

THE LOST JOURNAL – TLA

Chapter 1: The Door Above

Tom had rehearsed this moment a hundred times in the dark.
None of those rehearsals prepared him for the silence.

He turned the final crank slowly, listening for anything—air pressure changes, footsteps, voices, engines, wind—anything that would tell him the world he had known still existed. Instead, the old steel hatch groaned, pushed upward by six months of stale oxygen and fear.

Tom blinked hard.
The light stabbed his eyes.
The bunker's red emergency lanterns had been his only sunrise for half a year.

He climbed the narrow concrete steps, one gloved hand on the rail. The surface air hit him first—sharp, metallic, layered with the unmistakable scents of rot, dust, and something like burnt plastic. His stomach clenched reflexively.

TEOTWAWKI.
The end of the world as we know it.
He'd muttered the acronym like a joke when he first sealed the hatch.
Now it felt like a diagnosis.

He stepped out.

The world was still.

Not quiet—still.
Quiet meant a temporary pause, a breath, a lull between events.
Still meant nothing was coming next.

Grass grew tall and uneven up the collapsed driveway. Weeds split the old asphalt. The sky had a strange, washed-out clarity, as if the atmosphere had scrubbed itself too clean. He turned in a slow circle. No birds. No distant engines. No power lines humming. No jet trails. Not even the dull background hum of civilization.

It was as if the world had stopped making noise.

His boots crunched on gravel as he walked further from the hatch. A faint breeze carried the smell of old water—stagnant, trapped somewhere nearby. Tom's pulse quickened. People didn't leave water to stagnate. Not when the grid was alive.

He reached the tree line and paused.

A child's plastic tricycle lay overturned in the weeds, baking in the sun. The faded yellow frame had collected a thin film of grime. One wheel still spun lazily from the breeze.

Something in his chest tightened.

He kept walking.

The nearest house sat with its front door hanging half-open. A discarded grocery bag lay stiff on the porch, its contents liquefied into a black, congealed smear. Flies buzzed in lazy, intermittent patterns. Tom approached slowly, his hand gripping the handle of the pry bar he'd carried since sealing the bunker.

He pushed the door wider with his foot.

"Hello?"

His voice sounded small.

No answer.

The interior was dim, but the air smelled wrong—ripe, sweet, and fungal. A food pantry door hung open, cans scattered across the linoleum. A trail of dried footprints—bare, adult-sized—wandered across the room in looping, nonsensical arcs.

Tom stopped.

He recognized the pattern immediately.

He had read about it obsessively before retreating underground.

NRV-2027 didn't kill outright.

It unmade.

Adults drawn back to toddler minds.

Brains dissolved into curiosity without comprehension.

Walking, giggling, wandering until dehydration or infection finished the work.

He swallowed hard and stepped back out onto the porch.

"It really happened," he whispered.

The words felt heavy.

TEOTWAWKI wasn't a theory anymore. It was the landscape in front of him.

He moved down the street, checking each house from a distance. No movement. No voices. No signs of life beyond the scattered traces of chaos—half-opened drawers, overturned chairs, smears of food and filth. Every driveway told the same story: cars at odd angles, doors left open, personal items dropped mid-use.

It was the pattern of a world that had simply... fallen out of adulthood.

At the corner of the cul-de-sac, he saw something that made him stop.

A small figure sat on the curb, hunched over a metal mixing bowl, tapping it with a wooden spoon. The sound was rhythmic and gentle—tap... tap... tap. Tom's heart lurched. From a distance the figure looked like a child.

But the legs were too long.
The shoulders too broad.
The movements too clumsy.

An infected adult.

Tom ducked behind a mailbox, breath catching in his throat.

The figure kept tapping, absorbed in some private pattern, lost in the gentle percussion. No sense of danger. No awareness of being watched.

Tom stayed frozen until the figure eventually wandered away, dragging the bowl along the pavement with a scraping metallic whine that echoed down the dead street.

He exhaled slowly.

"Six months," he whispered.
"That's all it took."

The virus hadn't needed to kill.
It only needed to erase.

He gripped the strap of his pack, steadied himself, and moved on.
He needed water. Food. A safe place to sleep. And eventually—maybe, impossibly—another uninfected adult.

But the world looked like it had run out.

THE LOST JOURNAL – Chapter 2: The Mountain Holds Its Breath

The pot hissed softly over the camp stove, a thin ribbon of steam rising into the chilly morning air. Caroline crouched beside it, glancing between her notebook, a half-charged thermometer probe, and the battered smartphone lying faceup on a rock. No signal. Not even a flicker.

Mary sat nearby on a fallen log, hugging her knees. Her eyes were puffy from sleep or worry—maybe both. The sky above them was pale blue and perfectly empty.

Alexis emerged from the treeline, boots damp from the creek crossing. She carried a mesh sample bag packed with sediment jars, moss clumps, and a tangle of roots wrapped in cloth.

“North fork’s running low again,” she said, dropping the bag gently near the tent. “Lower flow than last week. If the hydrologists were right about the snowmelt patterns, something’s off upstream.”

“Well,” Caroline murmured, tapping her pencil against her notebook, “something’s off everywhere.”

She didn’t look up as she said it. The phone screen caught her attention—still blank, still no bars. She opened the cached emergency alert again, though she’d memorized it days ago:

CDC recommends immediate shelter-in-place.
Avoid close contact.
Symptoms include regression of cognitive...
The rest had cut off mid-sentence.

Mary pulled her jacket tighter. “It’s been three days since the last ping. Someone should’ve sent something by now. News, an update, anything.”

Alexis shook her head. “If the virus spread the way they said... Maybe there’s no one left to send an alert.”

Mary’s breath hitched, but she didn’t argue.

Caroline finally set her pencil down and rubbed her forehead. The three of them had come into the mountains for what was supposed to be a multi-disciplinary field cycle—a hybrid research project blending:

alpine water table sampling

fungal mapping along decaying root systems

microbial soil analysis around old-growth forest patches

atmospheric particulate measurements at elevation

It was part work, part adventure, part escape. A month away from campus noise. A month of crisp air and big skies.

They hadn’t planned on staying this long.

Caroline scrolled through her phone again even though she knew better. It held only fragments now:

an emergency broadcast from five days ago

a shaky video of a man sitting on a sidewalk making infantile noises

a news headline about airports shutting down

a text from Mary's sister saying "call me please"

another text that came in half-garbled minutes later

then... nothing

"We should go down," Mary said softly. "We can't just stay up here forever. People might need help."

Alexis dropped her pack with more force than she meant to. "And do what, Mary? Walk straight into a viral hot zone? Into whatever that regression thing is? You saw the video of those people in the hospital."

"Maybe it's not happening everywhere," Mary countered, her voice thin.

Caroline watched them both, silent.

They'd had this conversation before—three times yesterday, twice the day before. But it hung heavier now.

Alexis lowered her voice. "Mary... people with toddler minds in adult bodies can't survive long. Not without care, food, water, sanitation—none of which exist anymore. The cities will be dangerous. Not because of violence. Because of biology. Because everything will be... contaminated."

Mary covered her mouth with both hands.

Caroline finally spoke. "Look."

She held up her phone.

"Even if the networks crashed, emergency systems don't go down this fast. Not globally. Not unless the people running them are compromised."

She turned the phone toward them. The battery icon blinked red.

"Something happened out there. Something huge."

They fell silent as a gust of wind rippled through the trees, carrying with it the smell of pine sap and distant rain. The forest was alive and indifferent. You could almost believe the world beyond it still existed.

Alexis crouched beside the sample bag and unzipped it. "Until we know more, staying put is safer. Plenty of water in the creek. Rations will stretch if we're careful. And if we keep hiking higher, we'll get farther from anyone who might wander up here."

Mary hesitated. "Anyone infected, you mean."

Caroline looked toward the valley below. The sun glinted off something metallic far in the distance—maybe a roof, maybe a car abandoned on the old access road. She swallowed.

"The incubation period is short," she said. "Spread is fast. And those things we saw in the video... I don't think you come back from that."

Alexis poked at the campfire's ashes, checking for embers. "So we stay."

"Just for now," Caroline agreed.

"Until the world gets quieter."

Mary shivered. "What if it gets too quiet?"

Caroline didn't answer.

Alexis zipped up the sample bag. Caroline turned off the stove. Mary rubbed her hands together for warmth.

For a moment, they just listened—really listened—to the forest.

Wind.

Birds.

A distant waterfall.

All the sounds the world used to have.

But beneath it all, something else—a stillness so deep it felt like the mountain itself was holding its breath, waiting to see what humanity would do next.

And up here, the three of them had to make a choice:

Return to a collapsing world—or

stay in the last place untouched by it.

The choice came easier than any of them wanted to admit.

They stayed.

THE LOST JOURNAL – Chapter 3: The Stranger Below

They spotted the metal hatch by accident.

Alexis was the first to see it—a faint square of rusted steel half-hidden beneath pine needles on the slope above their camp. The three of them stood over it, staring, unsure whether to be terrified or relieved.

“It’s... a door,” Mary whispered.

“Or a trap,” Alexis countered, instinctively stepping between the hatch and the others.

Caroline knelt, brushing debris aside. A narrow seam circled the metal panel, just wide enough to be a pressure seal. Mounted to one edge was a heavy wheel-lock, the kind used on storm bunkers or old Cold War fallout shelters.

“This wasn’t made recently,” Caroline murmured.

Mary’s voice trembled. “Do you think someone’s down there?”

Alexis didn’t answer. Her fingers traced the metal. It was cold—far too cold for morning sun. The wheel-lock looked recently turned, its edges clean of rust.

Someone had opened it.
Not long ago.

Caroline leaned closer. “We need to be careful. If anyone is alive down there, they’ve been sealed away from the virus. They might be paranoid. Or desperate.”

Mary swallowed hard. “Or infected.”

“No,” Alexis said softly, almost to herself. “If someone were infected... they wouldn’t know how to operate a wheel-lock. They’d just wander off.”

They all knew she was right.

After a long silence, Caroline whispered, “Maybe they need help.”

Alexis exhaled through her nose. “Or maybe they have food. Water. A generator. Anything.”

Mary looked at the hatch again, hope flickering with fear. For weeks they’d been alone, improvising survival. This was the first sign—any sign—that someone else might still be thinking clearly.

Before they could make a decision, a voice drifted through the trees.

“You should step away from that.”

All three froze.

A man stood partially behind a fallen trunk twenty yards uphill, a battered pack slung over one shoulder, a pry bar in hand—not raised, but ready. His clothes were clean, too clean for someone living above ground. His hair was unevenly trimmed. His beard was short. His eyes were clear, sharp, cautious.

He looked nothing like the wandering regressed adults they feared.
He looked like someone who had survived on purpose.

Still, none of them moved.

“If you can understand me,” the man said carefully, “I need to know you’re not infected.”

Caroline lifted her hands slowly. “We aren’t. We’ve been in the mountains for weeks. Longer. We haven’t been around anyone since—since everything went silent.”

Mary nodded quickly. “We haven’t seen another person since the news stopped. We didn’t go back down.”

Alexis stayed tense, but she didn’t step forward. “We just found the hatch because it wasn’t covered well. If it’s yours, we’re sorry.”

The man studied them. Really studied them.

They weren’t trembling.

They weren’t smiling without cause.

They weren’t clapping or humming or tapping objects against trees.

Their clothes were dirty but organized.

Their packs were worn but functional.

And their eyes—alert, frightened, purposeful—were the eyes of adults whose minds hadn’t yet slipped.

Finally he lowered the pry bar.

"My name's Tom," he said. "And yes—that's my bunker."

