

## CHAPTER 1: USELESS

The screaming started at dawn, which gave Harper exactly thirty minutes to finish her skincare routine before breakfast.

She ignored it. Three years into the apocalypse and people got exiled from the California Safe Haven every two weeks like clockwork. First came the begging. Next, bargaining. Then lastly the crying before gates slamming shut, bringing silence.

Harper had timed her routine around it once, over a year ago. Probably a coping mechanism. Now her hands moved through the steps without thought. Cleanser during the begging, toner during the bargaining, moisturizer during the silence. Even on mornings when no one got thrown out, the rhythm stayed the same. Thirty minutes. Muscle memory.

Technically, she was being efficient.

The sun hammered through her dirty window. Harper's throat was dry, gritty—like she'd swallowed glitter. The air stuck to her skin, left a film of salt and something sour. The window unit wheezed—a wet, rattling gasp—then coughed out a breath of lukewarm air that did nothing but stir the heat around. And through the brick wall, sun-warmed and foggy with residue, a man's voice cracked.

"P-please, fuck man! I'll pay it back. I swear! Don't do this—"

Harper applied serum in careful upward strokes. The bottle was nearly empty, glass warm from the windowsill. The sticker had that rubbed-off fade—paper flaking under her thumb.

She was careful not to rub it off entirely. The La Mer logo still visible. Faded to shit, but still there. A reminder that normal used to exist.

Pre-ban. Back when companies could still add NuGen to skincare. Modified sugar that actually worked. Real vitamin C, not marketing bullshit.

Still better than nothing.

People acted like skincare was frivolous.

Those people had never dealt with combination skin in a post-apocalyptic climate.

She'd survived infected children eating half the country—she wouldn't end up looking like a handbag at twenty-four.

The man continued to beg. Louder now, getting more frantic and desperate the closer he got to the gate.

But her hands didn't shake at the sound of a man's cries for mercy. Never did. She'd learned that young. Stay calm when everyone else is losing their shit, and you end up with what you want. Worked at her grandfather's funeral when the whole family was screaming about the will—who got the Malibu house, who got the investment accounts, who deserved what.

Harper had just sat there. Quiet. Composed. While her aunts threw champagne flutes and her cousins threatened lawyers.

She'd walked away with the trust fund.

Staying calm was a skill. Even if most people didn't see it that way. Plus it kept her wrinkle free.

Finally the gates slammed shut. Metal meeting concrete, walls vibrating.

Silence.

Harper rolled her eyes, probably another coping mechanism, before checking the compact propped against the window. Cracked down the middle, held together by the hinge.

Blonde hair fell just past her shoulders, darker at the roots. Two boxes of dye were left in her mini-fridge. She'd been rationing them like antibiotics.

Her skin still had that glow. The dewy kind that came from expensive serums. A twenty-four-year-old face of someone who'd never missed a dermatologist appointment.

Blue eyes. Not the pale watery kind, but the saturated blue that looked good in photos. The kind magazines called "striking." She'd been told that her whole life.

Her lashes were naturally blonde, invisible without mascara. She applied it with the same precision she used to reserve for choosing between SoulCycle and Pilates. Two coats. Never clumpy. Back when that was the hardest decision she had to make. She looked good.

One of the few things she'd always been good at

Harper peeked through her extremely streaked window. Outside, the worker sector awakened. Someone was coughing. Wet, rattling, the kind that meant lungs weren't clearing right. A baby cried, got shushed and cried again.

Tent flaps scraped open. Canvas faded so thin Harper could see silhouettes moving inside. Bodies getting dressed, bodies already dressed, bodies that probably hadn't undressed at all.

A woman emerged carrying two empty water jugs. Her hands were wrapped in cloth, fingers too swollen to bend properly. She didn't look at Harper's house as she passed. Nobody ever looked directly at it.

Feet shuffled toward the mess tent. Raising dust that caught the morning light and turned the air the color of old concrete.

Harper's house sat on the edge of it all. Brick and mortar among canvas and desperation. Right next to the fence that divided the S.H.U.G.A.R. Initiative from the workers camp. Twenty by thirty feet. More than most could dream of. But honestly? She'd had shoe closets bigger than this in Malibu.

Someone walked past outside. Spat directly at the window she was staring through. The glob hit the glass with a wet slap. Yellow in the center, translucent at the edges. It clung for a second, then slid down slowly, like egg yolk breaking.

Harper winced, rolling her eyes at her reflection.

Same guy. Every morning. Mid-forties, graying beard, dented canteen. He'd spit, keep walking, never look back. Twenty minutes from now, the woman with the limp would do it. Then the kid with the burn scar. Then sometimes the older man who used to work in her father's office.

Harper knew their routine. Knew everyone's routine, really. Faces, patterns, details. Most people didn't bother tracking that stuff. She did.

The window was covered in dried streaks—layers building up over months. People had made it part of their morning ritual.

Like rubbing Buddha's belly for luck. Their way of saying fuck you to the man. She just happened to be the man's daughter.

Harper's face heated. She bit her bottom lip. Tasted copper.

Her hands went to her ponytail. Yanked it tighter. Higher. Tight enough her scalp stung. She could walk out there right now. Scream at him. Or better—tell her father. One word and the guy would be on night watch. On scavenger duty. Gone.

She had that power.

But using it meant admitting it bothered her. That their hate mattered. That she felt it. So she stood there. Adjusted her ponytail again even though it didn't need adjusting.

Being the bigger person. That's what she told herself, anyway.

They were just angry at the situation. Not at her specifically. Maybe.

No. They hated her too.

The knock was quiet. Respectful.

"Come in."

Her father filled the doorway.

Marcus Hale stood over six feet. Broad-shouldered. The kind of substantial that made spaces feel smaller. Three years into the apocalypse, he still looked put together—clean-shaven, sharp jawline, dark hair kept military-short with gray creeping in at the temples. Distinguished, not old.

His hands were large. Used to sign contracts. Now signed ration schedules. Still carried the same authority. Dark eyes that tracked everything. The kind that made people confess before he asked questions.

Pressed shirt despite limited water. Boots polished despite limited time.

He looked like a leader.

Harper looked like someone who'd spent forty-five minutes on her hair.

"Morning, snickerdoodle." His eyes swept the room—mini-fridge humming, laptop charging, actual mattress.

Everything organized. Makeup sorted by brand on the windowsill—Dior, Chanel, MAC, alphabetical. Skincare lined up by routine step. Three phone chargers coiled and labeled even though there was no service. Dead batteries in a drawer, sorted by size, because throwing them away felt wrong. A stack of Vogue magazines from 2019 through 2021, arranged by month. Designer shoes she'd never wear again—Louboutins, Jimmy Choos, Manolos—lined up by heel height in a box under her bed.

Harper couldn't throw anything away. But she could organize it. Make it neat. Make it make sense. Even when nothing made sense anymore.

Marcus's expression shifted. Not guilt. Just... aware. Of how it looked. Of what people said.

He'd keep doing it anyway.

"Sleep okay?"

"Fine." Harper grabbed her dead phone, slipped it into her pocket. Three years without service and she still carried it. The weight just felt right. "What's up?"

Outside, voices drifted toward her window.

"—princess gets a whole house—"

"—doesn't do shit while we—"

Footsteps stopped.

Harper looked up. Two workers stood in her open doorway, large logs in hand. They'd been walking past, hadn't looked before they spoke.

Now they were staring at Marcus. The color drained from their faces.

Marcus didn't raise his voice. Didn't need to.

"Names."

"Jackson and Rivera," Harper said before they could answer.

All three men turned to look at her.

She remembered Jackson had complained about the soap rationing last month—said the lye was burning his hands. Rivera had dropped his water jug two weeks ago, dented the bottom. Kept using it anyway even though it wobbled every time he set it down.

The workers stared at her along with Marcus.

Then Marcus turned back to them.

Pulled a small notebook from his pocket. Wrote something down then put it away.

"You're both on night watch. Three weeks. Starting tonight."

Night watch meant standing on the walls in the dark. Where infected children climbed. Where people disappeared.

