, you'll know the truth.

Part of her wanted to tear the notebook apart, to destroy every word inside so she could pretend her life was still hers to define. But her hands refused. Instead, she traced her father's name again and again until the ink smudged beneath her fingertip.

"Marked."

It wasn't just a word anymore. It was a shadow she could not outrun, a chain linking her to secrets that ran deeper than blood.

And for the first time, Jessica wasn't sure if she was afraid of discovering the truth—or of what she might become once she knew it.

The stairwell smelled of rust and mold. Jessica's boots echoed against the metal steps as she descended, her flashlight beam trembling across the walls.

She hadn't told John where she was going. If she had, he would have stopped her. Maybe tied her to that damn cot until she calmed down. But Jessica couldn't calm down—not when Elara's words still gnawed at her like teeth.

"If you can bear it, you'll know the truth."

The deeper she went, the colder the air became. Pipes lined the walls, sweating condensation. She thought she heard the faint hum of machinery beneath the silence, a low vibration that seemed to crawl through her bones.

At the bottom, a door. Heavy. Reinforced. Faded stenciled letters on the steel read: RESTRICTED ACCESS – LEVEL 0B.

Her fingers hovered over the handle. A voice in her head screamed to turn back. But another—quieter, stronger—whispered: You've already been here, haven't you?

The handle turned without resistance.

The room beyond was... wrong.

Rows of medical cots stretched into the dark. Most were empty, but some still bore the outline of bodies, faint stains seeping into the sheets. The air reeked faintly of iodine and something sweeter, more nauseating—like rot disguised by disinfectant.

Her flashlight skated across the walls. Folders stacked on a table. Charts pinned to corkboards. Photographs.

She froze.

Dozens of photographs. Of children. Of teenagers.

Of her.

Jessica's throat closed. She stepped closer, her knees threatening to give way. There she was at twelve years old, hair tied back, sitting in a sterile room. Another at fifteen, eyes red from crying, with wires stuck to her temples.

And then the one that made her legs buckle.

Seventeen. Just months ago. The same sweater she had worn at school the day before the outbreak. The caption beneath read:

SUBJECT J-17. RESPONSE TO EARLY EXPOSURE: WITHIN PREDICTED PARAMETERS.

Her hand clamped over her mouth. A choked, broken sound escaped anyway.

She stumbled backward, bumping into a gurney. A clipboard clattered to the floor. On it, a single sentence underlined three times:

"Immunity is not random. It is engineered."

Behind her, something moved. A shadow against the far wall. The scrape of a shoe.

Jessica swung the flashlight around, heart hammering.

"Who's there?" Her voice cracked.

A figure stepped into the light. Not Elara. Not John.

A man, gaunt and pale, wearing a blood-stained lab coat. His eyes were glassy but sharp, as if awake in a way others weren't.

"You weren't supposed to see this," he said softly.

Jessica's breath caught in her chest.

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"You weren't supposed to see this," he said softly.

Jessica's breath caught in her chest.

The silence between them stretched until it felt like it would crush her ribs. Jessica gripped the flashlight like a weapon, though her trembling hands betrayed her.

The man in the lab coat tilted his head, studying her as though she were an insect pinned under glass.

"You've lasted longer than most," he murmured. His voice was hoarse, but calm—almost tender. "I suppose that's proof enough."

"Proof of what?" Jessica demanded, though the words came out thin, almost swallowed by the stale air.

The man's lips curved, not into a smile but into something colder. "That the experiment worked. You are... exactly what we needed."

Jessica's heart thundered. Her mind clung desperately to denial. He's insane. He doesn't know me. He's just another survivor who's lost his mind.

But the photographs on the wall. The labels. Her name. Her face.

The truth pressed down on her until she could barely breathe.

She took a step back, but the man followed, his shoes dragging slightly against the concrete.

"Don't run. Running means you don't want to understand. And you do want to understand, don't you?"

Jessica shook her head violently. "Stay away from me."

He stopped, his eyes glinting in the flashlight's beam. For a moment, he looked almost sad.

"You think you were spared by chance. That you were just lucky. But luck doesn't exist in this world anymore. Only design."

Her stomach lurched.

"Design...?"

The man spread his arms, as if unveiling some sacred revelation. "We built you. We built all of you."

Jessica's grip on the flashlight slipped. It clattered against the floor, rolling until its beam swung wildly across the walls, throwing monstrous shadows. She scrambled to snatch it back, the darkness swallowing everything beyond its narrow cone of light.

The man didn't move. He just watched her with something like reverence—and hunger.

"You'll see," he whispered. "When the time comes, you'll see."

And then, without warning, he turned and walked deeper into the shadows, his footsteps fading until they vanished completely.

Jessica stood frozen, chest heaving, every instinct screaming to flee. But her eyes drifted again to the photographs—the proof she couldn't unsee.

She was shaking when she finally forced herself back up the stairs, each step heavier than the last.

At the top, the door loomed like salvation. But when she pushed it open, the VineVillage night no longer felt safe. The sky itself seemed thinner, like paper stretched over something monstrous, waiting to tear.

Jessica barely remembered how she stumbled back into the safety of VineVillage. Her body moved on instinct, but her mind was stuck in that underground room, replaying the man's words over and over.

We built you.

The phrase clung to her skin like frost, sinking deeper every time she repeated it in her head. At first, she told herself it was madness—just the ramblings of a broken man. But the photographs... the documents with her name written in sterile ink... they refused to dissolve like nightmares usually did.

By dawn, her reflection in the cracked bathroom mirror looked like a stranger. Hollow-eyed, lips pale, a tremor running through her hands as though her bones themselves rejected what she had seen.