Caroline stepped forward cautiously. "We're Caroline, Mary, and Alexis. We're doing environmental research. We didn't know anyone else was still thinking clearly."

Tom hesitated, weighing the risk, the fear, the loneliness of six months spent underground while the world above dissolved.

"When did you last have contact with anyone?" he asked.

Caroline answered. "Three... no, four weeks ago. A few broken signals. My last emergency alert is dated the 11th. After that... nothing."

"That fits," Tom murmured. "By then the regression was everywhere."

Mary looked at him with a strange mixture of awe and heartbreak. "Are you okay? Have you seen anyone else?"

Tom shook his head. "One. Just one. A man... tapping a bowl like it was a drum. Adult-sized. Child mind. He didn't even register I was there."

The three girls exchanged a silent, shuddering glance.

Then Tom added quietly, "I've looked for others. I haven't found anyone like you. Not yet."

Alexis's voice softened for the first time in days. "So what now?"

Tom looked at them—their gaunt faces, their patched packs, the dirt under their nails, the tension in their shoulders from weeks of survival bought only through fear and distance.

"I have food. Water. A generator. Clean air."
He paused. "And I can't stay underground forever."

Mary stepped forward. "We... we don't want to die out here."

Caroline added, her voice steady but pleading, "We know we're not immune. We know we're just... unexposed. We know none of us can outrun this forever. But if we stay on the surface, we won't even get a chance."

Tom nodded slowly. The truth was written in the dirt on their boots and the hunger in their eyes: they were holding on, but barely.

“You’re right,” he said. “No one is immune. Not me. Not you. Not anyone. But we might be able to keep each other alive a little longer.”

He walked past them to the hatch, turned the wheel-lock with practiced caution, and lifted the steel door.

Cool, filtered air drifted upward.

He looked at them again. “If you want, you can come inside. Just know that once we close this, I won’t open it again for a long time.”

The decision was instant.

Caroline packed her notebook.

Mary wiped her eyes.

Alexis tightened the straps on her pack.

Together, without speaking, they followed Tom into the bunker—the last refuge in a world running out of time.

THE LOST JOURNAL – Chapter 4: The Rules Below

The bunker door sealed shut with a hollow, metallic thud—a sound that felt too final to undo.

Caroline stood at the base of the short entry ladder, eyes adjusting to dim LED strips lining the ceiling. The air smelled filtered, dry, unnaturally clean. A generator hummed somewhere deeper inside, steady and constant, like a mechanical heartbeat.

Mary descended behind her, shoulders tight, breathing shallow.

Alexis followed last, stepping into the underground space with a wary sweep of her gaze.

Tom swung the hatch closed, spun the wheel-lock into place, and checked each bolt with practiced force. Only when the locks were tight did he turn around.

“Welcome to the last place on earth that still smells like bleach,” he said quietly.

He tried to smile, but the gesture never reached his eyes.

Life Underground (A)

The bunker wasn't large, but it was organized with a kind of obsessive care:

metal racks stacked with sealed food buckets

a water filtration column in the corner

airtight storage bins labeled in black marker

a small bathroom cubicle

a pair of cots already set up

and two rolled sleeping pads he unbuckled for the girls

Every surface was wiped clean.

Every corner was intentional.

Nothing smelled of mold, sweat, or fear—only disinfectant and metal.

"You'll get used to the hum," Tom said, gesturing toward the generator room. "It's loud on the first night, then you stop hearing it. If it ever stops, though—"

"We die?" Alexis finished.

Tom didn't soften it. "Pretty much."

Mary swallowed.

Caroline ran a hand lightly over the smooth wall. The bunker felt both safe and suffocating, like being inside a ribcage that wasn't theirs.

"We rotate lights on an 18-hour cycle," Tom continued. "Simulated day. Six hours dark for sleep. Food is rationed—non-negotiable. Water too. Every drop is accounted for."

He looked at them each in turn.

"Contamination is the only enemy now. And it's invisible."

Flashback: What They Escaped (B)

Later, as they settled on their sleeping pads, Tom prepared freeze-dried meals, rehydrating them in a tiny metal pot. The smell of something vaguely chicken-like filled the air.

Mary broke the silence first.

"We saw a woman on the road two months ago," she said quietly. "Or... something like a woman. She was sitting on the double yellow line. Playing with a piece of broken glass like it was a toy."

She hugged her knees.

"We turned around. I think that was the moment we decided not to go back down."

Caroline nodded. "There were sirens the next morning. A lot of them. Then nothing."

Alexis added, "The ranger station was empty. Doors wide open, screens ripped off. We figured people evacuated."

Tom shook his head. "Evacuation wouldn't look like that."

"So what happened?" Mary whispered.

Tom hesitated—not because he didn't know, but because he did.

"People lost the ability to care for themselves," he said. "Think about it. No one to cook. No one to lock doors. No one to clean up. No one to flush toilets. No one to shut off a stove." He paused. "Regression killed more people than the virus did."

Mary closed her eyes.

"You stayed up here because it was the only place left where the world hadn't fallen apart," Tom continued. "That was smart. Most people didn't have that option."

Caroline stared at her hands. "We're not immune. We know that."

"Good," Tom said softly. "Because immunity is a fairytale. Isolation is reality."

Tom's Rules (C)

After dinner, Tom gathered them near the center of the bunker. His tone shifted—less welcoming, more formal.

"Before we go any further, you need to understand the rules."

Alexis tensed. Mary sat up straighter. Caroline braced herself.

"Rule One: I open the outer hatch. No one else touches it. Ever."

Mary blinked. "Even in an emergency?"

Tom's voice hardened. "If you open that door without protocol, you die. And you take us with you."

Silence.

"Rule Two: Anything from outside stays in the airlock until it's decontaminated. Shoes, clothes, gear—everything."

Alexis nodded. "Makes sense."

"Rule Three: Daily cognition checks. Ten minutes each. Memory, logic, coordination. If anyone starts slipping..."

He waited until they met his eyes.

"...we isolate immediately. Before it becomes dangerous."

Mary's breath caught. "Dangerous?"

"If cognitive regression starts, you don't notice first," Tom said gently. "The people around you do."

Caroline looked at Mary, then Alexis. Both looked back at her. Three unspoken fears converged.

"Rule Four: No touching faces. No sharing cups. No physical contact after any of us goes topside."

Mary recoiled slightly. "Wait—you go outside?"

"Sometimes," Tom answered. "Short trips. Supply sweeps. Sensor checks. I prepare for days before going out, and disinfect for hours afterward."

Alexis frowned. "Why risk it at all?"

He gave her a tired, haunted look.

"Because the bunker only works until something breaks. And everything breaks eventually."

Something Above (D)

When lights dimmed for sleep, Caroline lay awake, staring at the faint red glow of the emergency strip above her head.

Tom paced quietly in the generator corridor, checking his panel of homemade sensors. Everything seemed calm. The surface microphones picked up only wind and rustling pine needles.

Then—

A faint tap echoed through the speaker.

Caroline sat up slowly.

Tom froze.

The sound came again:

Tap.

...pause...

Tap... tap.

Like someone knocking in confusion.

Or rhythm.

Or curiosity.

Mary stirred. "What is that?"

Tom turned the volume down so fast his knuckles whitened. "Nothing. It's nothing. Probably a branch in the wind."

But his voice betrayed him.

Alexis stood. "Branches don't knock."

Tom exhaled, long and low.

"They do if something's dragging them," he murmured.

Silence swallowed the bunker.

Caroline whispered, "Is someone out there?"

Tom didn't answer.

He didn't have to.

Because now they all heard it—

A soft scraping sound, right above them.

Something—or someone—moving around the surface hatch.

Something tapping lightly on the metal.

Then a muffled... giggle.

Mary clapped a hand over her own mouth.

Alexis went pale.

Caroline's heart pounded so hard she thought it might echo.

Tom stepped toward the ladder, one hand on the shotgun leaning by the wall.

"Lights stay low," he whispered. "Everyone stay quiet."

The sound scratched once more.

A sliding hand.

Fingernails trailing across steel.

Then silence.

Deep, complete silence.

Only the generator's steady hum remained.

Caroline looked at Tom. "What was that?"

Tom swallowed.

"One of them," he finally said.

"A fully regressed adult."

Mary trembled.

"Why did it come here?" she whispered.

Tom's face went hollow.

"I don't know," he said.

"But they don't wander randomly. Not anymore. Not this far. Not this high."

He looked at the ceiling.

"They followed something."

Caroline felt her stomach twist.

Alexis whispered the question:

“...Followed who?”

Tom didn't answer.

No one did.

THE LOST JOURNAL – Chapter 5: Cracks in the Seal

The next morning felt heavy before it even began.

The LED strips flickered into their simulated dawn cycle, but the bunker was still draped in the memory of the tapping from the night before. No one spoke at breakfast. Tom rehydrated more food than usual, but Mary barely touched hers, Alexis picked at hers, and Caroline forced herself to chew.

Tom watched them all with a quiet, calculating gaze—measuring their reactions, their hesitations, their micro-expressions.

Finally he set his fork down.

“We need to talk.”

Alexis shifted. “About the thing outside?”

“That,” Tom said, “and something else.”

1. The First Sign

Caroline noticed it first.

Mary kept rubbing the same spot on her sleeve, over and over in a small repetitive loop. The movement was absent, unfocused. Not fidgeting. Not nervousness.

It was... patterned.

“Mary?” Caroline said softly.

“Hm?” Mary blinked, pulling her hand away as if waking from a dream.

“You okay?” Alexis asked.

Mary smiled weakly. "Just tired. Didn't sleep much."

They exchanged glances. No one wanted to say the word.

Regression.

Tom leaned back. "This is why I do cognition checks. Early signs are subtle."

Mary tensed. "Stop looking at me like I'm sick. I'm just exhausted."

Caroline forced a calm tone. "We're all exhausted. That's why we check."

Tom stood and retrieved a small notebook from the shelf. "Mary, we'll do your assessment early today. Just to be safe."

"I'm not a child," Mary snapped.

"No," Tom said gently, "you're not. But the virus doesn't care."

Silence fell hard.

2. Tom's Story Begins to Surface

While Mary cooled off in her corner, Tom motioned Caroline and Alexis toward the small generator room. The air vibrated with the hum of machinery.

Tom closed the door halfway, leaving it cracked for safety.

"I need you two to understand something," he said. "I didn't build this bunker for a pandemic."

Caroline frowned. "Then for what?"

Tom ran a hand over the metal wall, eyes tightening. "My brother. He used to have... episodes. Severe ones. We thought he'd hurt himself one day. So I built a safe room. Soundproof. Reinforced. Locked from the outside."

Alexis stiffened. "You locked him in here?"

"No," Tom said quickly. "No. We only used it once. For a few hours. But the infrastructure was here. So when the first NRV alerts came, I upgraded it. Filters. Rations. Generators. Not for prepping. Not for the end of the world."

He paused.

"But by the third week, it *was* the end of the world. And I couldn't save him."

Caroline's breath stilled. "He regressed?"

Tom nodded once. Slowly.

“I found him stacking soup cans in the garage one morning,” he said. “Laughing. Like it was the funniest thing in the world. He didn’t recognize me.”

He swallowed hard.

“I didn’t know what else to do. So I sealed the bunker and never came back out for long.”

Alexis softened slightly. “We’re sorry.”

Tom shook his head. “I’m telling you because I’ve seen the signs. And you three need to tell me if you notice anything—anything—off about yourselves.”

Caroline nodded.

But her stomach sank.

3. The Return

The first tap happened at exactly noon.

Mary screamed and dropped her spoon. Alexis spun toward the hatch. Caroline felt her skin crawl.

Tom strode to the sensor panel and flicked the speaker volume up.