"Sir, please—" Jackson's voice cracked. "We didn't mean—"

"Would you prefer scavenger duty?" Marcus asked. His tone didn't change. Might as well have been discussing the weather. "There's plenty of openings."

Scavenger duty meant going outside the walls. Most didn't come back. Even during the day.

"No sir," Rivera said quickly. "Night watch is fine, sir."

"Yes sir," Jackson echoed. "Thank you, sir."

They turned to leave.

"And gentlemen?" Marcus's voice carried just enough to stop them. Not loud, but present. "That window better be spotless before I make my rounds this afternoon."

"Yes sir."

They left fast.

Marcus ran a hand through his hair. Closed the door. Turned back to Harper.

His face changed completely. The hard edges softened. The commander disappeared.

Just Dad again.

"I'm leaving today," he said, voice gentle now. Almost apologetic. "DC. Emergency council meeting."

Harper's stomach dropped. "For how long?"

"Couple weeks. Three at most. Emergency in DC."

He shifted his weight. Left foot to right. The tell he had when he was about to offer something he knew she shouldn't accept.

His hand moved toward his pocket—where he used to keep his wallet, back when wallets mattered—then stopped. Hovered. Dropped.

Harper could already see it. Read it in the way his shoulders tensed, the way his eyes darted to the mini-fridge, the laptop, the mattress.

That look that meant he was about to try to fix this with something. Money she didn't have anymore. Privileges she shouldn't still have.

"Malcolm will be in charge while I'm gone." He moved closer. His jaw tightened—another tell. "But I've already told him—"

"Told him what?" Harper's voice came out sharper than she meant. "That I'm off limits? That I get special treatment?"

Marcus's jaw tightened. "That you're not to be bothered."

"Right. Because that won't make people hate me more."

"Harper—"

"No, it's fine." She turned away, that familiar knot forming in her chest. Anger at him for protecting her. Anger at herself for wanting him to protect her. "It's great, actually. Malcolm will love getting orders to leave me alone."

"I'm trying to keep you safe."

"You're trying to keep me useless." The words came out before she could stop them.

Silence.

Her father looked like she'd slapped him.

Harper's face heated. She wanted to take it back. Wanted to not mean it. But she did mean it, and that made it worse. Because she also didn't want to change. Didn't want to be the person who had to work and suffer and sleep in tents.

She wanted to be spoiled and resent being spoiled at the same time.

"I'm sorry," Marcus said quietly. "I know I haven't... prepared you. I should have made you do the training. Should have made you contribute. But I couldn't—" His voice cracked slightly. "You're all I have left, Harper. And I know that's selfish. I know it's hurting you. But I can't—"

He stopped. Ran a hand through his hair again.

Harper's throat felt too tight. "Dad—"

"Malcolm will leave you alone," Marcus said, his voice firmer now. Back to the commander tone he used with everyone else. "I've made that clear. You'll be fine for three weeks."

"And then what? You come back and everything stays the same?"

"Yes." He said it like it was simple. Like it wasn't the whole problem.

Harper wanted to scream. Wanted to tell him he was making everything worse. That every privilege he gave her was another reason for people to hate her. That she couldn't survive without him \*because\* he'd never made her learn how.

But she also wanted him to keep protecting her.

Wanted the brick house and the extra rations and the complete lack of expectations.

Instead, her voice came out small. And Hated herself for it.

"Can't you just... stay?"

The words felt pathetic even as she said them. She was twenty-four years old. Not six.

But she sounded six.

Marcus's expression softened. He moved closer, pulled her into his arms. One hand came up to stroke her hair—the same way he used to when she'd wake up from nightmares as a kid.

"I wish I could, sweetheart," he said quietly. "But it's an emergency meeting. I have to go. I'm sorry."

Harper stood there, letting herself be held like a child. Hating it. Needing it.

"It's only three weeks," Marcus continued, still stroking her hair. Voice soft. Soothing. "Malcolm won't touch you. I've made sure of it. You'll be safe. I promise."

She wanted to pull away. Wanted to prove she didn't need this.

But she didn't move.

"Okay," she whispered instead.

Marcus kissed the top of her head. Held her for another moment—long enough that Harper felt herself relax despite everything. Long enough that she almost believed three weeks would be fine.

Then he let go.

"I'll be back before you know it."

Harper nodded. Didn't trust her voice.

He squeezed her shoulder once—reassuring, protective—then left.

The door clicked shut.

Three weeks. Malcolm in charge.

Malcolm, who'd called her dead weight.

Malcolm wouldn't exile her. Couldn't. Even he wasn't stupid enough to touch the owner's daughter. But he'd make her life hell in every other way that didn't cross that line.

Three weeks of Malcolm treating her exactly like everyone else. No special treatment. No exceptions. Military discipline. Harsh rules. The same expectations he had for people who actually worked.

The same tone he used on people who'd spent three years surviving instead of sitting in a brick house watching burned DVDs of Gossip Girl.

He wouldn't do more than that. Her father would punish him for it. But he'd enjoy every second of doing exactly that much.

Harper pushed the thought down where she kept all the uncomfortable realizations. It would be fine. Her father would come back and nothing would change.

It had to be.

Harper waited twenty minutes before venturing outside. Standard protocol for avoiding human interaction.

But not before her instant coffee.

Back in her old life, she'd spent twenty dollars on a small latte with her name spelled wrong. Now she drank instant coffee that tasted like someone's cruel joke and was grateful for it.

Character development, kind of.

She filled her chipped mug with hot water and stirred in the crystallized disappointment that passed for coffee. The first sip was bitter, gritty, with an aftertaste that lingered.

She drank it anyway.

Through her window, a S.H.U.G.A.R. Initiative vehicle rolled past.

Not a truck. Something else.

The exterior looked wrong—metal that moved in ways metal shouldn't. Too smooth. It had a weird pink color like she had never seen before. In certain light it looked wet. Not dirty-wet. Something else.

Like the metal itself was alive.

Harper blinked. Looked again.

Gone. Already turned down the side path toward the restricted zone.

But she'd heard it. The engine made a sound that wasn't quite mechanical. A wet thrumming that made her skin crawl.

Last week someone said they'd heard screaming from inside it.

Probably just panic-mongering.

The S.H.U.G.A.R. Initiative wouldn't do anything like that.

Probably.

They had access to technology that shouldn't exist anymore. Vehicles that ran without fuel. Medical equipment that worked too well. Weapons that looked like science fiction.

A guy in the worker sector had asked too many questions about the S.H.U.G.A.R. vehicles last year.

He'd been assigned to exterior maintenance.  
Outside the walls.

Nobody asked questions anymore.

She finished her coffee, rinsed the mug, and steeled herself for the walk to the mess tent.

The worker sector looked the same as always.

Depressing.

Rows of tents held together by prayer and duct tape. Canvas faded to yellow. Laundry hanging on lines—clothes washed so many times they were more holes than fabric. The air smelled like sweat and dust and chemicals from the communal toilets.

People moved through morning routines. Faces Harper recognized. Most of them, anyway.

The woman with the twins who always tied her hair the same way. The older man who'd worked in accounting before—Henderson, maybe? Or Hendricks. The teenager with the scar across his eyebrow who never made eye contact.

She knew their faces. Their patterns. Not their names. Not all of them. But she'd recognize them anywhere.

Harper's route took her through the center. She could've walked the perimeter—longer but less populated. But some stubborn part of her refused to hide. If they wanted to hate her, fine.

She wouldn't skulk.

Eyes tracked her. A woman carrying bags of sand stepped into her path. Deliberate. Forcing Harper to move around her. The woman's face was weathered. Aged beyond her years by sun and labor.

A man repairing tent poles looked up as she passed. His expression made it clear what he thought.

They didn't spit this time.

The contempt was just as clear.

Then Harper saw them.

Three children playing near a tent. Two girls and a boy, maybe six or seven. Some kind of game with rocks and sticks. Their laughter bright against the gray morning.

Harper slowed.

She'd always liked kids. Been good with them. Back in her old life, she'd volunteered at a children's hospital charity event. More for press than kindness, but still. The kids had liked her.

These children looked different. Harder. Their eyes held knowledge they shouldn't have.

