

CHAPTER 11 — The Conditioned One

Jim didn't stop running until he and Bonnie had cleared the broken fence behind the airfield. The moon hung low and bright, flattening the world into silver and black. Bonnie finally slowed, bracing herself against a rusted signpost.

Jim turned back.

The trap adult had stopped at the runway's edge, staring into the darkness exactly the way Ethan would—still, patient, calculating.

Waiting for further instruction.

Bonnie's breathing came ragged and sharp.
Her voice trembled, but she fought to keep it steady.

"I—I thought he'd never get that far," she whispered.

Jim kept his eyes fixed on the runway.

"What exactly did he do to him?" he asked.

Bonnie swallowed hard.

"That adult was infected," she said quietly. "But not completely. Ethan caught him in the early stages. The regression slowed... but didn't finish."

Jim stiffened.

"So he's... half?"

"No," Bonnie said. "He's worse."

Jim turned to her.

"How?"

Bonnie gathered herself, then spoke:

"When the regression takes hold, the mind breaks apart in stages. Ethan found a window—just a few days long—where the adult mind fractures but doesn't dissolve."

Jim felt cold creep up his spine.

“He stabilized him there?”

Bonnie nodded.

“A shattered mind that can form habits... but not thoughts.”

Jim exhaled slowly.

“And Ethan trained him.”

“Conditioned him,” Bonnie corrected. “He repeated simple loops. Posture. Movement. Holding patterns. Directional cues. He didn’t need the man to understand—just to respond.”

Jim clenched his jaw.

“A human beacon.”

Bonnie’s eyes glinted.

“A human algorithm.”

Jim stared at the dark horizon.

“This changes things,” he said. “We’re not just dealing with Toddlers anymore.”

Bonnie nodded.

“He’s building a multi-tiered system. Toddlers for wandering behavior. Trained sentries for surveillance. And half-regressed adults for... coordination.”

Jim swore under his breath.

“And if he has one,” he said, “he could make more.”

Bonnie shook her head.

“He tried. I saw his notes. The partial-regression window is unpredictable. Most adults either fully regress... or die.”

Jim felt a heaviness settle.

“So that one is unique.”

Bonnie looked away.

“That one is... a prototype.”

The Decision

They continued moving until they reached a concrete storm shelter behind a maintenance yard. Bonnie slipped inside first, checking corners with a small flashlight.

Jim followed, sealing the door behind them.

The faint smell of dust and old batteries filled the space.

Bonnie sat with her back against the wall, knees pulled to her chest. Jim sat nearby, letting the silence settle.

Finally, she spoke.

“We have to accelerate everything.”

Jim nodded.

“It’ll be rough in the dark.”

“It won’t get easier in daylight,” she said. “Ethan’s training window is closing. Those sentries will be better tomorrow. And the trap adult... he’ll be moved closer.”

Jim rubbed his temples.

“So we adjust the timeline. First light?”

Bonnie shook her head.

“No. Before first light.”

Jim’s eyes widened.

“That soon?”

Bonnie leaned forward.

“If Ethan thinks we’re trying to escape by the runway, he’ll reinforce the west perimeter. But if we go before dawn, during his recalibration cycle—”

Jim frowned.

"Recalibration cycle?"

Bonnie nodded.

"Between the chime sequences. When he sleeps."

Jim raised his eyebrows.

"He sleeps?"

Bonnie smirked faintly.

"Everyone sleeps, Jim."

"It's news to me," he said. "He seems like a man who powers down, not sleeps."

Bonnie looked away.

"He used to sleep," she said softly. "When I knew him."

Jim paused.

She rarely spoke about those early days.

So he didn't push.

Instead, he asked:

"What did he used to be like?"

Bonnie closed her eyes for a moment.

"Brilliant," she said. "Methodical. Quiet. He talked about systems like other people talk about dreams. He said order was mercy. Predictability was kindness."

Jim leaned against the wall.

"And when the world fell apart, that belief stayed intact."

Bonnie shook her head.

"No," she said quietly. "It intensified."

She opened her eyes.

“And then it weaponized.”

Jim felt the weight of that.

“So we do this tonight,” he said.

She nodded once.

The Plane

As the shelter fell quiet again, Jim pulled the sectional map from his pack. He spread it across the dusty floor.

Bonnie leaned in beside him, watching carefully as he traced the shapes.

Jim pointed to the Cessna’s location.

“If we can get into the hangar behind this one, there might be tools.”

Bonnie nodded.

“Probably fuel cans too. Maybe some avionics spares.”