John noticed. Of course he noticed.

"You didn't sleep," he said quietly that morning, leaning against the doorframe of her room. His eyes were searching, patient but sharp. "Something happened, didn't it?"

Jessica opened her mouth, but her throat locked. She thought of telling him—about the man, about the files, about the terrible possibility that her entire life had been a lie. But the words curled on her tongue.

If she told him, would he believe her? Or would he look at her the same way the man had—like an object, not a person?

Instead, she forced out: "I'm fine."

John didn't press. He just studied her for a long, unsettling moment before nodding and leaving.

But she could feel his suspicion trailing after her like a shadow.

The days that followed blurred together. The camp bustled with its usual rhythm—fires crackling, patrols swapping shifts, children chasing one another in the dusty courtyard. Yet Jessica drifted through it all as if separated by glass. Every laugh, every word, every touch from others felt distant, unreal.

At night, the dreams worsened.

She dreamt of doors that wouldn't open, of wires buried beneath her skin, of faces she recognized but couldn't name staring at her from the darkness. She woke with her throat raw, unsure if she had screamed aloud.

And always—always—the man's voice lingered. You are exactly what we needed.

By the fifth night, Jessica found herself standing outside the camp fence, staring into the black trees. The guards didn't notice her, or maybe they pretended not to. She pressed her hand to the cold metal wire, half-expecting it to spark beneath her touch, to reveal some hidden mechanism buried in her flesh.

Nothing happened.

But she couldn't shake the feeling that the man was out there still, waiting, watching, certain she would come back.

And worst of all—part of her wanted to.

At first, Jessica thought it was only her imagination. A pause in conversation when she walked past. Averted eyes. Laughter that stopped too suddenly when she turned her head. But by the end of the week, it was undeniable.

The others were talking about her.

At the communal fire, she felt their glances slicing into her skin, cautious and sharp. The same people who once offered her food, who once smiled when she carried water from the well, now leaned closer to one another, their voices pitched low.

"She doesn't sleep."

"Always wandering at night."

"Did you see her hands shaking?"

She tried to ignore it. She told herself it didn't matter. But the words followed her like a second heartbeat.

One evening, while helping repair the perimeter fence, a boy no older than twelve dropped his tools when she approached. His wide eyes locked on hers as if he had seen something monstrous. Then he bolted, sprinting back toward camp.

Jessica froze, chest tightening. What did he see? Just her face—her tired eyes, her trembling hands? Or something more? Something she didn't even know about herself?

John noticed too. He pulled her aside, his voice low but firm.

"Jessica. People are scared. You need to tell me what's going on. I can't protect you if I don't know the truth."

Her mouth went dry. She wanted to scream the truth at him—about the underground man, the photographs, the words etched into her skull. But the moment stretched, and her courage collapsed.

Instead, she whispered: "I don't know."

John's jaw tightened. For the first time, she saw doubt flicker across his face.

That night, she sat alone at the edge of the campfire's glow. The warmth of the flames didn't reach her. She heard the others laughing, trading stories, pretending the world outside the fence no longer existed.

But every time she glanced up, she caught them staring. Not with warmth. Not with trust. With fear.

Jessica hugged her knees and stared into the fire until her eyes burned.

And in the crackle of the flames, she almost thought she heard it again—  
a man's voice, calm and certain, whispering from the dark:

They'll never accept you. You don't belong to them. You belong to us.

Morning broke with a sky the color of ash. The camp stirred slowly—pots clanging, boots crunching in the dirt, voices rising like smoke. Jessica sat at the edge of the long table where breakfast was being served, her spoon idle in her hand.

Across from her, two women whispered, their eyes fixed on her like needles. One muttered something under her breath, and the other made a sign with her fingers, as if warding off evil. Jessica lowered her gaze. The food turned to dust in her mouth.

By midday, the tension broke.

A man named Harris, one of the hunters, stood before the firepit with his bow slung across his back. His voice carried sharp and loud over the camp:

"She doesn't sleep, she mutters to herself, she's always out there in the dark. You've all seen it. She's cursed. Mark my words—she'll bring death into this camp."

The murmurs spread like fire through dry grass. People turned toward Jessica, some nodding, others clutching their children close.

John stepped forward, his voice steady but strained.

"Enough. She's a survivor, like the rest of us. Fear is eating this camp alive, and you're feeding it."

But Harris wouldn't stop. His eyes burned as he pointed straight at her.

"She's not one of us. Whatever happened out there before she came here—it's still clinging to her. Can't you see it? She's wrong."

Silence followed. Every face was turned toward her now.

Jessica's chest hammered. Words clawed at her throat, desperate to get out—I'm not cursed. I'm not dangerous. I'm just scared like you. But when she opened her mouth, nothing came. Only silence.

And in that silence, the camp's mood shifted like a shadow at sunset.

No one touched her. No one shouted. But the distance between her and the others widened, invisible yet undeniable. Even the children avoided her shadow as if it burned.

That night, she sat in her tent, listening to the soft murmur of voices beyond the canvas walls. Her name surfaced again and again, woven into suspicion and fear.

Sleep wouldn't come. And when she finally dared to close her eyes, she felt the presence again—cold, unseen, just beyond the veil of thought.

The whisper returned, so close it might have been inside her own skull:

They're turning on you. Just like I said they would. The sooner you accept it, the easier it will be. Jessica pressed her hands against her ears, rocking back and forth, but the voice only laughed—low, patient, inevitable.

The campfire crackled in the center of VineVillage, its flames painting uneasy faces in shades of orange and shadow. Jessica stood on the fringe, feeling the heat against her skin yet colder than anyone else there.

Harris spoke again, louder this time, addressing the entire camp as though he were their chosen voice.