Through the static and ambient wind noise, a single rhythmic tap echoed through the bunker.

Tap... tap-tap... tap.

Then silence.

Then... giggling.

The same giggle from last night. High-pitched. Uncoordinated. A child’s sound forced through adult lungs.

Alexis whispered, “Why is it back?”

Tom’s jaw clenched. “Because it knows we’re here.”

Mary hugged herself tightly.

Caroline could hear her own pulse hammering.

“And,” Tom added quietly, “it brought something with it.”

A dragging noise scraped across the outer hatch—metal on metal. Something heavy. Something wet.

Mary gagged. “What is that?”

Tom didn’t answer.

He shut off the speaker.

4. The Emergency

The sound faded, but Mary didn’t calm. She paced in tight circles, breathing in uneven gasps.

“Mary,” Caroline said gently. “Sit down. Please.”

“I—I can’t,” Mary stammered. “I don’t feel right.”

Alexis moved toward her. “Tell us what’s wrong.”

Mary grabbed her own hair. “Noise... too much noise... everything’s too loud...”

Caroline stiffened. Sensory hypersensitivity was one of the earliest cognitive disruptions documented in NRV-2027 cases.

Tom stepped forward. “Mary, look at me.”

But Mary was shaking now—panic, fear, or something deeper.

“I need air,” she gasped. “I need to go outside—just for a second—”

Tom’s voice sharpened. “No one opens that door.”

Mary sobbed. “I can’t breathe!”

Alexis grabbed her shoulders. “Listen to me. This is anxiety, not infection—”

“How do you know?” Mary cried.

Caroline felt the room tilt. Mary wasn’t regressing. Not yet. But she was spiraling toward something dangerous.

Tom snapped into action.

“Isolation room,” he barked. “Now.”

“There’s an isolation room?” Alexis demanded.

Tom yanked open a small spare compartment lined with plastic sheeting. “Built it after my brother’s episode. She stays in here until she calms down.”

Mary backed away quickly. “No! Please—don’t lock me up!”

Caroline looked torn. “Tom... maybe we should try talking first—”

“There’s no time,” Tom said. “If she panics and touches the hatch or the intake vent—”

Mary’s breathing hitched into sobs.

Caroline stepped beside her, lowering her voice. “Mary... it’s not a punishment. It’s just a safe place. Just until you breathe again.”

Mary’s eyes overflowed.

But she didn’t fight as they guided her inside.

The door didn’t lock.

But it might as well have.

5. The Bunker Fails (E)

Two hours later, the air changed.

It started subtle—a faint warmth in the vents. Caroline noticed first. Alexis smelled it next.

“Tom?” Alexis called from the common area. “The air feels different.”

Tom rushed to the filtration unit, ripping open the access panel. Every muscle in his face tightened.

“No,” he whispered. “No no no—this can’t—”

Caroline ran up beside him. “What’s wrong?”

Tom pointed at the screen. “The HEPA prefilter is failing.”

“What does that mean?” Alexis demanded.

“It means,” Tom said grimly, “we’re not pulling in outside air efficiently anymore.”

Mary, still shaky but calmer, stood in the doorway of the isolation alcove. “Are we... safe?”

Tom didn’t answer immediately.

He turned a valve.
The machine groaned.
The generator surged.
The bunker lights flickered once—twice—

Then steadied.

Finally Tom faced them.

“The filtration system is on its last legs.”

Alexis stepped closer. “How long do we have?”

Tom inhaled through his teeth.

“A few days if the primary filter holds. If not...”

Caroline whispered the ending for him:

“...the outside air comes in.”

Tom nodded.

“And so does the virus.”

THE LOST JOURNAL – Chapter 6: The Quiet Outside

The bunker felt like a lung holding its breath.

Mary slept fitfully in the isolation alcove, her panic finally subdued. Alexis and Caroline sat near the filtration unit while Tom crouched inside the access panel, tools spread out like surgical instruments.

He had barely spoken since his grim announcement:

The primary filter was dying.
And the world outside was still lethal.

A faint vibration trembled through the bunker floor.

Alexis looked up. “Did you feel that?”

Caroline’s pulse jumped. “Please tell me it’s just the generator.”

Tom didn’t look up from the tools. “It isn’t.”

The vibration came again—
a dull, irregular thump.

Mary bolted upright, clutching her blanket.

“Not again,” she whispered.
“Please not again.”

1. The Return

Tom flicked on the surface audio feed. Static crackled, then—

Scrape... scrape... tap.

The same pattern as before, but weaker. Slower. Less deliberate.

Something dragged across the hatch, metal rasping like a shovel scraping asphalt. Then a labored exhalation. Wet. Hollow.

Caroline’s skin crawled.

“It’s back,” Alexis whispered.

“No,” Tom murmured. “It’s dying.”

They listened in horrified silence.

A heavy slump hit the ground.

A muffled cry—more reflex than voice.

Then a frantic scraping as something tried and failed to stand.

Mary squeezed her eyes shut. “Make it stop...”

Tom muted the feed, but the tension stayed.

Caroline forced her voice steady. “Why is it dying?”

Tom looked at the ground. “Regression strips a person’s instincts. They forget how to drink unless water is put in their hands. They forget to avoid cliffs. Forget what hunger feels like. Forget pain.” His voice thinned. “Eventually the body just... collapses.”

Alexis swallowed hard. “So it’s starving?”

“Starving, dehydrated, hypothermic,” Tom said. “Probably injured from falling. Maybe infections. Maybe just exhaustion. They can’t regulate anything after a certain point.”

The generator hummed on.
The girls stared at the sealed hatch.

Outside—
the last remnants of a human life were fading.

2. The Final Minutes

The surface mic flared suddenly—
a harsh gasp, followed by a wet choking sound.

Mary covered her ears.

Caroline whispered, “Tom... shut it off.”

But he didn’t.

Not out of cruelty.
Out of grim necessity.

“Listen,” he said softly. “This is the world now. This is the truth of what happens out there.”

Alexis clenched her fists until her nails dug into her palms.

Another thud.
A dragging sound.
A hollow attempt at a laugh that pitched upward into a gurgle.

Then—

A long, low exhale.

Followed by stillness.

Tom shut off the feed.

The silence that followed was suffocating.

Mary trembled. “It’s dead.”

Tom nodded. “Yes.”

Alexis swallowed. “Shouldn’t we... I don’t know. Do something?”

Caroline shook her head slowly. “We can’t open the hatch. And even if we could, we can’t... handle a body.”

Tom’s eyes softened, but his tone remained cold reality.

“Doing something will get us all killed.”

The bunker exhaled its mechanical breath.

The generator hummed.

The LED lights flickered with the strain of the filtration system’s failing purge cycle.

Above them, outside—
nothing moved.

3. But Death Isn’t Safe

Two hours later, the bunker alarm chirped—a high-pitched, piercing tone.

Tom jumped to the filtration panel.

“No no no—dammit—”

Alexis ran over. “What’s happening?”

Tom pointed at a flashing icon.

“The air intake is drawing less than minimum pressure. Something is blocking the intake shaft on the surface.”

Caroline froze. “Blocking it? How?”

Tom stared at the icon, jaw tight.

“It collapsed near the hatch. It must have fallen against the intake grate when it died.”

Mary clapped a hand over her mouth. “The body...”

Caroline whispered the rest:

“...is suffocating the bunker.”

Tom ran a hand through his hair. “The filtration unit can’t pull enough outside air through the blockage. If the system overheats, it shuts down to prevent fire.”

Alexis stared. “If it shuts down...”

“We breathe unfiltered air,” Tom finished.

Mary whispered, horrified, “We’d all be infected.”

Silence.

Thick.

Heavy.

Inescapable.

Tom looked at them—really looked—like a man calculating the least deadly of several deadly decisions.

“We can’t leave it there.”

Caroline felt her stomach twist. “Tom... you can’t go out there.”

“I don’t have a choice,” he said. “If the intake fails, this bunker becomes a coffin.”

Alexis shook her head. “If you go outside, you’ll be exposed. Even with your protocol, even with all your precautions—”

Tom met her eyes with a tired, resigned expression.

“I know. But we either suffocate slowly in here... or I risk myself out there.”

Mary stepped forward, voice shaking. “Tom... please... don’t go.”

He took a breath.

“Everyone,” he said, “get your decontamination gear ready. I’m suiting up.”

4. End of Chapter Cliffhanger

The girls stood frozen as Tom opened the equipment locker.

Hazmat gear.
Disinfectant canisters.
Sterile gloves.
External respirator packs.

None of it built for long-term exposure.
None of it guaranteed to protect him.

He began assembling it piece by piece.

Caroline whispered, “Tom... are you sure?”

He didn’t look back.
He tightened the final strap on the outer-suit’s sleeve.

“The world outside is dead,” he said quietly.
“But I’m still responsible for the world inside.”

The generator hummed.
The filtration alarm beeped its warning.
The air felt thinner with each passing minute.

Tom stepped toward the ladder.

The girls watched him go.

He placed his hand on the hatch wheel—

THE LOST JOURNAL – Chapter 7: Surface Protocol

The airlock filled with the harsh chemical scent of disinfectant as Tom finished sealing the outer layer of his suit. Caroline, Alexis, and Mary stood behind the inner glass partition—silent, pale, and afraid to even breathe too loudly.

Tom tapped the comm panel on his wrist. “Audio check.”

His voice came through a faint speaker on their side.

Caroline swallowed. “We hear you.”

“Good.” He stepped toward the hatch wheel. “Once I go out, no one opens this until I return to the airlock and signal. Not before.”

Mary hugged her arms around herself. “Tom... just be careful.”

He paused long enough to meet her eyes through the visor. “Always.”

Then, he spun the wheel.

Metal groaned.

A draft of cold, thin mountain air spilled into the chamber.

Tom climbed the ladder and pushed the hatch fully open.

For the first time since the world ended, the three girls watched someone step outside into it.

1. The World Above

A sharp, sterile wind hissed across Tom’s suit as he emerged onto the forest slope. Sunlight glinted off the helmet visor. Pine trees swayed gently—too gently. For all their height and strength, the forest seemed strangely muted, as though holding a secret beneath its needles.

The dead regressed adult lay half-draped over the air intake grate, one arm outstretched, fingers clawed into dirt that had given no mercy.

Tom approached cautiously.

“Surface audio engaged,” he said.

The girls heard the crunch of his boots through the speaker—slow, deliberate, nervous.

Up close, the body was worse.

The adult—once a full-grown man—looked deflated. Skin slack. Muscles wasted. Clothes torn and filthy. The face was blank, slack-jawed, eyes half open but utterly empty.

Tom knelt beside it. “Breathing stopped hours ago. Rigor already softening. Body’s collapsing.”

Mary turned away, gagging.

Alexis whispered, “That’s what it does to you...”

Caroline pressed a hand to her mouth.

2. Moving the Body

Tom braced himself and lifted the corpse by the arms, muscles straining beneath the suit. The movement caused the head to loll sideways—skin peeling slightly against the suit’s glove.

“Careful!” Caroline shouted instinctively.

“I know,” Tom grunted. “Just need to move him far enough to clear the intake.”

But the slope was uneven, and the corpse slid unexpectedly. The heel of the dead man’s boot skidded across Tom’s leg—

—and left a faint smear of grime on the outer suit sleeve.

Alexis gasped. “Tom! Your arm!”

He froze, staring at the mark. Even through the visor, the tension in his shoulders was visible.

“It didn’t get through,” he said, forcing calm. “Outer layer only.”

But his voice was too tight.

He dragged the body another few feet until it slumped against a fallen log in a twisted heap.

Then he turned toward the trees—

And froze.

3. Something Else Out There

“Girls,” Tom whispered.