Jim continued.

“And we’ll need to bypass the starter. The battery in that 152 is probably dead.”

Bonnie smirked.

“Show me what a starter looks like. I’ll find one.”

Jim glanced at her.

“You really think we can do all this in one night?”

Bonnie looked straight at him.

“We have to.”

Jim leaned back, mind racing through old checklists:

- carb heat
- fuel shutoff
- mixture
- primer strokes
- master on
- magnetos
- clear prop

The old reflexes were waking up, one by one.

“I can get her running,” Jim said finally. “But we need at least thirty minutes at the plane. Minimum.”

Bonnie nodded.

“Then we create a diversion.”

Jim frowned.

“What kind of diversion?”

Bonnie looked toward the shelter door, then back to Jim.

“A big one,” she said.
“Something Ethan can’t ignore.”

Jim studied her expression.

“You have an idea.”

She nodded once.

“We sabotage his communication lanes. The chime emitters. The ones he uses to coordinate the sentries.”

Jim inhaled sharply.

“That’ll make him furious.”

Bonnie’s voice was steady.

“That’s exactly what we want. If he’s chasing us through the complex, he won’t be watching the runway.”

Jim nodded slowly.

“It’s risky.”

Bonnie met his eyes.

“So is staying alive.”

The tension between them hung heavy, taut as a wire.

Jim finally said:

“Okay. We do it.”

Bonnie exhaled in relief.

She reached out—hesitantly—and rested her hand on his forearm.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“For choosing to fight.”

Jim placed his hand gently over hers.

“We’re in this together now,” he said.

She nodded—slowly, but with certainty.

As the night deepened, and the world outside grew dangerously quiet, Bonnie whispered the final words of their plan:

“At first light... the system falls.”

Jim nodded.

“And then we fly.”

END OF CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 12 — Breaking the Lattice

The sky was still black when Jim and Bonnie left the storm shelter.

A thin mist rolled across the ground, hugging the grass and pavement like a low tide.

It softened sound.

Blurred movement.
Hid tracks.

Perfect conditions.

Bonnie tightened the straps on her pack.
Jim checked the battery on his PAPR, then his gloves, then the radio Bonnie had repaired.

"We don't get a second chance," Bonnie whispered.
"If he catches us inside the lattice, he'll collapse the corridors around us."

Jim nodded.
He understood.

The plan was simple in theory:

1. Disable Ethan's coordination chimes.
2. Force him into manual control.
3. Slip out of his territory while he chases the disturbance.
4. Reach the plane before dawn.
5. Fly.

But every step required precision.

And now, under the cold pre-dawn darkness, the weight of their decision pressed down on both of them.

"Ready?" Jim asked.

Bonnie gave a small nod.

"Let's break the system."

Into the Lattice

They moved quickly through the shadowed alleys between buildings, following Bonnie's knowledge of Ethan's least-used paths.
At this hour, Toddlers slept in piles or wandered in half-dreams, their low voices humming like distant insects.

Bonnie held up her hand.

"Stop."

Jim froze.

Ahead, a trained Toddler sentinel stood perfectly still, facing an empty loading bay.

Red-coded vest.

High-alert category.

“He shouldn’t be here at night,” Bonnie whispered.

“He’s early.”

Jim swallowed.

“Meaning what?”

Bonnie’s eyes tightened.

“Meaning Ethan is already awake.”

Jim felt a cold ripple pass through him.

They circled wide, stepping only on the damp grass to avoid sound. When they were far enough away, Bonnie pointed at a narrow ladder leading to a low roof.

“That’s our first target. One of the chime nodes.”

Jim followed her up the ladder silently. The rooftop was coated with dew and rust, each step careful and controlled.

At the far corner stood a cylindrical device the size of a thermos.

The chime emitter.

The pulse generator.

The thing that turned the Toddlers into a coordinated net.

Bonnie crouched beside it.

“This one triggers lane awareness. If we cut it, they lose directional cohesion.”

Jim lifted his multitool.

“Tell me what to hit.”

Bonnie guided his hand.

“Here. And here. Sever the loop.”

He sliced the wires cleanly.

The device went silent.

Bonnie exhaled.

“One down.”

The silence that followed wasn’t peace.

It was wrong.

Heavy.

Expectant.

Jim looked at Bonnie.

“Did he feel that?”

She didn’t answer.

Which meant yes.

The Second Node

They made their way to a second rooftop—this one above an old HVAC control building.

Bonnie stopped halfway up the ladder.

