

CHAPTER 9 — Lines of Escape

Morning came hazy and windless, the kind of light that made every shadow seem deeper. Jim suited up in the PAPR again—not just for safety, but for anonymity. Ethan tracked silhouettes, gaits, micro-patterns of movement. A hooded figure in a bulky suit was one of the few predictable shapes that wasn't predictable.

Bonnie waited outside the generator bunker, scanning the yard carefully before motioning him forward.

"We stick to the east corridor today," she whispered. "He rarely uses that section unless he's testing long-distance calls."

Jim nodded.

He'd barely slept.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Ethan's shadow sliding across the vent.

Bonnie started walking, careful to step in grass patches rather than dirt—minimizing track signatures. Jim followed her pattern, trusting her experience.

"We need access to a map," Jim said quietly as they moved. "Before we make a run for the airport."

Bonnie gave a humorless smile.

"You think Ethan destroyed any usable maps?"

Jim blinked.

"Why would he?"

"He doesn't like variables," she said. "Keeps the environmental knowledge limited. Makes human movement more measurable."

Jim exhaled.

"We'll need to build our own, then."

Bonnie paused and turned to him.

"No," she said. "You already have one."

Jim frowned.

"My head?" he asked.

Bonnie shook her head.

“Your pilot training.”

Jim froze.

Images flashed:

—runway markings

—wind vectors

—visual navigation

—emergency landing grids

—the aerial perspective of terrain

—the instinctive mapping pilots never unlearn

“I haven’t flown in years,” he whispered.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said. “Your brain still runs the old software.”

He swallowed hard.

She was right.

A Secured Stash

Bonnie guided him to an outbuilding he’d never noticed—a squat metal structure half-hidden by collapsed ducting. She crawled beneath a slanted support beam and beckoned him in.

“This is where I kept the flight manuals,” she said. “I didn’t understand half of it, but I knew it mattered.”

Jim crouched beside her, his suit scraping softly against the metal edge.

Inside the building, the air was cold and dry.

A lantern sat in a corner, next to a pile of papers carefully wrapped in plastic.

Bonnie motioned to them.

“I couldn’t decode the charts,” she said. “But I kept them. I knew someday the right person might come along.”

Jim unwrapped the top sheet and felt his heart lift.

A VFR sectional map.

Waterlogged but readable.

“That airport’s two clicks north,” he murmured. “Runway orientation looks good. Terrain is flat. Fuel might still be an issue, but—”

A metallic clunk echoed outside.

Bonnie stiffened instantly.

“Put the map down,” she whispered.

Jim obeyed.

She motioned for him to crawl back out the side they entered.

“Is it him?” Jim whispered.

Bonnie shook her head.

“No. Too heavy.”

A Toddler, then.
One of the trained ones.

Jim moved silently to the exit and peeked out.

A Toddler in a yellow-coded vest shuffled past the building.
He wasn’t wandering randomly.

He was scanning.

Bonnie leaned close.

“If he calls them closer, he’ll sweep this entire sector,” she whispered. “We need to leave through the southern pipe channel.”

Jim frowned.

“That’s tight. And muddy.”

Bonnie gave him a flat look.

“Better than getting funneled.”

She led him to a drainage pipe opening half-hidden by weeds. It slanted downward into a dark, narrow tunnel lined with water-stained concrete.

"After you," Bonnie whispered.

Jim slid in, twisting sideways to fit. The pipe was claustrophobic, damp, and smelled of rust.

But it was completely outside Ethan's grid.

No lines.

No chimes.

No signals.

Bonnie followed, feet brushing lightly behind him.

After several minutes they emerged into a overgrown culvert.

Jim took a breath.

"That was close."

Bonnie nodded.

"He's tightening his net. He doesn't trust you two together."

"Us two?"

Bonnie shrugged, pushing her hair back behind one ear.

"You break his patterns. I break his authority."

Jim felt a small, surprising warmth rise in his chest.

"We make a good team," he said.

Bonnie looked away for a moment, then back.

"You think we can do this?" she asked. "Get to the airport? Get something off the ground?"