“Someone else... something else... was here.”

Caroline’s blood ran cold. “What do you mean?”

Tom lifted the suit camera toward the forest floor.

On their screen, they saw:

disturbed pine needles

matted footprints

drag marks

a knot of soil kicked outward, as if something had stumbled or lunged

a smeared patch that could have been blood or mud

And most unsettling—

a second set of footprints, larger, dragged in a wide arc circling the hatch.

Alexis whispered, “That’s not from the dead one.”

“No,” Tom murmured. “Whatever made these prints was still moving. Recently.”

Mary covered her mouth. “Is it still nearby?”

A gust of wind rustled the canopy.

Branches creaked.

A shadow moved at the far edge of Tom’s peripheral vision.

He spun. “Something’s watching.”

Static flared across the speaker. The video feed jittered. A dark shape ducked behind a stand of pines.

Caroline stepped back from the screen. “Tom, get back inside. Now!”

Tom didn’t argue.

4. The Dash Back

He sprinted for the hatch, boots thudding hard on packed earth. The speaker crackled with each pounding step.

Behind him—

a rustle

a crunch

a low, guttural vocalization that did not sound quite human anymore

Alexis shouted, “Something’s chasing you!”

Tom didn’t look back.

Looking back could trip him.

And tripping was death.

He leaped down into the hatch, slammed it shut, and spun the wheel just as something slammed into the steel overhead.

BOOM.

Mary screamed.
Caroline grabbed her.

Another blow thundered, this time sliding downward, like a dragging hand or shoulder scraping across metal.

Then—

slow tapping.

The same pattern.

But deeper.
Heavier.
Wrong.

Tom collapsed onto the floor of the airlock, panting inside the respirator.

“Decontaminate me now!” he barked.

5. Decontamination Failure

The girls activated the spray cycles.

White sterilizing foam jetted through the chamber, coating Tom. He scrubbed at the outer suit frantically, especially the marked sleeve.

But halfway through the cycle—

a warning beep.

Alexis gasped. “Pressure's dropping!”

The disinfectant tank stuttered, releasing only a weak sputter instead of the heavy cleansing spray.

Tom cursed. “Seal breach in the decon line!”

Caroline slammed controls. “Tom, did the body smear—it got on the suit—did it—”

“I don’t know!” he snarled. “I NEED THE SECONDARY SYSTEM!”

Mary scrambled to the panel and engaged the emergency backup nozzle.

A single, underpowered stream dribbled onto Tom's half-cleaned suit.

It was nowhere near enough.

Tom paused, breath ragged. "We... may have contamination."

Mary shook violently. "What does that mean?"

Tom stared at the foam-covered sleeve. Beneath his visor, his eyes were wide, terrified.

"It means," he said quietly, "I might have been exposed."

6. The First Slip

Two hours later, Tom—finally cleared of the outer suit—sat on one of the cots, silent, exhausted, staring at the floor.

The girls hovered near him, unsure what to do.

Caroline crouched down. "Tom? How are you feeling?"

He didn't respond at first.

Then he whispered, "I feel... fine."

But his hand was shaking.

Alexis noticed first.

Mary noticed second.

Caroline saw something else:

A small tool lay beside Tom's foot. A wrench.

Tom reached for it—

—and missed.

His fingers closed on empty air.

He stared at his own hand for a beat too long...

as if confused why it hadn't obeyed him.

Caroline felt ice crawl up her spine.

"Tom," she whispered, "look at me."

He looked up.

His expression calm.

Too calm.

"We need to do your cognition test," she said.

He didn't protest.

That was the most alarming part.

THE LOST JOURNAL – Chapter 8: The Weight of the Door

Tom passed the cognition test.

Technically.

He repeated the number sequence backward, solved the simple pattern puzzle, and recalled all three words Caroline gave him at the start: river, lantern, glass.

He got them right.

Every one.

But something was off.

It wasn't what he forgot—it was the way he answered.

Slower.

As if he were a half-second behind himself.

"See?" Tom said, forcing a grin. "Still here. Still me."

Caroline marked the results in the notebook anyway. "You passed. For today."

Alexis watched him closely. "You sound tired."

"I am tired," Tom said. "We've been running at full alert for months. Fear does that."

Mary, sitting with her legs crossed on the lower bunk, asked the question everyone felt under their skin.

“Do you think you’re infected?”

Tom hesitated. Just a fraction of a second. But they all noticed.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Probably. Maybe. The exposure risk was real.” He gave a small shrug. “But NRV doesn’t flip a switch. It erodes. Slowly.”

“That’s what scares me,” Mary whispered.

Tom sat down on the edge of the cot, elbows on his knees, hands clasped. The generator hum filled the silence.

“The real danger,” he said quietly, “is that I might not notice if my thoughts start... slipping. And I might decide something that hurts you.”

Alexis shook her head. “You’d never—”

“You don’t know that,” Tom cut in, gently but firmly. “Once the virus gets in, decisions aren’t mine anymore. They’re... fragments. Reflexes. A child trying to pilot an adult body.”

No one spoke.

He looked at the filtration unit, its small indicator lights blinking an anemic amber instead of healthy green.

“And this bunker won’t last forever,” he added.

Caroline followed his gaze. “How long?”

“Best case?” Tom murmured. “Months. Worst case? Weeks. Maybe days if something else fails.”

Mary’s voice trembled. “So we’re not safe. Even down here.”

Tom gave her a sad, apologetic smile. “We’re safer. Not safe.”

That night, Tom didn’t sleep.

Caroline woke twice and saw the faint glow of his lamp in the generator corridor. The first time, he was hunched over a notebook, writing in tight, cramped lines. The second time, he sat staring at the sensor panel, eyes unfocused.

By morning, there were three new binders on the shelf:

Filtration Maintenance

Food and Water Rationing

Surface Protocols

He didn't announce them. He just slid them into place.

At breakfast, Alexis noticed his hand shake when he tried to pour water. Just once. A tiny tremor that stopped the second he gripped the cup with both hands.

"Tom," she said softly, "when did you start writing manuals?"

"Last night," he replied.

"For us," Caroline said, more statement than question.

Tom didn't deny it.

"Paranoia isn't fun," he said. "But it's been useful. I've been planning for failure since before the virus. My brain doesn't really know how to stop."

Mary watched him carefully. "Is this your way of... saying goodbye?"

He looked up, and for a flicker of a moment, the mask fell away. The exhaustion in his eyes wasn't from lack of sleep. It was from carrying the entire weight of survival alone for too long.

"I'm saying," he said gently, "that if something happens to me, you won't be helpless. You'll know what to do."

Caroline's throat tightened. "Nothing is going to happen to you."

Tom smiled. "Everyone says that right before something happens."

The day was quiet. Too quiet.

No tapping. No scraping. No giggling from above. Whatever had followed Tom back had moved on—or died farther down the slope.

They should have been relieved.

Instead, the stillness felt like the silence after a slammed door.

Mary helped Alexis inventory food supplies. Caroline checked Tom's notes on the filter system. The generator seemed steady, but the prefilter readings were dropping bit by bit each day.

In the evening, Tom called them together.

"Sit down," he said.

They obeyed without thinking. It had become habit.

He leaned against the metal shelving, arms crossed, posture deceptively relaxed.

"I need you three to promise me something," he said.

Caroline tensed. "Tom—"

"Just listen." He held up a hand. "If I start showing signs of regression—real signs, not just stress—you isolate me. Immediately. No arguments. No mercy. You lock that door—" He nodded toward the isolation alcove. "—and you don't open it again if I stop making sense."

Mary's eyes filled. "We can't do that."

"You can," Tom said softly. "And you will. Because if you don't, I might do something that exposes you. Or worse."

Alexis looked him dead in the eye. "You're not there yet."

"Probably not," Tom agreed. "But I may not recognize when I cross that line. You might. That's the whole problem with this virus."

Caroline swallowed. "We'll watch. We'll be honest. We'll follow your rules. But stop talking like you're already gone."

Tom smiled faintly. "I'm not gone."

He paused.

"Not yet."

When lights went down to night-cycle, they lay in their bunks to the sound of the generator's hum and Mary's soft, slow breathing.

Caroline's eyes stayed open.

In the dark, she heard Tom's footsteps pacing near the entry ladder. Heard the soft squeak of the hatch wheel as he checked it one more time. Heard him muttering something under his breath.

She almost called out to him. Almost.

But exhaustion finally claimed her.

She drifted into uneasy sleep.

She woke up to silence.

Not the usual subterranean quiet, but a different kind—a wrong kind.

The generator was still humming.
The air was still moving.
But something essential was missing.

Tom's presence.

"Tom?" she called, sitting up. "Tom, you awake?"

No answer.

Alexis rolled over. "What time is it?"

"Cycle says morning," Caroline murmured, glancing at the dim clock. "He should've checked the sensors by now."

Mary sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Maybe he finally slept in."

"Tom doesn't sleep in," Alexis said.

They found his bunk empty, sheets neatly folded.

Caroline's stomach dropped.

The airlock light was on.

She ran.

“Tom?” she shouted, skidding to a stop outside the airlock door.

Through the small reinforced window, she saw him:

Standing in the center of the chamber, wearing only the inner layer of his clothing. No suit. No respirator. No gear.

Just Tom.

Alone.

Between two doors.

He looked up slowly, as if expecting this exact moment.

“No,” Caroline whispered. “No, no, no—”

She slammed a hand against the glass. “Tom! Get out of there!”

Alexis grabbed the intercom switch. “What are you doing?!”

Tom smiled at them through the glass. It was a tired, sad smile. The kind a parent gives a child before saying something they know will hurt.

“I warned you,” he said quietly.

Mary was already crying. “Don’t do this! Please, don’t—”

Tom raised both hands, palms out.

“Listen,” he said. “You need air. You need this room.”

“Not without you!” Mary sobbed.

“I don’t know if I’m infected,” Tom continued, steady now. “But I know I’m not thinking clearly. I’m seeing shadows that might not be there. I’m hearing things that might be real or might not. And I am terrified that one day I’ll open that outer hatch while you’re sleeping.”

Caroline pressed her forehead against the glass. “We can monitor you. We can—”

“You can’t monitor me every second,” he said gently. “And this system doesn’t have redundancy for me and you if I lose control.”

He placed one hand on the inner door release lever.

"If I remove myself from the equation," he said, "the math gets simpler."

Alexis's voice broke. "You don't have to do this. You'll die out there."

Tom nodded once. "Yes."

Mary shook her head violently. "Then don't go!"

Tom looked at each of them in turn, memorizing their faces.

"You survived up there longer than anyone I've ever seen," he said. "You adapted. You made good choices. You stayed away from the cities. You stayed together. You found me. You gave me something to protect that wasn't just myself."

His voice softened.

"And you're going to outlive me. That's how this is supposed to go."

Caroline's hands shook as she hit the override panel. "I'm opening the door."

The system flashed red.

ACCESS DENIED – MANUAL LOCK ENGAGED

Tom smiled sadly. "I locked it from here."

Alexis pounded the wall. "Tom!"

"You have my notes," he said. "You know the maintenance routines. You know the rationing schedule. You know the emergency shutdown instructions. You don't need me anymore."

"That's not true," Mary sobbed.

Tom's gaze held hers.

"Mary," he said gently, "I am not going to wait inside this bunker for my mind to disappear and become a danger to you. I won't do that to you. Or to myself."

He took a deep breath.

"I'm going to make my last choice while I'm still able to make one."

Caroline felt something tearing inside her.

“Please,” she whispered. “Don’t go alone.”

Tom’s eyes glistened. “There’s no other way.”

He reached up and placed his hand flat against the glass.

Caroline pressed hers to the same spot.

