



# The Forever (When the World Fell #3)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** LIV

After all the trials we've endured, the dream of making it to Bridgehill often felt unattainable—but we're so close now, I can almost touch it, and the thought makes me uneasy.

With Cruz by my side and my new family surrounding me, I can't wait to breathe the sea air and experience the true feeling of security. I want to be settled, to be building something good, and find meaning in a life where everything we knew and loved was obliterated just two short years ago.

All I can hope for is for our group to make it there alive. Beyond that, I'll take each challenge as it comes, knock down anyone who gets in my way, and keep loving Cruz, the man who's quickly become the best part of my life, just as Haruto had once referred to me.

THE FOREVER (BOOK THREE) IS THE FINAL INSTALLMENT IN THE WHEN THE WORLD FELL SERIES.

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## Page 1

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Liv

“Cruz, behind you! Aim low!” My heart lurched as an elderly woman tried to latch onto the back of his shirt. She may have been tiny and feeble, but her teeth worked just the same as the bigger infected bodies lumbering around.

Cruz downed a ragged man with a missing arm, then pivoted and swung his hatchet, connecting with the woman’s head in one blow. She crumpled in a heap like a macabre, melting candle, and without a second’s pause, he focused on the next target.

The sight eased the tightness in my shoulders, but it wouldn’t lessen my vigilance. We were out in the open, exposed and temporarily stranded. All my senses were heightened.

I gripped my tant? and removed the top of a woman’s head with a neat slice. As she landed in the rain drenched weeds at the roadside, my eyes locked on the next threat.

Only two of our cars had made it through the storm, the third suffering the brunt of the damage from flying debris.

After saying goodbye to Dawn at her graveside, our group had dragged every broken branch and body off the driveway to clear our exit.

Just when we thought we had a straight run back into town, Gabe swerved to avoid several of the still-moving infected and bogged his car in the softer gravel at the roadside.

Now, he and Remy were working to free their SUV while Cruz and I handled the dead that were blown into the area by the wild weather.

Jonah sat in the backseat of our car, pensive and quiet.

None of us had slept yet, and I'd never experienced this level of exhaustion in all my life.

"How's it going?" I called out to the guys.

"Almost there," Remy yelled back.

I glanced in their direction. They'd chocked the back wheels with branches and looked about ready to drive out of the mess.

A few more minutes.

I shifted my attention to the final infected man coming my way, slashing at his head once, then swearing under my breath and returning for a second swing when the first didn't quite land.

Droplets of black goo sprayed out in an arc as the body landed at my feet. Some of the dead were particularly nasty, and the stench that rose from this one made me dry heave.

With the worst over now, I stepped away from the smell and turned to scrutinise the other bodies. A few of them were splayed across the road between our two vehicles, blocking our path out of here.

Sheathing my sword, I dragged the closest one off to the side by its shirt, breathing hard as I heaved the dead weight. My energy levels were just about depleted, and my

patience wasn't too far behind. It wouldn't take much to make me snap—a stumbling step, a minor inconvenience—and I refused to hit that low in front of the others.

Cruz came over to help me, and when we were done, I straightened and stretched out the ache in my back, desperate for a break. Just a few hours to close my eyes and rest, so I could wake with my mind in fight mode again for the last part of our trip.

I prayed the rest of us would make it to Bridgehill. The thought that someone else might meet the same fate as Dawn played on my mind, and I wished I could shake off the feeling.

Cruz stowed his hatchet and frowned at my expression. “All good?”

“Nope, but I’m hanging in there.”

“That’s all we can do.” He ran his hand through his hair and gave the area a sweeping glance. “Come on. We’ll get this last part done, then we can pass out somewhere in town.”

“This place looks pretty solid.” Cruz pulled up in front of a brick house, just a couple of streets over from where we’d stopped to meet Remy and Gabe yesterday.

Storm litter covered the roads and footpaths. The ground was still wet, and the sky almost as grey as the mood inside the car.

Jonah had barely spoken since we left the farm, but what could he say? He’d just lost the most important person in his life—the only person from his old life.

I stared out the passenger window. “It’s better than the others, at least.”

The property had a wide driveway, with no garage or fence separating the front from

the back; just a house plonked on a desolate piece of land, with a rear gravel yard where we could hide the cars while we slept.

Cruz stopped at the end of the drive and performed a walkthrough of the ground before we parked, stamping his feet to make sure the rain hadn't turned it boggy. When it looked like we were good to go, he and Remy reversed our vehicles in to make escape easier, and we entered the house through the unlocked back door.

As we moved into the cramped laundry, I picked up on a stale smell, but no decay, so our biggest worry was stumbling onto humans in hiding.

Gabe sighed and said, "Let's do this."

Remy stepped into the kitchen first, and the rest of us followed, spreading out to perform our usual sweep. The house had been built years before the modern, open-plan styles came along, and it was made up of a series of boxy rooms with a short hallway.

We checked the cupboards and under every bed to ensure we were alone, finding nothing but dust and cobwebs.

No one spoke as we completed our tasks, and the quiet somehow seemed louder after a night filled with chaos.

When we were done, the five of us brought in our backpacks and left the rest of our supplies in the cars.

"I'll open the drapes a bit, so we can see outside." Concerned we wouldn't pick up on approaching threats, I crossed the lounge room and let in a wedge of light, while Cruz dragged a chest-height bookcase over to the front entrance. The boys took care of blocking the laundry door with the washing machine, and only minutes later, we were

as secure as we could be with our limited resources.

Jonah stood off to the side, staring at nothing in particular.

I didn't know where my mum was, if she'd survived or if she was now one of the millions of infected wandering the country, but I understood the feeling of being alone.

"Go get some sleep," I said, rubbing his arm.

With a half-hearted smile, he exhaled and looked around the room. "All right. I'm gonna take a bedroom."

"Just remember, there's no hurry to move on from here. We can stay another day or two if you need some time."

"It's fine. I'll be good to go later today."

I watched him leave the room, unsure if I'd be ready that soon.

Bone tired, I unloaded my weapons on the coffee table and sank onto the red and blue checkered couch, aware of every aching muscle.

Remy scrubbed his hands down his face and blew out a loud breath. "We'll take the other two rooms if you guys are fine out here," he said.

As was our habit, Cruz left his weapons with mine and dropped into the spot beside me. "Fine by me. I can sleep anywhere."

"I'm about ready to pass out on my feet," Gabe said. "See you on the other side." He gave us a quick, closed-mouth smile and disappeared with his brother.

As their footsteps thudded down the hall, Cruz turned his head toward me. “You didn’t want a bed?”

I smothered a yawn with the back of my hand. “I’d rather be where you are.”

He examined me in his usual analytical way. “Because you want to be alone with me, or you’re scared something might happen to me when you’re not around?”

After thinking it over, I decided it didn’t have to be one or the other. “Both, I guess.” I pulled the tie from my ponytail and slipped it onto my wrist, shaking out hair that was still damp from last night’s rain. “The fear’s always there, no matter what’s happening or how safe I am,” I said. “I felt it in Melbourne, too, but it was easier to deal with then, because my life was more predictable. Now, though...”

“Shit keeps coming at us, and we have no clue what’s on the way next?”

I pressed my lips together in a weird imitation of a smile, my heart heavy with loss. Not just Dawn and Haruto, but my family and friends, the life I used to love.

“When we met the two of them, I never could have imagined how fast she’d be gone from our lives,” I said. “Now... if I lost you...” I played with the hair tie on my wrist, snapping it against my skin.

Cruz watched me intently, his eyes lifting from my wrist to my face. He grabbed the two cushions beside him and arranged them on the arm of the couch, easing me down until we were stretched out together. As I shifted into a more comfortable position, I realised we didn’t have a blanket to keep us warm, but after the night we’d had, I think we were both too tired to care.

I curled into him and let out a breath.

Being close to him made me feel more at ease, his strength seeping into me, his presence letting me know I'd never be alone as long as he existed in the world.

He stroked the side of my face, no doubt contemplating the best way to put my mind at ease. "You and me, querida ... we do whatever we need to do to survive. Even when it feels like we've got nothing left, we never give up—and if we're ever separated, I'll always, always find my way back to you."

"Promise?" I asked, looking into his eyes.

He touched his lips to mine. "Promise. Now, try to get some sleep . Jonah might be up to travelling later, and we need to be ready."

"Try to sleep? I'm trying to stay awake ."

He gave me a lingering kiss, then another. "Stop trying then."

The moment I let go of control, my eyes drifted closed.

Mere seconds later, the fatigue took over.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Cruz

I awoke to the sensation of a warm body shifting against mine, and soft lips touching my neck. A low current of desire moved through me, and I considered keeping my eyes shut for a while longer, just in case it was a dream.

Those same lips kissed their way over to the beating pulse in my throat, then the underside of my jaw.

With a hum of pleasure, I opened my eyes and lifted my trapped forearm to check my wrist. We'd been out for almost five hours, and going by the silence in the rest of the house, we were the first ones to wake.

My gaze flicked to the window, where I found a bright, cloudless sky and an empty street. Quiet out there, too. For the first time in a while, we had a chunk of time ahead of us with nothing to do other than scavenge while Jonah adjusted to life without Dawn.

My attention returned to my favourite view, and I murmured, "Morning, carino. "

Liv stretched against me in a slow, sensual way that brought me fully awake. "Hmm. I don't think it's morning anymore."

Amused, I wrapped my hand loosely around her neck and tilted her chin upwards with my thumb. "Why did you wake me? Do you need something?"

Her eyes were deep pools of blue, her hair tousled and sexy. She was always

beautiful, but something about the way she looked straight after she woke got to me.

My teasing tone registered, and her mouth lifted on one side. “Maybe.” She slipped her arm around my waist and worked her hand under the edge of my shirt. “Depends on what you’re offering.”

When her fingers came into contact with my skin, my pulse jumped, and my humour faltered. As we stared at each other, I tossed around what kind of fun we could get away with in a house full of people. I wanted her, and I didn’t know how long it would be until we’d have this chance again.

The waiting made her restless, and when she made an urgent sound in her throat, I pressed my mouth to hers, kissing her slowly, taking my time and immersing myself in every second I got to be alone with her. I explored her upper lip, then her lower, touching her tongue with sweeping caresses of mine. We made out for long minutes, tasting and taunting, pulling away, and diving straight back for more.

The contact warmed my body, my heart, and my need for her only deepened.

As our lips moved together, I combed my fingers through her hair, touching her anywhere and everywhere. When I grabbed a handful of her hair and kissed her deeper, Liv shivered and smiled against my mouth.

The two of us could still have these moments, I realised, even when everything was falling apart.

She was my peace in the middle of a shitstorm.

My strength, my comfort.

While I kept her mouth busy, my fingers worked the belt buckle on her jeans, then the

button underneath. As I eased the zipper down, her breathing hitched, and she broke the kiss to stare up at me.

“What are you doing there?” she whispered.

I wondered how well my restraint would hold up after being celibate for so long.

“Exactly what you think I’m doing.”

With a glance out the window, I listened for movement down the hallway again. When only silence greeted me, my body went taut with desire.

We still had time. How much of it, I didn’t know.

With a deep breath, I slipped my hand inside her jeans and ran my palm over her panties. The softness of the material against her overheated skin had me groaning.

She lifted her hips and sighed. “Cruz.”

I clasped her between her legs, cupping her warmth as my lips found hers.

Pushing down the urgency rising inside me, I took my time kissing her until she was making desperate noises and tilting her hips toward me.

With a harsh breath, my mouth left hers, and I trailed my lips over her jaw, then the side of her neck, wanting to know every inch of her.

When her body turned needy, I dipped my fingers into the waistband of her panties, travelling lower, then lower still. Her silkiness made me groan again, and I watched her face as I massaged her.

“Let me touch you,” she said, her voice hoarse and gorgeous. “I want to feel you.”

Heat slammed into me. I craved the touch of her hands, but it was too risky with the others close by. As her hips moved to meet the glide of my fingers, I dug deep and suppressed my desire to focus on her.

“Not now.” I kissed her temple, her cheek, letting my gaze wander over her as my fingers went deeper.

Her chest rose and fell with her shallow breaths, her eyes on mine as if she couldn’t look away.

I kissed her again, moving my thumb higher and rubbing her with slow circles. She was wet, warm, and so ready for me it killed me not to be inside her.

I wanted to push her until she couldn’t hold back any longer, watch her lose it right here in my arms.

The pressure of my fingers increased, picking up the tempo. Her eyes remained trained on me as time slowed.

The connection between us turned so real, so deep, that my heart stuttered. I swallowed the emotion creeping up my throat and marvelled at the fire in her eyes, the way her mouth parted.

My pulse pounded in my ears, and I was so fucking hard I could have exploded.

Liv dragged in a single, shaky breath as it took hold of her, her expression urgent.

“Kiss me,” she pleaded.

A rush of desperation hit, and my mouth claimed hers as her lower body rocked to match the pace of my fingers. With a strangled cry, she shuddered and trembled, her hips writhing to extract every bit of pleasure.

My breaths were coming just as fast as hers, and I didn't know how I was still keeping it together.

Aching to be inside her, I rubbed her until her lower body twisted, and she gripped my wrist to stop me.

While she was coming down from the high, an aggressive affection I'd never felt before overwhelmed me. I gripped her face and kissed her hard, releasing a sharp breath against her cheek. For someone who hadn't reached this point with a woman, it should have scared me.

It didn't.

I couldn't get enough. I wanted to go deeper with her.

When I pulled back to calm myself, Liv studied my features, looking me over as if seeing me for the first time. She gave me the ghost of a smile, then ran her fingertips along the scruff on my jaw, stopping when her thumb came to rest on my lower lip.

Movement from down the hall killed any chance of doing more with her, but her expression told me everything.

We were both feeling this—and she cared just as much as I did.

We were on the road again by early afternoon, travelling down a highway strewn with branches and surface damage from the rain. A soft breeze rustled the grass, and sunlight broke through breaks in the cloud cover, turning the asphalt into a

kaleidoscope of colours.

The twins were sticking close to us in the rearview, and Jonah had jumped in with Liv and me again, more lively now after he'd had some sleep.

"The car sounds like shit," he said, leaning between the front seats. "You think we'll make it?"

We'd needed a jumpstart before leaving our temporary base in Harriet, and the noise coming from the engine mimicked a death rattle now. The plan was to stop in the next regional city, Darby Downs, to find a more reliable vehicle since we were still driving the car Liv and I had stolen from Jackson.

"We'll be all right for a bit," I said, pretty sure we'd make it through the next hour. Whatever happened beyond that was anyone's guess.

"Are you doing okay?" Liv asked, looking over her shoulder at him.

"I keep going over how she died..." he said, his voice trailing off. "I think she was asleep when it happened, so she didn't know what was going on. That's what I'm telling myself, anyway."

Liv reached back and squeezed his arm. "It was over too fast for her to feel fear or pain. I promise you, she didn't know."

If it was true or not, it didn't matter. Jonah just needed to believe his mother hadn't struggled in her last moments.

He didn't respond, but when I checked on him in the mirror, his posture was more relaxed, and his expression seemed less troubled.

The farther we got from Harriet, the more the ground dried up. Before long, the sun took over, flooding paddocks and occasional farmhouses and brightening the mood inside the car.

Corpses shuffled through the long grass by the roadside, and a few wandered down the highway in groups small enough to avoid. We passed lost belongings and abandoned vehicles here and there that looked to be in good condition, but I wouldn't stop out in the open to see if any were salvageable.

Our best chances lay on the streets bordering Darby Downs.

When the sign for the town appeared almost an hour later, Liv sent me a surprised look. "We're here already."

A low level of anticipation buzzed inside the car, but we needed to stay focused. "Keep your eyes open."

I eased off the accelerator to avoid a dozen or so corpses in the middle of the road, and as they turned in slow motion to follow the car, I continued down the off ramp with Remy and Gabe following.