“Jim,” she whispered. “Look.”

He followed her gaze.

Ethan stood at the far end of the yard.

Hands in pockets.

Body still.

Head tilted slightly upward as if listening to a faint vibration in the air.

“The first chime is offline,” Jim whispered.

Bonnie nodded.

“He’s confirming.”

Ethan turned slowly.

Not toward the node.
Toward them.

He was too far to see their faces.
But he didn't need to.

He had mapped their tendencies.
Their angles.
Their pathways.

"Move," Bonnie hissed. "Now!"

Jim scampered up the ladder. Bonnie followed.
The second emitter sat on the roof, pulsing faintly.

Jim reached for it—

But this one was different.

He traced the wires.

"This is tied into a feedback loop," he whispered. "If we cut it too fast—"

Bonnie finished for him.

"It'll broadcast a spike."

"And wake them," Jim said.

Both looked over the edge.

Three Toddlers in yellow vests stood below.
Swaying.
Listening.

Bonnie mouthed:
Slow.

Jim nodded, hands steady, breath controlled.
He clipped one wire.
Then paused.
Clipped the second.

The pulse died.

The Toddlers didn't move.

Bonnie exhaled shakily.

Then Ethan's voice echoed across the yard:

"You're accelerating the collapse."

Jim's stomach dropped.

How close was he?

Bonnie grabbed Jim's arm.

"Roof three. Now."

The Third and Final Node

This one was the most dangerous:
above the electrical conduit hall.
Center of Ethan's monitoring grid.

As they climbed, Bonnie whispered:

"He'll defend this one. He has to."

Jim nodded.

They reached the top.

The final chime node glowed faintly, sending small rhythmic pulses into the metal beneath.

Jim knelt.

Bonnie stood watch.

"Can you disable it?" she asked.

"I can," Jim said. "But once I do—"

Bonnie finished:

“—the system collapses.”

Jim clipped the first wire.

Bonnie stiffened.

Footsteps.

Jim clipped the second.

Shadows stirred.

Jim clipped the third—

The emitter fell silent.

And the entire lattice groaned as if the world itself exhaled.

Bonnie’s voice was barely a whisper.

“He knows.”

Jim stood.

They both turned.

And Ethan Cole emerged from the smoke vents on the far roof.

Not running.

Not rushing.

Walking.

Controlled.

Measured.

Terrifyingly calm.

“Bonnie,” he said.

Disappointment in his voice.

“After everything we built.”

Bonnie stepped in front of Jim, breathing hard.

"I didn't build your system," she said. "I escaped it."

Ethan tilted his head.

"And you brought him."

Jim lifted a tool instinctively, though it was useless against a man like Ethan.

Ethan noticed the gesture.

"Still clinging to improvisation," Ethan said quietly.

"You're mistaking chaos for freedom."

Bonnie clenched her fists.

"You're mistaking control for survival."

Ethan stepped closer.

"When the world fell apart, I kept my mind," he said. "When millions regressed, I preserved function. When cities collapsed, I built order. And you two—"

He motioned at the darkened nodes.

"—think you can outrun inevitability."

Jim's pulse hammered, but he held his ground.

"We don't need to outrun inevitability," Jim said. "Just you."

Ethan stopped.

Silence stretched—thick and dangerous.

Then:

"You won't make it to the airfield."

Bonnie stiffened.

"You don't know where we're going."

"Yes," Ethan said. "I do."

Jim froze.

Ethan's voice was almost gentle.

"You think you're unpredictable, Jim.
But you still follow arcs."

He pointed toward the north.

"Your pilot training.
Your need for altitude.
Your instinct for escape routes.
Your avoidance of straight paths.
I mapped all of it."

Jim felt ice in his veins.

Ethan continued calmly:

"The moment you looked at the sky, I knew."

Bonnie grabbed Jim's arm.

"We move now," she whispered.

Ethan stepped forward—

"Run," Bonnie hissed.

They sprinted toward the fire escape ladder.
Ethan lunged—not to grab them, but to reach a small transmitter clipped to his belt.

He pressed it.

And three loud, sharp CHIMES thundered across the campus—

BOOM—BOOM—BOOM

Bonnie gasped.

"No—he's overriding the collapse!"

Jim didn't understand—but he ran.

Behind them, dozens of Toddlers across the complex jerked awake, their bodies stiffening as Ethan's emergency override pulsed through their conditioned reflexes.

Bonnie shouted:

"He's bringing the entire network down on us!"

Jim leapt from the ladder, hitting the ground hard.
Bonnie landed beside him.