On the other side, skin to skin, separated by inches of reinforced barrier.

“Remember,” he said softly, “isolation isn’t freedom. It’s a delay. Don’t stay down here forever. When it’s time, you go back into the world.”

Mary was shaking so hard she could barely stand.

Alexis’s voice was hoarse. “We’ll keep each other alive.”

Tom’s smile finally reached his eyes.

“Good.”

He stepped back, turned, and placed his hand on the outer hatch release.

“Tom!” all three shouted at once.

He looked over his shoulder one last time.

“You were,” he said quietly, “the reason I stayed human this long.”

Then he opened the door and climbed out of sight.

The outer hatch thudded shut above him.

The airlock alarms blinked briefly, then cleared.

He never came back.

THE LOST JOURNAL – Chapter 9: Six Months Below

Three days.

They argued with his absence for three days.

They told themselves he would return suddenly, knocking on the hatch, asking sarcastically why they'd assumed the worst.

On the fourth day, the reality settled in:

Tom had walked into a world where no adult survived long without care.

And he had gone alone.

Mary cried herself empty and then numb.

Alexis threw herself into work.

Caroline read every page of Tom's manuals until the words blurred.

Then they began to live.

1. Routines

Tom's schedule became their backbone.

Lights on at simulated morning.

Cognition tests after breakfast.

Filter readings every four hours.

Food logs recorded meticulously.

Water levels checked and rechecked.

Caroline took charge of the filtration system. She studied the diagrams Tom left behind, tracing lines with her fingertip until she understood what each valve and gauge meant. She cleaned the prefilter twice as often as Tom had recommended. She listened to every whine and rumble of the machine like it was a language she was slowly learning.

Alexis became logistics and security. She monitored the hatch sensors, audited the food stores, repaired loose shelves, tightened bolts. She inventoried everything—from batteries to bandages—like planning for a siege.

Mary handled health. She tracked their weight, sleep, and stress levels. She insisted on stretching, movement, hygiene. Her hands shook less when they had a purpose. She became the one who noticed when someone forgot to eat or stared too long at the wall.

They instituted a new rule:

"If you're not okay, you say it."

Sometimes they obeyed it.
Sometimes they lied.
But the rule was there, like a promise.

2. Time and Silence

Weeks blurred.

The tapping never returned.

Once, during a storm, a branch scraped across the hatch with a sound so much like knuckles that Mary nearly fainted. But no one was there when Caroline checked the sensor logs. Just wind. Just debris.

Outside, the world moved on without people.

Inside, the three of them learned how to be something like a family.

They shared stories about the world before NRV:

Caroline's fatigue in lecture halls

Mary's nieces and their loud birthday parties

Alexis's obsession with fixing anything with a motor

They laughed sometimes. Real laughter, thin but genuine.

Then there were nights when grief settled over them like another layer of concrete. On those nights, one of them would read a page from Tom's notebooks aloud. As if his voice could be resurrected through ink.

3. Cracks in the System

Around the five-month mark, the filtration readings began to slip again.

Not catastrophically.

Just a little.

Then a little more.

Caroline tried everything. She replaced the inner filter elements with spares. She flushed lines. She tightened seals. But the machine had limits, and time didn't care about their schedule.

"Maybe we can last another six months," Mary said one day.

Alexis shook her head. "Or the motor seizes in two weeks. We can't gamble on a machine that doesn't know we're down here."

Caroline watched the slowly declining pressure values and felt the same conclusion forming in her chest:

Tom hadn't just prepared them to maintain the bunker.

He had prepared them to leave it.

4. The Decision

The choice came on a day that felt like any other.

Breakfast. Tests. Readings.

Caroline checked the pressure graph and saw another dip—shallow but unmistakable.

"That's it," she said.

Mary looked up from her notes. "What?"

"We have to leave," Caroline replied. "Not soon. Now."

Mary shook her head. "But the air is still moving. The line is still above minimum."

"Today," Caroline said, steady but firm, "we can walk out by choice. If we wait until this fails completely, we walk out choking. Or we don't walk out at all."

Alexis nodded slowly. "I agree."

Mary's eyes filled. "What if it's worse than we think out there?"

Caroline met her gaze.

"It is worse," she said. "That's not the question anymore. The question is whether we die slowly underground or try to build something above it."

Mary shut her eyes. A single tear slid down.

“Tom said not to stay here forever,” she whispered.

“He was right,” Alexis replied.

They spent the rest of the day packing.

Tom’s manuals.

Water containers.

Dry rations.

A compact stove.

First aid kit.

A small solar charger.

A hand-crank radio that might or might not work.

They left behind anything that didn’t help them walk or think.

When the time came, they stood in front of the ladder, packs on their backs, wearing improvised face coverings and the thinnest hope that enough time had passed for the viral load outside to have dropped.

“Six months,” Mary murmured. “Do you think it’s still infectious out there?”

Caroline inhaled slowly. “Less than it was.”

“Enough to kill us?” Mary pressed.

“Enough to remind us to be careful,” Alexis said. “But not enough to keep us buried.”

That was the best answer they had.

They climbed.

5. After TEOTWAWKI

The hatch opened with a complaining groan.

Fresh air—real air—poured down the ladder. It smelled of wet soil, pine sap, and the faint, distant musk of decay that the wind couldn’t quite erase.

For a moment, none of them moved.

Then Caroline stepped out.

The forest greeted them with a hush so deep it felt like reverence. No cars. No power lines humming. No aircraft. Even the birds seemed fewer.

The world wasn't gone.
It was... empty.

Alexis followed, scanning the trees with sharp, wary eyes. Mary climbed last, pausing to place her palm briefly on the metal edge of the hatch.

"Thank you," she whispered—to the bunker, to Tom, to whatever had held them together this long.

Then she stepped fully into the open.

They closed the hatch, but didn't spin the wheel all the way. For the first time, the bunker wasn't a sealed refuge.

It was something else.

A place they'd survived, but not a place they'd live.

"Which way?" Mary asked.

Caroline looked at the mountains. "Down, eventually. Toward water, roads, structures. Somewhere people used to be."

"Somewhere they might be again," Alexis added.

"Somewhere they might still be," Mary said quietly.

They started walking.

The forest floor was soft under their boots—layers of needles, leaves, and time. Sun filtered through the canopy in pale, angled beams. In the distance, a highway overpass jutted crookedly above the treeline, empty and silent.

Once, they passed a parked car on an old access road, door hanging open, interior moss-covered. A child's sock lay on the seat, stiff with age.

No bodies.
No movement.
Just traces.

Hours later, as the sky began to tint gold with late afternoon, they made camp in the lee of a rock outcropping. Alexis set up a compact tarp shelter. Mary coaxed a small, smokeless fire to life. Caroline turned on the hand-crank radio and slowly, patiently turned the dial.

Static.

Hiss.

More static.

“...—zzk....”

She froze.

“Did you hear that?” she whispered.

Alexis and Mary looked up.

Caroline turned the dial back a fraction. “Say it again,” she muttered to the empty air. “Come on...”

For a moment, there was nothing.

Then, faint and broken, a voice bled through the noise:

“...copy... if... anyone... hearing this... adult... unregressed... moving east... river corridor...”

Mary’s hand flew to her mouth.

“Did he say adult?” Alexis breathed.

The signal crackled, cut, came back weaker.

“...two of us... repeat, two unregressed adults... heading for higher ground... if... you’re out there...”

The voice distorted, but Caroline’s brain had already seized on two words.

“Two of us,” she whispered. “He said two.”

Mary’s eyes were wide. “Do you think—”

Caroline’s heart hammered so hard she could barely force the words out.

“I think,” she said, “we’re not the only ones left.”

Outside the glow of their tiny fire, the world after TEOTWAWKI stretched vast and unknown.

Somewhere out there, far beyond the tree line and the valley and the dead cities, Jim and Bonnie were walking under the same sky.

And now, for the first time since the virus rewrote humanity, five unregressed adults were moving toward each other.

They just didn’t know it yet.

★ DISCUSSION: What the World Looks Like Six Months After TEOTWAWKI

The girls are stepping into a world that has not had:

humans maintaining infrastructure

sanitation

electricity

pets being fed

roads being used

homes being lived in

garbage being removed

livestock being tended

predators being controlled

All of this leads to a believable, haunting landscape.

★ 1. Skeletons — Why They’re Everywhere

In an NRV collapse, adults didn’t fight; they simply stopped.

People wandered into:

fields

roads

parking lots

shallow water

stairwells

forest paths

porches

abandoned cars

Most died from:

exposure

dehydration

starvation

infections

animal scavenging

accidents (falls, drowning, burns, fractures)

Six months later:

- ✓ In direct sun → mostly skeletonized
- ✓ In shade → partially decomposed
- ✓ In homes → still more intact
- ✓ In vehicles → leathery remains, not yet full skeletons

Bones are everywhere.

Sometimes arranged in strange, child-like patterns — not because of malice, but because regressed adults had no idea what they were handling.

Some skeletons still hold:

backpacks

shoes

keys

hats

phones (long dead)

The girls would see:

a line of skeletons along a trail, like they marched without understanding

a body in a creek bed, bleached by flowing water

a pile of bones near a campsite, spread by scavengers

tiny human bone fragments where dogs or coyotes dragged parts away

This isn't gore — it's quiet, realistic decay.

★ 2. What Happened to Pets?

This is a brilliant world-building element and makes the world uniquely dangerous.

✓ Dogs

Dogs didn't regress fully — regression is a cortical issue, and dogs operate more on instinct. What they did lose was their human anchor.

Without caretakers:

some starved

some formed packs

some reverted to territorial, wolf-like behavior

some became feral scavengers

Behaviorally, dogs:

no longer bark for attention

no longer wait at doors

roam in packs

avoid humans

growl at anything unfamiliar

kill small game more effectively

occasionally follow survivors from a distance

A few might still exhibit “broken” pet behaviors:

sitting beside their owner’s corpse

guarding a doorway

carrying a torn collar in their mouth

whining at night with no one to respond

These details will emotionally devastate readers — in a good way.

✓ Cats

Cats survive more easily.

They become:

night hunters

territorial

distrustful

invisible except for flashes of eyes in darkness

Cats no longer meow for food — they hunt rodents and birds.
But some still spend nights curled on empty porches.

✓ Livestock

Cows, goats, and sheep:

wander fields

form feral herds

starve in enclosed barns

break fences over time

Some cattle might be skeletal but alive — a horrifying sight.

✓ Birds

Sky feels emptier:

Fewer pigeons, fewer crows, fewer scavengers — many died off early from contaminated environments, but some thrived.

★ 3. Apex Predators

With humans gone:

coyotes thrive

wolves retake territory

mountain lions hunt freely

bears break into homes and abandoned vehicles

Early-month remains would've fed scavengers well.
By Month Six, many are territorial and bold.

Predators learned fast:

Regressed adults didn't run.

They were easy prey.

This means the forests around the girls are not just quiet — they're patrolled.

★ 4. Environment

With human absence, the wild takes over:

vines crawling over cars

saplings growing through asphalt cracks

moss covering rooftops

weeds overtaking sidewalks

tree branches fallen everywhere

once-bright houses fading into forest shadows

Nature reclaims the world faster than expected.

★ 5. Tone of Chapter 10

This is not an action chapter.

It is a world-reveal chapter.

The girls see:

the truth of collapse

how much died

how much changed

how much survived

how much threatens them now

It sets mood for their later meeting with Jim & Bonnie, who are also navigating the same changed world.

★ Narrative Flow for Chapter 10

1. Leaving the bunker region fully

They move into denser forest.

2. First skeletons

A hiker on a log.

Someone by a broken tent.

A pair holding hands near a dry riverbed.