Things Harper had been protected from.

The little boy looked up. Face smudged with dirt. Clothes patched and re-patched until they were more thread than fabric.

"Hi," Harper said, smiling. "What are you playing?"

The boy opened his mouth.

"Mia. Come here." A woman emerged from the tent. Mid-thirties. Exhausted. Protective anger from losing too much. Hands raw and cracked. "Now."

The girl closest to Harper hesitated. Stick still raised mid-game.

"I said now." The woman's eyes locked on Harper.

“Stay away from my children.”

The three kids scrambled toward the tent. The boy looked back once. Confused. His mother pulled him inside.

Harper just stood there.

She'd only wanted to say hello.

But normal didn't exist anymore. And Harper was the enemy—the privileged girl in her brick house while their children slept on dirt.

She kept walking.

At some point Harper's stubbornness gave out. She diverted to her usual route past the S.H.U.G.A.R. Initiative compound. Longer. Meant passing the fence that separated the elite from everyone else.

Something about seeing the compound made her feel connected to the before-times. When having nice things wasn't a crime.

The compound was smaller than the worker sector but infinitely nicer. Actual buildings. Brick and concrete instead of canvas. Windows with real glass. Solar panels that worked. Security that kept people safe.

The woman was there.

Always there in the mornings.

Late-thirties. Blonde going gray in that way that looked like a choice instead of surrender. Harper had recognized her immediately three years ago—Cheyenne Rivers. Model-turned-actress. Magazine covers throughout Harper's teenage years. Luxury fashion campaigns. Guest appearances on prestige TV. The kind of beautiful that seemed effortless but wasn't.

Now Cheyenne was doing push-ups in the courtyard.

Real ones. Perfect form. Fifty so far. Sweat darkened her shirt. Dripped onto concrete.

Harper had never understood it.

Cheyenne's father was here too. Rich. Connected. Not Marcus Hale rich, but comfortable. Cheyenne could've had an easier life. Lighter work. The privilege that came from the right last name.

Instead, she'd chosen this. Training at dawn. Physical labor. Earning respect instead of inheriting it.

Didn't make sense.

Maybe Cheyenne was stupid. Maybe she had issues. Rich people always had issues. Harper knew that firsthand.

The point was, Cheyenne was making bad choices.

And Harper was making good choices by not doing push-ups like a masochist.

Logical.

One of the S.H.U.G.A.R. Initiative guards walked past. Cheyenne stood. Wiped sweat with the hem of her shirt. Said something that made him laugh. Easy conversation. Mutual respect.

Like colleagues. Like equals. Like she'd earned it.

Harper looked at her own hands. Nails painted pale pink. Chipped but redone last week with the last bottle of polish. Thirty dollars at Sephora three years ago.

Cheyenne's nails were trimmed short. Practical.

The hands of someone who worked.

Harper looked back at the compound. At buildings with reinforced walls. At Cheyenne doing another set of push-ups like physical suffering was aspirational.

She had Three weeks. And she was going to use those three weeks to prove she wasn't dead weight.

But standing there, watching the sun climb higher and turn the air thick, Harper couldn't figure out where to start.

Harper turned away from the fence. Away from Cheyenne and her stupid push-ups. Away from the life she could've had if she'd been stronger or braver or more willing to feel like shit for longer than three days.

Everything would be fine.

It had to be.

The alternative was too terrifying to think about, so Harper did what she'd always done.

She didn't think about it at all.

## CHAPTER 2: HATERS

The mess tent reeked. Damp canvas. Unwashed bodies packed too close. Something burnt at the bottom of a pot that nobody had bothered to scrape clean.

Harper's throat tightened as she walked in. The air was thick, almost solid. Made it hard to breathe without tasting it.

Harper arrived at noon. Line already thirty people deep, but she was used to it. Normally she skipped lunch crowds, sent Britt or Aaron to grab her midday rations. But with her father gone and Malcolm in charge, showing her face for breakfast seemed necessary.

Proof of existence. Proof she wasn't hiding.

She joined the line. Eyes found her immediately. That physical weight of being watched. Assessed. Judged.

Harper pulled out her dead phone. Pretended to scroll through old photos. Because making eye contact with people who hated her seemed like poor time management.

"Harpy!"

Britt materialized. Twenty-six. Blonde. Former sorority president. The kind of person who'd organized charity galas and called it "giving back" while wearing dresses that cost more than the charity received.

"Oh my god, I heard your dad left this morning." Britt grabbed her arm with both hands. Touch as communication—her primary language. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. He'll be back in like, three weeks."

"You're so brave." Britt squeezed harder. "I'd be losing it if my dad left."

Aaron appeared on her other side. Twenty-eight. Trust fund kid from Newport Beach. Still wore polo shirts three years into the apocalypse. Still had product in his hair.

Harper had no idea where he was getting hair product. She'd run out of good conditioner eighteen months ago.

"Hale." Aaron did that bro-nod thing. "Holding up?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Malcolm's not giving you trouble?" Aaron's voice dropped. "Because I heard he's been making noises about 'restructuring resource allocation.'"

Harper waved dismissively. "Malcolm's always making noises. He's bitter my dad's in charge and he's not. Classic middle management."

"You sure? Because some people think—"

"Some people are paranoid." Harper's voice got louder. Confident. "Malcolm's an asshole but he's not stupid. My dad will be back before he can try anything."

Britt giggled. "You're totally right."

The line moved forward. Britt and Aaron had already gotten their portions—standard single servings. When Harper reached the counter, the woman's face went carefully blank.

"Bowl," the woman said.

Harper held out her tray.

The woman scooped. Paused. Scooped again.

Double portion. Maybe more. Harper's bowl was definitely fuller than the guy's in front of her.

Behind her, someone made a sound. Disgust without words.

Harper took her food. Britt and Aaron flanked her like decorative bodyguards.

"Did you hear that?" Britt whispered, loud enough several people heard. "Someone literally made a noise at you."

They were halfway to an empty table when a voice cut through the mess tent noise:

"Must be nice."

Harper's spine went rigid. She turned.

A woman sat at the table they'd just passed. Older. Fifties maybe. Gaunt in a way that suggested skipped meals. Faded maintenance uniform. Dark circles. Hair unwashed for days.

Harper surprisingly didn't recognize her.

"Excuse me?"

The woman didn't look up. Just kept stirring her paste. "Nothing. Thinking out loud."

"No, say it." Harper's voice got louder. Braver with Britt and Aaron beside her. "You clearly have something to say."

The woman finally looked up. Her eyes weren't angry.

Just tired. Empty.

"I said, must be nice. Getting special treatment. Double portions. Getting chances most of us would kill for and just... throwing them away."

Harper's stomach dropped. Face stayed neutral. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Really?" The woman's voice was quiet. Matter-of-fact. "My sister applied for the S.H.U.G.A.R. Initiative program three times. Three times they rejected her. Said they were full. Said she didn't meet criteria."

Oh no.

"Meanwhile, Marcus Hale's daughter gets accepted first try—no questions asked—lasts three whole days, and quits because it was too hard."

Around them, tables had gone quiet. Listening.

Entertainment.

"That's not—" Harper started.

"My sister would've done anything for that spot." The woman's voice stayed quiet. Worse than anger. "She's been training on her own for months. Running laps at night when she should be sleeping. Practicing with whatever she can find."

She took a bite. Chewed slowly. Never broke eye contact.

"But yeah. Must be nice. Getting opportunities handed to you just to waste them."

Harper's face was on fire. Everyone was staring.

The worst part—the woman wasn't wrong.

Harper had gotten in because of her father. She knew it. Everyone knew it. And she'd quit because it was hard and humiliating and she'd hated every second.

But that didn't mean this woman had the right to call her out. In public. In front of everyone.

"Look, I'm sorry about your sister. But that's not my fault. I didn't make the rules."

"No. You just benefit from them."

"What am I supposed to do? Apologize for who my father is?"

"No." The woman's voice was so tired. "But you could've tried. You could've actually tried instead of quitting the second things got difficult."

The word tried hit harder than anger would have.

This woman wasn't attacking Harper out of jealousy. She was stating facts.