"Look at her. Look at how she sits alone, muttering when she thinks no one's listening. Since she arrived, the nights have grown darker. The walls weaker. How long before the dead follow her scent here?"

The people around the fire shifted uncomfortably. Some avoided Jessica's eyes. Others stared openly, their expressions hardened by fear.

John rose to his feet, jaw clenched.

"You want to blame someone? Blame the plague. Blame the things outside those walls, not the girl who's fought to stay alive like the rest of us."

But his words, though steady, fell like stones into water—sinking without a ripple.

Jessica's pulse thundered in her ears. She opened her mouth, desperate to defend herself, but before she could, a woman from the crowd spoke:

"My son woke screaming last night. He said he saw her standing at the edge of his bed. Watching."

Gasps scattered like sparks. Jessica shook her head violently.

"No—I wasn't—" But the denial faltered in her throat. Her voice cracked like broken glass.

The murmur swelled. Paranoia was no longer a whisper; it was a rising tide.

Then the leader of VineVillage, a tall woman named Mara, stepped forward. Her expression was unreadable, her presence commanding silence.

"We are at war with the dead every hour of every day. Fear makes us reckless, and recklessness gets us killed. If there is even a chance that she carries something dangerous, we cannot ignore it."

Her eyes lingered on Jessica, cool and appraising, as though weighing her humanity against the camp's survival.

Jessica's stomach dropped. She felt the invisible thread that tethered her to this place begin to snap.

John moved closer, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder. "This is madness. You exile her, you condemn her. She's innocent."

But the camp was no longer listening. The decision had already begun to form in their minds, like rot spreading under the surface of fruit.

That night, Jessica couldn't bring herself to sleep. She sat outside her tent, staring at the embers dying in the firepit, listening to the camp whisper her fate.

And the voice in her head returned—softer now, coaxing, patient.

See how easily they turn? You don't belong to them. You never did. But you belong to me.

For the first time, Jessica didn't cover her ears. She just sat there, trembling, wondering if the voice was right.

Jessica lay awake long after the camp had fallen silent. The whispers, the suspicion, the voice inside her head—all of it pressed against her skull like a vice. But beneath the noise, there was something else.

A memory.

Her father's hand, firm and steady, guiding hers across a piano's ivory keys. His voice, calm even when the world outside had already begun to tremble. His promise: "No matter what happens, Jessie, I'll always find you."

The memory would not let go.

Near dawn, she rose from her bedroll and slipped past the sleeping guards. Her feet carried her almost without thought, past the tents, past the walls, until she stood at the fence that marked the edge of VineVillage.

There, beyond the mist and the treeline, a figure moved.

Tall. Broad-shouldered. Familiar.

Her breath caught.

"Dad...?"

The figure did not answer, only swayed slightly, as though waiting. Jessica's fingers clutched the wire fence so tightly that they split and bled. She wanted to scream, to run, to collapse. But the voice in her head was quicker.

There he is. Just beyond reach. He's been waiting. Do you think he survived for nothing? Go to him, Jessica. Go.

Tears blurred her vision. She wanted to believe. She needed to believe.

A hand gripped her shoulder—John's. His whisper was sharp, urgent.

"Jessica, what the hell are you doing? Step away from the fence."

She shook her head violently.

"I saw him, John. My dad. He's right there."

But when John looked, the mist was empty. Only the shifting of branches in the wind.

Jessica's knees buckled. Her voice cracked into a sob.

"I'm not crazy. I know what I saw. I know."

John didn't argue. He just pulled her back, holding her upright as she trembled. Yet even as he whispered for her to calm down, Jessica's eyes remained locked on the treeline, where she swore she still saw the silhouette.

And in that silence, a single thought pulsed inside her:

If he's out there, I'll find him. Even if no one believes me.

The next days passed in a blur. Jessica couldn't shake the image of the man in the mist. She stopped eating. She stopped sleeping. Every sound beyond the walls of VineVillage made her jerk awake, convinced it was him.

And then, one evening, it happened.

The guards shouted down from the watchtower: "Movement! East perimeter!"

Jessica's heart lurched. She sprinted before anyone could stop her, John cursing as he ran after her. They pushed through the gate just as a group of survivors stumbled into the clearing—dirty, half-starved, clothes torn by weeks on the road.

Among them was a man. Tall. Broad-shouldered. His beard had grown thick and gray, his face gaunt, but his eyes—those piercing hazel eyes—were unmistakable.

Jessica froze.

"Dad...?"

He stopped dead in his tracks. His face twitched, recognition flickering and then hardening into something else. A wall.

"Jessica," he said at last. His voice was deeper, rougher, but it cut through her like a knife.

She rushed forward, but he held out a hand. Not to embrace. To stop her.

"Don't," he muttered. "Not here. Not now."

Confusion tangled with relief and hurt.

"What—what do you mean? It's me. It's your daughter."

"I know who you are." His gaze darted to the guards, to John, to the nervous crowd that had gathered. His posture was rigid, military, a man who no longer moved with the ease of a father but with the precision of a commander.

"I told you I'd find you," Jessica whispered, tears streaming down her face.

Her father's jaw tightened.

"And I told myself I'd keep you alive. But this..." His hand gestured at the camp around them.

"This is weakness. You're not safe here."

John stepped in, frowning. "She is safe here. Safer than out there with whatever you've been running from."

Her father's eyes narrowed at him like a blade being drawn.

"You have no idea what's coming."

Jessica stared at him, searching for the man who once guided her across piano keys, who once kissed her forehead before school. But all she found was steel and shadow.

Her voice broke.

"Dad... what happened to you?"

He looked at her for a long, painful moment. Then:

"The world happened."