If we were lucky, we'd stay off human and corpse radars and be back on the road in less an hour.

I took the first left and travelled down a long stretch of road with new houses packed in on both sides; another development completed not long before Ultimus hit. If it hadn't been for the overgrown gardens, the otherwise tidy street could have passed for pre-pandemic times.

Liv shifted in her seat to get a better view, her attention switching from one spot to the next. "It's so quiet here. Not many infected. No visible humans."

“Quiet feels creepy,” Jonah said, distracted by our new surroundings.

I checked each house as we passed, hoping to find a car parked in a driveway, so we could avoid searching garages. Each home looked abandoned, but none of us would fall for the trap of assuming silence meant safety.

A glimpse of silver caught my eye a second too late, and Remy flashed his lights to let me know he’d seen the car, too.

I pulled over and cut the engine, eager to get the task over with so we could keep moving. “This could be an easy swap.”

“You better knock on wood or something,” Liv said, her expression alert despite her lighthearted tone.

As we exited the car, I clocked several corpses milling around in the distance, and a lone magpie tracked our movements from its perch on a TV antenna.

Remy and Jonah volunteered to stay out the front and keep watch while Liv and I headed up the driveway with Gabe.

The three of us drew our weapons as we approached the silver Honda.

I dipped my head and peered through the side window, finding a spotless interior devoid of personal items. With a sigh, I straightened. “Nothing inside.” Which meant the car didn’t belong to a home-owner who had plans on leaving, and it wasn’t a traveller who’d stopped for a break.

My initial guess was that we’d find people inside the house—most likely long dead.

The car was locked, and the property didn’t have a gate leading around to the back.



We retraced our steps to the front entrance, and I made sure Jonah and Remy were still doing active surveillance, ready to let us know if the corpses got too close.

Gabe checked the handle, then cracked the panel and reached inside to open the door.

Readying myself for whatever lay across the threshold, I rested my hand on Liv's shoulder and went in behind her. We filed into the small foyer, and the stench of death hit me like a smack in the face. My stomach lurched, and I shared a disgusted look with the others before checking the row of hooks beside the door.

No keys.

No sign of corpses either, so I sidestepped Liv and passed through to the lounge room on the left.

A pool of blood on the floor was smeared along the far edge, and drag marks led to the opposite side of the room, where they stopped. Whenever I'd seen those streaks in recent times, it meant a dead human had attacked a living one, and the victim had tried clawing their way to safety. With the blood old and dry now, whatever had gone down in here happened a while back.

Going by the eye-watering smell, I'd bet anything the bodies were still mobile.

"Watch out for corpses," I said, no longer caring about keeping quiet. We wouldn't find any of the living in here. "I'll clear the kitchen."

"I'll do a sweep of the hallway," Gabe said. "See if the keys are in the pocket of a dead one."

"Yell out if you need a hand."

“You, too.” He slipped around the corner and left my sight.

Liv and I moved into the kitchen. She rifled in a drawer while I sifted through the contents of a homemade clay bowl on the bench, finding paperclips, tape, and other miscellaneous junk.

A couple of heavy thuds came from the hallway, but Gabe was experienced enough to handle more than one body, so I stayed focused on the task. The quicker we got out of here, the sooner we’d be on our way to the last stop, where we’d find out if the house we’d poured all our hope in to still existed.

“I’m not having any luck,” Liv said, yanking open another drawer.

“Me either.”

I shoved the bowl away and looked around the kitchen for more hiding spots when Gabe called out, “A little help in here!”

My heart skipped a beat.

Liv slammed the drawer shut, and we ran for the hallway.

Gabe had been bailed up by three smaller corpses who couldn’t have been more than mid teens when the virus took them. Cornered against a closed door, he was quick enough to grab the nearest one and keep it between him and the others.

To add to the danger, a large-framed male emerged from a bedroom further along, his mouth gaping as he made a beeline for the action.

other bodies lay on the floor, fresh kills Gabe had taken care of before he was outnumbered.

If I'd had any clue this many corpses were in the house, I never would have left him to deal with them on his own.

"I'll help Gabe," Liv said. "You take the big one."

She headed straight for him with her knife at the ready, taking down the first corpse with ease and moving immediately to the second.

"Hey!" The adult male followed the sound of my voice, extending both arms in my direction, one of them missing its index and middle fingers.

I slipped behind Liv and moved closer to my target, just as the corpse tripped over its own feet and ploughed straight into my chest.

The hit took me by surprise, and I had no time to steady myself.

Liv cried out as the momentum threw me backward.

A split second later, my hatchet clattered on the floor, and I landed hard beside my weapon, just shy of winding myself.

When I thought it couldn't get any worse, the corpse followed me down.

"Cruz!" Liv sent me a panicked look as she yanked the final corpse away from Gabe.

"I'm all right." Rancid breath hovered over me, and I used my forearm to stop its teeth from sinking into my skin. Pieces of flesh hung off its face, and seeing those dead, milky eyes up close was like staring straight into a nightmare. My muscles went tight with the realisation that this was how it happened—this was exactly how people lost their lives.

I'd had enough close calls now that one of them would be my last.

"Jesus, don't let it get you." Gabe tried to lift the full-grown corpse off of me as Liv wrangled the teen one, but he couldn't get a secure grip while it was in attack mode.

The weight grew heavier; the corpse becoming more aggressive by the second.

"Kill it first," I said through gritted teeth, using all my strength to keep a safe distance between us.

"I can't, unless you want all the shit that comes off it to hit you in the face."

Fair point. I lifted my knee and wedged it against the corpse's lower abdomen. When I tried rolling to the side to throw it off me, I couldn't get the leverage.

Fucking fuck .

When she was done, Liv ran over to help Gabe, the two of them hauling the weight off me while the corpse snapped the air mere centimetres from my face.

As soon as they'd pulled it clear, she shoved her knife under its jaw to end the struggle, giving me room to roll away and dodge the fluids that spilled onto the floor.

Close call.

Shit. Too close.

With a harsh breath, I sat with my legs bent and my elbows resting on my knees.

My heart hadn't pounded this hard in a while, but I should be thankful it was beating at all.

Liv crouched beside me and touched my face, my neck, and chest, methodically searching for puncture wounds, her calmness a complete one-eighty from the near miss I'd had when it was just the two of us in Melbourne. "Tell me it didn't get you."

"It didn't." I curved my hand around her knee. "I'm okay, mi amor."

Gabe huffed out a relieved laugh. "That was intense. Are you all right?"

"I'm good."

Liv straightened, and they both extended a hand to pull me to my feet. When I was upright again, I took in the bodies scattered down the hallway and blocked out the image of mine lying among them. "Let's find those car keys and get the hell out of here."

"All sorted, mi amor." At Jonah's taunting tone, I turned to find him at the other end of the hallway, dangling a keyring from his finger. "Found these on top of the front tyre."

"Nice work." I smiled for the first time since the shit had hit the fan, thankful for the quick-thinking actions of the people around me.

The more time I spent with this crew, the more connected I felt to them. We were a team. We had one another's backs—and although I'd always put her first, it wasn't just about Liv anymore.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Liv

Half an hour later, we'd transferred the contents of our old vehicle to the Honda, and Cruz had filled the twins' SUV with siphoned fuel.

With a bunch of well-rested people in two reliable cars, our chances of making it to Bridgehill this afternoon were good—great, even.

I hadn't been this excited about anything in years.

"Only one more hour to go," I said to Jonah, smiling at him over my shoulder.

We were heading back to the highway when all that positive energy took a nosedive.

A young girl of about thirteen or fourteen was running down the centre of the road as if being chased by an army of the dead, but there were no infected in sight.

No people either.

A chill seeped through me as I took in the scene.

Her long hair flew out behind her like blonde ribbons, and her eyes were round and terrified. She wore a striped long-sleeved tee, baggy jeans, and sneakers. No backpack or weapons. Her appearance reminded me of the way girls used to dress before society crashed, and the sight was so out of place, so unexpected, that I gasped.

"What the hell?" Jonah murmured.

Cruz checked the rearview and surveyed both sides of the road, confirming we weren't driving into an ambush.

I looked at the girl more closely and my stomach flipped. Way too young to be out on her own. "We have to stop."

"It could be a trick," he said. "Give me a minute."

Cruz slowed the car and scanned the area again, paying closer attention.

I lowered my window and tuned into the noises from outside, but there were no indicators of others around. If people were hiding nearby, I couldn't see any movement other than the girl and the swaying trees.

She looked utterly alone.

"Stop just long enough to pick her up," I said. "We can take her somewhere else and find out what's going on."

I checked over my shoulder and caught the twins slowing to match our speed. Jonah's eyes remained riveted on the view in front, his expression bewildered. I couldn't blame him. It was the weirdest and most normal thing I'd seen in years.

"Open your door," Cruz said to him in the mirror. "When I pull up next to her, get her in the car as fast as you can."

"I don't like this." He removed his seatbelt and cracked the door open, anyway. "We're basically kidnapping her."

The girl must have understood our intention, because her face lit up with relief. "What could she be running from that jumping into a car with strangers seems like a

better option?" I asked.

"That's what I'm wondering." Cruz stopped beside her, and she rushed for the open door. Rather than move over to make room for her, Jonah got out and urged her to climb into the middle seat. He jumped back in and shut the door, blocking her in just in case she changed her mind and tried to dive out while we were moving.

I turned in my seat to smile at her, giving her a subtle once over to see if she had any injuries—bite marks specifically. Her hair had a healthy sheen to it, and her clothes were undamaged, her skin clean. She'd been taking care of herself... or someone had been taking care of her.

Her gaze swept around the car as if trying to determine whether she'd improved her circumstances or made them worse.

"We won't hurt you," I said. "I'm Liv, and these two are Cruz and Jonah. What's your name?"

"Willow." The realisation that she was temporarily safe must have suddenly hit home. She blinked once, stared at Jonah, then burst into a round of loud, messy tears. "This is bad," she said with a wet sob. "It's so bad."

Jonah threw me a desperate look as I reached through the gap to pat her knee. "It's going to be okay," I assured her, even though I had no idea what she'd been through. "We'll find somewhere safe, have a little chat. Whatever's happened, we'll do everything we can to help you fix it."

"I'll head back to the house we just left." Cruz swung the car around in a wide U-turn. "At least we know it's empty while we figure this out."

He stopped beside Gabe and Remy and lowered his window to let them in on our new



plans. They nodded agreement and sent curious looks at the rear windows, just as confused as we were.

When we returned to the house, I grabbed the smallest tub of fresh food from the boot, just in case Willow was hungry.

“Take your time coming inside,” Cruz said, walking up the pathway ahead of me. “I’ll clean up the hallway and open a few windows to air out the place.”

I nodded and stayed close to Willow as the guys went in through the front door. “This isn’t our house,” I told her, keeping watch on the street as we waited. “We only stopped in town to switch cars, and we found the infected inside while we were looking for keys.”

“Are they still moving?”

“Not anymore.” I smiled to lighten the mood. “The house stinks, though, so be prepared.”

She couldn’t seem to focus on anything other than the thought that played primarily on her mind. Her features were taut, her eyes darting around in a way that made her seem like prey.

I wanted to know who her predators were, and what we’d gotten ourselves into here.

“Good to go,” Remy said a few minutes later, popping his head through the doorway.

Willow walked in ahead of me, and I directed her to the kitchen, where the others were waiting for us. Someone had opened the sliding window above the sink to draw fresh air into the room.

“Hungry?” I pulled out a chair at the table and gestured for her to take a seat.

“Starving.” Willow sat and tucked her hair behind her ear. “But I really need to tell you what’s happening. I can’t stay here. It’s just wasting time.”

“In a minute, I promise.” Using a knife from the drawer, I cut an apple and arranged the slices on a plate, adding a handful of cherry tomatoes and strawberries. As I slid the offering in front of her, she gave me a half wary, half grateful look.

“Thanks.” She bit into a strawberry and made a small, appreciative sound.

I sank into the spot beside her. Cruz pulled out another chair, and the guys remained standing, propping themselves against the kitchen bench.

Willow’s features were small and delicate, her eyes a clear sky blue. She would have been around eleven or twelve when the pandemic was in full swing; the youngest person I’d met since the entire world collapsed. My childhood had been stress free compared to hers, and I empathised with her as I watched her eat.

“How old are you, Willow?” Cruz leaned his elbows on the table and kept his features relaxed.

She analysed him for a moment, then grabbed another strawberry and picked a tiny leaf off the side. With another bite, her tongue darted out to catch the juice that had pooled in the corner of her mouth. “Fourteen, almost fifteen.”

“Do you live in town?”

“Now, yeah.” She swallowed and searched the faces around the room. “But I’m not from here.”

I rested my chin in my hand, trying not to look too eager for information. “How long have you been in Darby Downs?”

“Since the pandemic turned bad,” she said. “My parents wanted to get out of Melbourne, so they came here to my aunt’s house. She lives on acres and they thought it was going to be safer—but it’s not. It’s really not.” Her gaze jumped from Cruz to me. “Now, it’s just my older sister, my auntie, and me, and I seriously need to help them. They’re in so much trouble.”

I clasped her forearm to settle her. “Hang on a sec. Help us out with information first, so we know exactly what needs to be done. Where are they now?”

She grabbed another strawberry, as if eating helped distract her. Her gaze went to the window, then moved to Jonah and the twins. As she took in their features, her expression tightened, but I didn’t get the impression it was anything personal. “In a shed in the middle of town.”

“What kind of shed?” Cruz asked.

Willow returned the strawberry to the plate, then snatched it up again just as quickly. “One of those places where they used to fix cars.” She took a bite and spoke around the mouthful, using her hand to block the view. “There’s an old house behind it.”

“Were you in there, too?”

She nodded at Cruz and swallowed, letting out a shaky breath.

“For how long?” He surveyed her appearance, no doubt noting her clean hair and clothes.

“Since yesterday afternoon. I got out maybe an hour before you picked me up.”

“Why didn’t you go back to your aunt’s place?” Gabe asked.

“Because there’s no one there to help me?”

“Who else is in the shed, Willow?” Cruz’s tone may have been laid back, but the flicker of heat in his eyes told a different story.

We needed to be careful about how we spoke to her, though. It was beginning to sound like an interrogation, and from personal experience, firing too many questions at a teenager was the quickest way to make them shut down.

“Four guys—like them.” She pointed at the boys, and Jonah jerked to attention.

“Young guys?” Cruz asked. “The same age?”

She nodded. “Except for the leader. He’s old. Like... thirty or something. My aunt knows one of them. His name’s Tae. My sister likes him.”

Cruz showed impressive restraint by not reacting to her comment about age. “He’s a friend?”

Her features clouded over as she pushed her plate away. “Kind of. He helped me get out.”

“How did you end up in the shed?” Jonah asked.

“They saw us before we saw them. The leader’s crazy. He keeps talking about repopulating the country. Like, ranting about it and shouting.” Willow looked away as her cheeks turned pink. “He won’t stop staring at my sister and me, and he said some disgusting things that made my aunt lose her shit.”

When Cruz's gaze met mine, I caught the glint of restrained anger. Jonah and the twins turned restless, and the atmosphere in the room shifted.

We may have intended to make a quick stop in town, but we'd been presented with a mission none of us could ignore.

My body clenched with an overwhelming urge to find the place and tear it to the ground. "Could you show us how to get there?"

Before she could answer, Willow stiffened and looked from one face to the other—then her skin went shockingly pale, and she doubled over and vomited on herself.

"I'm sorry," she said, retching again, covering her jeans in bile and bits of strawberry. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay." I gestured to the tea towel on the bench and Jonah tossed it my way. "You don't need to be sorry. We'll clean you up and help your family."

"We've gotta go check it out," Jonah said.

Gabe threw Remy a look, ready to dive into the fray, too.

"Hold up," Cruz said. "If any of us go running off before we've come up with a plan, we could end up making it worse for them. We need to be smart about this."