Obvious facts everyone could see.

"Tell your sister I'm sorry," Aaron said. Voice cold. "Sorry she's bitter."

The woman looked at him. Then back at Harper. "I'm not bitter. I'm just tired of watching people waste opportunities while good people beg for scraps."

Harper let herself be pulled away. Britt on one side, Aaron on the other. Her hands were shaking. Her tray was shaking.

"Don't listen to her," Britt said. "She's just a hater."

They found seats at the edge.

Harper stared at her bowl. Double portion that suddenly felt like evidence.

Gray-brown paste. Thick as clay. Mineral smell. The texture of something that had given up.

She took a bite.

Still disgusting.

"God, this stuff is so gross," Britt said, poking at her bowl. "I literally can't believe we're supposed to survive on this."

Harper looked at Britt's hair. It was fine. Everyone's hair was thinner now.

"At least it's food," Aaron said.

"Barely. When we get out of here, when things go back to normal, I'm going straight to Erewhon Market."

Harper latched onto this. Safe territory. Before-times talk made the present bearable.

"Oh my god, same. I miss sushi so bad. That place in Santa Monica? With the truffle rolls?"

"Yes! That place was amazing."

Harper didn't remember Britt being there. Nodded anyway.

"I dream about In-N-Out," Aaron said. "Double-double, animal style."

"With actual fries," Harper jumped in, grateful to talk about anything except that woman's sister. "Real fries made with NuGen-oil. Remember when fries had nutrients?"

"God, NuGen fries were so good," Britt said.

They spent ten minutes talking about food they'd never eat again.

Harper's untouched bowl sat between them.

Finally she pushed it toward Britt. "You want some? I have protein bars at home."

She didn't.

Britt's face lit up. "Really? Oh my god, you're literally the best."

She took a generous scoop. Didn't offer to share with Aaron first.

Aaron cleared his throat. Puppy dog eyes.

Harper slid the bowl between them. "Go for it."

Watching them fight over her scraps made her feel powerful. Like she had something they wanted.

Which meant they needed her.

"You're seriously so nice," Britt said through a mouthful.

Harper smiled.

This was why she kept them around. They made her feel good. Agreed with her. Didn't make her feel useless.

Sure, they were transactional. She knew that. They hung around because she had benefits—extra food, protection, access.

But that was fine.

She'd tried earning respect the real way once. Three days of humiliation.

So if buying friendship with extra rations was what it took, fine.

At least they smiled at her.

After lunch, Harper spent the afternoon alone. She loved Britt and Aaron—or liked them—but they could be exhausting.

Sometimes she just wanted to sit in silence.

She watched Gossip Girl. Moisturized—one thin coat to make the bottle stretch. Found a protein bar in the back of her mini-fridge. Pre-NuGen stock. Preservatives keeping it technically edible.

She remembered NuGen chocolate bars. The ones fortified with iron. You could eat three and hit your daily nutritional targets.

This protein bar had none of that. Just compressed sadness.

By six, Britt and Aaron came over. Sprawled on her mattress like they lived there.

Quinn showed up at six fifteen. Never a minute late. Knocked exactly three times. Never two, never four. Entered without waiting.

He looked exactly like always. Mid-thirties going on sixty. Thick black-framed glasses held together with electrical tape. Greasy dark hair. Stubble too patchy to be a beard. Rumpled khakis and a button-up that might have been white once but was now defeated beige.

Scrawny. The kind of thin that came from forgetting to eat because finishing your scientific studies was more important.

"Harper." He nodded. Looked at Britt and Aaron. "Brittany. Aaron."

"It's Britt," Britt said.

"Noted."

Harper had set out four bowls with reheated paste. Plus extras—crackers she'd been saving. A can of tuna from last week.

Apocalypse luxury.

"Oh my god, Harper, you didn't have to do all this," Britt said.

Her eyes were already on the tuna. Hands reaching before the words finished. They said this every time. The gratitude script. Performed with just enough enthusiasm to seem genuine.

"It's fine. I have plenty."

She didn't.

Britt split the tuna between her and Aaron's bowls without asking. Her movements smooth. Practiced. Like she'd done this before.

Because she had.

Aaron's fork was already raised. Ready.

Neither of them offered Harper any. Didn't even glance at her bowl to check if she wanted some.

Just took it. Like it was owed.

Harper watched this happen. Recognized every movement, every beat.

She'd seen it before. Every time.

Quinn observed this. Detached curiosity. Nature documentary.

"That tuna has a shelf life of seven years," Quinn said. "Rationing it over several days would be more strategic."

Harper rolled her eyes. "It's just tuna, Quinn."

"Combined with the paste it's approximately twelve hundred calories of protein. Could sustain you through three separate meals."

"Or I could share it with my friends now. Like a normal person."

"Yeah, Quinn," Britt jumped in. "Not everything has to be survival math."

"Being generous and being strategic aren't mutually exclusive." Quinn's voice was flat. "But statistically, emotional decision-making regarding resource allocation has a higher failure rate."

"Dude, just eat your food," Aaron interrupted.

Quinn shrugged, but Compiled.

"This protein paste is thirty-two percent less nutritious than last month's batch. They're cutting corners on the soy ratios."

"Gross," Britt said.

Quinn looked at her like she'd spoken a foreign language. "It's not qualitative. It's quantitative. The nutritional density has decreased by a measurable margin. August fifteenth batch was forty-one percent soy protein isolate, seventeen percent wheat gluten, twelve percent—"

"Dude, how do you remember all that?" Aaron interrupted.

Quinn blinked. "I read the supply manifest. Once."

"When?"

"August fifteenth."

Aaron stared. "That was like four months ago."

Quinn pushed his glasses up. "I remember things I've read. Seen. Heard. It's not intentional. Just how my brain processes information."

"That's..." Britt trailed off.

"Eidetic memory," Quinn said. "Photographic, technically, though that's a misnomer. The retention is auditory and spatial as well. Not just visual."

Harper had known Quinn was smart. Everyone knew Quinn was smart. But this was different. This wasn't intelligence. This was his brain working like a hard drive. Recording everything. Storing everything. Never forgetting anything.

Including every single time she'd quit.

"Still gross," Britt said, going back to her food.  
Quinn gave up

"Speaking of survival," Aaron said, "heard S.H.U.G.A.R. got another supply drop last week. Straight from DC. Unmarked trucks. Middle of the night."

"So?" Britt said.

"So that's the third one this month. What are they getting that we're not?"

Quinn pushed his glasses up. "Classified equipment requires classified transport protocols."

"But what equipment? Where's this shit even coming from?"

"Probably pre-war stockpiles. Military research facilities. DARPA projects." Quinn took a methodical bite. "S.H.U.G.A.R. has access to resources beyond standard survivor capabilities. The source is classified. The nature is classified. But the results are observable."

Harper tuned out. Tech talk was boring.

"How's the research going?" Harper asked.

Quinn was one of three researchers working on infection analysis. He also maintained the haven's computer systems. Valuable skills.

That's why he hadn't gone to DC this time. S.H.U.G.A.R. needed him for tests.

"Slow," Quinn said. "Every time we develop a potential counter-agent, the infection adapts. It's like trying to shoot a moving target that learns to dodge."

"That sucks," Harper said.

"Fascinating from an evolutionary biology perspective. The mutation rate suggests intentional design. Not natural evolution." Quinn's voice stayed flat. "The CDC keeps referencing the Osaka incident but the data is heavily redacted. Ground zero for the outbreak."

He pushed his glasses up. "Chemical warfare that got out of control. Or biological weapon testing that breached containment. Japan closed their borders a year before anyone else. That's not coincidence—that's prior knowledge."

Quinn took another bite. "Japan engineered this. But won't admit it."

"Cool." Harper tuned out.

Quinn switched topics. "Your father left this morning."

"Yeah. DC."

"Emergency meetings suggest crisis-level decision-making. Which means the situation is deteriorating faster than projected." Quinn looked at her over his glasses. "Interesting timing. Malcolm's been vocal about resource optimization. Your father leaving creates a window for policy changes."

Harper's stomach tightened. Voice stayed light. "Malcolm's not going to do anything."