They ran.

The Toddlers converged.
Dozens.
Maybe more.

Not violent—
but forming lines.
Walls.
Lanes.

Pushing them.
Herding them.
Corralling them.

Toward a single point.

The place Ethan wanted them:

A dead end near the old diesel plant.

Bonnie screamed:

"LEFT!"

Jim slammed into her, shoving both of them through a narrow gap between pipes as the Toddlers closed the path behind them.

Ethan's voice echoed:

"You can't escape the system."

Bonnie grabbed Jim's hand.

“Then we don’t escape the system,” she panted.

“We escape the map.”

Jim blinked.

And understood.

They weren’t going back through the corridors.

They were going out.

Through the unpatterned land.

Through the wild terrain beyond the complex.

Toward the hill.

Toward the airport.

Toward the plane.

Bonnie pulled him.

“Jim.

Now.”

And they ran into the dark.

END OF CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 13 — PART I

The Boundary of Maps

The mist thickened as Jim and Bonnie left the last structured corridor of Ethan’s territory. The sound of the override chimes still reverberated faintly behind them—metallic echoes bouncing through the sleeping buildings like the heartbeat of a collapsing machine.

They had crossed into a place Ethan did not groom.

Did not measure.

Did not predict.

Here the ground was uneven, overgrown, scattered with twisted rebar and half-swallowed vehicles. Without painted lanes and auditory cues, the Toddlers rarely ventured this far.

Jim slowed.

"We're out of his lattice," he whispered.

Bonnie didn't answer at first.

She scanned the darkness, breath quick, hands tense.

"He'll send the trap adult next," she said quietly.

"That's his cleaner. His retrieval unit. He only uses it when the map breaks."

Jim swallowed.

"Then we stay unpredictable."

Bonnie gave a faint, humorless smile.

"You do that naturally."

Jim scanned the rising hill to their north—the silhouette of the airfield just visible beyond it.

"We make for the crest," he said. "From there, a straight shot to the runway."

Bonnie hesitated.

"Straight shots are predictable."

Jim nodded.

"So we break into zig-zags at the base. Change elevation. Vary pace. Keep low near the drainage berm."

Bonnie whispered:

"You're already thinking like a pilot."

Jim allowed himself the smallest, slightest smile.

But it faded as a faint metallic clink echoed through the brush to their right.

Bonnie stiffened.

"That's not Ethan," she whispered. "That's him."

“The trap adult?”

Bonnie nodded once.

Jim motioned silently, leading her up the slope, taking an indirect diagonal route through broken concrete and collapsed fencing.

They didn’t speak.

They didn’t breathe loudly.

They didn’t look back.

Until the sound came again:

Clink.

Clink.

Clink.

A steady rhythm.

A conditioned rhythm.

It was following.

Crossing the Wild Ground

The ground turned treacherous—roots lifting panels of asphalt like tombstones, vines twisting around old pipes, puddles reflecting the moon in broken fragments.

Jim lifted a hand.

“Here,” he whispered. “Use the shadows near those old fuel tanks.”

Bonnie slid beside him, blending perfectly into the darkness.

“How much farther?” she breathed.

“Not far,” Jim whispered. “Five hundred meters.”

Clink.

Closer now.

Bonnie’s eyes widened.

“He’s accelerating.”

Jim clenched his fists.

“Can it track outside the lattice?”

Bonnie shook her head.

“No. But it can follow noises. And disturbances. And scent.”

Jim froze.

“Scent?”

Bonnie nodded.

“He’s not fully regressed. His senses are sharper than the Toddlers. Ethan... tuned him.”

Jim wiped sweat from the inside of the PAPR hood.

“We need to mask our trail.”

Bonnie scanned the terrain.

“There,” she said, pointing to a low drainage channel. “Water flow will blur scent. And noise.”

Jim nodded.

They dropped into the shallow channel, moving fast as water splashed lightly around their boots. The cold seeped through their clothing, but the sound was soft and swallowed by the mist.

The runway lights were now visible—small, dead bulbs on tall poles, silent sentinels of a world long gone.

“We’re close,” Bonnie whispered.

Jim nodded.

Then froze.

Because above them, framed against the sky, a tall silhouette stepped into view.

At the top of the hill.

Still.

Silent.

Watching.

Bonnie grabbed Jim's arm.

"Oh god... he got ahead of us."

Jim's pulse slammed in his chest.

"How—?"

Bonnie's voice was small.

"He doesn't need the lattice. He learned us."