The reunion should have been a miracle. For days, the camp whispered about the stranger with Jessica's eyes, about the way she clung to him as if she were afraid he would vanish into mist. But to Jessica, the miracle tasted like ash.

Her father—Richard Hale—was alive. And yet, as she sat across from him in the dim firelight that evening, she felt like she was staring at a stranger wearing her father's face.

He didn't smile. He didn't ask about her childhood, or whether she had been safe, or how she had survived the long months alone. He only asked about the camp's defenses. How many guards? How many rifles? How much food?

Jessica tried to pull him back.

"Dad, it's me. I've missed you every single day. I thought you were dead—"

"I was," he cut in sharply, his gaze distant. "The man you knew... he didn't survive. Only the one who learned what it takes to keep breathing did."

His words chilled her more than the night wind.

John, sitting nearby, bristled. "She doesn't need speeches. She needs her father."

Richard's eyes snapped to him, and for the briefest instant, Jessica thought her father might attack. His stare was cold, assessing, like a wolf weighing prey.

"You think survival is kindness?" he asked. "You think it's comfort, or promises? No. It's vigilance. It's sacrifice. And if you're not willing to give everything, you don't deserve to live."

The words carved into Jessica like glass. She remembered the man who once held her hand on the way to school, who hummed lullabies under his breath while fixing the car. That man was gone.

Later, in the dark of her tent, Jessica sat awake, hugging her knees. She could still hear his voice outside, low and commanding, as he spoke with the guards. Some of them listened with sharp, hungry interest. Others looked uneasy.

A realization crept into her bones: her father wasn't just surviving. He was leading. And his way of leading wasn't about protection. It was about control.

Her stomach twisted. She wanted him back—her real father, the one who had taught her how to play the piano, who told her that courage was choosing love over fear. But as she drifted into a fitful sleep, only one thought haunted her:

What if that man never came back?

Morning broke over VineVillage in a haze of pale gold, the mist clinging stubbornly to the treetops. The settlement stirred slowly—families boiling water, children chasing each other with sticks, guards changing shifts on the wooden watchtowers. It should have felt safe. It should have felt like a sanctuary.

But Jessica could feel the shift in the air.

Her father was already awake, standing near the northern gate with two guards. He was pointing toward the barricades, his voice low but sharp. Jessica couldn't hear the words, but she saw the way the guards nodded, eager, almost obedient.

By midday, whispers spread like wildfire. Richard Hale thought the walls were weak. He thought the patrols were sloppy. He thought the leader of VineVillage, a woman named Marisol, was too cautious, too soft.

At the central firepit, Marisol addressed the community.

"We've survived this long by working together," she said, her voice steady. "Our defenses are enough. What we need now is unity, not fear."

Richard stepped forward from the crowd, his shadow cutting across the firelight.

"Unity without strength is just weakness dressed as hope," he said. His tone was quiet, but it carried, each word a stone dropping into still water. "I've seen what's out there. You haven't. Those creatures don't care about speeches or kindness. They only care about tearing down your gates and ripping you apart. And when they come—and they will come—you'll wish you had listened to me."

A ripple of unease passed through the crowd. Some people nodded. Others shifted uncomfortably.

Jessica's throat tightened. She wanted to step in, to tell them he wasn't the same man anymore, that he was dangerous. But the way they watched him—the way some leaned closer, as if drawn to his gravity—made her chest ache with dread.

Marisol held his gaze, calm but firm. "Fear is a weapon, Mr. Hale, but wielded too often, it turns against its master. VineVillage will not become a prison of paranoia."

Her father smiled faintly, but it wasn't the smile Jessica remembered. It was sharp, knowing, like a blade half-hidden in shadow.

"Then you've already lost," he whispered, just loud enough for the crowd to hear.

That night, the camp felt different. Jessica walked the narrow dirt paths, lanterns flickering on either side, and heard voices in hushed tones. Some people repeated Marisol's words. Others repeated her father's.

Two leaders. Two visions. And a fracture beginning to split VineVillage right down the middle.

Jessica lay awake long after midnight, listening to the muffled echoes of her father's voice outside—still talking, still convincing, still pulling people into his orbit.

The thought clawed at her mind: What if VineVillage wasn't strong enough to survive her father?

The days that followed were like walking across thin ice. Outwardly, VineVillage went on as usual—meals cooked, tools repaired, guards standing their shifts. But underneath, a murmur was spreading, a quiet current twisting through the camp.

Jessica began to notice the signs. Men and women who used to gather around Marisol now lingered near her father instead. At night, when most had gone to sleep, Richard's voice would carry through the air—low, steady, persuasive—drawing in a handful of listeners at a time.

She passed by once, unseen in the shadows. Her father was speaking to three men, their faces half-lit by the dim glow of a lantern.

"You think Marisol can keep you safe?" Richard asked, his tone sharp but calm. "She tells you the walls are strong. I've seen stronger walls crumble. She tells you the patrols are enough. I've seen patrols torn apart in minutes. I know what's coming. And if you want your families to live through it, you'll stand with me when the time comes."

The men exchanged glances, uneasy but not dismissive. One of them finally nodded. Richard clasped his shoulder, almost fatherly, and Jessica felt her stomach knot.

It wasn't just fear he offered—it was belonging. A sense of being part of something stronger, harder, more ruthless than the fragile hope Marisol clung to.

By the third night, Jessica overheard children whispering her father's words during a game, mimicking the growl in his voice. "Walls fall. Gates break. Only the strong survive." They laughed, but it chilled her blood.

Marisol noticed too. She didn't say it aloud, but Jessica saw the tightness in her jaw, the way she lingered longer at the firepit after speeches, as if listening for cracks in the crowd.