I gave Willow the tea towel to wipe the mess from her face. After a cursory glance at her clothing, I concluded none of it was salvageable without running water and a lot of effort—neither of which we had time for right now.

Nothing of mine would fit her, so I'd have to search the bedrooms to find temporary

replacements.

“Let me get Willow some fresh clothes first,” I said, “then we can talk it through. We won’t be long.”

As I left the kitchen with her, their voices carried on behind us, energetic and determined. Ready for our next fight.

They didn’t need to worry.

I’d be ready, too.

We avoided the bedroom with the closed door and rummaged in the cupboards of a room that had once belonged to teen boys, finding clothes small enough to fit Willow until she could get back into some of her own.

Posters from video games covered every wall, with dark, threatening scenes revolving around violence and death. While she stepped out of her soiled clothes and into a pair of skinny tracksuit pants and a long-sleeved tee, I took in the images, wondering if we’d be walking into a similar situation ourselves soon enough.

Willow sat on the edge of the bed to put her shoes back on, remaining silent as she tied the laces in double knots. When she was done, I handed her a denim jacket with the sleeves rolled up to shorten the length.

“Let’s see if there’s a hair tie somewhere around here,” I urged. “Then we can work out our next move.”

In the bathroom, I searched under the vanity and found a faded tartan scrunchie. With no brush in sight, I finger combed her hair into a ponytail and wrapped the scrunchie around twice. “Make sure you keep your hair up whenever you’re outside,” I said.

“It’s harder for the dead to get a hold of you.” I smoothed a few wisps into place and met her eyes in the mirror. “A ponytail’s fine, but a braid or a bun’s even better.”

She nodded and held my gaze; her eyes were troubled yet filled with resolve.

It was like staring into her past and seeing everything she’d been through since the pandemic hit—the loss of her friends, her parents, everything that used to matter. She only had two family members left, and although it was a hell of a lot more than most of us, the thought of being alone must have terrified her.

“We’re going to get them back,” I assured her.

She released a loud breath and checked her reflection in the mirror, swiping her forearm over a speck of strawberry she’d missed on her chin. “What about Tae?”

Exactly. What about Tae? He’d made it possible for her to escape, but he also spent time with men who had no qualms about kidnapping women. What did that say about his values and trustworthiness? “You think he’s a good guy?”

She turned to face me. “He doesn’t really want to be with the others. You can tell. They didn’t even know each other, you know... before .”

I looked her over. “Do you think you’re a good judge of character?”

Willow lifted her brows. “You tell me. I think you’re a good person.”

I held back a smile. “All right, let’s go.”

When we returned to the kitchen, the others were seated around the dining table in the middle of an animated conversation. Cruz scanned Willow’s clean outfit and gave me an appreciative smile. “Welcome back.”

I pulled out the remaining two chairs and urged Willow to take a seat beside me.

“We need you to help us with some intel,” Cruz said as we settled in.

She frowned. “Intel?”

“Information about the shed. As much detail as you can give me. Every little thing helps.”

Willow eyed off the food, so I dragged the plate toward her. She picked a cherry tomato from the selection and launched into a description of the layout.

We got the location of the doors and windows, where her sister and aunt were when she last saw them. We learned the men used knives or hammers for weapons, no guns, and the leader’s name was Dane.

Cruz questioned Willow about the men, and she explained that Tae had helped her escape while two members of the crew were out scavenging. Apparently, all four men would be in the shed for hours, then they’d leave in pairs, alternating the combination, while the other two remained behind to guard the women.

“Have they said anything about moving you guys somewhere bigger?” Gabe asked. “They’ve gotta be running low on space with the extra people.”

Willow shifted in her seat until she was perched on the edge of the chair. “The leader wants to move to a farm and find more women,” she said. “I heard them talking in the office at the back of the shed. My aunt called him a wannabe cult leader and a hundred other names I’m not gonna say out loud. She wants to kill him—and I don’t mean that in a joking way.” She paused and shivered. “Every time he looked at me, it felt like worms were crawling under my skin.”



We needed to get her family back. If we didn't act fast, he could already be in the process of moving them, and then we'd never know where they'd gone.

With all the extra information Willow had given us, it became clear what needed to happen next. "I'm going to the door as bait while the rest of you get in position."

Cruz yanked his gaze toward me, his jaw clenched. "What?"

"It makes the most sense. I'm young, I'm a woman. They won't see me as a threat—and I can distract them while the rest of you find a way in through the back."

"She could hide somewhere close by and only approach the shed when we know two men have left." Jonah looked from me to Cruz and back again.

I stared at each of them patiently, my mind already made up. "This is the best way to go about it."

"It makes sense," Gabe said.

"We'll all go in our car," his brother added. "Leave the other one here in a safe place as a backup."

Cruz rubbed a hand over his mouth and looked around the table. When his eyes came back to mine, I knew he was considering the idea and its chances of success. Keeping the men busy at the door meant I'd be there to defend the women if it came to that, but if everything went to plan, I wouldn't need to use my sword at all.

"It's your decision," Cruz said, his reluctance almost making me smile.

Remy's gaze swept around the room. "Sounds like we've got a plan."

“We need to empty some of the crap from the backseat first,” Jonah said. “We’re taking Willow, right?”

“We have to.” I felt her eyes on me. “I’m not leaving her here on her own, and we can’t spare anyone to stay behind with her.”

I liked Remy’s idea of travelling to the shed in a single vehicle. We could leave Willow in it, hidden and safe. If— when —we freed her family, we’d make two trips back here to regroup. A minor inconvenience that would leave us with cars in two separate locations, just in case something prevented us from getting back to one of them.

“We’ll go unpack the SUV and stack everything around the back. See you out there.” Jonah headed straight outside with Remy and Gabe.

Cruz pushed back his chair and stood. “Back in a minute,” he said to Willow, then he urged me into the lounge room where he said in a low voice, “Promise me you won’t take any unnecessary risks.”

“I won’t, but we need to move fast.”

He levelled his gaze on me, his eyes flooded with concern. “Not too fast.”

“If I’m lucky, Tae will be one of the two who stays behind while the others go out scavenging. From what Willow said about him, it won’t take much to get him on my side.”

“And if he’s not there?”

“I’ll figure it out. You know I will.”

Cruz cradled my face and swept his thumbs over my cheeks. “I’ll be close by just in case you need me.”

I rose on my toes to press a peck on his mouth. “I know that. You’re always there when I need you.”

## Page 4

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Liv

D arby Downs was the largest regional city we'd visited on our trip, and the last one we'd see before we reached the coast.

There'd been some high-level rioting and looting in the business district before everything crashed—worse than any other place I'd seen. Shop windows were caved in and ominous phrases like The End is Here had been sprayed on walls. Cars were burnt out and shopping trolleys overturned on footpaths. The dead wandered in aimless, endless paths throughout the destruction.

Black smoke billowed from a rooftop a couple of streets over, and the sight immediately put me on edge. Any sign that humans were in the vicinity wound my body tight, and my leg jiggled with nervous tension.

I pointed at the growing cloud of smoke, and Cruz nodded.

He'd seen it, too.

With Willow crammed in beside me on the passenger seat, I rested my elbow on the console to steady myself. We'd run through our plan on the short drive here, and she'd told us about a spot where we could hide her while we covered the rest of the distance on foot.

“The shed's two blocks away,” she said, “and the car park's just behind the buildings over there on the left.”

A blue sign marked the entrance to the rear parking area. Cruz slowed and took the turn while the rest of us kept our attention on the shopfronts. Anyone could have been watching us from countless vantage points— multiple anyones—and not necessarily the small number of men we were targeting.

“What are their names?” I asked to distract myself. “Your aunt and sister?”

“My sister’s name is Ellie and my aunt’s Rowena, but everyone calls her Ro.”

“I’ll lock that away for later,” I said. “Remember what we discussed on the way here? Stay in the car, keep quiet, and cover yourself with the blanket. Don’t leave, no matter what.”

She nodded quickly.

Cruz pulled up on the far side of the lot, disguising the car amongst a bunch of other vehicles.

After we jumped out, Willow climbed in the back and stretched out along the rear seat. Jonah handed me the blanket I’d tossed in before we left the house, and while the twins took off with Cruz to make sure the nearby cars were empty, I tucked it around her. “Try not to worry,” I said, handing her the key fob. “We’ll be as fast as we can. It could be an hour, but I promise, no matter what happens, at least one of us will come back for you.” I partially covered her head to make her blonde hair less obvious. “Press the lock after I get my backpack out—and don’t open the door for anyone but us.”

“Okay. Just... hurry.”

Hearing the quiver in her voice nearly made me change my mind about leaving her, but I steeled myself and patted her foot. With nothing more to do, I grabbed my

backpack from the boot and slipped it on my shoulders. After I heard the click of the lock, I left her there and fell into step beside Jonah.

“All good?” he asked as we headed off to catch up with the others.

“I don’t know. I think so.” My brows pulled together. “Are you good?” I slid him a sideways glance. “You’ve been thrown into this a day after losing your mum. It’s a lot.”

Just saying it out loud hit me like a punch, a sudden reminder that a member of our group would forever be missing.

His lips flattened into a grim smile. “I feel shitty saying this, but having something different to focus on helps me forget. Not totally,” he added, as if I might think he was heartless. “Just enough that it doesn’t feel like it’s going to wreck me.”

I linked my arm through his and pressed my cheek to his shoulder. “It’s okay,” I said. “We all understand. Every one of us has been where you are now. No one’s ever going to judge you for how you get through it. Grief is weird.”

“So fucking weird.”

Armed with our weapons, we joined the others and walked the next block together, scoping out roof lines and windows, stopping here and there to take down clusters of the dead.

Cruz and I remained at the rear, and the farther I got from Willow, the more my concern for her grew. “Do you think she’ll be safe back there?” I asked, keeping my eyes ahead.

“Safer than she would have been alone at the house or walking with us now.”

Not exactly comforting, but the truth didn't always ease my concerns. Sometimes it made them more real.

I pictured Willow lying on the back seat thinking about her family; a young girl alone. Did I do enough in our short time together to build her trust in me?

"I hope this doesn't take long." I kicked a discarded shoe off the footpath. "I'm worried about her. I really don't like the idea of her being by herself."

"Yeah. I picked up on that."

When I looked up, his eyes were warm with affection, and my gaze narrowed. "Are you laughing at me?"

As we approached a clothing shop with smashed doors and windows, an infected woman in business attire stumbled out and headed for Jonah. Barely slowing his stride, he grabbed her dirty, sun faded blazer and drove his blade straight into her eye socket. She dropped to the concrete in a pile of withered bones, and we continued on our mission.

"Not laughing." He stroked his hand down my ponytail. "Just enjoying this big sister, protective side of yours. I've never seen it before. It's adorable."

I side-eyed him and bit back a smile.

We reached the second block where the mechanic workshop was located, and my humour died.

Almost there.

"Ready?" Remy asked over his shoulder.

We stopped at the curb and took our time scrutinising every window, every rooftop. I swept my gaze over the buildings on the opposite side of the road, searching for anything that might complicate our situation.

Our plan would kick off with me heading over there on my own and finding a place to wait and watch the premises. As soon as I saw two men leave, I'd cross the street and approach the shed.

A couple of them may have already been out looking for Willow, or their entire group might be inside working out what to do about their missing captive. Either way, I needed to confirm, and I hoped it wouldn't take too long. "I'm ready."

Cruz cupped my chin and slid his thumb over my jaw. "Stick to the plan," he said, pressing a soft kiss on my mouth. "No unnecessary risks, remember? I'll be close by if you run into trouble."

I nodded and rubbed my lips together to savour his kiss, staring past him at three of the infected as they headed in our direction. "Incoming."

Stepping away from him, I gave myself a little warm up, swinging my sword and taking the dead down in three easy strikes.

It felt good to be active.

Determination mixed with my nerves, my confidence building with each passing minute.

The last time I took on a male enemy was at Dawn's house, and although it hadn't gone too well then, I was a different person now.

Stronger, more resilient.



“We gonna do this?” Jonah asked when I rejoined them.

“Yep.” I pulled my shoulders back and prepared myself for the next step. “Let’s take down these pendejos down.”

The butcher shop opposite the shed was structurally sound and free from the infected. Perfect for a stakeout. Dust covered every surface, but no damage had been done to the interior, and the lingering scent of stale meat was tolerable compared to some places I’d been.

I sat on a stool behind the display case and kept my head just above bench height, watching the street through a big, wide window.

For the first fifteen minutes, only the occasional infected person shuffled past, and a cat skulked amongst some rubbish. Faint smoke from the burning building seeped under the door, and the wind blew a dried up ball of weeds down the street.

The calmness had the opposite effect on my nervous system, but I ignored the hammering of my heart and reminded myself the others were waiting in separate locations. We were well equipped to extract the women with none of our people getting hurt.

Ten minutes later, someone from inside the shed pulled the roller door up and my spine went rigid. I held my breath as two men on bikes rode out and headed off to the left. We hadn’t asked Willow for a physical description of Tae—an oversight on our part—so I didn’t know who I was watching leave, and who remained behind.

Before I could take in any details of the interior, the door closed again.

I released a breath and squared my shoulders. It didn’t matter. I had all the information I needed to complete my job.

The moment I lost sight of the men on bikes, I left my stakeout position and stepped outside into the sunshine.

The scent of smoke and charred flesh clung to the air, and I paused at the curb, wondering if the men were using the building as a walk-in crematorium. If so, it was the first sensible thing I'd seen them do.

Before I crossed the road, I leaned out to ensure they were truly gone, and glimpsed their bikes just before they rounded the corner. Several of the dead were nearby in two separate groups, but it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if some of them followed me.

Mentally readying myself for the next step, I made my way over to the shed. My role was to play a lost, confused woman searching for somewhere safe, keeping at least one man talking while the guys took out the other and freed Willow's family. I surveyed the laundromat on the left and the takeaway food shop on the right, searching for signs that Cruz and the others were close. Wherever they were hiding, their cover was perfect because I felt completely, utterly alone.

Sunlight glinted off the side mirror of an old car on the property, and a few stacks of tyres had been stored against the left boundary fence. The steel gate on the right-hand side kept the home at the rear separate from the business.

A white truck with Dunstall Towing on the side had been parked on the gravel near the roller door. I sidestepped the bumper and approached the window, leaning in close enough to look inside without touching the grimy glass. My gaze landed on the rear view of a blonde woman with a ponytail, sitting on a ladder-backed chair with her hands tied behind her.

Another blonde with loose, shoulder-length hair had her wrists secured with a rope that someone had looped through an overhead beam. Her arms were extended, her

back to me. Although I couldn't see either of their faces, the positions of their bodies, the uprightness of them, told me they were conscious.

Both women were fully dressed, which in their current predicament gave me hope that we'd made it here in time.

As I looked them over again, my heart nearly punched a hole in my chest. Until now, they hadn't been real to me, and now I wanted to kick the door down and go on a killing spree.

A shuffling sound came from behind me. I turned away from the shed to find three of the dead closing in on me, a rangy man flanked by two women.

Leaving my weapons in my belt, I committed to the role of vulnerable woman, and as the front runner reached for me, I screeched in a way I hadn't done since I killed my very first one in the beginning.

A low male voice came from inside the shed, mixing with the muffled higher pitches of the women as they presumably tried to get my attention.

My pulse galloped, and I gripped the ripped shirt of the infected man to maintain a barrier between myself and the others. With the pressure mounting, I knew if I failed to draw the men outside before their friends returned, we'd be in trouble. Cruz was convinced they'd use the women as shields if we couldn't separate them.

As the door swung open at my back, I let the infected man's weight drive me closer to the building.

Bracing myself for impact, I collided with a live body and nerves exploded inside me as he pushed straight past me. Before I could say a word, he jammed his knife into the ear of the dead man I was holding, and as the body dropped from my grip, he took

down the remaining two members of the trio, moving faster than necessary given their deteriorated state.