3. First animal encounter

A feral dog pack circling at a distance.

Not attacking — assessing.

4. A structure

An abandoned cabin. They see a cat inside watching them with unblinking eyes.

5. Signs of predation

Dog prints. Blood trails. Drag marks.

6. A chilling discovery

Caroline finds a human jawbone.

Mary finds a child's shoe.

Alexis sees a skeleton caught in a tree by animals.

7. Nightfall danger

Animals howl.

Branches crack.

Something prowls nearby.

8. Ending hook

A faint flashlight beam in the distance—

Jim and Bonnie passing through the valley
(without seeing the gals yet).

THE LOST JOURNAL – Chapter 10: The Bones of the World

They didn't see the first skeleton until late afternoon.

The day had been almost normal, if such a word still applied. They walked under a high, thin sky, following a narrow game trail that wound between pines and firs. The forest seemed untouched from a distance—green slopes, rock outcrops, a distant ribbon of water flashing through the trees.

But the silence was wrong.

Even the birds sounded cautious.

Caroline led, scanning ahead with the small pair of field binoculars Tom had left them. Alexis walked in the middle, carrying the heavier pack and keeping an eye on the ground for tracks or hazards. Mary brought up the rear, watching their flanks and occasionally glancing back at the hatch hill that had already disappeared behind the folds of the land.

They crossed a small, dry wash, scrambled up its far side, and stepped into a clearing.

The bones were seated on a rotting log, as though their owner had simply sat down to rest and never got up again.

For one moment, Caroline's brain tried to interpret the sight as a trick of branches and debris. But the geometry of it—the curve of the spine, the shape of the ribcage, the pale twin arcs of femurs and tibias—wouldn't resolve into anything else.

"Oh," Mary breathed.

The skull lay tilted slightly, jaw hanging open, eye sockets turned toward nothing. A tangle of faded fabric clung to the upper vertebrae, all color washed by sun and weather into the same noncommittal gray. What had once been a backpack lay collapsed at the log's base, straps gnawed through. The shoes were gone. Below the knees, the bones lay askew, scattered by something that hadn't needed to understand what they'd been attached to.

Alexis stopped abruptly, one hand going out as if to block the others from getting closer.

"Don't step forward," she said quietly. "There might still be metal fragments. Or... other things."

Caroline swallowed.

"We knew this would happen," she said. Her voice felt like it belonged to someone else. "NRV doesn't leave neat endings. People just... stop in place."

Mary's face trembled. "It's different seeing it."

They stood there for a long, uneasy moment. The skeleton didn't move. Flies buzzed in a half-hearted way around the last fraying scraps of fabric, but whatever organic matter had been here was gone now—taken by weather, bacteria, insects, and mouths.

Alexis gradually relaxed her shoulders. "At least it's old," she said. "Sun-bleached. Means nobody's been by here in months. Maybe longer."

"That's supposed to be comforting?" Mary whispered.

"No," Alexis said. "Just... informative."

They skirted the clearing in a wide arc.

Caroline's eyes kept snagging on the way the bones sat upright, the way the head tilted as if listening. She imagined the last moments of that person's life: regressed, thirsty, maybe delighted by the pattern of bark under their hands, mind sliding backward toward childhood while the body quietly failed.

It was the first skeleton.

It wasn't the last.

The second one was different.

An hour later, the trail crossed a narrow jeep road, unmaintained and half-swallowed by weeds. A rusted SUV sat at a crooked angle in the ditch, front bumper buried in earth, windshield cracked by a fallen branch. Moss grew up the tires. The back hatch hung open.

Inside, something pale glinted.

Caroline moved closer, cautiously.

"Careful," Alexis murmured.

Caroline peered into the shadowed interior.

Bones lay across the back seat—disarticulated, tangled, partially wrapped in what had once been a jacket. They hadn't stayed in anatomical order. Animals had been busy here. The skull

was missing. A single humerus rested against a child's car seat, its faded fabric decorated with cartoon stars.

Mary choked on a sound that might have been a sob.

She turned away, both hands over her face.

Alexis swore under her breath. "They never even got out."

"The virus wouldn't have cared," Caroline said quietly. "If they were in the car when it hit... that's where they stayed. Until dehydration."

Mary backed away until her calves hit the opposite embankment. "We should go."

"Agreed," Alexis said, already pulling Caroline gently away from the vehicle. "Parked cars and houses are going to be... like this. All over."

Caroline didn't argue. Her stomach felt hollow and sour.

They resumed walking.

As they moved along the road, the landscape grew stranger—not because of anything overtly catastrophic, but because of the absence of anything that should have been routine: no distant engines, no power lines humming, no contrails in the sky. Only wind in branches... and shapes on the edges of perception that resolved, one by one, into reminders.

A skeleton sprawled on a rocky slope, one arm outstretched as if reaching for a dropped water bottle that lay just out of reach.

Two bodies near a campground fire ring—now fully skeletonized, their bones scattered in a rough circle where scavengers had dragged them.

A smaller set of bones half in, half out of a collapsed tent, still partially wrapped in faded nylon and the remnants of a sleeping bag.

"Kids," Mary whispered, voice shaking. "There were kids out here too."

Caroline's throat tightened.

Alexis's jaw worked. "We can't fix it," she said. "We can only not join them."

The world after TEOTWAWKI was teaching them, one step at a time, what had happened to those who hadn't found bunkers or remote trails or sealed CDC labs.

Most people hadn't.

They heard the dogs before they saw them.

Late in the afternoon, as shadows stretched longer between the trees, a sound drifted down the slope—a low, rolling bark that didn't quite sound like anything Caroline remembered from backyards and city parks.

These weren't playful sounds.
They were... testing.

Alexis froze, hand going up.

"Stop."

They did.

The bark came again, answered by another, higher and sharper. Then a low whine. Dry leaves rustled somewhere above them.

"Dogs?" Mary whispered.

"Or coyotes," Alexis said. "Maybe both."

Caroline's heart picked up speed. "Do we... hide?"

"Yes," Alexis said immediately. "And we don't make ourselves look like easy prey."

She guided them off the road and into a dense stand of young fir. The trees grew close together here, branches low and interlocking, creating a thicker wall of green. Alexis motioned for them to crouch.

Through a gap in the branches, Caroline saw movement.

Four shapes padded into view along the narrow road. They moved with the loose, confident gait of animals that didn't expect to make way for anyone. Their coats were ragged but dense, colors a mix of domestic variety and wild pattern—black-and-tan, mottled gray, russet patches. Two had torn collars hanging loose around their necks, tags long since shredded or lost.

Their ears were erect. Their noses were constantly working, scanning the air.

They were dogs, but they weren't.

They moved like wolves.

The largest of them paused near a faded signpost, sniffing, then raising its head. Its gaze swept across the road, the slope, the trees.

It stared directly toward their hiding spot.

Caroline held her breath until her lungs screamed. Mary's fingers dug into her arm.

The dog's lip curled slightly, revealing teeth. It didn't bark. It didn't rush.

It just... looked.

Then it huffed, turned away, and moved on, the rest of the pack flowing after it in a loose formation. One stopped to sniff at something in the roadside grass—a long bone, bleached and obvious. It picked the bone up casually and trotted to catch up, tail low but relaxed.

The pack disappeared around the bend.

Only when they were fully gone did Alexis exhale.

"Those were pets," Mary said in a strained whisper. "They had collars."

"They had owners," Alexis said. "Past tense."

Caroline listened to the receding crackle of paws on leaves.

"They've been eating well," she said quietly.

Mary shuddered. "On... them."

"On everything," Alexis said. "Trash, livestock, carcasses. But that won't last forever. We need to assume packs like that own the territory now. We don't want to cross one in an open field."

Caroline swallowed. "Dogs used to wait on porches for their humans to come home."

"They did," Alexis said. "Then nobody came home. So they remembered the other thing they were built for."

"Wolves," Mary whispered.

"Closer to wolves than to pets now," Alexis agreed.

They found the first house just before dusk.

It sat halfway slid into the forest edge at the bottom of a shallow valley—a one-story cabin with peeling paint, a sagging porch, and a crumpled satellite dish hanging uselessly from the roof. Weeds grew wild through the gravel driveway. A wind chime tinkled softly by the door, though no wind touched it.

“Do we check it?” Mary asked.

Caroline hesitated. “We need usable shelter. But houses are... where people died.”

“Where people died, where virus lingered,” Alexis added. “Even after six months, interior surfaces could be risky.”

They approached cautiously, bandanas pulled up over their noses and mouths, gloves on.

The front door was already ajar.

“Classic,” Alexis muttered. “Nobody thinks to close it when their brain’s dissolving.”

The air inside smelled stale—dusty, with a thin undercurrent of mold and something older, covered in time. Caroline’s eyes watered slightly.

“Open windows first,” she said. “Cross-ventilate. We’re not staying in stale air.”

They circled the small structure, wedging windows open with sticks and stones until air began to move. Only then did they step inside.

The living room was mostly intact. A couch sat facing a dead television. A shelf held books in neat rows, some fallen sideways. An empty mug rested on the coffee table, its contents long evaporated, leaving only a brown ring.

On the rug, near the couch, lay a single radius bone.

Caroline’s stomach flipped. “Someone died in here.”

“Or was dragged,” Alexis said quietly. “Scavengers leave traces.”

Mary walked into the kitchen, which was surprisingly clean. No skeletons slumped over the table. No bodies on the floor. Cabinets stood closed. A refrigerator door hung half-open, its interior shelves empty and slick with mildew.

She stopped at the back door, staring out.

“Hey,” she called softly. “Come here.”

Caroline and Alexis joined her.

Beyond the house, the yard ran down toward a shallow ravine. A small fenced area held the remnants of a chicken coop—wire bent inward, boards broken, feathers scattered.

Next to the coop, in the high grass, a shape lay curled tightly as if sleeping.

A cat.

Or what had been one.

Its bones were nearly clean, fur clinging only in small clumps. The skull had a ragged hole along one side. The body lay facing the house, nose pointed toward the back door.

“It never left,” Mary whispered.

Caroline’s chest ached.

“Maybe it did,” she said softly. “Maybe it just came back here at the end.”

Alexis looked away, jaw tight.

They stayed only long enough to grab a few sealed cans from the pantry and a small camping lantern from a closet. No one wanted to sleep under a roof that had once sheltered a mind collapsing into infancy.

They left the door open behind them.

The sky had gone from gold to bruised purple by the time they climbed back to higher ground. Alexis found a rocky overhang that offered some wind protection and a vantage point over the valley. They set their small camp beneath it, fire kept low and shielded.

During dinner—cold beans straight from the can—Mary stared at the darkening landscape.

“There are bones everywhere,” she said quietly. “People. Pets. Wild things. Like the whole world... stopped mid-sentence.”

Caroline poked the embers with a twig.

“Tom said the virus wasn’t the monster,” she murmured. “The lapse was. All the things nobody did while their minds were regressing.”

Alexis sipped from her canteen. “The dogs didn’t lapse. They adapted.”

“And the cats hunted,” Mary added. “And the wolves came back. And whatever else was out there just kept doing what it always did.”

“The world doesn’t need us to keep turning,” Caroline said. “It just needs time.”

They fell quiet, each listening to the new sounds of the world after TEOTWAWKI.

Far off, a coyote—or dog, or both—howled. Another answered, closer than any of them liked. Something heavy moved through underbrush to the east, then paused, then moved on. Owls called to each other in low, mournful tones.

When full dark settled, they doused the fire entirely, leaving only a faint glow in the ashes. The stars overhead looked sharp and impossibly numerous with no city lights to compete.

Mary lay on her side, watching the sky.

“Do you ever feel like we’re trespassing?” she asked quietly. “Like this belongs to... everything else now?”