One evening, Jessica confronted her father directly.

"You're poisoning them," she said, her voice trembling but firm. "This isn't survival. It's... it's manipulation."

Richard looked at her the way one might look at a child who hadn't yet learned the rules of the world.

"Manipulation?" he repeated softly. "No, Jessica. This is truth. I am showing them the world as it is, not as they wish it to be."

His eyes, once warm, now glinted like steel.

"You'll understand soon. You're my daughter. You have my blood. You'll see things the way I do. Eventually."

Jessica's chest tightened as though the walls themselves were closing in. She wanted to scream at him, to shake him until the man she remembered—the father who used to carry her on his shoulders, who laughed at her clumsy jokes—returned. But he didn't return. He only turned back to his new followers, lowering his voice once again to that calm, magnetic rhythm that was steadily pulling VineVillage apart. And Jessica realized, with cold clarity, that her father wasn't just a survivor anymore. He was becoming a leader. A rival.

The shift began subtly, like the sound of dripping water behind a wall—too faint to notice until the structure started to rot.

VineVillage, once united by necessity, now carried two heartbeats. On one side: Marisol and her council, clinging to order, to rules, to the fragile balance that kept them alive. On the other: Richard, with his quiet certainty, his words sharp enough to pierce fear and turn it into loyalty. It started with food.

One morning, the kitchen reported that several sacks of grain had gone missing. Fingers pointed at the newcomers, the scavengers, even some of the guards. But Jessica knew. She had seen the same men who listened to her father carrying heavy bundles into the shadows two nights before.

Marisol kept her composure, but her eyes were knives.

"Rations are for everyone," she reminded the camp, her voice carrying through the courtyard. "Stealing from each other is the same as digging our own graves."

But Richard was there too, standing with his arms crossed, saying nothing. He didn't need to speak—the small smirk at the corner of his mouth said enough.

Later, Jessica overheard him with his followers.

"Why should we starve while she feeds mouths that can't fight? Children, the sick, the weak—what do they give back? Nothing. And yet we're told to risk our lives for them. Do you call that fair?"

The men nodded, their faces grim, hungry.

By evening, the tension thickened into something tangible. People avoided each other's eyes. Families ate in silence. A guard walked past Jessica muttering, "Walls won't protect us if the enemy's already inside."

Then came the shouting.

Two men clashed in the center of the camp, one accusing the other of hoarding, the other spitting back that he'd done what was necessary to survive. The scuffle turned into fists, then into a circle of bodies, until Marisol herself waded in, pulling them apart.

"Enough!" she roared. For a moment, her voice silenced the camp. But only for a moment.

From the back of the crowd, Richard spoke. Calm, measured, but cutting like glass.

"Marisol says 'enough.' But hunger doesn't stop. Fear doesn't stop. The dead don't stop. You want to keep pretending rules will save you? Then go ahead. But don't drag the rest of us into the grave with you."

Murmurs rippled through the people. Some turned to him, others to Marisol. The courtyard felt like a scale tipping back and forth, its balance growing more fragile by the second.

Jessica stood frozen, caught between two poles of gravity: her leader and her father. One demanded trust. The other demanded obedience. Both offered survival—but at a price.

And for the first time, she wondered if VineVillage's greatest threat wasn't outside the walls at all.

It was inside, beating in the chest of a man who once tucked her into bed at night.

# Chapter VII

The night after Richard's speech, VineVillage no longer breathed as one.

It pulsed in fragments—small knots of people whispering in corners, glances traded like currency, doors shut faster than usual.

Jessica noticed it immediately. The marketplace, once filled with low laughter and bartering, now carried only mutters. Neighbors eyed each other with suspicion. A single cough made people step back, their hands twitching near the knives on their belts.

At dawn, the first sign appeared.

A group of ten, led by a man named Silas, dragged their bedding out of the communal barracks and staked a claim near the southern wall. They set up their own fire, their own sentry rotation.

When asked why, Silas said only:

"We don't trust the council's rationing anymore."

Marisol ordered calm, telling the guards not to provoke them, but her jaw was tight, her fists hidden behind her back.

Richard, meanwhile, watched from the shadows, speaking to his followers with the patience of a man planting seeds.

"Walls divide, don't they?" Jessica overheard him whisper. "One wall between us and the dead.

Another between us and those who pretend to lead. Which one will fall first, I wonder?"

By evening, more families shifted their loyalty—subtly at first. A mother carrying her child sat by Richard's fire instead of the council's. Two hunters offered their latest catch to his group, bypassing the communal stores.

Marisol couldn't ignore it any longer. She called a meeting in the hall, summoning everyone.

Jessica sat among the crowd, her stomach twisting, as Marisol stood tall at the podium.

"We will not survive if we fracture. Discipline and unity are the only reasons this camp exists at all. I don't care who whispers what in the dark—we share what we have, or we all starve together."

A silence followed. Heavy. Expectant.

Then Richard stepped forward.

He didn't shout. He didn't sneer. His voice was calm, steady—terrifying in its restraint.

"And what if unity means death? What if her rules bind us tighter than the noose around our necks? You call it sharing. I call it wasting. I will not watch my people die to keep the weak comfortable."

Gasps rippled through the hall.

Marisol's hand trembled against the podium, but her eyes burned.

"Your people?" she repeated.

Richard smiled faintly.

"Yes."

The crack had widened into a canyon.

Jessica felt the ground shift beneath her, as if the entire camp had split in two while she sat frozen in the middle.

And for the first time, she wondered—not whether VineVillage could survive the dead outside, but whether it could survive the living inside.