When the last body thudded on the gravel, I made my eyes wide as I faced him. “Thank you,” I said, breathless. “Thought I was a goner for a second there.”

My gaze landed on a young, attractive Asian man with dark brown eyes that were full of concern. His black hair had grown to a length where it probably annoyed him, and he shoved it back from his cheek as if to confirm my assumption. “Run,” he hissed. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re getting into here. Dane’s in the back room. If he sees you, you’re in deep shit.”

He didn’t care who I was or what I was doing here. He just wanted me gone.

Only a decent guy who’d got tangled in a messy situation would warn me off. Adrenaline pumped through me, and I went back and forth over my options, undecided on what to do next. I wasn’t supposed to let on that I knew anything about the occupants of the shed, but a deep-down instinct took over, and I went with it.

“Tae?” I whispered.

His eyes narrowed, his body turning rigid. “Who are you?”

“A friend of Willow’s.”

Relief flooded his features. “She’s okay?”

I nodded as another male voice came from inside the shed. “Yo! Tae! Where’d you go?”

The door had swung shut behind him when he came outside, so his location wouldn’t

be immediately obvious. My stomach flipped as I glanced at the shed window. “I need you to trust me,” I whispered.

“I don’t even know you.”

“I know that—but I need you to trust me, anyway.” Keeping my ears attuned to noises behind me, I locked eyes with Tae as my new plan formed. “Run to the car park behind the shops two blocks from here. There’s a red SUV there with Willow hiding inside.” He stared at me like I’d lost my mind, but I had no more time to convince him. “I have four people waiting close by. As soon as the other guy—Dane?—comes outside, they’re jumping him. I need you to protect Willow while we break her family out of here.”

He shot another look over his shoulder.

We’d officially run out of time.

If he stayed, he could sink even deeper into something he’d never escape from. If he didn’t do this one thing to prove his commitment to keeping Willow safe, the others wouldn’t want him in our group. “Tae, this is how you earn your place with us—this is your ticket out of here. If you don’t go now, I can tell you with absolute certainty, you’re choosing the wrong side.”

Tension buzzed off him, growing thicker by the second.

My stomach churned as I held his gaze. “Now,” I repeated.

He ran. Straight off the property and down the road in the direction I instructed.

I sighed with relief, hoping Cruz and the boys had overheard enough of our conversation to know not to chase after him.

The door to the shed flung open, and the man I could only assume was Dane stepped outside. He looked to be a few years older than Tae, with dark hair pulled into a ponytail and the top few buttons on his flannel shirt left open. This time, there were steely blue eyes in place of soft ones, and a wiry body that looked well attuned to fighting.

“Who the fuck are you?” He gripped my shirt and yanked me toward him. “Where’s Tae?”

“I’m Alison,” I said, giving him my mother’s name. The urge came over me to swing and find out how much damage I could do before he fought back, but I smiled in a sweet, uncertain way that went against everything I knew. “I’m alone, and I’m trying to find a group to join. Do you take new people?”

“I asked where Tae went.” His teeth were yellow, with a gap where an incisor used to be.

He tightened his grip and surveyed the dead bodies nearby. It was obvious his friend had been out here, so I needed to be smart about how I played this to avoid tipping him off.

Dane shoved my chest with his bunched fist before letting me go.

“I don’t know where he went,” I said. “I don’t even know if that was Tae. There was a man here, but he pushed me out of the way and ran. Somewhere down there.” I pointed in the opposite direction to the one he’d headed. My pulse raced, and the heat creeping up my neck would make my nerves obvious if we didn’t wrap this up soon. “Will you let me in? Please?”

The women had gone quiet. I mentally begged them to stay that way until we were in a better position to help them. Once this man caught onto the fact that I knew there

were captives inside, all of us would be in danger.

His eyes dropped to take in the sword on one side of my belt, the knife on the other, and I immediately realised my mistake. Two weapons made me look capable and confident—a direct contrast to the helpless picture I’d been trying to paint. When his gaze lifted to mine again, something shifted in his expression. His eyes darkened, and a chill moved through me.

Since he hadn’t pulled a weapon yet, I drew my sword and aimed the pointed end at his chest, almost making contact, but not quite. “Don’t do anything stupid.” I pushed the blade close enough to inflict a sting, letting him know I had no qualms about using it on him. “I don’t care about you. I’m just here to help the women. No one needs to die.”

“Die?” A corner of his mouth lifted, as if he found my threat amusing. “How’d you find this place?”

“Just lucky, I guess.”

An ear-splitting crack came from somewhere behind me, reminding me of the noise the farmhouse had made before the roof caved in. I’d bet anything the frame holding up the burning building had just given way, but I refused to take my eyes off Dane to find out.

He looked over my shoulder, but his expression didn’t change. No unease, not even a flinch.

He couldn’t grab the sword off me without getting closer to reach the hilt, and he couldn’t lean in without impaling himself on the blade. His only way out was backwards, and I had him trapped against an outward opening door. All I needed to do was keep him there until my backup arrived.

My pulse hammered as I gripped my sword, ready to do whatever it took to get out of this unharmed.

Dane didn't say a word. He'd already assessed the situation and come up with a solution, but his smirk tipped me off a second too late. He crouched without warning and used a fast, sweeping kick to knock one of my feet out from under me. I lost my balance and tumbled backward, landing hard, with my elbow and backpack taking the brunt of the impact.

Recovering quickly, I kept my sword extended between him and me, raising my voice to make sure the guys heard me. "Stay the fuck away from me!"

"Oh, we're about to get so much closer," he warned with a slow smile. "You're gonna know me real well by the time this is over. You, me, and those ladies in there... we've got some work to do." He bent to reach for my boot, presumably to try dragging me inside to add to his collection. I kicked his hand away and kept my feet in a defensive pose until I could get my breath back.

When he pulled the knife from his belt and descended again, Cruz came out from the side of the shed, creeping up without a sound. I didn't look in his direction, but just having him close by while I was trapped eased some of my concern.

Jonah and the twins should have got to the women by now.

In minutes, we'd have this under control.

I tipped my head back, and when I glimpsed more of the dead approaching, I suddenly wished I hadn't made so much noise. After a quick calculation, I counted nine. It wouldn't be long before we were surrounded, and here I was laid out on the ground like a meal on a platter.



Dane flicked a look at the infected, and a sense of urgency took hold of him, too. He reached for me again, but Cruz ploughed into his back before he could grab my ankle.

Expecting the fall, I tossed my sword aside to roll out of Dane's way. Gravel grated the skin from my elbows and dug into my shoulder, but the pain barely cut through the pressure building inside me. The smell of the dead intensified with their approach, a dire warning we were about to be outnumbered.

With a grunt, I got to my feet and scanned the ground for my sword.

The infected were already too close. I couldn't reach it without putting myself in danger.

Instead, I yanked my knife from my belt and trusted Cruz to control the situation behind me. With a fortifying breath, I gripped the jacket of the first infected and shoved it like a battering ram into the others. They weren't packed in tightly enough for me to knock them all down with one move, but I took four of them off their feet and bought myself some time.

"What's going on?" I called out to Cruz while my attention stayed on the dead.

"Don't worry about me."

Okay then.

A loud metallic bang came from the back of the shed, but I heard nothing more from Cruz—only Dane's stupid, taunting comments.

The lack of visibility worried me, but I needed to keep the dead from surrounding us. I grabbed the closest one and drove my knife into its ear, then pushed it as hard as I could before I released its body. It landed on another, and they both went down with a

satisfying thump.

As I transferred my attention to the next contender, a movement on the side street next to the butcher shop piqued my interest.

The two missing members from the gang were coming our way, one of them limping heavily while the other supported his weight. When the activity in the background registered, my stomach lurched. Dozens and dozens of burnt, mobile bodies were in pursuit, only a handful of steps behind the men.

Humans could make the strangest decisions when the lizard brain kicked in, and in this case, the lizards were fucking idiots. The men were leading danger straight back to where they lived because they saw this place as a safe haven.

A tremor of fear went through me, and I took out the final two standing infected in quick succession. more remained on the ground, but only one of them had made it back to its knees.

I swept up my sword from the gravel and shoved it back in its sheath. “Horde!” I yelled, turning to Cruz.

He punched Dane in the face so hard it made me wince, sending him sprawling across the ground with an audible thud. It didn’t knock him out, but it stunned him enough that when I ran past, it didn’t occur to him to try grabbing me.

Without wasting a second, Cruz snagged my elbow and pulled me toward the door. As soon as we were inside, he slammed it shut and engaged the lock.

“Are you injured?” he asked, looking me over.

“No. You?”

He shook his head.

Breathing hard, I scanned the interior. There were car parts on shelves, tools scattered across the floor, and two vehicles parked inside, one still up on the hoist.

Remy and Jonah were removing the women's gags and untying them, while Gabe performed a sweep with his knife drawn.

The open door along the rear wall showed glimpses of the backyard and the house behind the business.

Our way out.

If we didn't get moving, we'd be inundated in a minute or two.

"Is everyone okay?" I called out to the room.

"They're not hurt." Jonah gave me a reassuring look as he helped Ellie from her seat.

She turned to face me, an older version of Willow with eyes the same shade of blue. "What's happening?" she asked, kicking the loosened rope off her ankle. "How did you know we were here?"

"It's all right," I assured her. "We'll explain as soon as we can get you somewhere safe. Let's move."

A bang came from behind me, followed by another. I spun to find a man's face pressed to the window, his expression panicked. Not Dane, but still one of his crew. "Open the fucking door!" he screamed. "They're here!" He planted one of his hands on the glass as the other smacked the metal panel beside the window, creating a reverberation through the building.

If we didn't run soon, he might try to make it through the side gate and create a whole new set of problems for us.

Cruz turned away from the view, meeting my eyes briefly before his attention shifted to Willow's family members. "Can you both walk?" he asked the women.

Ellie nodded, still wary.

Ro flung aside her bindings and yanked her denim shirt into place. "I don't know who you are or why you're helping us," she said, rolling her shoulders after being in one position for too long, "but I'm thankful as hell you came."

I gave her a quick smile, eager to keep moving. "I'm Liv, and I'll introduce you to everyone else later. The dead are coming. We need to get out of here before we're surrounded."

As we rushed to the back of the shed, I stuck close to Ro and Ellie. "We've got Willow," I said, as Jonah and Remy passed through the door first. "She's with your friend Tae."

Ro's entire being seemed to sigh with relief, and Ellie's eyes shot to mine. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "It's how we knew where to find you."

"Come on." Cruz clasped my shoulders from behind. "We can talk more later."

We exited the building and ducked through a gap in the fence where several palings were missing.

When everyone had emerged on the other side, we crowded together in a deserted

alley that backed on to the mechanic business. With no infected in the immediate area, it looked like we had a clear run to the car park where Willow and Tae were waiting.

“Let’s go, everyone,” I said.

As we hurried away from the scene, a male scream filled the air, the type of scream I’d heard before and exactly the kind I never wanted to hear again. Whenever humans were surrounded by the dead and the biting began, they let out a particular in human, gut-wrenching sound that went right through you.

I swallowed my revulsion and tried to block it out, but my heart was beating too fast, and I could hear my own breaths.

We didn’t have time to exchange small talk with the women or get caught up on what had happened while Willow was gone. The pressure was on, and it would be until we’d reunited them with their missing family member.

I’d been through more adrenaline rushes in the last few days than I’d experienced in the previous two years, and brief moments where I desperately didn’t want to do this anymore would catch me off guard.

Cruz clasped the side of my head and touched his lips to my temple. “It’s going to be okay,” he said. “You did good back there.”

He never used empty words to placate me. If he said them, he believed them, but I wondered when it would be okay. With the state of the country and the uncertainty of our living situation, it was hard to picture a time when life would feel settled again.

I nodded as Ellie walked in front of us with her aunt; the image reminding me to be thankful that we’d achieved something positive, even if three more people had died

around us. Our numbers kept growing, and during all the time I'd lived in the city with Haruto, I hadn't so much as hit another living person.

Remy and Gabe moved a little farther ahead, with Jonah several steps behind.

Each of us scoured the area while we moved.

My pulse quickened as we closed in on the car park, and a sick feeling I couldn't explain filled my stomach. Maybe knowing people had just been torn apart back at the shed was the cause, or the unknown of what awaited us when we returned to the car. Either way, I wouldn't feel secure until I knew Willow was exactly where we'd left her.

We walked the last few metres in silence, and when the twins reached the car park before us, I immediately knew something was wrong.

Gabe's body tensed, and Remy lifted his hands in a what-the-hell gesture.

Jonah rushed forward to join them.

"What's up?" Cruz called as the rest of us broke into a jog.

As soon as I reached the entrance, I spotted the problem on sight.

The car was gone.

Tae and Willow, too.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Cruz

“ A re you sure you can trust this guy?” I asked Ellie, my tone coming out more forcefully than intended. “He was told to stay here.”

We’d given the car park a thorough once-over on the off chance they’d left clues for us to find. After coming up empty, Jonah and the twins stationed themselves at the entrance to keep watch on the street, leaving me with the women to figure out what was going on here.

Ellie didn’t know me well enough to understand my irritation was at Tae for ignoring the plan, and she straightened her shoulders as if I was just another asshole looking to pick up where Dane and his crew had left off. “ Yes, I’m sure. I’d bet anything he’s taken her home. Where else do you think he’d go?”

“We’ve got a second car stashed at a house not too far from here. Willow knows the location.”

Ellie couldn’t have been much older than twenty, but she had a mature way about her, like all the other kids who’d been forced to grow up too fast. She frowned, a little less sure now. “Well, I didn’t know that.”

Ro had the same blonde hair and blue eyes as her nieces, a wiry, sun-browned woman in her forties. She switched her attention between Ellie and me, her gaze narrowing as she sized me up. “I’m not worried about Tae,” she said. “Wherever he’s taken her, she’s safe with him.”

This was going nowhere. I clasped my hands on top of my head and met Liv's eyes, silently sharing my frustration. We needed to find our car and wrap this up so we could all move on with our lives.

"How far away is your place?" Liv asked Ro, just as eager to get to a solution.

She pointed north. "About two kilometres that way."

Roughly twice the distance as the journey back to our temporary base, only in a different direction. "What do you think? Would Willow go to the house we've been using as a pit stop, or to your place where it's familiar?" I asked.

"Now you've told me about the other car, I don't know." Ellie nibbled her lower lip. "It honestly could go either way."

"We'll save time then and split into two groups to cover both locations," I said, "which means you'll need to separate for a bit, so one of you can direct each group back to your place."

"I'll take Ro's house," Liv said, no doubt ready to stretch her legs after missing her daily exercise. "Remy, Gabe, and Ellie can come with me. We'll run it while the rest of you walk and grab the car."

"I'm not sold on the idea of splitting up." Ro's gaze swept over me, then shifted to the boys at the car park entrance. "We're grateful you helped us, but I've got two girls to think of, and I'm not excited about showing you where we live—no offense."

"None taken." I pulled the knife from my belt and spun the handle around. Pushing her was the quickest way to get on her bad side, but we didn't have the time to let her warm up to us naturally. "I don't want to rush you, but you need to jump on board with the plan now, or we'll say goodbye and go our separate ways."



Liv's expression tightened, but she didn't voice any objections to my handling of the situation.

Unspoken concerns swirled between Ro and Ellie for a few beats, then Ellie blew out a breath and her expression softened. "They didn't have to help," she said to Ro as her gaze came to rest on me. "It would have been easier just to leave us behind in that hellhole, but they put themselves in danger and broke us out of there—and now they're still trying to help, even though they don't owe us a thing."