"Maybe. But the power dynamic shifts significantly when a deterrent is removed." Quinn set down his spoon. "You're statistically the most vulnerable person in this facility right now. No combat training. No practical skills. No resource generation capability. Complete dependency on external protection."

Harper's face burned. "Jesus, Quinn. Way to be a downer."

"I'm not being pessimistic. I'm being accurate. You're twenty-four and you can't start a fire."

"I can start a fire."

"Can you?"

"I could. If I needed to."

"But you've never done it."

"That doesn't mean I can't."

Quinn tilted his head. "The other day I watched you try to open a can of beans for ten minutes before giving up."

Harper's face got hotter. "The can opener was broken!"

"It wasn't. The can was upside down."

"That's—it was confusing!"

"You asked Dr. Rivera to teach you first aid. Lasted one session. Said the blood made you nauseous."

"I have a weak stomach!"

"You vomited because you saw a diagram. Not actual blood. A line drawing." Quinn's voice stayed flat. "You have a pattern. You express interest in learning something. You attempt it once, maybe twice. You encounter difficulty. You quit."

Aaron snorted. Britt elbowed him.

Harper wanted to throw her bowl at Quinn's face. "Why are you even here if you're just going to criticize me?"

"I'm not criticizing. I'm observing." Quinn took another bite. "Look. I like you. You're one of the few people who doesn't treat me like I'm defective. You invite me to meals. You don't ask questions about my past. You just... accept things. You're nice."

Harper's throat felt tight.

Almost sounded like a compliment.

"But that doesn't change reality. People don't like you because you don't contribute. And if something happens to your father, nobody here is going to protect you out of goodwill."

"That's not true," Britt said quickly. "We'd protect her."

Quinn looked at Britt. Really looked. "Would you?"

"Of course!"

"If it came down to your survival or hers. If there was limited food or limited space. If protecting her meant risking your own life." Quinn's voice stayed calm. "Would you actually sacrifice your own survival for someone who's never done anything for you except share extra food she gets for free?"

Britt opened her mouth. Closed it. "That's not... that's not fair."

"I'm not making a moral judgment. I'm asking a question. Would you?"

Britt looked at Harper. Then away. "I... I mean..."

"Exactly. People protect assets. People who provide value. You're not an asset. You're a liability."

Harper felt her heart beat in her fingertips. "I don't need people to save me. I have skills."

"Such as?"

"I—" Harper's mind raced. "I remember people. Their faces, their names, their birthdays. Details about them. I actually care about—"

"You developed that skill to avoid social awkwardness at charity galas," Quinn interrupted. His voice stayed flat. Clinical. "When someone approaches you at a party and says 'remember me?', you don't have to lie and pretend because you've already catalogued their face, their name, the context of your previous interaction. That's not empathy. That's social pattern recognition designed to maintain status."

Harper's jaw tightened. "Whatever. But I can stay calm. Under pressure. In stressful situations."

"To manipulate outcomes in your favor," Quinn said. "You've demonstrated exceptional emotional regulation when it benefits you. Your grandfather's funeral. Remaining composed when people ceremoniously spit on your window. It's to make you seem like you are the most rational party."

Her face got hotter. "I'm organized—"

"Accurate. You demonstrate compulsive organizational tendencies. Alphabetized cosmetics. Chronologically arranged magazines from 2019 to 2021. Dead batteries sorted by size despite having no functional purpose." Quinn pushed his glasses up. "However, organizational skills applied to luxury goods don't translate to survival contexts. How does arranging designer shoes by heel height contribute to water purification? Food acquisition? Defensive capabilities?"

"You- I... you don't know what you're talking about. I can like, read body language," Harper said. Voice rising. "I can tell when people are lying. When they're faking. When they want something."

Quinn paused. Tilted his head. Then looked at Aaron and Britt, then back to Harper with a raised eyebrow.

"That's actually accurate. You demonstrate above-average capability in nonverbal communication analysis. Microexpressions. Postural shifts. Physiological indicators of

deception." His voice stayed clinical. "In a survival context, that's valuable. Detecting threats. Identifying unreliable allies. Negotiating resource exchanges."

Harper felt a flicker of hope.

Quinn crushed it.

"However, you don't know how to apply that skill operationally. You use it to identify fake friends and gold-diggers in social settings. Not to assess whether someone's lying about supply routes. Not to detect if a trading partner is planning to use you. Not to read an infected's movement patterns before it attacks."

He took another bite. Chewed methodically.

"You possess skills with theoretical survival applications. But you've never practiced applying them outside privileged social contexts. Which renders them functionally useless in your current environment."

Harper's hands were shaking. "I can stay calm under pressure."

"Can you?"

"Yes!"

"You're not demonstrating that capability currently." Quinn's voice stayed perfectly level. "Elevated vocal volume. Increased respiratory rate. Facial flushing. Hands trembling. All physiological indicators of emotional dysregulation."

"Because you're—" Harper's voice cracked. She was yelling now. Couldn't stop. "Because you're sitting here telling me I'm useless!"

"I'm providing objective analysis of your current skill set and its applicability to—"

"Stop TALKING like that!" Harper slammed her hand on the table. Her bowl jumped. "Stop analyzing me like I'm some fucking experiment!"

Quinn blinked. "I'm attempting to help you understand—"

"You don't know me, Quinn." Her voice was shaking. Years of people calling her useless, dismissing her, hating her—all of it crashing down at once. But this was worse. Because Quinn wasn't saying it out of jealousy or spite. He was saying it because he cared. Because it was true. "You don't get to sit there and tell me who I am."

"Respectfully, you're not that difficult to analyze."

Something in Harper snapped.

"Get out."

Quinn blinked. "What?"

"I said get the fuck out." Her voice cracked. "If all you're going to do is tell me how useless I am, you can fucking leave."

Quinn sat there. Calculating where he'd miscalculated.

Then he stood slowly. "I apologize. I wasn't attempting to cause distress. I was attempting to provide you with accurate assessment of your situation so you could develop appropriate survival strategies."

"Well, I don't need your help."

"Yes, you do. You need everyone's help. That's the problem."

He paused. Something flickered across his face. "I'd know."

He left. Didn't slam the door. Just walked out like he'd stated a theorem.

Harper watched him go. For just a second, his shoulders had slumped. Like he was carrying something heavy.

Then he straightened and was gone. Silence filled the house. Heavy.

"What an asshole," Aaron said finally.

"Seriously." Britt moved to sit next to Harper. Arm around her shoulders. "Don't listen to him. He's weird."

"He's such a dick," Aaron continued. Voice getting louder. "Acting like he's smarter than everyone."

"And that whole thing about us not protecting you?" Britt squeezed Harper's shoulder. "That's bullshit. Of course we'd protect you. You're our friend Harpy."

Harper nodded.

Even though Quinn's words echoed.

'Would you?'

'Would you actually sacrifice your own survival?'

She shoved the thought away. Quinn didn't understand. Didn't get loyalty. Didn't get friendship.

That's why he was alone.

"He's just jealous," Britt said. "Because you have us and he's got nobody."

They kept talking. Kept reassuring her. Kept building her back up with words that felt good even if they rang hollow.

Britt and Aaron left around eight.

After they left, in the quiet with only the mini-fridge humming, Quinn's words settled like stones.

'You have a pattern.'

The thing was, Quinn was right. She had a pattern of starting things and quitting when they got hard. But knowing something and changing it were two different things.

And change was hard. Quitting was easy.

Harper had always been good at easy.

She sat alone with her laptop. Gossip Girl episode she'd seen twelve times. Blair and Serena fighting over some guy.

Harper picked up her phone that she was charging—23% battery—and scrolled through old photos. Her and friends at a Malibu beach house. Everyone tan and laughing. Her at some charity gala in a three-thousand-dollar dress. Brunch. Mimosas. Avocado toast. Sitting with her grandfather and his 18-year-old wife Naomi. Problems that seemed so big then but were so small.

That girl was gone. That world was gone.

Quinn's words pushed back: 'You're not an asset. You're a liability.'

She shoved them away.

He didn't understand people. Didn't understand that some things mattered more than survival statistics.

Things like...