Jessica woke to the sound of bells clanging through VineVillage. At first, she thought it was another attack—undead pressing against the outer walls. But when she stumbled outside, heart hammering, she saw flames clawing up into the night sky.

The storehouse.

The one place they could not afford to lose.

People ran in every direction, shouting for water, hauling buckets from the well. The fire roared like it had been waiting for this moment, greedy and merciless. The guards' torches scattered in the chaos, painting the scene in flashes of orange and shadow.

Jessica caught sight of Marisol at the front, directing lines of villagers, her face slick with sweat. She was shouting, "Keep it contained! Don't let it spread!"

Her voice carried command, but fear bled through the edges.

And then, in the glow of the fire, Jessica saw Richard.

He stood at the edge of the crowd, arms crossed, his followers behind him. He didn't lift a bucket. He didn't move. He only watched.

For a second their eyes met. Jessica felt her chest go cold. He wasn't smiling. He wasn't scowling. He looked patient. Calculating. As if the fire were simply another piece on the board he'd been arranging all along.

By dawn, the flames were beaten back. Half the stores were gone.

The village sat in stunned silence, smoke curling into the sky like a signal.

Marisol addressed the crowd, her voice hoarse.

"This was no accident. Someone set this fire."

Gasps rippled. Murmurs. Denials. Accusations. People turned on one another with wild eyes.

And then Silas—Richard's right hand—spoke.

"Maybe it wasn't sabotage. Maybe it was punishment. For poor leadership. For wasting our strength."

A hush fell over the camp. Even the children were silent.

Marisol's jaw clenched. She pointed at him, trembling with fury.

"You dare—?"

But Richard stepped forward, cutting her off.

"Enough. The people have seen what happens when you cling to weakness. The fire was a warning. VineVillage will not survive on empty promises. If you wish to follow Marisol to starvation, so be it. But those who value life will stand with me."

And then it happened.

A line was drawn. Half the camp moved toward Richard. Half stayed with Marisol.

Jessica stood frozen in the middle. The smoke stung her eyes, but it wasn't the fire making them water. It was the knowledge that the dead outside had finally succeeded without even breaching the walls. They had broken VineVillage apart from within.

Two nights after the fire, the village was quiet—too quiet. Jessica lay awake in her cot, staring at the beams overhead, when the first scream ripped through the darkness.

She was on her feet before she realized she'd moved, rushing outside with others spilling into the square. Torches flared. Shouts echoed. And then she saw it: two guards locked in combat, knives flashing in the firelight.

One bore Marisol's crest on his sleeve. The other, Richard's.

Blood hit the dirt before anyone could stop them. The man in Marisol's colors staggered back, clutching his throat, crimson spilling between his fingers. He collapsed without a sound. The village erupted.

"Traitors!" someone screamed.

"Justice!" another shouted.

The square became a storm of fists, blades, and rage. People who had once shared meals now turned on each other with feral desperation. Buckets and tools became weapons. The dead hadn't breached the walls—but VineVillage was tearing itself apart.

Jessica's lungs burned as she stumbled through the chaos. She searched for Marisol, for Ethan, for anyone familiar, but all she saw were twisted faces in the firelight.

And then she saw Richard.

He moved through the madness like a conductor through an orchestra, every motion deliberate, every word a spark.

"Stand your ground!" he roared. "Take what is ours!"

His followers surged forward with renewed fury. Marisol's people fell back, unprepared, uncoordinated. The fighting spilled toward the walls, toward the gates that had once stood as symbols of safety.

Jessica ducked behind a wagon, her breath ragged, her hands shaking. She'd seen blood before. She'd seen death before. But this—this was worse. This was people choosing to become monsters.

A hand grabbed her wrist. She nearly screamed—but it was Ethan. His face was pale, streaked with sweat and soot.

"Jess—we have to move. Now!"

She froze.

"Move? Where?"

"Out of the square. Away from them. If we stay, we'll be swallowed up in this."

For a heartbeat she wanted to argue. To scream at him that this was her home now, that leaving wasn't an option. But then another body hit the ground with a wet thud, and the decision was made for her.

The walls of VineVillage no longer kept danger out.

They only trapped it inside.

They ran.

Through alleys splattered with blood, past burning thatch and overturned carts, Jessica and Ethan pushed into the night. The sound of fighting trailed them like a living thing—steel clashing, voices breaking, the sickening crunch of bone.

John caught up at the rear, panting, his shotgun clutched tight against his chest.

"Keep moving!" he barked. "They're tearing each other apart back there!"

Jessica's legs burned, but fear gave her strength. The village walls loomed ahead, massive and dark. Once, they had meant safety. Now, they felt like a cage.

At the gate, two bodies slumped against the timbers—guards, throats slit. The gate itself hung half-open, the locking bar shattered. Jessica's breath caught. Whoever had done this... they had meant for the village to fall.

John shoved the gate aside. "Out. Now!"

They spilled onto the Ash Road, a dirt path winding between skeletal trees. The air smelled of smoke and iron. Jessica risked one look back. The fires within VineVillage cast long shadows across the fields, like the earth itself was bleeding.

"Jess," Ethan hissed, pointing to something on the ground.

She followed his gaze—and froze.

Half-buried in the mud lay a tarnished silver lighter. Ornate. Scratched from years of use. Her father's initials etched into the side.

Jessica knelt, her fingers trembling as she picked it up. The weight of it was unmistakable. The small hinge clicked as she opened and closed it, the sound sharp as a gunshot in the night.

Her throat tightened. "This was his..."

John frowned. "Who?"

"My father," Jessica whispered.

The three of them stood in silence, the chaos of VineVillage echoing faintly behind them.

Somewhere ahead, the road stretched into blackness, swallowing all certainty.