"Okay, okay. Enough with the melodramatics." Ro had a shrewd, no bullshit way about her that had the potential to be entertaining once we got to know her. "But I'm gonna let you know right now if any of that help involves putting a hand on either of my girls, I'll get real pissed, real quick. You got me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Liv snuck me a smile. "Don't worry," she said, "I'll be there to watch over Ellie, and you have my word that Cruz and Jonah are trustworthy—but we need to get moving. We don't know how many men survived back there or which direction the horde went. We've got to get ahead of this now while we still have the chance."

Neither of them had weapons, so I held my knife out to Ro, handle first. She clocked onto the fact that I'd already pulled it out in anticipation of her saying yes and gave me a deadpan look as she took it from me. Liv passed her own knife to Ellie, and we stepped away from the women, giving them a chance to say their temporary goodbyes to each other.

As we wandered over to the others at the entrance, I prepared myself for the next half hour of activity away from Liv. We were about to part for the second time in as many hours, and although she'd have Remy and Gabe with her—and Ellie, too, a resident who knew her way around the town—it didn't change the fact that I wouldn't be

there.

I stopped and turned to face her. With a finger hooked in the neckline of her shirt, I tugged her closer. “Watch your back out there, querida. Don’t let your guard down for a second.”

She gazed up at me with the hint of a smile in her eyes. “Always.”

Her demeanour should have lessened my concerns, but it didn’t. “I mean it.”

“I know you do. You be careful, too. Ro’s just looking for a reason to unleash on someone, and you’ll be right there in her firing line.” She tipped her head back and offered her lips. “Now kiss me goodbye, mi amor, and let’s get this done.”

With a huff of amusement, I cradled her face in both hands and pressed my mouth to hers, kissing her several times in quick succession until her eyes shined with happiness.

Since my group would do a combination of walking and driving, I eased the backpack off her shoulders and onto mine, freeing her up for her run.

My chest tightened as I looked at her, but I reminded myself we’d survived every other challenge, and there was no reason to think we’d fail this time around, either.

“You never told me how you found Willow.” Ro adjusted her pace to keep up with Jonah and me.

We’d left the business district behind several minutes ago and ventured into residential territory. Townhouses lined both sides of the street, and fenced-off gardens overflowed with shrubs and trees.

“Perfect timing.” My boot crushed a clump of weeds pushing through a crack in the footpath. “She was running down the road right when we were leaving town. A few minutes earlier or later, and we never would have seen her.”

“God. That girl.” Ro extended her knife hand and pointed out a corpse staggering down a driveway.

“All yours.” I hung back with Jonah to see how she’d handle the challenge. We still knew next to nothing about her or her nieces.

She approached the withered man with a confident stride and kicked him in the knee hard enough to bend his leg the wrong way. The second he hit the pavement, Ro stabbed him in the ear and took him out with a single strike.

She lived on a farm. It shouldn’t have surprised me to see her willingness to do the dirty work, but I smiled in appreciation, anyway.

“As I was saying,” Ro went on as if we’d never been interrupted. “Even at her age, Willow’s tough enough for this world. She doesn’t complain or cry about losing all the things she used to love. The only time I’ve ever seen her upset is when her parents died last year.”

“Willow told us they were living here when it happened,” Jonah said.

She nodded, her eyes troubled. “My brother-in-law, Joel, and my sister, Laura. She dived straight into a gaggle of zombies to save him. Ellie saw it, but I was back at the house with Willow when it happened.”

In all this time, I’d never heard someone refer to the corpses as zombies. People seemed to avoid using the term because saying it out loud meant admitting the impossible—that they were real and this was our life now.

“My dad died the same way,” Jonah admitted, his features drawn.

“It’s pure instinct to defend the ones you love.” Ro headed for another corpse and drove her blade straight up through the emaciated woman’s jaw. When she joined us again, she said casually, “There’s seriously nothing I wouldn’t do for those girls, so remember to keep your hands and other appendages to yourself, or I won’t treat you any different from a zombie.”

I slid a glance Jonah’s way. “Got that?”

His eyes widened. “What makes you think she’s talking to me?”

I’d already received the same warning, but he didn’t need to know that. “Because you’re an immature little boy with wandering eyes, and I’m a mature, grown man.”

He scoffed. “Keep telling yourself that.”

I smiled and shot another look behind us, finally accepting that we were in the clear. Whichever direction the horde had gone, there were no corpses in sight, and their monotonous drone had faded to nothing.

“How did those clowns get three of you to the shed without a car?” I asked Ro.

“We were scavenging in town. Tae tried to word us up, but we caught on too late. There were four of them and three of us, and we weren’t that far from their place.”

“You didn’t know they were using it as a base?” Jonah asked.

“Nope.” She spun around and walked backwards for a couple of steps, checking the street in the other direction. “We hadn’t wandered that far across town since the pandemic,” she said, facing the front again. “I’ve only caught glimpses of other

people here and there, and I don't know who's left and who's bad news. No one's talking to anyone."

"Did that come from one of them?" I pointed to my temple to refer to the bruise on hers. Willow had mentioned her aunt giving the men a hard time, and after meeting her, I believed it.

She made a humming sound in agreement. "Dane didn't like being threatened by a woman. Had to prove how much of a man he was by getting physical. You think he's dead? Ever seen anyone escape from that many zombies?"

The visceral image of my brother being surrounded by a horde hit me out of nowhere. "No, but without their bodies as evidence..."

"They could still be out there."

"Always safest to assume the worst." If Dane had survived and took another run at the group like Sue did back in Wallin, he wouldn't make it through another attack. I'd kill him myself.

As we closed in on the last turn, Jonah ran off to put an end to the suspense. "See you there," called over his shoulder.

"This is where we'll find her," Ro said, as he rounded the corner and left our sight. Her voice sounded more hopeful than certain. "It's closer than my place. It makes the most sense."

We reached the end of the street, and by the time the two of us had set eyes on him again, Jonah was just a few of houses away from our destination.

When his steps faltered, I almost held my breath. Then he raised his fist and pumped

the air. “They’re here!”

“That’s my girl.” Ro grinned and clapped me on the back.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Liv

Our group of four kept up a respectable pace as we ran through the streets of Darby Downs, with Gabe in the front, Ellie and me in the middle, and Remy bringing up the rear.

So far, nothing had triggered any concerns, and it felt good to be running again.

“Left up here,” Ellie said as we approached a cross intersection.

We turned the corner, and I performed a head check to the right, finding only the dead loitering in the distance. “How are you doing after what happened?” I asked her.

“I’m all right—just thankful to be out of there,” she said. “We weren’t even in the shed for twenty-four hours, so it could have been worse.”

“Did they hurt you?” I asked carefully as we jogged.

Ellie was cruising, arms loose, breaths coming easily. “Not in the way you’re asking,” she said, giving me a sideways look. “Dane was working up to it, but Tae kept getting in the way without making it seem like he was doing it on purpose. If he had the time, he would have got us all out of there—and if not, Ro would have figured out a way to rip Dane to shreds.”

I smiled as I pulled in a breath. “I don’t doubt that.”

Gabe slowed as we approached a cluster of dead blocking our path, with several

spread out in a way that dodging one threat put us in the path of another.

As he grabbed the stained t-shirt of a young woman and drove his knife through her jaw, the rest of us dived into the melee.

Ellie took the one closest to her, a heavysset man in overalls and a ripped flannel shirt. She snatched a handful of matted hair and stabbed the knife I'd given her through his ear, jumping back as his body dropped to her feet.

Impressed with her quick movements, I swung my sword at two more, blood and fluids spraying the air as I took them both out with a single sweep.

Remy ended the fifth and sixth, and Gabe followed soon after with the remaining two.

Without another word, we took off running again, and I glanced in Ellie's direction, thankful to have another confident, skilled member on our team—even if it was only for the duration of our time in town.

"More coming," Gabe said a short while later.

The horde must have splintered off into several smaller clusters. Remy moved in close, and our group tightened as we encountered more than a dozen of the infected.

"Focus, everyone." He bumped his shoulder against mine. "Cruz told me to look out for you, so you better take it easy. He'll kill me if you get hurt."

"I've got it covered," I said, tossing him a smile. "You just worry about yourself."

Several of the infected were badly burned, their decaying skin blackened and raw. Tattered clothing had fused to their bones, and some were missing body parts. If I



thought the smell of rotting flesh had been bad, the crispiness added an extra layer of disgusting that made me want to gag.

“They must have come from the building Dane set on fire,” Ellie said as we spread out to prepare for a fight.

“Why did they burn it?” Gabe asked after he’d dropped the first one.

“Trying to clear the zombies from town.” Ellie stabbed a woman with a backhanded motion while she kept her eyes on the next one. “I don’t think they expected them to keep moving afterwards, but the fire didn’t damage their brains enough to stop them for good.”

Remy grabbed one of the infected and swung it into two more, knocking them all off their feet. He leaned over each of them to pierce their brains, ending the moaning and writhing in seconds. Sometimes watching him fight could be like seeing every action in fast forward, a blur of movements that left me in awe.

I put the tip of my sword into the face of a petite woman with the longest hair I’d ever seen, the strands partially burnt and stuck to her arms. She fell to the ground in a heap as Ellie took care of two more in quick succession. For someone who’d spent hours tied to a chair, she’d recovered surprisingly well.

Gabe threw himself into the fray, working fast, his form smooth and graceful. He dropped more than his share, occasionally using roundhouse kicks to take them down.

By the time we were out of danger, I stopped for a minute to catch my breath, turning to take in the immediate area.

Even with the delays caused by the dead, we were about halfway to Ro’s place.

Hopefully, the others were picking up the second car by now, and if everything went to plan, they'd found Willow and Tae waiting for them.

"Where to now?" Remy asked.

Ellie pointed straight ahead at a stretch of road that went as far as the eye could see. Houses were no longer on standard residential lots, and the view opened up into vast farmland. "Just over a kilometre up that road on the right. White fences all around. Ro used to have a horse agistment business there before... you know... everything."

I flicked my sword to dislodge a chunk of crap clinging to the blade. "Let's keep moving then," I said. "We shouldn't be out in the open with so many of the dead around."

"Race you there." Remy launched off his back foot as if he'd just heard a starter's pistol, moving quicker than our original pace. Maybe too fast for me, but that wouldn't stop me from trying to catch him.

Gabe rolled his eyes. "Can you tell he's the younger twin?"

I smiled. "By how many minutes?"

"Eight, but every one of them counts."

With a laugh, I readied myself for a nice, quick burst of speed to finish our run. "Ready to go home?" I asked Ellie.

Her mouth lifted on one side. "More than you can imagine."

I gripped my sword and prepared to kick off when a weight hit her in the middle of the back, thumping into her like she'd just been punched. She made a strange

squeaking sound and dropped my knife, falling to her hands and knees soon afterwards.

A fluttering started in my stomach, and my eyes went wide with confusion. “What the hell was that?”

“Rem!” Gabe bellowed, turning to scrutinise the area behind us.

Winded and struggling for breath, Ellie rolled over and sat on the ground directly next to a hammer.

An attack.

I rested my palm on her shoulder and lifted my gaze, steeling myself for a fight.

When I spotted Dane standing in an alley between two tall buildings, my heart punched against my ribcage.

Other than a bloody patch on the front of his shirt, he looked to be unharmed, and seeing him still breathing ticked me the hell off.

Gabe crouched beside Ellie to help her, and I took a step back as rage built inside me, turning my blood hot and sharpening my focus.

“You’re going down,” I murmured, bending to collect my knife from the ground.

“Liv,” Gabe warned. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

“It’s fine,” I said, distracted by murderous thoughts. “Everything’s fine. Take care of Ellie.”

I returned the blade to my belt and slid my sword back into its sheath, freeing up both hands to maximise my speed.

Before anyone could stop me, I ran straight for him, arms pumping, determination in every step.

Dane grinned and performed a one-eighty, heading straight back down the laneway he must have just come from.

It couldn't have been more obvious I'd given him what he wanted, but letting him go meant leaving a dangerous man out there lurking and planning. Stalking.

We'd seen what happened with loose ends, and he had the potential to cause lasting damage if we didn't keep track of him.

Still.

I'd been doing this for far too long, and I knew better.

I knew not to go it alone.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Cruz

Two minutes. That's all I gave Ro and Willow to enjoy their reunion. With our fractured group in precarious positions, we needed to move fast to bring everyone together again.

Willow smiled and threw her arms around her aunt, laughing as they embraced—a stark contrast to the girl we'd met running down the street. Nothing about her appearance suggested her one-on-one time with Tae had gone badly, and as I took in the scene, my concern evaporated.

While she peppered Ro with questions about Ellie, I shifted my attention to her saviour.

Tae looked to be a few years older than Jonah and wore a grey shirt and faded black jeans. He had an athletic, capable vibe about him, and carried a couple of weapons on his belt, one of them a well-used machete.

“What happened to the plan?” I asked, pushing down my irritation. “Liv told you to wait.”

“Executive decision. I know that piece of shit. You don't. Keeping her anywhere near Dane was a bad idea.”

“Yeah, that's great and all...” Jonah stepped closer, similar in height to Tae and more fired up than I'd seen him. “But you took our car, and in case you haven't noticed, there's a fucking horde in town.”

Tae gave Jonah a passing glance, ending the confrontation before it could get started by switching his gaze back to me. “Willow told me about this place,” he said. “I knew you didn’t have far to walk, and I’m not apologising for keeping her safe.”

“Does Dane know where Ro lives? Is that why you brought her here?”

He shook his head. “He didn’t have a clue who any of them were, and I never let on that I knew them.”

Ro slipped her arm around Willow and beamed, elated to be back with her again. Neither of them had been injured during their separation, and Jonah and I hadn’t run into any trouble on the way back, either. As far as problems went, it could have been worse.

I recalled my conversation with Liv about being flexible and seeing the shades between black and white. With a harsh exhale, I let go of the lingering annoyance. “All right, we’re here now. Why don’t we just move on and get back to the others? The key?”

Tae dropped it into my palm and my fingers closed around it as I addressed Jonah. “I’ll take the Honda. You take the twins’ car. Everyone else, jump in with whoever you want.”

It took all of five minutes to pack up the supplies we’d left behind the house. Then Ro and Willow accompanied me in the lead car while Tae followed with Jonah.

Both vehicles started on the first try, and we reversed out of the driveway.

“Must be a relief knowing Willow’s safe,” I said to Ro as we pulled away from the house for the last time.

“A massive relief.” She pointed to the left at the upcoming intersection. “But I clearly need to reevaluate how we stay off other people’s radars now,” she said as I took the turn. “Even if Dane and his sidekicks are dead, there’s gotta be more like them around.”

“We’re safe now,” Willow said from the back. “You don’t need to worry anymore.”

“Ha. Like it’s that easy.”

Ro guided me through a couple more turns, taking us into an older residential area where less rioting and damage had occurred. The streets were free from clutter, and if it hadn’t been for the corpses, we would have had a straight run. One cluster after another created minor roadblocks for us to navigate, but we weaved through each time without getting trapped.

When we turned onto a road with open space and more expansive plots of land, I knew we were close.

“One more left, and we’re on my street,” Ro said. “Hopefully, the others are on the last stretch by now.”

“Is that her?” Willow asked, gripping the front seats. “Is that Ellie?”

My brows pulled together and my gaze locked onto a scene a few hundred metres in the distance.

A beat later, my heart slowed to a heavy thud.

Ellie sat in the middle of the road amongst a collection of slain corpses. There looked to be more than a dozen around her, but four people could easily handle those numbers. We’d done it before.

Willow reached through from the back to grab Ro's arm. "It is her. Do you see? She's hurt. I think she's hurt."

"I see." Her voice dropped to a dangerous tone, and the atmosphere in the car heated. "Tell me that asshole didn't come back for her. If he touched her... if he hurt her..."

"We don't know anything yet." I raced toward them, my eyes moving from one spot to another as I put the details together on the fly.

Too many missing pieces.

Ellie's hands were linked on top of her head as if she was trying to open her airways, and she had Remy beside her in a crouch, with his palm resting between her shoulder blades. It didn't look to be a case of exertion after pushing herself too hard. She'd be standing to catch her breath, not sitting in a heap on the ground.