Jim nodded.

"We won't just try," he said softly. "We'll succeed."

Bonnie gave a faint, tired smile—the first he'd seen.

But it faded quickly.

Because somewhere beyond the culvert, a sharp WHISTLE-CALL echoed across the yard.

Bonnie froze.

“That’s new,” she whispered.

Jim frowned.

“What does it mean?”

She swallowed.

“It means he’s moved past sentries.”

Jim’s blood went cold.

“How far past?”

Bonnie grabbed his arm.

“He’s coordinating them. In groups. Patterns that mimic adult tasks. He’s training them as a search unit.”

Jim’s pulse kicked.

“He’s coming for us.”

Bonnie nodded.

“Not just him,” she whispered.

“All of them.”

Jim stared into her terrified, determined eyes.

“Then we make our move now,” he said.

“Tonight.”

Bonnie nodded slowly.

Then her gaze softened in a way it hadn’t before.

“Tonight,” she echoed.

Ethan Speaks Again

As they slipped deeper into the culvert path, Ethan's voice carried faintly on the wind.

Not angry.
Not frantic.

Calm.
Measured.
Certain.

"Bonnie. Jim."

They froze.

"You're planning something."

Bonnie gripped Jim's sleeve so hard he felt her nails through the suit.

Ethan continued:

"I look forward to studying it."

Silence.

Bonnie whispered:

"We have to move faster."

Jim nodded.

"Then let's start the escape."

END OF CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10 — The Airfield Ghosts

The night was cold enough that the regressed adults—Toddlers—moved slower, drifting like pale shadows in the moonlight. The wind cut across the ruined campus, carrying gravel and dead leaves down the empty pavement.

Jim and Bonnie kept to the drainage tunnels until they emerged at the outer fence line of the CDC complex.

Bonnie pressed her ear to the chain link.

“Hear anything?” Jim whispered.

She shook her head.

“No chimes. No whistles. He’s not sweeping for us here.”

Jim breathed out—slow, controlled.

“That’s good.”

“No,” Bonnie said. “That’s bad.”

He frowned.

“Why?”

“Because if he’s not sweeping,” she whispered, “he’s stalking.”

Jim’s pulse jumped.

She met his eyes.

“He’s in hunting mode.”

The Edge of Ethan’s Territory

They followed the cracked asphalt service road north, toward the small rise that marked the boundary between the CDC complex and the municipal airfield.

The world beyond Ethan’s zones looked different:

fewer vests on Toddlers

fewer behavioral markers

no laid-down lane tape

no color-coded patches

It felt almost peaceful.

Almost.

Bonnie crouched behind a low concrete barrier at the hilltop and pointed.

“There.”

Jim followed her finger.

The municipal runway stretched into the darkness like a torn ribbon.

A few hangars remained intact.

A fuel truck lay overturned near the tarmac.

Jim’s breath caught.

He could almost smell jet fuel and hot tarmac from years ago.

He could remember the lessons:

—wind checks

—run-up procedures

—magneto tests

—short-field takeoffs

Bonnie kept scanning.

“See the tail number on that one?” she asked, pointing to a small Cessna near the hangar.

Jim squinted.

“N-five-six-eight-Echo,” he said automatically. “152 model. Older engine. Probably metal tanks. Might have rust in the lines.”

Bonnie raised an eyebrow.

“You remembered all that from squinting at a shadow?”

“Once a pilot,” he murmured.

She nodded slowly.

“It’s good,” she said. “We’ll need that.”

He glanced at her.

“We?”

Bonnie didn't blush.

Didn't look away.

Didn't waver.

“Yes,” she said simply. “We.”

Something in the Hangar

They slipped down the hill, keeping low among the overgrown brush.

Jim held the sectional map against his chest inside the suit pack.

Bonnie carried a scavenged flashlight.

They reached the chain-link fence surrounding the airfield.

A large panel near the bottom had already been cut away—years ago.

“Probably looters,” Bonnie whispered.

Jim nodded.

They slid under the fence and approached the first hangar.

Jim paused at the door.