Ethan touched her shoulder. "If he left this here, then maybe..."

Jessica didn't let him finish. Her chest ached with equal parts hope and dread. If her father was alive, then why hadn't he come back for her? Why leave only a fragment of himself behind?

She slipped the lighter into her pocket, her pulse hammering. "We find him," she said, her voice steadier than she felt. "No matter what's out there."

The night closed in around them as they walked. Somewhere, far off in the woods, something screamed—a sound too broken to be human, too human to be anything else.

The Ash Road awaited.

The Ash Road narrowed as the three of them pressed deeper into the woods. The skeletal trees leaned inward, their bare branches like claws scraping at the starless sky. Every step on the gravel sounded too loud, too final, as if the earth itself was warning them to turn back.

Jessica gripped the straps of her backpack so tightly her knuckles turned white. The silver lighter inside weighed more than stone. Each time it shifted against her side, her mind flickered back to her father—his hands flicking it open, his voice calling her kiddo, the smell of burnt tobacco that clung to his jacket.

Now the smell of smoke was everywhere. But it wasn't tobacco. It was flesh.

"Keep your eyes sharp," John muttered, sweeping the beam of his flashlight across the undergrowth. The pale light caught shards of broken glass, a shredded shoe, and something else—something half-buried in moss. A doll. Its porcelain face cracked, one eye missing.

Jessica forced her gaze away.

The woods breathed around them—windless, yet alive. Ethan walked closest to her, his fingers brushing against hers occasionally, not quite holding, not quite letting her go. "You alright?" he whispered.

"No," Jessica admitted, her voice thin.

They moved in silence for what felt like hours. Then, from somewhere ahead, a sound broke the monotony. A rhythmic scraping. Metal against stone.

John froze, raising his hand. "You hear that?"

The scraping grew louder, followed by a wet shuffle. Jessica's pulse spiked as she squinted into the dark.

At first she thought it was another infected, dragging its ruined body through the undergrowth. But then she saw it: a man, tall, gaunt, wearing a ragged coat. He dragged an axe along the gravel, the blade sparking when it struck stone. His face was hidden in shadow, his gait unsteady, almost drunken.

Jessica's breath hitched. Something about the way he moved—it wasn't mindless. There was deliberation in every step.

The man stopped. His head lifted. The beam of John's flashlight caught his eyes.

They were human. Bloodshot, hollowed by exhaustion, but still human.

"Stay back," John warned, lifting his shotgun.

The man's lips curled into something halfway between a grin and a grimace. His voice, when it came, was cracked but steady:

"You shouldn't be on this road."

Jessica's stomach dropped. That voice—gravelly, low, worn from years of shouting over machines and storms.

It was her father's voice.

The night was unnaturally still.

Not even the wind dared to move through the trees surrounding VineVillage. The silence pressed against Jessica's ears until it felt like the world itself was holding its breath.

That was when she saw him.

Her father.

Standing beyond the perimeter fence, beneath the pale glow of the moon. His posture was the same as it had always been—broad shoulders, head slightly bowed as if in thought. But his face was wrong. His skin was stretched thin, his eyes too dark, too hollow.

Jessica's knees weakened. She gripped the wooden post beside her, her breath caught in her throat.

"Dad..." The word slipped out, fragile, a child's plea.

His head tilted. Slowly. Deliberately. And then—he smiled. Not the warm, steady smile she remembered, but something fractured, stretched too wide, a shadow of humanity clinging to a broken mask.

Her heart thudded painfully. She wanted to run to him, to throw the gates open, to pretend none of this had ever happened. But her stomach twisted with dread. She knew—whatever stood there was not the man who had once carried her on his shoulders, who had kissed her goodnight.

John's voice snapped through the silence.

"Jessica. Step back."

She hadn't even realized he was beside her. His hand clamped down on her arm, pulling her away from the fence.

"No," she whispered, shaking her head. "It's him. It's my dad."

John's eyes hardened. "That's not your father anymore."

But the creature spoke.

"Jessica."

Her entire body froze. The voice was rough, guttural, like stones grinding together. And yet—it was his. A sound she had memorized since childhood, broken but unmistakable.

"I found you."

Tears blurred her vision. Against every instinct, she took a step forward.

The guards shouted, raising weapons. John shoved her back. "Don't. He's infected."

Jessica's nails dug into her palms. Her father's gaze locked onto hers, burning with something she couldn't name—hunger, grief, love, or all twisted together into a single unbearable expression.

"I came... for you."

Her throat constricted. The air around her seemed to vanish, leaving her suspended in a void where only his voice existed.

And then he lunged at the fence.

The guards fired. Gunfire tore the night apart. Jessica screamed.

When the smoke cleared, her father was on his knees, his body riddled with holes, swaying like a dying flame.



But still—still—his eyes never left hers.

With the last ragged breath that scraped from his chest, he whispered one final word:

“Run.”

And then he fell.

Jessica collapsed, her cries muffled against her hands as the world tilted and cracked apart around her.

The air in VineVillage felt poisoned after that night.

No one spoke of it openly, but everyone had seen. Everyone had heard Jessica’s scream, the way she had tried to run toward the creature that once had been her father.

Whispers followed her wherever she walked.

“She’s connected to them.”

“She almost let him in.”

“She’s dangerous.”

She felt the eyes on her like blades at her back, like unseen hands shoving her toward exile.

Even the children she had once smiled at pulled away, their mothers clutching them close.

John tried to shield her from the murmurs, stepping in when voices grew too loud, but even his presence couldn’t erase the suspicion festering in the camp.

At night, Jessica lay awake, replaying the moment again and again. The way his hollow eyes had found hers. The word he had spoken—Run.