Something bad had gone down, and once I stopped focusing on Ellie and Remy, it hit me like a sledgehammer.

Liv was missing.

Gabe, too.

Where the fuck were they?

My gaze sharpened, and a surge of adrenaline barrelled through me.

With my heart in my throat, I pulled over hard, and the force locked Ro's seatbelt, yanking her into place. As determination steeled my spine, I shoved the keys in my pocket. "Wait here and lock the doors. We don't know who's around."



I jumped from the car, and as I flung the door closed, Ro said, “Like hell. I’m coming with you.”

She was a grown woman who could make her own decisions. I didn’t have the time or energy to convince her otherwise.

All my attention shifted to Liv and Gabe.

Jonah pulled over next to us, and I took off at a run. Seconds later, I heard footsteps sprinting toward the scene behind me, all of us desperate to find out what had happened here.

No one spoke.

Nothing made sense.

Ellie looked in our direction, wincing each time she drew breath. I spotted the hammer lying behind her, and the picture became clearer. One or more of those fuckers had survived the horde. There wasn’t a single reason for an unknown person to attack our group.

When I stopped beside them, Remy’s eyes lifted to meet mine. “It was Dane,” he said. “Threw a hammer and took her down. She’s okay. Just winded.”

“How long ago?” I asked, as Jonah and Tae joined me.

“Two minutes. Maybe three.”

Tae sank to his knees and took over from Remy, sweeping Ellie’s hair back from her face as he spoke to her. His presence and the low timbre of his voice calmed her, and seeing her in excellent hands meant I could focus on more urgent matters.

Breathing hard, mind whirling, I turned in a slow circle and scanned the area, seeing no sign of the others. “Where’d he go—and what about your brother and Liv?”

Remy straightened and gestured to an alley between two red brick warehouses. Dark and deserted. No corpses. “Down there. Dane first, then Liv and Gabe.”

Shit .

If anything had happened to her, someone might as well punch a hole in my chest, rip my heart out, and stomp it to pieces on the ground.

I’d be done.

Gone.

I dragged in a breath and kept my eyes on the alley. “How far behind was Gabe?”

“Not far. He acted quick. He’s faster than her.”

Which only mattered if he was close enough to know which direction she went.

I’d heard how Dane spoke to Liv and seen the predatory way he looked at her. Running after him was the stupidest and most brave thing she’d ever done.

“Where’s your place?” I asked when Ro joined us.

“A kilometre up that road,” she said, pointing north. “Benson Stables. You can’t miss it.”

“Head straight home with Ellie,” I said, handing her the key. “We’ll take the other car when we’re done and catch up with you there. Tae, you might as well go with them.

Dane doesn't need to see you."

I didn't wait for an answer. There wasn't time to talk it over.

No time at all.

I took off running like my life was on the line, eyes focused on the alley, resolution in every step.

Jonah and Remy fell in beside me and kept pace. My back up, my support.

I hoped like hell we weren't too late.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Liv

Gabe shouted out for his brother to take care of Ellie while he presumably followed me, but I couldn't wait around for him to catch up. A delay of even a few seconds might mean losing sight of Dane.

My body kept a steady rhythm as I chased him into the alley, my limbs loose after having already warmed up. I was in my element now, and I'd keep running for however long it took to end this stupid game.

With a brick building on either side of us, Dane continued straight ahead. Our footsteps were the only sound, and the pressure to match his pace left no room for fear or nerves. No time for doubt. I didn't even think too much about the people I'd left behind, and I hoped I wouldn't come to regret that later.

He reached the end of the alley and branched off to the left, disappearing from view for the moment it took me to reach the same spot.

My pulse kicked up as I neared the corner, and I crossed over to the other wall, leaning out to make sure I wasn't running into an ambush. With two others from Dane's crew unaccounted for, he could be leading me straight to them, but something had taken hold of me now, and I had to see this through.

All clear.

With a bracing breath, I launched into a run again, entering the adjoining alley that travelled along the rear of the buildings.

Roller doors lined both sides of the space, with warehouses on the left and garages belonging to residential homes on the right. At the open end of the alley, a group of the infected were headed in our direction, their moans bouncing off concrete and brick. If Dane kept running straight, dealing with the dead would give me time to catch up, and I had a feeling he didn't want a confrontation yet.

Before I could predict his next move, he stopped halfway down the lane, clasped the top of a fence for leverage, and jumped over into the rear garden of a house.

My eyes widened, and I slowed my pace.

In one move, he'd left my sight.

I contemplated following him, but he had too many places to hide and potentially take me by surprise.

Instead, I continued running, keeping my steps light, heading straight for the cluster of dead at the mouth of the alley. I weaved between the group, dodging bodies and slapping a hand away as it tried to grab me.

"Keep going. Keep going," I muttered.

Reaching the corner, I hung a right and immediately encountered two more of the infected. "Oh, crap ." My heart slammed against my ribs, and I jumped back from the threat, but I didn't have time to pause and recover.

To avoid having to draw a weapon, I sidestepped them and hurried to the next intersection, where I stopped to plan my next step.

I'd landed on a standard residential street with an extensive, modern development on the opposite side; a collection of townhouses in a U shape surrounding a neglected

playground and green space.

My pulse thundered in my neck, and tension rippled through me.

Dane could already be waiting somewhere close by, ready to jump me the second I let down my guard. I wouldn't even know about it until it was too late. Maybe the others were here, too—three against one to take advantage of me in ways I refused to think about.

“ Think . Don't lose focus.”

Tossing up between which weapon best suited my needs, I drew my tant? and moved slowly, turning to examine every direction.

The cars parked at the curb and abandoned in the road provided endless options for cover, but instinct told me he wouldn't lure me away from the group just to come at me on the street.

He'd want somewhere spacious where he could take his time playing out the depraved fantasies in his warped little mind.

Staring hard at my surroundings, I stood still and waited for a movement, a sound, anything to tell me he was close.

There.

My breath caught as a figure ran between the swings and slide, heading for the open area in the centre.

Long grass obscured the lower half of his legs, and each time he moved behind an overgrown bush, I waited for him to reappear on the other side. My skin heated as I

kept watch, my body flooding with another dose of adrenaline.

After I'd tracked him for several seconds, Dane stopped and hid in the greenery.

His stakeout spot chosen, he remained there, still and quiet, like a lion waiting for its prey.

Red and brown leaves skittered across the road as I considered the smartest approach. The need to keep active had my legs trembling, and I was desperate to use up the energy buzzing inside me. I shaded my eyes against the sun glinting off a car window and paused, waiting to see if he'd call out to the other guys from his group.

Nothing happened.

He had to be alone.

With a split-second shoulder check, I moved forward, keeping my eyes locked on Dane's location, my fingers wrapped tightly around the hilt of my sword.

I bypassed a fallen bike and slipped between the bumpers of two vehicles. As I approached the park entrance, I slowed my breathing, thankful my muscles were prepped for action.

Dane may have had quick reflexes and physical strength on his side, but I wouldn't let him get the better of me.

Shouting echoed from somewhere in the distance, my name echoing in the quiet, again and again. It should have bolstered my confidence knowing Gabe was on the way, but he hadn't seen which direction I went, and he wasn't close enough to help me.

That thought alone prompted me to make my move.

“Hey, Dane!” I called out.

His head whipped toward me, and I had the satisfaction of seeing momentary shock before his cocky persona slid into place again. “Alison,” he said, his voice heavy with sarcasm. “Are you here to give yourself to me? Is that why you chased me?”

The man was equal parts arrogant and delusional. All I’d give him was a fatal puncture wound and the privilege of my face being the last thing he saw before he closed his eyes for good. “Nope. Try again.”

He smiled, revealing the gap in his teeth. “That’s all right.” His hand hovered over the knife strapped to his side, and he sauntered toward me through the knee-high grass. “You don’t need to give me anything. I’m happy to take whatever I want, sweetheart.”

I shivered with disgust. He was barely a step up from the mindless, rotting bodies roaming the streets. If I could have guaranteed hitting my target, I’d yank my knife free and fling it straight at his face.

“The only thing you’ll be taking from me is a beating, sweetheart. Now, come closer so we can get started.”

He threw back his head and laughed, so confident he had the upper hand he felt comfortable taking his eyes off me.

Going with my initial impulse, I pulled the knife from my belt and flipped it one-handed into a pinch grip. With a hard, fast throw, I hit him in the thigh with a sickening thud. The blade embedded deep in his quad muscle, and I congratulated myself on a nice solid landing, even if I’d missed a vital organ.



Still in the throes of amusement, it took him a second to register what had happened. Before reality kicked in, I strode toward him with my sword, keeping my steps controlled, my breaths even. No more running. If I wanted to avoid hand-to-hand combat where he could use his strength against me, every move required thought.

Dane's gaze dropped to his thigh. When his eyes rose to mine again, his flinty expression sent ice through my veins. "Oh, now you're gonna get it."

More yelling came from somewhere to my right, but I wouldn't risk a look in that direction. Still too far away.

With a growl of pain, Dane pulled my knife from his thigh and launched it at me. As I dodged the blade and continued closing in on him, he removed one of his own knives from his belt and tossed that my way, too. The blade whizzed past my ear, but I had a feeling he was trying to distract me rather than land a hit.

He wanted to punish me before he killed me. It was all part of the fun.

"One chance left." I smiled, feeding into his rage. If I pushed enough buttons, I might just shove him over the edge.

"Baby, that's all I need." Blood poured from the wound on his thigh, flooding the front of his pants. He slipped the other knife from his belt and took a couple of limping steps toward me, faking a throw that had me jumping to the side to avoid where it would have landed had he let it go.

Dammit. I couldn't risk a single mistake.

While I regained my footing, he ignored the pain in his leg and came straight for me.

I stopped and widened my stance, holding my tant? in a two-handed grip. My eyes

remained locked on him, my body wound tight in readiness.

He threw his last knife just before he reached me, and the blade glanced off the side of my abdomen. A stinging sensation followed, and when I made an involuntary step to the right, my boot hit the edge of an uneven patch of grass.

No, no, no. My stomach dropped, and I stumbled for barely a second before I steadied myself, but it was enough.

Dane was on me, diving and grabbing my waist, throwing all his weight into the move.

Cursing, I released my sword so I wouldn't hurt myself. Twice now he'd got the better of me, and my pride was already hurting before I'd even hit the grass.

With no backpack to soften the landing this time, I let out an oof as all the breath left me. Urgency charged through me, and I sucked in a lungful of air, switching quickly to survival mode.

"Don't touch me!" I warned, as I tried to roll out from under him.

He straddled my hips and gripped my neck in one hand, his fingers tightening enough to inspire a wave of panic. "You think you're calling the shots?"

Neither of us held any weapons, but one punch from him could knock me unconscious, and I had to make sure he didn't get the chance. With my eyes on his, I drove my knee upwards, jamming it between his legs as hard as I could with my limited space. I didn't have enough room to do serious damage, but it still enraged him.

"You could have been part of something good," he spat, wincing in pain, "the

rebuilding, the repopulating—but you fucked it all up.”

“You’re insane. Pathetic. Useless.” I forced my body to relax, to tamp down the panic and enable myself to think. If I didn’t make a game-changing move soon, this could all be over.

He grabbed my neck with both hands and pressed his thumbs under my chin, forcing me to lift my head. “I’m gonna make this hurt,” he said. “You’re gonna feel every fucking second, you stupid bitch.”

He reached between our bodies for his belt, unfastening the buckle with one hand. His other hand kept hold of my neck, the pressure enough to leave bruises. While he was preoccupied with a mission that would never happen while my heart was still beating, I grabbed his hair in both fists and twisted my grip, bringing his nose down hard against my forehead.

Pain bloomed from the point of contact, and blood spurted from his nostrils, splattering my face and blurring my vision. Before he could regain control, I screamed and repeated the motion, hitting harder the second time. I could only hope I’d live long enough to feel the headache.

I yanked his face back from mine and shoved him hard, rolling to my side to throw him off me. Using my sleeve to wipe the blood from my eyes, I spat red-tinted saliva into the grass and struggled to my hands and knees.

He grabbed my ankle and dragged me toward him, roaring like a madman.

Time slowed.

Blood rushed in my ears.

Deep inside, I knew these were the seconds that determined whether I lived or died. Every decision counted. Every move.

I'd see Cruz again. This wouldn't be the end for me—for us.

I didn't utter a single word, instead using all my energy to kick blindly backwards and damage any part of Dane's body I could reach. Whatever I connected with had him punching the back of my thigh in anger, and I cried out from the pain.

As I searched the grass for a knife, my panic doubled. There were three of them lying around here somewhere. I had to find one.

Cruz and Jonah took turns shouting my name above the racket Dane was making, but I had no way of knowing if they could see me in the long grass.

It didn't matter. I could do this on my own.

My fingers closed around a handle, and my heart gave a sharp thud. Yes. Yes .

As Dane battled to get me to submit, it only fuelled my determination. I tightened my grip and channelled every shitty, deplorable thing that had ever happened to a woman at the hands of a man, letting it take control of me like a physical presence. Rage flowed through my veins and my entire body grew tight with purpose.

With one foot planted on the ground, I flipped myself over and locked eyes with him.

He'd moved to a sitting position. Blood streamed down his face and slid off his chin, staining his skin bright red. His eyes were cold, his lips pressed into a grim line. If I hadn't been holding a weapon, the sight would have terrified me.

"I'm done playing," he said, pulling his fist back to deliver the punch I'd been trying

so hard to avoid.

Before he could connect, I drove my knife between two of his knuckles, nearly slicing his hand straight down the middle. The force pushed me backward, and my brain and body were so pumped with adrenaline; I didn't care about his injury or the sensation of slashing a human body part.

I just wanted to survive.

If the others weren't aware of my location before, Dane's agonised scream had just alerted them.

Running entirely on instinct, I wrenched the blade free and threw all my weight into him, shoving him flat on his back. With my mind focused on one thing only, I gripped the knife in both hands, lifted it above my head, and used every bit of strength to plunge the blade into his chest. While frenzied breaths tore from me, the tip scraped ribs, pierced muscle, and found his heart.

His eyes met mine, and his mouth dropped open in shock or fear—maybe both. It had never occurred to him he might lose this fight.

My pulse was racing, my skin searing hot. I needed to end this for good.

Gabe arrived on the scene first, and I spared him a glance as I jerked the knife free and jammed it into Dane's chest again.

Part of me wanted to keep going, keep stabbing until I'd unleashed all the anger still trapped inside me, but I somehow found it in me to stop.

When it was done, when the last breath had left him and his body went limp beneath me, the adrenaline that had been keeping me going left me violently shaking.

We were safe.

A relieved sob heaved from me. The women in our group would never need to worry about him again. No woman ever would.

I lifted my head to share the victory with Gabe, but when I locked eyes with him, I sucked in a breath.

There was no concern there. No congratulatory words.

He was pissed.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Liv

“What the hell were you thinking?” Gabe pulled me to my feet and immediately dropped my hand as if touching me irritated him. “You could have been killed going after that psycho on your own.” Perspiration dotted his upper lip, and he scanned my face, no doubt alarmed by the blood. “Are you hurt?”

His abrupt tone made me realise how much he cared, and a twinge of guilt kicked in. My body ached, and I’d have a nice collection of bruises after the dust settled, but no lasting injuries. “I’m fine.” I dragged my sleeve over my face to wipe off more of the splatter. “It’s not mine. I’m okay.”

Cruz stopped at the scene with Jonah and Remy, their breaths wrenching from them as they took in the damage.

I knew enough about each man to understand the heat in their eyes came from a place of fear rather than anger, but I couldn’t handle anyone else yelling at me right now—not when my body was still shaking and my pulse hadn’t slowed yet.

“She wasn’t thinking,” Jonah said. “Just went all fucking commando without giving a shit about the rest of us.”