Harper's brain stalled out.

Her father would be back in a few weeks. Malcolm would leave her alone. The walls would hold.

Everything would be fine.

It had to be.

Harper got up. Plugged in her laptop to charge. Went back to bed and pulled her blanket up.

Outside, gunshots started.

Harper didn't flinch. Didn't open her eyes.

Just another night. Guards on the outer wall. Keeping infected away.

It happened every night. Distant cracks echoing. Rhythm as regular as a heartbeat.

Harper had stopped noticing two years ago. Background noise.

Tonight felt different though. More gunfire. Sustained bursts instead of scattered shots.

Harper's eyes opened slightly. She stared at the ceiling.

Jackson and Rivera. Night watch. Three weeks. Starting tonight. Her father's punishment for talking shit about her. For getting caught.

They were up there right now. On the walls. In the dark. Where infected children climbed. Where people disappeared.

Harper's stomach twisted.

She tried to push the thought away. They'd be fine. Guards didn't always die on night watch. Most of them came back.

Most.

The gunfire continued. Closer than usual.

Harper pulled her blanket tighter and squeezed her eyes shut.

It was fine. The guards had it handled. Jackson and Rivera would be fine. They had to be.

The lights flickered.

Harper's breath caught.

Her mini-fridge hummed. Stuttered. Hummed again. Her charger light blinked. The overhead bulb dimmed. Brightened. Dimmed again.

That didn't happen every night.

Harper sat up. Stared at the bulb.

More gunfire. Closer than before.

Harper pulled her blanket tighter. Cold feeling in her stomach.

It was fine. The guards had it handled. The walls were thick. The infected never got through.

They never got through.

The lights steadied. Stopped flickering.

The gunfire continued. Didn't get closer.

Whatever it was, the guards were handling it.

Just another night. Just the guards doing their job. Just background noise. Nothing to worry about.

Outside, someone was crying. Someone was always crying late at night. Harper had gotten good at ignoring that too.

She forced her breathing to slow. Forced her mind to empty. Forced herself not to think about flickering lights or increased gunfire or the fact that something might be getting closer.

Sleep came eventually.

Restless and thin.

But it came.

## CHAPTER 3: USEFUL

Harper woke to sunlight cutting through her curtain along with three seconds of mercy before memory returned.

Her father had left. Quinn had dissected her uselessness. The maintenance worker's sister who'd applied to S.H.U.G.A.R. three times while Harper lasted three days.

'You have a pattern.'

Harper shoved the thought away and reached for her laptop.

Gone. Right. Charging.

The solar panel on her windowsill sat dark, its indicator light dead. She unplugged her laptop—full battery—and repositioned the panel toward direct sunlight.

Maybe tonight she could charge her phone.

Outside, the California Safe Haven performed its morning ritual—voices calling orders, metal clanging.

She pulled on jeans that needed washing and a tank top that smelled fine-ish, grabbed her shower caddy and laptop, and headed for the communal showers.

The shower block squatted on the eastern edge. Concrete walls, fluorescent lighting, and the constant awareness that twelve other people were also naked within a twenty-foot radius.

Three women occupied the sinks. One brushed her teeth with a manual toothbrush whose bristles looked defeated. One washed her face with bare hands. One stared at her reflection like she'd forgotten why she was there.

All three turned when Harper entered. The temperature dropped.

Harper claimed the farthest sink and pulled out her electric toothbrush. Battery powered, oscillating head.

She pressed the button.

The mechanical whirl echoed through concrete. Impossible to ignore.

Someone muttered. Harper didn't catch it.

She brushed for exactly two minutes, rinsed, and headed for the showers.

The stalls had plastic curtains instead of doors. Harper found an empty one, hung her towel, and turned on the water.

Cold hit her instantly.

The hot water had died eight months ago. Harper stepped under the spray and tried not to think about how many other people had stood in this exact spot today.

Her body wash was nearly gone. Three more showers, maybe. Then she'd be using communal soap that smelled industrial and felt like sandpaper.

When she turned off the water and reached for her towel, she caught the woman in the next stall watching her.

Sixties. Scars mapping her arms.

Not glaring. Just observing.

Harper's skin prickled. "What?"

The woman blinked slowly. "Nothing."

Harper grabbed her stuff and left.

Britt was waiting outside Harper's brick house, clutching a bowl of protein paste.

"Hey girl!" Voice too bright. "I grabbed you breakfast! The line was literally forty people—"

"You can have it. I'm not hungry."

Britt's face transformed. "Really? Oh my god, thank you, you're literally the best."

She was eating before Harper finished the sentence.

Harper watched her devour the gray-brown sludge.

'Would you actually sacrifice your own survival for someone who's never done anything for you except share extra food she gets for free?'

"I'm gonna find a quiet spot. See you later."

"Okay! Thanks again!" Britt called through a mouthful.

Harper walked away.

The California Safe Haven had one tree. One scraggly oak that had survived through spite.

Harper had claimed it six months ago. Just by sitting under it almost every day until everyone else stopped trying.

She settled against the trunk now, laptop balanced on her knees, bark digging into her spine. Around her, the worker sector moved with purpose. People carrying supplies. People patching tents. People hauling water.

Everyone had purpose except Harper.

She opened her laptop. Battery: 97%. Gossip Girl loaded. Season 2, episode 14. Serena and Blair fighting over Yale, over boys, over problems that could be solved with dramatic confrontations.

Harper hit play.

For two hours, she watched rich people navigate crises that had stopped mattering. Watched them wear clothes that cost more than yearly rations. Watched them eat at restaurants with menus.

Watched the life she used to have.

People walked past. Stared. Muttered. Harper turned up the volume.

The screen flickered. Harper's heart stopped. Flickered again.

"No." Her voice came out strangled. "No, no, no—"

She jabbed the power button. Nothing. Held it down. Nothing.

The battery last said 74%. That should've been enough.

Black. Complete. Total. Dead.

"No." She shook it. Gently at first, then harder. "Please. Please don't do this."

She pressed every button. Checked battery indicators on a screen that wouldn't light. Tried plugging it into the solar panel.

Nothing.

Around her, people kept working. Kept moving.

Harper sat there, laptop open displaying nothing. Three years of saved episodes. Her music library. Photos.

Gone.

She spent four hours trying to resurrect it.

Not because she thought she could. But because admitting it was dead meant admitting she'd lost her last escape route.

Solar panel: tried.

Different cords: tried.

Taking the battery out and putting it back in: tried.

By hour three, she was sitting on her front step, pressing the power button over and over.

A mechanic walked by. Young guy, grease stains mapping his competence.

"Excuse me." Harper stood fast, laptop clutched to her chest. "Do you know anything about laptops?"

He glanced at her. At the laptop. Back at her.

His expression said everything.

"It won't turn on. The battery just died and—can you look at it? Please? Just two seconds."

His jaw tightened. "I fix generators. Not toys."

"It's not a—"

He was already walking away.

"Please! I'll trade you something! Rations or—"

He didn't stop.

Harper tried three more mechanics.

One ignored her completely. One looked at it for thirty seconds and said "It's dead, sorry." One actually laughed. "Lady, I'm trying to keep the water filtration system from exploding."

By hour four, she was back under her tree, pressing the power button.

It stayed dead.

Harper stared at the black screen. Her throat tightened. Her eyes burned.

She refused to cry over a laptop. Except it wasn't just a laptop. It was her last piece of normal. Her last reminder that she'd been someone once.

"Harper!"

She looked up, wiping her eyes fast. Britt and Aaron were running toward her, faces flushed.

"Oh my god, we've been looking everywhere." Britt grabbed her arm. "You have to come. Now."

"What—"

"Malcolm's at your house."

Harper's stomach dropped. "What?"

"There's machinery and workers and they're moving your stuff—"

Harper was already running.

By the time she arrived, half her belongings were stacked on the dirt.

Her mattress. Her mini-fridge. Her boxes of carefully hoarded supplies.

An excavator sat twenty feet away, engine rumbling.

Workers moved in and out of her house, carrying boxes.

"What the fuck is this?" Harper's voice came out strangled. "What the hell are you doing?"