“Do you hear that?” he whispered.

Bonnie frowned.

“Wind?”

“No,” Jim said. “Listen.”

A soft, rhythmic shuffling came from inside.

Not random.

Not drifting.

A pattern.

And behind it—a faint metallic tapping.

Bonnie's face went white.

"That's a marker tap."

"Ethan?" Jim whispered.

Bonnie shook her head.

"No. He never leaves the main zones for long. But he sends trained ones."

Jim swallowed hard and pushed the door open a crack.

Inside, illuminated by moonlight through broken windows, stood a Toddler in a green vest—different colors than the sentries.

This one held a metal pipe and tapped it lightly against the wall.

Tap-tap-tap.

Pause.

Tap.

Tap-tap.

A signal.

A trained signal.

Bonnie grabbed Jim's arm.

"We're not alone. Ethan's people—his system—is reaching out this far."

Jim scanned the hangar for threats.

"Can we slip past him?"

"No," Bonnie whispered. "His hearing is too attuned. Green vests are responders. He'll trigger a group behavior if he senses us."

Jim frowned.

"What kind of group behavior?"

Bonnie swallowed.

"A corralling response. They'll gather and push us back toward the complex. Right into Ethan's range."

Jim clenched his jaw.

“We go around the back then.”

Bonnie nodded.

They circled the hangar, keeping to the shadows, stepping only on soft ground to mask their tracks.

The air grew colder as they approached the far side of the airfield.

Jim spotted the small Cessna again.

It sat under a bent sunshade, its wings intact, tail undamaged.

“You could fly that?” Bonnie whispered.

Jim nodded slowly.

“If we can find parts. And fuel that hasn’t spoiled. Oil. And a battery—”

Bonnie squeezed his arm.

“Tell me what to look for. I can scavenge.”

Jim nodded.

“Tomorrow. In daylight. Today we just survey.”

She exhaled, relieved.

But then her expression shifted.

Her eyes widened.

“Jim,” she said softly. “Look.”

He followed her gaze.

Far across the runway, near the flight office tower, a silhouette stood.

Human.

Tall.

Still.

Watching them.

Ethan.

No.

It wasn't him.

Not quite.

The posture was wrong.

Too rigid.

Too straight.

But the figure slowly raised an arm.

To wave.

Bonnie's breath caught.

"That's not a Toddler," she whispered.

Jim shook his head.

"No. It's an adult."

Bonnie backed up a step.

"Who—? Who could—?"

Then her face drained of all color.

"Jim... he told me once..."

"Told you what?"

Bonnie swallowed hard.

"He said he had a second adult. Someone he kept in reserve. Someone who never escaped."

Jim stared across the runway.

The figure stood motionless, one arm extended, hand open.

Inviting.
Silent.
Emotionless.

Jim stepped forward instinctively.

Bonnie yanked him back sharply.

“No. Don’t go. That’s his trap adult.”

Jim froze.

His voice cracked.

“Trap adult?”

Bonnie’s eyes glistened with terror.

“He doesn’t need violence. He uses adults as lures. As proof. As bait. That one isn’t free. That one is conditioned. Trained to stand. To signal. To draw people in.”

Jim’s stomach dropped.

The figure turned slowly.

And its face came into the moonlight.

Eyes blank.
Emotion stripped.
Mouth slightly parted.

An adult mind, erased by the regression—but not wandering like the others.

This one had been shaped.

Defined.

Trained to obey.

Ethan’s voice drifted across the dark, carried by the open field like a whisper through a cathedral.

“Jim. Bonnie.
You’ve seen my newest refinement.”

Bonnie clutched Jim's sleeve.

"Run," she whispered.

"Run now."

The trap adult turned fully toward them.

And began to walk.

Not drift.

Not wander.

Walk.

Purposefully.

Predictably.

Toward them.

Jim grabbed Bonnie's hand without thinking.

They ran for the fence line.

And as they fled into the night, Ethan's voice followed them like a calm, inevitable storm:

"You won't escape the future I'm building.

But I encourage you to try."

END OF CHAPTER 10