What had he meant?

Run from VineVillage?

Run from the plague itself?

Or run from something deeper, darker, that even he could not name?

Her dreams gave no answers. Only shadows, echoing gunfire, and her father’s collapsing body.

The defenses of VineVillage grew stricter in the following days. Guard rotations doubled. Walls were reinforced. But beneath the surface, a quiet fear gnawed at everyone: the infected had found them, and they would come again.

Jessica noticed things others seemed too frightened to see.

The fences rattled at night when no wind blew.

Figures moved in the tree line, just beyond torchlight.

Sometimes, she thought she heard her name whispered on the breeze, in her father’s broken voice.

And in the heart of the camp, cracks began to form—not in the walls of wood and stone, but in the fragile trust that bound the survivors together.

The elders argued in hushed tones about whether to move the camp deeper into the mountains. The younger fighters whispered of abandoning the weak and fleeing altogether.

Fear splintered loyalty, and suspicion turned toward Jessica like a compass needle locked on north.

One evening, as she carried water from the well, a stone struck the ground near her feet. She looked up. A boy stood a few paces away, no older than twelve, his face twisted with a mixture of fear and hatred.

“You should’ve gone with him,” he spat.

More stones followed, thrown by trembling hands, until John appeared, scattering the children with a glare.

Jessica stood frozen, water spilling from the bucket, her heart breaking quietly inside her chest. She understood then: she was not safe here. Not truly.

And if the infected were coming, as her father’s final word suggested—then VineVillage was not safe either.

Jessica waited until the campfire embers had dimmed into a dull orange glow and the guards' voices faded into tired murmurs. VineVillage was wrapped in uneasy sleep. Her hands shook as she packed—just the barest essentials: a canteen, a knife, a scrap of bread wrapped in cloth, the battered flashlight John had once given her. Each item felt heavier than stone.

She moved like a shadow through the narrow paths of the camp, her heart thundering in her chest. The wooden watchtower loomed ahead. Two guards sat slumped, muttering half-awake, their rifles resting across their knees. She crouched low, slipping behind a stack of crates, and waited.

Every second stretched unbearably, but when their conversation lulled into silence, Jessica ran—quiet and fast—toward the fence.

The gate was locked. She knew it would be. Her father's voice echoed in her mind: Run.

She climbed instead. Fingers clawing at rough wood, palms scraped raw. Her breath came in ragged gasps as she dragged herself up and over, dangling for a moment above the torchlight. Then she dropped, landing hard on the other side. Pain shot up her ankle, but she bit down on it, forcing herself to stand.

The forest swallowed her whole.

Behind her, the muffled noises of the camp faded until there was nothing but wind in the trees and her own trembling breath. She was alone again.

But it was different this time. Before, she had longed for people, for safety, for walls to protect her. Now, she knew the walls had turned into cages, and the people into judges.

Her loneliness carried no illusions.

Hours passed. Branches clawed at her skin as she stumbled deeper into the woods.

Somewhere in the darkness, distant howls rose—whether human or not, she couldn't tell. She gripped the knife tighter, whispering under her breath:

"Just keep moving. Don't stop."

At dawn, the horizon bled gray light. Jessica collapsed against the trunk of a dead tree, exhaustion finally overtaking her. She stared at the empty world stretching before her: endless forest, shadows crawling with things unseen.

She was free.

She was alive.

And she had never felt more uncertain of what either meant.

For the first time since her father's voice reached her through the gunfire, Jessica whispered her own answer:

"I'm running... but where?"

The forest gave no reply. Only silence.

The days bled together.

Jessica wandered through the wilderness, her body shrinking, her thoughts unraveling. Hunger gnawed at her like teeth. Her lips cracked, her skin bruised, and her eyes hollowed until the mirror of her reflection in stagnant water frightened even herself.

The silence was worse than the hunger. It pressed down on her chest, whispering doubts, spinning illusions. Sometimes she swore she heard footsteps trailing behind her, the crunch of leaves too synchronized with her own. She would whirl around—knife raised—only to face empty trees.

Other times, voices. Familiar ones.

Her father, calling softly, "Jessica, don't stop now..."

Her mother, humming a lullaby she barely remembered.

John. Ethan. Names that drifted through her ears like ghosts.

At night she dreamed of VineVillage, of fires burning, of faces turning monstrous, of her father standing at the gate with eyes that were no longer human, reaching out to her with bloodstained hands.

Sleep became her enemy. Waking was worse.

One morning—though the sky was too clouded to tell if it was morning or dusk—Jessica stumbled upon a ruined cabin. The roof sagged, the windows shattered, but it promised shelter. She crawled inside, the floorboards groaning under her weight.

She collapsed in a corner, pressing her back to the cold wall, the knife slipping from her hand. Her breaths came shallow, broken.

The hallucinations thickened. She saw them—her family, standing before her. Whole, smiling, waiting for her at a dinner table laid out with warm bread and soup.

Tears burned her eyes.

She reached out a trembling hand.

"Mom... Dad... I'm so tired..."

Her vision blurred. Shadows grew longer, darker, until they consumed the cabin.

When the storm broke that night, the cabin roof gave way, rain pouring through shattered beams. By dawn, the building was silent again.

Inside, Jessica lay still. Her knife rested by her side, untouched. Her eyes remained half-open, staring at a ceiling she would never escape.

No one would find her.

No one would know the story of her last journey.

The world outside moved on—trees swaying, crows circling, the distant growl of the infected rolling through the mist.

Jessica's story ended as it had begun: in silence, in shadows, swallowed by a world that no longer cared.

Ashes in the wind.

**“WE MUST  
ACCEPT OUR  
FATE”**