Malcolm stood near the excavator, clipboard in hand.

"Ms. Hale." He didn't sound surprised. "We tried to find you this morning to inform you of the relocation."

"Relocation?" Harper's voice climbed. "You didn't tell me anything! This is my house!"

"This is facility property allocated to you by your father." Malcolm's voice was perfectly level. "Who is currently in DC. Who left me in charge."

Harper's face burned. "You can't do this."

"Actually, I can." He gestured at the brick structure. "Dr. Rivera requested additional medical space. This location is optimal—central, accessible, proper infrastructure. The expansion will serve three hundred people."

He paused. "Your accommodation was serving one."

The logic was sound. Impossible to argue without sounding selfish.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Her voice cracked.

"We sent three people." His eyes flicked to the dead laptop still clutched in her hands. "But you weren't at any work station. Not on duty rosters. Not helping with meal prep or maintenance."

Another pause.

"Couldn't find you anywhere... productive."

The word landed.

Harper's jaw clenched. "That's not—"

"We've prepared alternate accommodations." He gestured to a folded tent near her belongings. "Six-person capacity. Multi-room. Waterproof. Most families of four are in half this space." His tone stayed professional. "You should be grateful."

"My dad is going to hear about this." Harper hated how her voice shook. "The second he gets back—"

"I'll include the relocation in my report. Standard facility expansion for medical purposes. I'm sure he'll understand prioritizing resources for the greater good."

Malcolm turned to the workers. "Continue. I want this cleared by nightfall."

"Wait—"

He was already walking away.

Behind her, Britt touched her shoulder. "This is so fucked up."

"So fucked up," Aaron echoed without conviction.

Harper watched workers move her life into a pile.

The tent was bigger than expected but still a tent.

Three rooms divided by fabric walls. Structure poles. Rainfly. Mesh windows. Fabric floor over dirt.

Harper stood at the entrance, staring at her mattress on the fabric floor, her boxes stacked haphazardly, her mini-fridge useless without electricity.

Her brick house had had walls. A door that locked. A toilet.

This had fabric.

"Where do you want this?" A worker held up a box marked CLOTHES.

Harper's throat tightened. "There. No—wait. Other side."

The worker's jaw clenched but he moved it.

For an hour, Harper directed workers arranging her failure.

"Do you want us to help?" Britt asked, tone suggesting she'd rather volunteer for scavenging runs.

"Yes, make sure they don't break anything."

Aaron shifted. "Harper, I have to get to my shift—"

"This'll just take a few minutes."

"I'm already late. If I miss another one, Malcolm said he'd cut my rations and I really can't—"

"Aaron." Harper turned. "I just lost my house. Can you stay ten minutes? I'll give you more rations."

The words came out desperate.

Aaron's face did something complicated. "Yeah. Sure. Ten minutes."

He stayed.

But the look he exchanged with Britt said everything about their friendship's expiration date.

When the workers finished, the tent looked organized.

Not good. Not comfortable.

But organized.

"Is that everything?" one worker asked, desperate to escape.

Harper looked around.

Mattress: check.

Boxes: check.

Mini-fridge: check and useless.

"I guess."

They practically ran.

Britt and Aaron lingered, both radiating discomfort.

"This is so messed up," Britt said without feeling.

"Your dad's going to lose it," Aaron agreed.

Harper nodded, but her father's face flashed through her mind.

"You guys can go. I need to unpack."

"Yeah, totally." Britt hugged her. Quick. "I'll check on you tomorrow!"

They left.

Harper stood alone in her tent.

She couldn't stay here. Couldn't sit with her failure stacked in boxes.

She grabbed her dead laptop and walked.

No destination. Just moving.

The worker sector stretched around her. Rows of tents filled with families. People cooking over small fires. Children playing in dirt.

Real life. Real survival.

She ended up at the administration tent. Not because she wanted to be there. Just because her feet took her.

Inside: mostly empty. A few people on benches. A woman at the desk logging entries.

And near the back—a bulletin board.

AVAILABLE POSITIONS in neat black marker across the top.

Harper stopped. Stared.

Cooking (FULL)  
Medical Assistant (FULL)  
Supply Organization (FULL)  
Janitorial (AVAILABLE)  
Scavenging (AVAILABLE)  
Agriculture: N/A  
Construction/Manual Labor (AVAILABLE)  
Latrine Maintenance (AVAILABLE)

She stood there, words blurring together.

Jobs. Work. Things useful people did.

Harper's hands clenched around her dead laptop.

She could walk away. Go back to her tent. Wait for her father to fix everything.

Or.

Harper walked to the desk before she could stop herself.

The woman there—forty-something, eyes tired—looked up with skepticism.

"I want to apply." Her voice came out steadier than she felt.

The woman blinked. "For what?"

"Janitorial."

Pause.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

The woman didn't pull out forms. Just sighed and wrote Harper's name on a clipboard.

"Report to Supervisor Chen. East side. Tomorrow, six AM."

"I want to start today."

The woman looked at her. "Today?"

"Yes. Right now."

Because if she waited until tomorrow, she'd talk herself out of it.

The woman picked up a radio, said something, set it down.

"Chen says come now. East side."

Harper went.

Supervisor Chen was waiting for her. In his fifties and built solid. His face suggesting he'd stopped finding joy years ago.

He looked at Harper. At the dead laptop under her arm.

"You can't bring that." Voice flat.

"I—what?"

"The laptop. Put it somewhere safe. Can't have you distracted."

Harper looked down at it. Her last piece of before. Dead and useless but still hers.

"Where?"

"Don't care. Somewhere you can find it later. Just not with you."

Harper set it down near a storage container. Carefully.

When she turned back, Chen held out a bucket and rubber gloves. Yellow rubber that went to her elbows.

"First task. Food waste collection. Mess tent generates forty pounds of scraps per meal. You collect it, take it to compost, dump it."

Harper took the bucket. Heavier than it looked. "Okay."

"It's going to smell bad."

"I can handle it."

Chen's expression said he'd heard that before.

Harper could not handle it.

The bucket was heavier than it looked. The scraps were disgusting—rotting protein paste, mystery liquids.

And the smell.

Sour and organic and wrong.

She gagged twice in the first five minutes. Held her breath. Tried breathing through her mouth—that just made her taste it.

"This is so fucking gross," she muttered, holding the bucket at arm's length.

A cook nearby—woman in her forties, arms covered in burn scars—looked over.

"We do have a system. It's called you doing your job."

Harper's face burned.

She made it halfway to the compost area before her boot caught on a tent stake.

Harper went down. Straight down. The bucket spilled.

Across the ground. Across her jeans. Across her boots.

"Oh my god." Her voice strangled. She stared at the mess spreading across the dirt. "Oh my god, oh my god—"

A janitor appeared with a second bucket and shovel. Sixty-something, gray hair.

He looked at the spill. At Harper.

"First day?"

"Yes." Harper wanted to cry. "I'm sorry. I didn't see the stake. I'll clean it. I'll—"

"Happens to everyone." He handed her the shovel. "Clean it up, start over. East path is clearer."

Then he walked away.

Harper spent twenty minutes scooping food waste off dirt while people walked past.

Most tried not to laugh. Most failed.

By the time she reached the compost area, her entire body hurt and she smelled like death.

Chen was waiting, clipboard in hand.

"Forty minutes. Should take ten."

"I spilled it."

"I know. I heard. Had to send someone to clean up after you." He gestured past the compost. Toward latrines. "Next task. Latrine cleaning."

Harper's stomach dropped. "What?"

"Latrines need cleaning. Daily. Someone's gotta do it."

"Can't I do something else?"

Chen looked at her. "You asked for this job. You specifically said you wanted to start today. Right now. Those were your words."

"I know, but—"

"You want to quit already?"

Harper's jaw clenched. "No."

"Good. Latrines are that way. Supplies inside."

---

Harper had never seen the latrines before.

Her brick house had had a private bathroom. Toilet. Sink. Running water.

Now she understood why people looked at her the way they did.

The latrines weren't bathrooms. Not toilets. Not even porta-potties.

Just holes. Wooden seats over holes. Buckets underneath.

And the smell.