The trap adult tilted its head.

Then began to descend the hill.

Deliberate.

Measured.

Purposeful.

Bonnie shook.

"He's blocking the runway."

Jim scanned left desperately.

"There—old trucks. We break around him."

They crawled up the channel wall, moving behind the rusted skeleton of a loader. The trap adult shifted direction—matching them.

Bonnie's breath hitched.

"He's anticipating us."

Jim took her hand—firm, steady.

"Then we stop being predictable."

He pointed to the broken rubble slope to their left.

“A pilot trick,” he whispered.

“Gain altitude where no one expects you to.”

Bonnie followed.

They scrambled up the rubble, rocks sliding beneath their feet. The trap adult adjusted—slower this time, confused by the new angle.

Bonnie whispered:

“It’s working—he’s not mapped for vertical changes.”

Jim pulled her higher.

“Keep climbing.”

Near the crest, Jim looked back.

The trap adult stumbled once.

Twice.

Then reoriented.

And began the climb.

Faster.

Bonnie gasped.

“Jim—he’s mimicking us.”

Jim’s stomach dropped.

This wasn’t just a trained lure.

This was a learning algorithm.

In human form.

Ethan’s prototype evolving in real time.

Jim gripped Bonnie’s wrist.

“Don’t slow. Don’t speak. Move.”

They reached the top of the rubble pile.

And there—spread before them—
like a dream carved from the bones of the world—
lay the airfield.

Runway cracked but straight.
Hangars silent and waiting.
The Cessna’s tail shimmering faintly in the moonlight.

Bonnie exhaled a breath she’d been holding for too long.

“We’re here,” she whispered.

Jim allowed himself one second of relief.

And then—

Clink.

Directly behind them.

They turned.

The trap adult had reached the crest.

Moonlight fell across his blank eyes.

His arm lifted.

Pointing.

Signaling.

Calling the others.

Bonnie’s voice was a broken whisper:

“He’s summoning Ethan.”

Jim stepped in front of her.

“No,” he said.

“We don’t give him the chance.”

He pulled Bonnie’s hand.

“Down the slope.

Now.

Full speed.”

Bonnie nodded, eyes fierce with terror and determination.

And together, they sprinted toward the runway—
toward the plane—
toward the last hope of the last adults.

Behind them:

Clink.

Clink.

Clink.

Growing louder.

As the trap adult followed.

END OF CHAPTER 13 — PART I

CHAPTER 13 — PART II

The Last Step Before Sky

The slope toward the airfield was steeper than it looked. Jim and Bonnie half-ran, half-slid down the loose gravel, boots skidding, arms windmilling for balance.

Behind them—

CLINK

CLINK

CLINK

The trap adult descended with eerie control, its movements smooth and repetitive, like a machine learning a new terrain with every step.

“Faster!” Bonnie gasped.

Jim didn’t respond. He pulled her forward, momentum carrying them across the last stretch of broken concrete until their feet hit flat ground.

The runway.

It stretched out before them like a lifeline.

The small Cessna—tail number N568E—sat at the far end of the tarmac, half-hidden under a collapsed shade canopy.

Jim felt his pilot instincts snap into focus.

“Straight shot,” he whispered.

“No zig-zags. We need speed.”

Bonnie nodded, breath heaving.

They sprinted across the cracked pavement, their shadows long in the moonlight.

Behind them, the trap adult reached the runway edge and paused—eyes following, head tilting as if recalculating.

Then it broke into a jog.

Bonnie’s voice trembled.

“He’s adapting too fast—”

“Don’t look back,” Jim said. “Just run.”

The cold air whipped across their faces as they closed the distance to the Cessna. Jim ducked under the torn canopy, yanking open the cabin door. It resisted, then screeched upward on old hinges.

“Inside!” he ordered.

Bonnie crawled in, sliding into the right seat.

Jim vaulted in after her, heart pounding, breath ragged.

The cockpit smelled like dust and old vinyl.

He checked the panel by instinct:

Master switch dead

Radios useless

Mixture lever stiff

Fuel selector stuck between left and right

But the structure—
the bones of the plane—
were still intact.

Bonnie clutched his arm.

“Jim—”

He didn’t look.

“I know,” he said.

“We’re not airborne tonight.”

Her eyes widened in terror.

“Then why—why are we—”

Jim leaned close.

“We use the cabin as a shield. Keep low. Wait for a break. Then we move to the tool hangar behind this one.”

Bonnie swallowed hard.

Outside, the clink-clink-clink drew closer.