His dig had more of an impact than any of the physical blows I’d taken, and I ignored the sting as I searched the long grass for my weapons. “Thanks.” I gave him a quick, frustrated smile. “For the record, I do care. That’s why I went after him, so I could corner him before he had the chance to hide and come at us again.”

“And we’re supposed to... what?” he prodded. “Lose someone important to all of us just so you can end a piece of shit who means nothing to anyone?”

The air went still, the atmosphere silent save for the wailing of the dead in the distance. His words sank in, and emotion clogged my throat as I held his gaze. He was right. I hadn’t given them a second thought.

He’d already been through enough without me piling on more, and the tremble in his voice drove the point home better than any words could have done. “You didn’t lose me,” I said. “I’m still here. I’m sorry I scared you.”

Shock had settled in, my brain reeling from the physicality of what I’d endured. A shiver stole over me, and I kept my eyes averted from Dane’s body so I wouldn’t have to see what remained of him. As I stepped back, the side of my boot hit an object; my knife. I stooped to collect it and wiped it on the grass before I returned it to my belt.

Cruz found my missing sword and held it out to me without a word. I mumbled my thanks and took it from him, avoiding his gaze as I slipped it back in its sheath. It would have killed me to see judgement in his eyes, and for someone who communicated so well, his silence unnerved me.

Why wasn’t he reprimanding me or making sure I wasn’t hurt?

Several of the infected were on their way to the playground, thirty or so metres away. There was no good reason for us to be here anymore.

Remy followed my line of sight and formed the same opinion. “Let’s move,” he said, clasping my shoulder as he sidled past me. “Ro’s taken the others back to her place. Might as well hang around for the night and kick off again tomorrow morning.”



“Sounds like a good idea.” The guys walked away, leaving me alone with Cruz. I braced myself and built the courage to look at him for the first time.

He must have been watching me because his eyes were already on me, dark and dangerous and filled with too many emotions to name. My stomach dipped, and I dragged in a lungful of air.

I didn’t know what to think. How to feel. Too much had happened, and it was all catching up to me.

“I’m okay.” I lifted my shirt to inspect my ribs and found only a pink line where Dane’s knife had grazed my skin. “No injuries,” I said, letting the material fall back into place.

His eyes strayed from my abdomen to my forehead, giving nothing away. “If you say so.”

Not exactly a promising response, so I swiped at the blood on my face again, wondering if my appearance was the reason behind his mood. “Do you want to talk while we head back?”

He gave just the barest shake of his head. “Not yet. I’m still processing, and Gabe and Jonah had it pretty well covered.”

“Okay.” My throat constricted as I looked past him. Maybe I’d finally done enough to change his view of me. Maybe this was the tipping point. “Later, then.”

I expected him to walk away from me after that, but he stayed by my side until we’d caught up to the others.

Whether it was out of duty or desire, I didn’t know.

I couldn't read him, and I could always read him.

Cruz eased off the accelerator and turned into a wide driveway with a sign out the front that read Benson Stables and Agistment .

The entire place was a collection of white fences separating one enclosure from the next, each containing a shelter and water trough for the horses that once roamed here.

Ro had allowed the grass and weeds to grow wild, but the asphalt driveway was still in pristine condition, creating a grand entrance to a property that would have been beautiful just a few years ago.

At the end of a circular driveway, her house appeared. A wide and sprawling homestead.

Cruz followed another drive that branched off the main one and went around to the rear, where a shed and stables were located, along with extra space for parking.

A white Land Cruiser sat in the opening to the shed, no doubt with an empty fuel tank and a dead battery.

Ro had parked our other car back here, so Cruz pulled up beside it and shut off the engine. Without saying a word, he jumped out and walked a short distance away with Gabe, surveying the grounds and pine trees bordering the property.

I exited the car and paused as the two of them talked and pointed at something in the distance. The breeze ruffled Cruz's dark hair and flannel shirt, and his confident, reassuring presence made me long to hit the rewind button and take us back to the way we'd been only an hour ago.

With a lump in my throat, I blinked and turned away from the view. Whatever had

caused his shift in mood, I couldn't fix it with everyone around, so I headed for the house.

Ro opened the sliding door and stood off to the side, welcoming me with a smile that dropped when she caught sight of my appearance. "Wow. I'll need the story behind that later. I hope it means what I think it means."

"A horror story with a happy ending." I smiled to lighten the mood. "Everyone get back here okay?"

"They're all in the living room." She looked me over again, and something in my eyes had her features softening. "There's a bucket of water and some soap in the kitchen if you want to wash your face."

"Thanks." Before she could ask questions I wasn't ready to answer, I stepped straight into the kitchen-dining area and stopped at the sink.

I took a minute to scrub my face and hands, then removed my shirt to reveal a clean tee underneath. By the time I was done, the others still hadn't come inside, so I continued through to the adjoining lounge room.

Tae and Willow were seated on a tan leather couch, and Ellie was stretched out on an extended recliner with her blonde ponytail draped over one shoulder. She looked to be a much improved version of the person I'd left in the middle of the street.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

She threw me a quick smile. "Fine. Just sore. The hammer kind of side swiped me, so it could have been worse."

"I'm glad it wasn't." Broken ribs would have been a bitch to recover from.

“Are you all right?” she asked, taking in the bump on my forehead. “It freaked me out when you ran off like that.”

Feeling the weight of three sets of eyes on me—one of them a fourteen-year-old’s—I kept it simple. “Just sore, like you.”

“What happened?” Tae asked. “You were gone for a while.”

I dragged in a breath, still coming down from the exertion. “Without going into detail, Dane won’t be a problem anymore.”

Relief passed over his features, and he shared a look with Ellie. Relief there, too. The tightness in my chest eased a fraction, and their reactions made me feel like less of a monster.

As the rest of our crew came inside, I wandered to the front foyer to examine the entrance. Coats and boots filled the space, and daylight streamed through the lead light panels in the door, projecting colourful shards onto the white walls. I counted three locks, and when I noted the mesh security door providing another layer of defence, I relaxed a little.

They were relatively safe here... as much as three people could be inside a property with no high walls or fences.

I went back into the lounge room and took in the collection of art above the fireplace, the warmth in the colours reminding me of autumn. Ro had a nice home. Cosy. Clean. Rustic in that expensive, intentional way.

I wished the peaceful setting would rub off on me, but when Cruz stepped into the room and met my eyes, my throat closed up. Inexplicable tears followed, and I blinked to clear my vision.

Ignoring everyone else, I approached him and waited to see if he'd say or do anything to put my mind at ease.

Whatever thinking he'd done during the silence must have helped because he caught sight of my damp eyes, and his gaze turned soft. He cupped the back of my head and rubbed his thumb against my hair before he moved past me.

It wasn't the time or place for us to delve deep and talk it through, so I'd have to wait.

Minutes passed by as everyone but Ellie and Willow met up in the kitchen, some of us taking seats around the dining table while others stood propped against the bench.

Cruz sat beside me and rested his elbows on the table, widening the spread of his thighs until his leg pressed against mine. Whether the move was unconscious or intentional, I didn't know, but the connection calmed me and helped me focus on details outside of my head.

Ro disappeared into a walk-in pantry and returned with a water cooler bottle that was half full, lugging it out to fill glasses for each of us.

Remy and Jonah passed the drinks around, and the chatter kicked off.

"So, I take it from the way Liv looked when she got here that the threat's been... eliminated?" She slid the bottle onto the bench and dragged out the chair beside Cruz to sit with us.

Cruz nodded and lowered his hand from the table, curling his fingers around my knee. I pulled in a shuddering breath at the contact, and when his grip tightened momentarily, I knew he'd heard it. "You don't need to worry about Dane," he said to Ro. "And we didn't see any of the others from his crew, either, so I think we can safely assume they're gone."

“That’s good news.”

He was touching me again. He still wanted to touch me.

My heart thundered, and heat rushed to my cheeks.

It felt like my world was being torn apart and put back together by the same person.

“What does that mean for all of you now?” she asked. “You said were driving out of town when you found Willow. Are you still leaving today?”

Ellie called out from the couch behind us, “And where are you going?”

“We’re heading to a place about an hour from here, a property built for this kind of shitstorm.” Gabe crossed his arms over his chest, his dark eyes moving from Ro to where Ellie sat with her back to us. “You probably know of it being so close. Bridgehill?”

“I do,” Ro said. “It’s a coastal holiday town I never had the time off to visit.” She tucked her shoulder-length blonde hair behind her ear. “Have you got family there?”

While Gabe gave Ro the spiel we’d already delivered a few times to others, out of nowhere, a flashback of my boots thumping on the pavement as I chased down Dane assaulted me, the memory harsh and violent and impossible to believe it belonged to me—or the me I’d been a week ago when the thought of murdering people hadn’t entered my mind.

As everyone chatted about Bridgehill and the idea of Ro and the girls coming with us, the weight on my chest intensified. I couldn’t keep up with the conversation, tuning in and out as each new image crowded my brain. Blood. Shouting. A literal fight to the death.

Stress built inside me, taking over until I wanted to tear at my skin to let it free.

Just as the urge to run overwhelmed me, Cruz said in a low voice, “Do you want to go outside?”

I nodded as the claustrophobic feeling I’d experienced at the waterfall came over me again.

I needed space.

Lots of space.

We pushed back our chairs, and Cruz shared a few quiet words with Jonah before we left.

Feeling like I was about to make the walk toward my execution, I followed him outside and off to the left, entering an undercover area with a bricked-in barbeque and a long table with benches on each side.

Cruz perched on the end of the table, feet planted wide on the ground.

My heartbeats played in my ears and my stomach was churning before we’d even started our conversation. It had been so easy between us right from the start that to experience any kind of awkwardness threw me.

He reached out and grabbed my hand, pulling me toward him. “Why do you look so scared?”

“I haven’t seen you all pensive and quiet like this before. I don’t like it.”

He captured both my wrists, stroking the spots where I suspected my pulse was

already beating faster. “Why don’t you like it?” he asked, his voice a tempting invitation.

I huffed out a breath. “I feel like I’ve upset you, and now I’m on the point of spiralling even though everything turned out fine. None of our people were hurt. I survived—but you could barely look at me after it happened, and I don’t know why.”

He examined me for a long moment, his expression changing in miniscule ways to match his thoughts. “That wasn’t intentional,” he said. “You ran after a deranged idiot who would have killed you if he’d got the chance, and I didn’t know where you were. When I found out you were alive, my brain was still locked on the losing you part.” He paused for a beat, then continued. “I’m worried about you, querida .”

“Because of what I did?” Indignation rose inside me. “He had to die.”

His hold on my wrists kept me still when I would have paced. “I’m not questioning that decision.”

“What then?” Tears pooled in my eyes, and an errant one ran down my cheek. The careful way he watched me would have more of them falling soon.

“You ran off without backup, without an exit strategy, if it all went to shit. You put your need for revenge above everything else—including your own safety. You were reckless.” Cruz paused, as if considering whether to continue. “He didn’t need to die today,” he went on . “ That pendejo didn’t know where Ro and the girls lived. When he took off down the alley, you should have stayed with the group and let him go—or at least waited for Remy or Gabe.”

In my defence, I didn’t know Dane was unaware of Ro’s address, and if I’d had that piece of information before I decided to chase him, the result may have been different. But I couldn’t change it now.



I swiped a tear with the back of my hand. My throat ached, and I suddenly wanted to turn away from the caring look in his ridiculously beautiful eyes. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” He released my wrists and cradled my head in both hands, running his thumbs under my eyes. “I know a person who’s been pushed too far when I see one.”

“I’m okay now, though.”

His thumbs stilled, and he gave me a flat look. “Is that why you’re crying?”

I let out a watery laugh and rested my hands on his waist.

When we first met, Cruz had seen me sneaking around the streets like the ninja Haruto had nicknamed me. Our initial meeting came after many days of feeling each other out—nothing spontaneous, because I liked to avoid unnecessary risks. Today, he’d watched me hunt Dane down specifically to end his life. It suddenly made me sick, and when I imagined what it must have looked like to him and the others, the bitter sting of bile crawled up my throat.

“I don’t know what came over me,” I said. “I’ve never felt that kind of rage or been that impulsive.”

“The fight instinct,” he said with a vague smile, tracing the newest bump on my forehead. “Seems like you got more than your fair share.” His humour faded and a sweet, soft moment passed between us. “You keep forgetting you’re human in some pretty fucked up, inhuman situations. Why do you think you need to be strong all the time, or that every decision you make has to be perfect?”

“Because it’s expected of me, and I don’t want to let anyone down?”

“Bullshit,” he said. “Leaning on someone doesn’t make you weak. We all do it. It’s the whole point of having a group, otherwise you might as well be alone—and for the record, you couldn’t let us down if you tried.”

I’d never regret my decision to trust Cruz and leave my home with him. It opened my world and allowed me to meet people I couldn’t have known if I’d stayed on my own in the city. I was human, though, and I needed to learn how to take it easier on myself. “Well, that last part’s not true. I disappointed you an hour ago,” I reminded him.

“You didn’t disappoint me.” Cruz rested his hands at the base of my neck, his warmth chasing away the chill. “You scared the shit out of me,” he said, looking into my eyes. “You’re important to me, to all of us—just like Jonah said. We need you, and I want to make sure we don’t lose you to all the shit out there.”

I dragged in a shuddering breath, his words sobering and heartwarming at the same time. “You won’t.”

“I need you, carino.” When he leaned in and let his mouth hover beside mine, heat rushed to my face. “Don’t run off like that again.”

The rough edge to his voice set off sparks inside me, and the weight on my chest lifted. “I won’t.” I turned my head and gave him a slow, soft kiss. “You don’t need to worry about that anymore.”

Cruz examined me for a long moment, giving me a hint of a smile before he captured my mouth again. He sighed through his nose and sank into the kiss, slipping his arms around my waist to keep me pressed against him. I wrapped my arms around his neck and maintained the physical connection with him wherever possible; my home, my person, the man I wanted to be with always.

We went on like that for a while, and even when our mouths separated, he didn't let me go far. He wrapped me up in a hug so tight it was like we were melded together, with every muscle in his body straining against me. His strength tempered the chaos inside me, and the longer he held onto me, the more I felt like myself again.

As my heartbeat slowed, he pressed a kiss against my overheated neck, then said so softly I could barely hear it, "Te amo."

The gruffness in his voice roused my interest, and I pulled back, ready to learn some new words. "What does that mean?" I asked with a smile.

The pink hue to his skin suggested those particular words hadn't been meant for my ears. "It's nothing."

Seeing the normally unflappable Cruz rattled only fuelled my curiosity. "Oh, it's most definitely something. What did you say to me?"

Before he could decide whether to share the secret with me, Gabe opened the sliding door and stepped outside. Under other circumstances, the relief that passed over Cruz's features would have amused me, but not today. "Gabe, do you know any Spanish?"

"Not unless we're talking hola and adios. Don't you have a fluent Spanish speaker right there in front of you?"

"He's being suspiciously non-compliant."

With a huff of laughter, Cruz planted one last kiss on my lips, then eased me back so he could move away from the table. "What do you need?" he asked, approaching Gabe.

Gabe glanced from Cruz to me, then back again. “Some of the guys want to go out on a run before dark. Tae mentioned a few farms he hasn’t been to yet. Said they might have guns.”

“I’ll come with you,” I said, ready to get back out there again now that we’d cleared the air.

Cruz slid me a look. “You’re staying here.”

Gabe raised his brows at Cruz’s tone. Neither of us were used to him speaking to me this way.

I considered my chances of winning if I argued with him. Our gazes meshed, the challenge in his equal parts intimidating and exciting. I hadn’t seen that hard gleam directed my way before. Although I knew there were only good intentions behind it, a shiver moved between my shoulder blades.

“I’m going back inside to wait,” Gabe said. “You two look like you’re about to fight or get naked, and I don’t want to be around for either when you get into it. We’re leaving in five.”