Worse than the food waste. Exponentially worse.

Harper stood at the entrance and felt her gag reflex activate.

"You're going to need these."

The same janitor appeared. She handed Harper a dust mask and scrub brush. "Breathe through your mouth. Not your nose. Never your nose."

Harper put on the mask. It didn't help.

She made it into the first stall before the smell hit her full force. Her stomach heaved. She ran outside and dry heaved into the bushes.

Nothing came up. She hadn't eaten.

The janitor was waiting when she came back, grinning. "First time?"

"Stop asking that."

"Gets easier."

It didn't feel like it would get easier.

But Harper forced herself back in. Forced herself to approach the first stall.

She had no idea how to clean a latrine. Had never cleaned a toilet in her life.

She'd never even cleaned her own dishes.

Harper stared at the brush, at the bucket of cleaning solution, at the wooden seat over the hole.

She dipped the brush. Started scrubbing.

Used way too much bleach. The chemical smell mixed with everything else and created something toxic. Someone walking past started coughing.

Harper panicked. Added water. Too much water. Now it was just spreading liquid everywhere.

She scrubbed harder. The wooden seat was slippery now. She grabbed it to steady herself and nearly fell.

Her boot splashed in the puddle she'd created. Chemical water soaked through.

After twenty minutes, the janitor came back.

"Okay, you can stop."

"I'm almost done—"

"No. You're making it worse. I'm going to have to redo this." Not mean. Just tired. "Next task."

Harper wanted to argue.

But the woman was already walking away.

---

Chen found her outside, sitting on the ground.

"Done with latrines?"

Harper looked up. "I made it worse."

"I heard." Chen's expression didn't change. "That's fine. Learning curve. Next task."

"Medical ward needs cleanup. Examination room three. After a patient."

Harper's stomach tightened. "What kind of patient?"

"The kind that doesn't make it."

---

The medical ward was quieter than expected.

Not silent. Generator hum. Occasional beeps. Soft murmurs behind closed doors.

Dr. Rivera met her at the entrance. The same doctor who'd tried teaching her first aid.

"You're doing janitorial now?" Genuinely surprised.

Harper lifted her chin. "I'm contributing."

Something shifted in Dr. Rivera's expression. Not quite respect. But acknowledgment.

"Room three. Kit inside with supplies. Protocol posted on the wall. Read it carefully."

Harper nodded. "I can do this."

Dr. Rivera hesitated. "Harper—"

"I can do this."

Dr. Rivera stepped aside.

Harper walked down the hall—clean floors, working lights, disinfectant covering everything else—found room three, pushed open the door.

Froze.

A man on the table. Not dead. Dying. Still breathing. Barely.

The infection was everywhere.

Glitter covered his exposed skin—arms, face, neck—sparkling under the fluorescent lights. It seeped from his pores. Behind his half-open eyelids, Harper could see it coating his eyes. When he breathed, his mouth opened slightly, revealing glitter on his tongue, his teeth, down his throat.

His chest rose and fell in shallow, irregular breaths. Wet, rattling sounds. Lungs filling with fluid.

Blood on the floor. On the table. Dried trails from his nose, his ears.

Harper's hands started shaking.

She'd never seen an infected person up close. Not like this. Not real.

Glitterkids were outside the walls. Abstract. Distant.

This was someone's father. Brother. Son.

Blood on the floor. On the walls.

Harper stood in the doorway, cleaning supplies clutched in shaking hands, and couldn't move.

She took one step forward.

The man's eyes opened.

Harper gasped, stumbled back, hit the doorframe.

His eyes were wrong. Bloodshot. Clouded. Glitter coating the whites, making them sparkle. He tried to move, but restraints held.

He made a sound. Not words. Just a wet, rattling wheeze.

Harper dropped the supplies. Spray bottle hit the floor and rolled.

She bent down. Hands wouldn't stop shaking. Vision blurring. She was crying but didn't realize until tears hit the floor.

She grabbed the bottle. Stood. Approached the blood. Sprayed.

The man made another sound. Louder. More desperate.

Harper's hands shook so bad she dropped the bottle again.

She tried to pick it up. Couldn't.

Her entire body was shaking. Breath coming in gasps. Room too small. Too hot. Smell of blood and infection everywhere and she couldn't breathe and—

"Harper."

She turned. Dr. Rivera stood in the doorway.

"You can go." So gentle it made Harper want to cry harder. "I'll finish this."

"I can do it." Her voice cracked. "I can—I can do this."

"I know you can." Dr. Rivera stepped in. Picked up the spray bottle. "But you don't have to. Not today."

Harper looked at the blood on the floor. At the dying man on the table. At her shaking hands.

"I tried," Harper whispered.

"You did." Dr. Rivera's voice stayed soft. "You tried."

Harper didn't believe her.

She left the medical ward with hands still shaking and vision still blurred and that man's dying wheeze echoing in her head.

Chen was waiting on a bench outside.

"Done already?"

Harper shook her head. Couldn't speak.

Chen looked at her for a long moment. "You want to continue?"

"No." The word came out broken. "I can't. I'm sorry. I can't."

She waited for him to call her useless.

Instead he just nodded. "Okay. You can go."

That was it. No lecture. No disappointment. Just permission to leave.

Somehow that was worse.

Harper grabbed her things and walked away.

---

She walked back toward her tent. Not her brick house. Her tent.

Her entire body hurt. Clothes smelled like bleach and rot. Hands raw. Eyes stinging.

But she'd tried.

She'd shown up. She'd attempted manual labor.

She'd proved... she'd proved...

Nothing. She'd proved nothing.

She'd failed at everything. Made things worse. Quit before her shift ended.

Harper dragged herself inside. Mattress on fabric floor. Boxes organized. Mini-fridge useless in the corner.

Everything smelled like dirt and fabric.

She grabbed the solar panel and plugged in her phone.

Set it by the entrance.

Then she changed clothes and collapsed onto her mattress. Grabbed her laptop. Still dead. Still useless.

She closed it then set it aside and laid back and stared at the fabric ceiling.

She'd tried. She'd actually tried.

And she'd failed spectacularly at everything.

Tomorrow Quinn would ask how it went. Tomorrow she'd have to admit she quit. Tomorrow she'd have to face that he was right about her pattern.

But that was tomorrow.

Harper's eyes drifted closed.

For a few hours, there was nothing.

Then the screaming started.

Harper jolted awake, heart hammering, disoriented in darkness.

Not one scream. Multiple. Coming from the outer wall. Panicked. Terrified.

Then came the boom. The entire tent shook. Someone nearby shouted. Another boom. Closer. She felt it in her chest.

Then the siren.

Not the meal bell. Not the shift change. Not the drill.

Lower. Louder. And it didn't stop.

It built and built, wailing through the night air.

More screams. More booms. Gunfire—rifles, multiple. Then a roar. Not human. Something monstrous.

Harper's hands shook as she reached for the electric lantern by her mattress. Battery powered.

She flicked it on.

The tent flooded with harsh artificial light.

Outside, shadows moved past. Running. Shouting. Boots on dirt and panic.

Harper sat frozen, heart hammering.

She moved toward the tent entrance. Hand reaching for the flap.

Another boom. Ground shook.

Fire flickered somewhere. Orange light reflecting off fabric walls.

Harper's hand closed on the entrance flap.

A sound cut through the chaos.

High-pitched. Inhuman. Multiple. Sounded like glass scraping metal mixed with static. Screeches that made every hair on Harper's body stand up.

A small shadow appeared on the tent entrance. Backlit. Distorted.

Child-sized.

Moving wrong.

The shadow screeched. Closer. Right outside her tent.

So close she could hear the clicking. Feet on dirt. Tap-tap-tap-tap.

Harper's lantern flickered.

Once. Twice.

Sparks popped from the battery compartment. Smell of burning plastic.

The lantern died. Pitch black.

All Harper could see was orange emergency lights outside. The shadow on the tent entrance.

Small. Still. Wrong.

Waiting.

Harper stood frozen in darkness, unable to move, unable to breathe, while something that used to be a child stood right outside her tent.

Waiting for her to open the flap.

Waiting for her to make a sound