Alexis lay on her back, hands behind her head. “It always did,” she said. “We just pretended otherwise.”

Caroline sat between them, one hand resting on the small radio.

She turned it on, turned the dial slowly. Static. Hiss. The faint, distant whisper of atmospheric noise. No voice tonight. No desperate adult calling into the void.

Maybe the signal had been a fluke. Maybe the transmitter had died. Maybe the people using it had moved beyond range.

Or maybe they were closer now than they realized.

She almost turned it off.

Then, at the edge of her vision, she saw it.

“Look,” she whispered.

Down in the valley, faint and small, a pinprick of artificial light moved between the trees. Not firelight—the color was wrong. It was whiter, sharper. A flashlight beam sweeping across a slope, pausing, moving, then cutting off.

Mary pushed herself upright. “You see that too, right?”

"I see it," Alexis murmured.

It appeared again a moment later, farther along the valley floor. A slow, searching beam. It swept across a rock face, then pivoted briefly in their direction, catching a cluster of leaves before swinging away.

"Someone's down there," Mary whispered. "Someone with a light."

"Or more than one," Alexis said.

Caroline's heart hammered. "The voice on the radio," she said. "Two unregressed adults, moving east along a river corridor."

Mary nodded quickly. "There's a river down there. We heard it earlier."

The light blinked off again.

They held their breath.

It didn't return.

For a long time, the valley remained dark and quiet.

"Do we call out?" Mary asked.

"No," Alexis said immediately. "Not tonight. We don't know who they are. Or what's near them."

Caroline gently turned the radio dial back to silence.

"Tomorrow," she said, more to herself than to the others. "We move closer to the water. We watch. We listen. If they're heading east... we can intercept without being reckless."

Mary lay back down slowly. "I don't want to be alone anymore."

"You're not," Alexis said. "You've got us."

"I know," Mary whispered. "I mean... I don't want us to be the only ones anymore."

Caroline stared into the darkness where the light had been.

"We're not," she said quietly.

Somewhere down there, under the same sky and stars and predator calls, two other minds were making their way through the skeletons and feral dogs and ruined world.

Two other adults who remembered how the world used to be.

Two adults named Jim and Bonnie.

The bones of the world lay between them all.

But for the first time since the virus ended everything, the paths of the few who still thought like adults were bending toward each other.

THE LOST JOURNAL — Chapter 11: Tom's Box

The morning after the flashlight sighting felt different.

The air was sharper, the forest quieter, the girls more alert. Caroline woke first, long before sunrise, staring up at the dim outline of the overhang above their heads. She could still see the faint white beam sweeping the far side of the valley—burned into memory like an afterimage.

Someone else was out there.
Someone awake inside their own mind.

It changed everything.

As Mary stirred beside her, Caroline quietly rose and walked a few steps to where their packs rested. Tom's old duffel bag sat among them—patched canvas, frayed handles, weighed down by something heavy and metallic inside.

He had never opened it in front of them.

Alexis joined her, rubbing her eyes. "We should check that today. Before we move."

Mary sat up, hugging her knees. "I think he meant us to."

Caroline unzipped the bag.

Inside was a small locking case, steel-gray and cold to the touch. A red sticker along the edge read:

PROPERTY OF T. — DO NOT OPEN UNLESS CONTINUITY DEPENDS ON IT

Alexis huffed. "Continuity depends on everything now."

Caroline braced herself and clicked the latches open.

The lid rose with a soft metallic groan.

Inside were items arranged with grim intention:

a cracked tablet wrapped in a cloth

a small USB drive taped with the note READ LAST

a spiral notebook full of cramped handwriting

three stapled documents, the top labeled in faint ink:

“NRV-2027 — Preprint Draft (CDC Internal)”

another set titled:

“NRV Survivorship Field Notes — Life and Death of the Infected”

a folded envelope:

“To Whoever Survives Me”

Mary whispered, “He kept all this from us...”

“No,” Caroline said quietly. “He kept it safe for us.”

Alexis frowned at the documents. “Let’s see what he thought we needed.”

1. The First Pages

Caroline picked up the preprint—the same pages Tom had once read silently when he thought they were asleep.

The first line hit hard:

> “There is no known immunity to NRV-2027. Exposure equals eventual regression.”
— CDC Lead Researcher, J.

Mary’s breath shook. “He... he knew that? All this time?”

Caroline skimmed further.

> “The virus maintains environmental stability far beyond expectation. Viable particulates detected on surfaces after 90+ days.”

> “Neural regression precedes motor decline; cognitive death occurs long before physiological collapse.”

> “Survivors not isolated completely will eventually succumb—indirect contact is enough.”

Alexis clenched her jaw. “So that’s why he wouldn’t leave the bunker. Why he panicked when he thought he was contaminated.”

Caroline nodded slowly. “He was doomed the minute he touched that body. Even if he never showed symptoms.”

Mary covered her mouth, tears forming. “No wonder he...”

No one finished the sentence.

2. Life and Death of the Infected

Caroline set the technical preprint aside and reached for the thicker, more battered set of pages—the field notes.

Tom had annotated these heavily.

She skimmed aloud:

> “NRV victims typically survive 3–14 days after full regression.”

> “Death most commonly from dehydration, hypothermia, infection, or predation.”

Mary winced. “We saw that yesterday. Everywhere.”

Alexis leaned closer as Caroline turned the page.

> “Sanitation collapse accelerates mortality. Toilets overflow, water sources become contaminated, bacterial spread quickens death.”

> “Bodies often remain above ground, leading to scavenger surges. Dogs are primary vector for secondary exposure due to contact with contaminated remains.”

Mary shuddered. “Feral dogs. We saw how bold they were.”

Alexis exhaled sharply, rubbing her temples. “This explains everything we saw in the valley... everything about the skeletons.”

Caroline felt the weight of each word.

Tom hadn’t wanted them to know this while they were still fragile in the bunker. But out here... they needed truth more than comfort.

3. The Notebook

The spiral notebook was next. Caroline flipped through pages filled with Tom’s handwriting—tight, slanted, uneven where his hand must have shaken.

One entry stopped her cold.

“If I regress, I’ll be dangerous.
If I show early symptoms, I won’t let myself become a threat.
This is my responsibility. Please live.”

Mary’s tears finally broke. She cried silently, face buried in her hands.

Alexis closed her eyes, jaw tight.

Caroline swallowed hard. “He didn’t kill himself because he gave up. He did it because he was scared of hurting us.”

Mary nodded through her tears. “He loved us.”
“Yeah,” Alexis said softly. “He did.”

4. The USB Drive

The USB stick was sealed in clear tape, with an instruction:

“READ LAST — AFTER YOU KNOW THE WORLD YOU’RE ENTERING.”

Caroline hesitated, then slid it into the tablet.
Surprisingly, the device powered up—battery nearly dead, screen cracked but functional.

A single audio file appeared.

She tapped it.

Tom's voice filled the clearing.

Tom's Last Message

"Hey. If you're hearing this, then I didn't make it out alive."

A long breath.

"I'm not going to pretend I was ready. Or brave. I was scared every day. Scared I'd regress. Scared I'd infect you. Scared I'd fail."

Another breath, shakier.

"You three... you gave me purpose. For six months, I had something worth fighting the dark for. No man deserves that kind of gift at the end of the world, but you gave it to me anyway."

The girls were silent, frozen.

"You need to know something important. If I'm gone, it's because I wanted you to have a chance. A real chance. I knew the risks out there. And I knew that if I stayed... I'd be the first one taken. You'd waste food on me. Or worse."

His voice trembled.

"I'm not proud of leaving. But I'm proud of you. Proud that you survived long enough to hear this."

A soft exhale.

"One more thing. If you see anyone out there—ANYONE—do not assume they're immune. Nobody is. But there may be others who stayed unexposed. Maybe bunker survivors. Maybe someone from CDC. They might have knowledge we never did."

A pause.

"And if you find them... tell them Tom said thank you for making the fight worth it."

The recording ended.

Mary sobbed quietly.

Alexis wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve, pretending she wasn't crying.
Caroline stared at the tablet, jaw set.

She closed the file.

"Let's pack," she whispered. "We know where to go now."

5. The Final Map

Under the papers, folded into a thick, creased square, was a hand-drawn map. Tom had marked several locations:

"Possible safe zone — CDC evac?"

"River corridor — movement detected"

"RF source (weak)"

"Light seen twice late spring"

And finally, circled heavily:

"If I don't return — follow this route. Others may still be alive."

Mary stared at it. "He knew. He must have heard the same radio signal we did."

Alexis nodded. "He just couldn't reach them."

Caroline folded the map into her jacket pocket.

"We can."

6. The Decision

They stood in the clearing, the box now empty, the journals tucked securely into their packs.

Mary wiped her eyes. "So what now?"

Alexis slung her bag over her shoulder. "We follow the river."

"Toward the light we saw," Mary added.

Caroline nodded.
Toward the flashlight.

Toward the voice they'd heard weeks earlier.
Toward the only adults left besides themselves.

Toward Jim and Bonnie.

The world might be full of bones and feral dogs and broken silence...

...but the Lost Journals had given them knowledge—
and hope.

"Tom wanted us to live," Caroline said.

"Then we will," Alexis replied.

Mary nodded fiercely. "And we'll find them. Whoever they are."

They left the clearing, sunlight catching the metal case behind them before shadows reclaimed it.

THE LOST JOURNAL — Chapter 12: River Crossing

They followed the river because Tom told them to.

Not directly, not in words—but in the map, the notes, the cautious circles he'd scribbled around a meandering blue line that vanished under folds and valleys.

"Movement detected."

"Light sighted in early spring."

"Possible unregressed adults along corridor."

Caroline kept the map tucked inside her jacket, but she barely needed it now. The river was their guide—sometimes a rushing presence, sometimes a muted whisper far below the slope they walked.

Three days had passed since they'd seen the flashlight in the valley.

They had not seen another sign of it.

Not yet.

1. The River Trail

The river twisted through a deep ravine, churning white against boulders, then widening into slow, reflective stretches between reeds. As they walked, Caroline felt the rhythm of a world reclaiming itself—earth swallowing homes, vines threading through ruined fences, sun bleached bones fading into ground.

Mary walked beside her, quiet but alert. Alexis scouted ahead, her steps careful, purposeful.

Late morning found them at a section where the river split into two arms around a rocky island. One crossing was narrow but turbulent. The second was broad and calmer, but waist-deep.

“Which?” Mary asked.

Alexis studied the narrow path. “Fast current. Too risky.”

Caroline tested the broader water with a stick. “Cold, but safe if we take it slow.”

“Let’s do the quiet one,” Alexis said. “Less noise, less chance of attracting something.”

Mary shivered at the memory of the feral dogs.

They stepped into the water together, gripping each other’s arms for balance. The cold bit hard, numbing ankles and crawling toward knees.

Caroline hissed. “Just keep moving.”

Halfway across, Alexis froze—her head snapping toward the treeline downstream.

“Did you see that?”

Caroline held her breath.

Mary whispered, “What?”

“Someone,” Alexis murmured. “Or something.”

The trees remained still.

A moment passed. Then another.

“Let’s get across first,” Caroline said.

They did.

2. Tracks That Weren't Theirs

After drying their feet and boots on a sun-warmed rock, Alexis crouched by the soft mud at the river's edge.

"Look."

Caroline leaned closer. A set of footprints—not animal tracks—crossed the mud. Old but clear.

Human.

Adult.

Boot size.

"Not ours," Mary said, voice trembling.

"No," Alexis replied. "These were made this morning."

Caroline touched the edge of one print. The mud was still damp where water hadn't yet dried.

"He's close," she whispered. "Or she."