“He’s almost here,” she whispered.

Jim shut the cabin door as silently as he could.

The cockpit fell into darkness.

Only the faint moonlight through the cracked windshield illuminated their faces.

Bonnie pressed her back against the seat, shaking.

“Jim,” she whispered, “he won’t stop. He doesn’t get tired. He doesn’t question. He doesn’t—”

Jim placed a gloved hand over hers.

“We’ll find a way. This is just the first step.”

Bonnie tried to steady her breathing.

Outside—

A shadow passed the canopy.

The trap adult.

He moved directly toward the nose of the Cessna.

His hand pressed against the cowl.

Then he tilted his head...

And leaned close to the windshield.

His face appeared inches from Jim’s.

Blank eyes.

Slack mouth.

Cold breath fogging the glass.

Bonnie stifled a scream.

Jim held her tight.

The trap adult raised one hand—

And tapped the windshield with his finger.

Clink.

A signal.

A summons.

A coordinate.

Jim's blood ran cold.

He whispered:

"He's telling Ethan we're here."

Bonnie's heart pounded so loudly she thought Ethan could hear it through the glass.

Jim scanned the area outside.

No Toddlers yet.

No chimes.

No footsteps.

But something worse:

A faint blue glow in the distance.

A single LED strip flickering on one of Ethan's portable command units.

Bonnie's voice trembled.

"Jim... he's coming."

Jim grabbed her hand.

"Get ready to run."

Bonnie stared at him.

"Run where?"

Jim swallowed.

"There's another plane in the second hangar. If we can get to its tool kit—"

A sound cut him off.

Soft.

Sharp.

Distinct.

Footsteps on gravel.

Adult footsteps.

Measured.

Confident.

Inevitable.

Bonnie's voice cracked.

"No... no no—he's already here—how did he—"

Jim whispered:

"He followed the trap adult."

The footsteps grew louder.

Closer.

Stopping just outside the windshield.

Bonnie squeezed Jim's hand so hard his bones ached.

Silence.

Then Ethan Cole stepped into the moonlight.

His eyes locked directly onto the cockpit.

He saw them.

Both of them.

He raised one hand—
not as a threat,
but as a command.

The trap adult responded instantly, stepping back from the windshield and turning to stand at Ethan's right side.

Ethan looked calm.

Certain.

Unhurried.

He placed both hands behind his back and spoke in a quiet, crisp voice that drifted effortlessly through the still night air:

“Jim. Bonnie.”

They froze.

Ethan continued:

“You don’t understand what you’re running toward.”

He took a step closer.

“You won’t make it off the ground.”

Bonnie trembled.

Jim held her tighter.

Ethan’s voice softened.

“And you won’t leave this airfield.”

Jim felt something inside him twist—not fear, but resolve.

Ethan stepped right up to the nose of the plane, leaning close, eyes meeting Jim’s through the glass.

“Part of survival,” Ethan said softly, “is accepting the map you’re given.”

Jim whispered back, barely audible:

“And part of being human is breaking it.”

Ethan’s expression darkened.

Just slightly.

Then he reached into his pocket—

And pulled out a cylindrical object.

Bonnie inhaled sharply.

“Jim... what is that?”

Jim stared.

It was a portable chime module.

A handheld override.

With a range strong enough to summon every trained Toddler for a quarter mile.

Ethan lifted it.

Pressed his thumb against the trigger.

Jim braced himself.

Bonnie clutched his arm.

The trap adult stepped forward, ready to move.

And Ethan said:

“Part I ends now.”

He pressed the button.

BOOM

BOOM

BOOM

The override chimes exploded across the airfield, loud enough to rattle the Cessna's windows.

In the distance—

Shadows stirred.

Dozens of them.

Hundreds.

Lining up.

Turning.

Converging.

Bonnie's whisper broke into a sob:

"Jim... they're coming."

Jim pulled her close.

"I know."

Outside, Ethan backed away slowly, letting the system form around him.

The trap adult followed.

The chimes echoed like the heartbeat of a waking giant.

Jim whispered:

"Get ready."

Bonnie nodded against his shoulder.

The first wave of Toddlers reached the far fence.

Jim tightened his jaw.

"This is where Part I ends."

Bonnie swallowed hard.

"Then what happens now?"

Jim looked out the windshield, eyes blazing.

"Now," he whispered,

"we fight for the sky."

And the first line of Toddlers began spilling onto the runway—

as Ethan Cole watched,

calm,
quiet,
and certain.

END OF PART I — THE LAST ADULTS