Mary nodded. "The flashlight person."

"Or people," Alexis said. "There could be two."

Caroline felt her pulse quicken. "What direction?"

Alexis pointed downslope.

"Following the river. Same as us."

They were not alone.

Not anymore.

3. The Bridge

By mid-afternoon they reached an old wooden footbridge spanning a narrow section of the river. Moss covered the boards; a few planks were cracked or missing. A faded sign, partially eaten by rot, read:

PEOPLE'S TRAIL LOOP — 1.2 MILES

Mary stepped onto the first board cautiously, testing its strength.

Alexis held up a hand. "Wait."

She knelt beside a set of footprints—fresh, clear, deep enough to suggest someone had lingered.

A different pattern of boot tread.

Caroline's breath caught. "Two sets?"

Alexis nodded. "One lighter. One heavier. They crossed maybe an hour ago."

Mary swallowed. "A man and a woman?"

"Could be," Alexis said.

Caroline looked at the trail beyond the bridge—curving into a mix of birch and pine, sun filtering between leaves in quiet gold shafts.

"They're right ahead of us," she said softly.

Alexis nodded once. "Let's move."

They crossed.

4. First Contact Without Contact

The trail narrowed into a corridor between rock faces—weathered granite rising five or six feet on either side. Roots clung to cracks. Ferns grew in shaded pockets.

Halfway through the stone corridor, they heard it—

A faint clatter of metal.

All three froze.

Mary's eyes widened. "That wasn't an animal."

Alexis motioned quickly: Get down.

They ducked behind a fallen log, hearts pounding.

Voices drifted from ahead.

Actual voices.

Human voices.

Caroline pressed closer to the ground, straining to hear.

A woman's voice:

"...no, we need to check the western side first. The batteries won't last forever."

A man's voice:

"They'll last long enough. What I'm worried about is the—"

Static hissed—a radio crackle.

Mary clamped a hand over her mouth, eyes filling with tears.

Caroline felt her pulse hammer in her ears.

Alexis mouthed silently:

Real. Humans.

The voices grew louder—coming toward them.

Caroline risked a glance over the log.

Two figures emerged from the bend:

A woman—brown hair tied back, jacket patched at the sleeves, moving with alert precision.

And a man—taller, lean, with a backpack rigged with homemade straps and a flashlight clipped to the shoulder, head swiveling as he scanned the trail with sharp, wary awareness.

Caroline felt chills rush down her spine.

Jim.

And Bonnie.

The same pair from Tom's notes.

The same pair from the flashlight in the valley.

The same pair broadcasting faint radio messages.

They were real. Alive. And close.

Mary almost stood—Caroline grabbed her wrist just in time.

“Not yet,” she whispered.

Alexis barely breathed. “We don’t know if they’re safe.”

Mary whispered back, “They’re unregressed.”

Alexis shook her head. “Doesn’t mean anything yet.”

Jim paused suddenly.

He turned his head sharply, looking straight toward their hiding place.

Caroline felt her heart stop.

Bonnie tensed. “Jim?”

He raised a hand. “Someone’s here.”

They dropped into a defensive stance—quick, controlled, trained.

Not hostile.

But cautious.

Ready.

Mary’s grip tightened on Caroline’s arm.

Caroline whispered into her ear: “If we reveal ourselves now, and they panic...”

She didn’t finish. No one needed the ending.

Jim stepped closer to the log.

Bonnie raised her flashlight, beam tight, focused.

Caroline held her breath—

Then, from somewhere deeper in the forest, a rustling noise erupted.

Large. Sudden. Not human.

Jim spun, weapon raised. “Movement! Northwest!”

Bonnie's flashlight snapped toward the sound.

The forest exploded in motion—something large crashing through undergrowth, snapping branches, growling low.

"Dogs?" Mary gasped.

"No," Alexis whispered. "Something bigger."

Jim and Bonnie sprinted toward the noise, moving with coordinated precision.

Within seconds, their voices faded down the trail.

The forest swallowed them.

The girls remained hidden a long moment after.

Caroline finally exhaled. "We almost met them."

Mary slumped against the log. "I thought he was going to see us."

Alexis nodded slowly. "Not yet. But soon."

Caroline stood, brushing dirt from her knees.

"They're headed down the river," she said. "Still following the same route. We can follow them... at a safer distance."

Mary nodded. "Until we know it's safe."

Alexis looked down the path where Jim and Bonnie had disappeared.

"We're not alone anymore," she murmured. "We just haven't introduced ourselves yet."

Caroline folded Tom's map and tucked it into her jacket again.

"Tomorrow," she said softly. "Tomorrow we follow closer."

Absolutely — here is Chapter 13, the emotional and suspenseful conclusion to Lost Journals – Part I, where Caroline, Mary, and Alexis finally reunite with Jim and Bonnie after nearly a year of TEOTWAWKI.

This chapter honors the shared history you noted — the five of them once collaborated on various scientific and research projects before the collapse. This pre-apocalypse familiarity will transform their reunion from a coincidence into a profound, world-shifting moment.

THE LOST JOURNAL — Chapter 13: The Crossing of Five

Dawn broke pale and cold over the river valley, painting the water in streaks of silver. Caroline stood on a rocky rise above the trail, watching the mist lift from the treetops, listening for the voices they'd heard the day before.

Jim and Bonnie.

Names heavy with memory.

Before the world ended, the five of them — Caroline, Mary, Alexis, Jim, and Bonnie — had worked on different parts of the same sprawling research ecosystem. Climate data. Neural modeling. Field sampling. Systems ecology. Emergency contingency protocols.

Different specialties.

Same projects.

Same conferences.

Same coffee-fueled all-nighters.

They had traded reports, emailed datasets, attended the same remote briefings. In smaller circles, they'd argued over methodology, shared jokes, admired each other's work.

That was why Tom's discovery of Jim's NRV preprint had shaken them so deeply.

It wasn't just a scientist's warning.

It was a colleague's voice.

Someone they once knew.

Caroline still couldn't believe he was alive.

Beside her, Mary rubbed her hands together nervously. "If we see them again today... we don't hide. Right?"

Alexis adjusted her pack straps, eyes scanning the slope. "Right. But we don't rush them. We announce ourselves clearly."

"Do you think they'll remember us?" Mary asked softly.

Caroline nodded. “Yes. How could they not?”

A distant voice carried up the trail — faint but unmistakable.

Bonnie.

Then a deeper voice answering her.

Jim.

Mary’s breath hitched. Alexis straightened, alert and ready.

Caroline stepped forward. “This is it. Stay close. Let me speak first.”

They descended the slope.

1. The Second Encounter

Jim and Bonnie were standing at the river’s edge, inspecting a cluster of tangled metal and driftwood — what had once been part of a footbridge. Jim crouched to clear debris while Bonnie held watch, scanning the treeline with her flashlight.

Bonnie was the first to hear it — the soft crunch of feet on gravel behind them.

She spun, flashlight raised.

Jim rose quickly, hand on the tool strapped to his side.

Caroline stepped out from behind a cedar trunk into the morning light, palms open.

“Jim,” she said.

Her voice trembled.

Jim froze. His eyes widened, scanning her face as if seeing a ghost.

“Caroline...?”

She nodded once, tears threatening. “It’s me.”

Mary and Alexis emerged beside her.

Bonnie inhaled sharply. “Mary? Alexis? You’re alive?”

Alexis gave a half-laugh, half-sob. "We could ask the same."

Jim took one cautious step forward, eyes moving between them, verifying what his mind struggled to believe.

"I don't understand," he said quietly. "I thought— we thought—everyone from the field teams..."
He swallowed hard.
"...was gone."

Caroline shook her head. "We had a bunker. Tom kept us alive."

Jim closed his eyes briefly, pained. "Tom... he made it that long?"

Mary nodded. "Long enough to save us."

Bonnie took a few more steps toward them. Her voice broke. "You look—"
She caught herself, emotions cracking through her composure.
"You look like hell. All of us do. But you're here. You're really here."

Caroline exhaled, a quiet, shaky sound. "We saw your flashlight two nights ago."

Jim blinked. "You saw us? We thought something was following us."

Alexis smirked slightly. "It was. Us."

Bonnie's laugh was part relief, part disbelief. She stepped forward without waiting and wrapped Mary in a sudden, fierce hug. Mary collapsed into it, crying openly.

Jim hesitated — then stepped forward and pulled Caroline into his arms.

For a moment the world felt less shattered.

They weren't five strangers wandering a dead civilization.

They were colleagues.

They were survivors.

They were human beings who still remembered how to think, how to care, how to build.

Maybe the world wasn't finished after all.

2. The Circle of Five

They moved to a flat area by the riverbank, where morning sun warmed the stones. For the first time in months, Caroline sat not in fear, not in exhaustion — but in the presence of people who truly understood everything she'd been through.

Jim studied them with a scientist's precision and a friend's concern.

"You stayed unexposed this whole time?" he asked.

"We were vigilant," Alexis said. "We read your preprint. Tom had copies."

Jim's face tightened. "I wish I could say the worst parts weren't true."

Bonnie nodded slowly. "We've seen the same things. Skeletons. Packs of feral dogs. Abandoned shelters. Disease spread everywhere dust settles."

Mary hugged her knees. "We saw... a lot."

Caroline reached into her pack and pulled out Tom's folded map. "He marked places he thought were safe zones. And a note that said, 'If you find others, stay with them.'"

Jim took the map gently, studying the circles Tom had drawn. His fingers shook slightly.

"He knew the score," Jim whispered. "He always did."

Bonnie placed a hand on his arm.

Mary looked between them. "Do you two have a destination? Or just... searching?"

"We're tracking patterns," Bonnie said. "Movement, water sources, any sign of structure we can rebuild with."

She paused.

"And looking for anyone like you."

Alexis leaned forward. "Then you found us."

Jim looked at each of them in turn — Caroline, Mary, Alexis — and something like hope flickered behind his tired eyes.

"Five adults," he said quietly. "Five unregressed minds in a world full of children."

"We're not children," Mary said softly. "Not anymore."

"No," Jim agreed. "You're survivors."

3. The Decision

By midday they had shared everything — the bunker, Tom's final message, the dogs, the skeletons, the intermittent radio static, the trail of clues that led them all to the same river.

Jim finally stood, stretching his back.

"Our next step," he said, "isn't to wander. It's to build."

Bonnie nodded. "A base. A safe zone. A place to live, not just survive."

Mary whispered, "A home?"

Caroline looked at the river. "People can be found. Or new ones may emerge. Tom believed that."

Alexis crossed her arms. "So where do we start?"

Jim looked down at Tom's map again.

Then he looked up, determination settling into his features.

"We start together."

4. A New Circle

For the first time since NRV-2027 ended the world, a small group of adults stood together in the same clearing.

Not isolated.

Not hiding.

Not running.

Planning.

Jim folded the map and handed it back to Caroline.

"You three survived the impossible," he said. "You belong with us."

Bonnie smiled gently. "Let's rebuild something. Anything."

Mary wiped her eyes. "I'd like that."

Alexis nodded. "I'm in."

Caroline breathed deeply, letting the moment settle into her bones.

They weren't just five survivors.

They were the first spark of a new world.

"Then we move," Jim said. "There's a place downstream we've been scouting. High ground. Protected. Water access. It could be our first real base."

The group formed up instinctively — Bonnie at the flank, Jim out front, Alexis scanning the rear, Caroline and Mary close together in the center.

Five adults.

One direction.

A single purpose.

As they walked, the forest seemed less ominous.

The river sounded less mournful.

The world, though broken, felt less empty.

Because for the first time since TEOTWAWKI...

they were not alone.

The Last Adults

★ End of Lost Journals — Part I