He returned to the house to give us another minute alone. As the door clicked shut, our attention remained locked on each other, and the mood grew darker, more intense. Thrilling in the best kind of way.

“I vote for getting naked,” he said, lowering his gaze to my breasts.

A rush of desire took me by surprise. “What if I want to fight?”

“I’ll be as rough as you want me to be.”

Desperation roared through me as my nipples tightened. How could he talk to me so casually and turn my entire body into flames? “Cruz.”

His eyes smiled at me, dispersing the heaviness between us in an instant. “Olivia.”

The quick shift from lust to affection had that feeling of wanting to cry coming out of nowhere again. As I pushed the emotion down, it forced me to admit I could benefit from some downtime. “You win. I’ll stay here while you go out.”

“Gracias, mi amor.”

His accent, the way he looked at me... My heart turned soft and vulnerable whenever he was around, and I loved the security of knowing he’d protect it for me. He closed the distance between us in two quick strides, then dipped his head to place a hard, heated kiss on my lips. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“Wait.” I grabbed fistfuls of his shirt to keep him close, earning a raised eyebrow. “Whatever those words meant, I liked the look on your face when you said them to me. Say them again.”

With the ghost of a smile, Cruz swept the wisps of hair from my forehead and palmed my temples. He dipped his head, kissed me softly, then said beside my mouth, “Te amo.”

The words came easier the second time, and I held onto his forearms, wishing I had it in me to beg him to stay. He’d probably stick around if I did. “It’ll be dark soon. Please be safe.”

“I’ll try my best to stay out of trouble.”

We always did, but it had a way of finding us.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Cruz

I pulled up at the first stop on our scavenging run and swung into the entrance. We were only a couple of streets back from Ro's place, but the sheer size of the properties meant we could no longer see hers from here.

Gabe was in the back, Tae beside me in the passenger seat, and the others had stayed behind at Ro's.

"Did you grow up in Darby Downs?" I asked Tae, navigating a winding gravel drive lined with wild looking shrubs.

He shook his head. "I came here from Perth to do a gap year after I finished my degree."

"Aren't gap years supposed to be before uni?" Gabe asked.

Tae smiled a bit. "They are, but I needed a break before I kicked off the career that never happened, so I got a job on a sheep farm. It was only supposed to be for twelve months."

"Then the pandemic hit, and the lockdowns kept you here." I slowed as we approached a weathered farmhouse that reminded me of the one where we'd buried Dawn.

He nodded, no doubt revisiting memories. "I kept in touch with my family until communication went down. By the time we lost phones and the Internet, my sister

was the only one left.”

In the beginning, the army had patrolled the highways to keep the population contained, but when Ultimatus mutated and corpses were reanimating, control went out the window. People scattered in all directions, flooding major roads in a panic—as if there was anywhere left in the country the virus hadn’t touched.

At that stage, it would have been too dangerous for Tae to make the forty-plus hour drive home. As much as the distance must have tortured him, he’d made the right decision by staying here.

“How do you know Ellie?” Gabe asked, as I pulled up outside the house.

“Ro was friends with the owner of the farm where I worked. We got to know each other a bit, pre-pandemic.”

“They’re all gone now?” I asked, cutting the engine. “The people you worked for?”

He pushed his door open as the gravel dust caught up with us. “Isn’t everyone?”

As we walked up the concrete path to the front entrance, I frowned. The more I spoke to him, the less he seemed like the type of person to gravitate toward a group like Dane’s. “Is that why you were with those clowns?”

“Part of the reason.”

The door was locked; the windows uncovered. I rapped the horseshoe knocker to draw attention, then cupped my hand around my eyes and leaned in to see through the side glass. There was no movement in there, no sounds to suggest corpses were bumping around.

“Why wouldn’t you just go to Ro’s place and stay with them?” Gabe asked, his mind travelling down the same track as mine.

Tae stood back as I cracked the glass with my knife. “I was still at the farm when I met the other guys. My boss had just died the day before, and I hadn’t figured out my next move yet. Dane turned up at the farm scavenging with his crew and decided for me.”

I opened the door and stepped inside a cold, musty home that felt like it had been sitting empty for years. “How long did it take you to figure out they were shitty people?”

Gabe closed the door, and we shifted into clearing mode, moving through a living room made up of two worn, mismatched couches, into a kitchen with a well-trod vinyl floor. The house was set up for practicality and comfort, with nothing about it designed to be aesthetically appealing.

“About two seconds,” Tae answered. “They were looking for women and talking stupid shit about breeding humans like they could save humanity or something. I figured if I stuck with them, I could keep track of them and make sure they stayed away from Ellie and her family.”

Now the details were falling into place. I gave him an appraising look as we followed Gabe. “They didn’t hurt the girls?”

“No.” Tae opened a tall cupboard and checked inside. “If you haven’t already heard,” he said, shutting the door, “Ro’s got a mouth on her. Whenever someone made suggestive comments about Ellie and Willow, she fired back with threats involving body parts and how she’d remove them. She had this light in her eyes and fucking smiled . She was so nice when I met her.”



I huffed out a laugh. “She’s smart. She kept the girls safe while you worked on getting them out of there. You were working as a team naturally without even discussing your game plan.”

Tae’s dark eyes held mine before he glanced at Gabe, assessing us in much the same way Liv did whenever she was getting to know someone. “If you say so, but you can stand between me and her if she ever looks like she’s ready to do an amputation. Deal?”

Gabe smiled. “Pretty sure if you treat her nieces right, you’re good.”

“That part, I’ve got under control.” Tae gave the room one more look and blew out a loud breath, his reaction matching mine.

There was nothing here for us.

We scoured the houses, grounds, and sheds of three more properties, with nothing to show for it other than a few axes and a decent long-handled screwdriver like the one Remy carried. After hearing Tae’s story about how he’d met the other guys, it looked like the farms had already been picked clean, leaving nothing of value behind.

All the animals were long gone, the gates left open. Everywhere we went had been abandoned long ago.

“What about the businesses in the city centre?” Gabe asked as we wandered back to the car. “Any worth checking out?”

Tae opened the passenger door and rested his forearm on the roof. “There’s a shooting supplies store on the main street that still had some stock in it last time I went in there. No guns, and there’s a zombie locked in the back office.”

Whatever remnants were left on the main floor wouldn't be worth the effort it took to cross town—but the mention of a corpse in a locked office got my attention. I checked my watch. We'd already been gone for two hours, and I didn't want to leave Liv wondering and worrying about me for too much longer. "How far?"

"Less than ten minutes if we don't run into any trouble."

Gabe surveyed the sky. "It'll be dark in a half an hour."

Even with a detour, we could be back at Ro's before sunset—maybe with something worthwhile to show for it, too. "Why don't we do a drive by?" I suggested. "If it's an easy stop, we go in. If not, we let it go. I've got a good feeling about this place."

Gabe's brows lifted, his eyes lighting with amusement. "Oh, well, that's different. If you've got a feeling, we better go see what's up."

His humour reminded me of the way Diego used to give me shit, his little-brother energy simultaneously making me smile and miss my old life. "You can drive, smartass."

We jumped in the car again and followed Tae's directions to the city centre.

The impending darkness took my alertness up another notch, and I took in every shadow, both stationary and moving. After passing broken-down cars, a wrecked motorbike, and countless corpses, we made it to the shooting supplies store without running into trouble.

The building had blacked-out windows and steel bollards out the front to prevent ram raids. Someone had still found a way to bust through the reinforced double doors; the metal bars were bent and broken on one side and completely missing on the other. Shattered glass covered the ground, and one of the door frames had returned to its

original position, swinging slightly in the breeze.

Gabe and I threw our backpacks on and followed Tae to the entrance.

I stepped over a decapitated corpse on the footpath and paused, turning to survey the street before I went inside. The horde was still circling somewhere in town, close enough to hear but not see. We'd have to make sure we were out of here before it became a problem.

When I faced the building again, Tae had already stepped through the empty doorframe, his boots crunching over glass as he ventured into the store.

Gabe and I joined him, and I immediately noticed the empty racking along the back wall where the rifles had once been displayed. Without checking, I knew the ammo supplies would be gone, too. Gun stores were among the first to be raided when the shit hit the fan.

I dodged a couple of circular racks of clothing and followed Gabe to the rear of the store, where Tae was waiting for us.

"Hear that?" He nodded at the locked office.

Dull thuds came from the other side, but the blind had been lowered over the window that faced the shop. When I tapped the end of my hatchet against the door, the sounds amplified and became more agitated. I listened for a minute, only picking up on one set of footsteps.

"Keep watch on the main doors in case the noise stirs up trouble," I said, waiting for Tae to step back.

As soon as he'd given me the space to swing, I hacked at the handle and doorjamb,

going at it until the wood splintered and the corpse on the other side turned more aggressive.

“Get ready,” I said, then pulled back and kicked the damaged door inward.

The impact knocked the corpse on the floor, and the smell that spewed out was eye-wateringly potent.

Tae gagged in disgust and stepped away from the entrance.

I held my breath and bent over the corpse; a man with a ragged, rotting bite mark on his neck and the main part of his face missing. Grabbing his stained shirt with the Wilson’s Shooting Supplies logo, I finished the job he’d attempted who knew how long ago, ending him with a blow to the head.

Conscious of our limited time, I kept hold of my hatchet and dragged the body out one-handed.

“Shit, that’s bad.” Gabe hid his face in the crook of his elbow.

“Keep an eye on the shop while I search the room.” I slid my hatchet back in my belt and stepped into the kitchenette-slash-office.

Family photos were stuck on the fridge, and dirty dishes filled the sink. Blood and brain matter had splattered the far wall, and an office chair was pushed back from the desk, likely from the gun’s recoil. The single round he’d fired had taken out a chunk of the ceiling, and a pool of congealed blood was spread out on the floor where he’d initially landed.

Beside it lay a rifle, a Remington 700.

Poor bastard had misfired and died from a bite, turning before the gunshot wound could take him. My heart pumped harder, and I pushed aside thoughts of his last moments as I stooped to collect the weapon. The attached strap was soaked in dried blood.

When I checked the chamber, I found another six rounds and let out a low whistle.

This could change everything.

Save lives.

“What’s up?” Gabe asked without coming into the room.

“Found a rifle.” I could barely believe our luck.

Tae popped his head around the door. “Any bullets?”

“Six more rounds.” I laid the gun on the desk and yanked open every drawer and cupboard, flinging out the contents in the hope I’d find the rest of the ammo he’d used to load the rifle. There was nothing other than a box cutter, which I pocketed just in case. It didn’t matter. We were still better off than we’d been when we walked in here.

“Do any of us know how to use a gun without killing ourselves?” Tae asked. A murmured conversation took place before I could answer, then he poked his head around the door again. “You were a cop?”

“Yeah.”

“That explains a few things.”

“Such as?”

“Nothing.” He grinned and popped his head straight back out again.

With a calming breath, I noted the distant groaning of corpses had grown louder since we’d been here. “You two want to make yourselves useful and see if the street’s clear? I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Will do,” Gabe said.

Their footsteps moved away from the door, and I shrugged off my backpack, setting it on the desk with the rifle. While the other two kept busy, I went out onto the main floor and checked the shelves on the off chance I’d find a strap that wasn’t covered in a dead man’s blood. “All good out there?” I called, returning to the back room empty-handed.

The telltale shuffling of an incoming pack registered, mingling with grunts and movements that sounded more human than dead. I worked fast, securing the gun to my bag just as a male shout filled the air. When I slipped my pack on again and left the office, the hairs on the back of my neck prickled.

They hadn’t come back inside yet, and the collective hum of corpses drifted into the store. Louder. Closer.

Straightening my shoulders, I pulled out my hatchet and gripped the handle, releasing a hard breath through my nose.

My attention shifted to the entrance just as Tae came bursting through. His eyes were wild, his breaths laboured. Gabe followed mere seconds behind him. Both their shirts were covered in blood and fluids. As far as I could tell, none of it belonged to them.

“They’re coming.” Tae could barely get the words out.

“Too dark to see how many,” Gabe said. “Going off the noise, it’s a shitload.”

Tae lifted his shoulder and wiped the blood from his cheek. “We took out the leaders, but they saw us come in here.”

My jaw clenched, and I shot a look at the entrance. “Can we make it to the car?”

Gabe shook his head. “Too close. One wrong move, and we’re gone.”

I trusted him to give accurate advice on the timing, but I approached the door to scope out the situation for myself.

Leaning off to the side, I caught countless moving shadows accompanying the growing noise. Some were already surrounding the car as others closed in on the building, stepping onto the footpath and heading for the spot where I stood. A corpse clocked my presence and its mouth opened with a long, mournful wail that rose above all the others.

Leaving via the front was a suicide mission, and there was nothing substantial we could use to block the doors and keep ourselves safe inside.

When the mass descended, they’d come in if we liked it or not.

My heart pounded hard and fast, and I blocked out the mounting pressure to sort through our options.

No one suggested using the gun. Six bullets against a horde were pointless.

We needed to run.

I shifted my gaze to the access hole in the ceiling, then to the rear wall of the shop. There'd be a locked door back there that led to a storeroom or warehouse, and unless we wanted to climb into the roof cavity to wait who knew how long for the horde to clear out, it was our only escape. "Let's move."

We ran across the shop floor, and I looked over my shoulder as the first of the corpses stumbled inside. Three others followed, and the numbers continued to grow. My gut twisted as I pushed Gabe to speed up the pace.

When we reached the rear door, Tae tried the handle. "Fuck," he said, his voice strained.

There was no time to search the office or the owner's pockets for keys. "Stand back and keep the corpses under control."

I turned away and hacked at the handle as they took down the first members of the horde. Energy pumped through me, keeping my strikes on point.

My eyes stayed locked on the doorjamb, and I tried not to think about Liv—what would happen to her if I didn't make it out of here, how she'd cope.

After the third swing, Tae let out a scream reminiscent of the one we heard at the shed, and the panicked sound sent alarm through me.

We'd have to deal with his injury when we were safe—if we survived.

I hit the door harder, giving it everything I had, but they'd reinforced this door just like the entrance to the store. If I couldn't get the fucking thing open, I'd be better off turning the rifle on the three of us before the biting kicked in.

My shoulders ached as the chaos behind me intensified. Thuds, yelling, and that God



awful wailing and moaning. More corpses would have pushed their way into the shop by now, circling and gathering like sharks waiting for a piece of the action.

It gave me a strange sense of peace knowing I'd told Liv I loved her before I left, even if it was in a language she didn't understand.

I hacked at the door one last time and stood back to kick the shit out of it. When that didn't work, my body coiled tight with adrenaline, and I rammed my shoulder into the door. A split second later, it gave way and flew inward. Finally . My stomach flipped, and with a glance at the empty storage room, I reached for Gabe.

“Go!” I shouted, pushing him through first, then Tae.

Facing the horde again, I raised my hatchet and cracked the bit into the nearest skull, ripping it free to take on the next one. I shook off a set of fingers that latched onto my forearm, and took down three more in quick succession before I turned and ran, hot on the heels of the others.

My boots thumped over concrete, my pace keeping time with my heartbeats. I followed the trail of blood spots to the far side of the warehouse.

Gabe was already at the roller door, turning the manual lock mechanism. “Get ready.”

We may not have known what was waiting for us out there, but it had to be better than what we faced in here. I threw a look at the ruckus behind me and saw too many corpses trying to push through the doorway at once. The leader tripped and fell, creating a temporary hurdle for the others to tumble over. More of them filled the opening, their arms reaching in our direction while the bodies piled up in front of them.

The delay bought us a few precious seconds, but it wouldn't hold them for long.

Gabe dragged the roller door up while Tae stood ready with his knife.

Darkness greeted us in the alley. No corpses.

“I know of a house close by,” Tae said. “We can watch the street and wait for the herd to move on.”

His arm needed immediate attention, and this would at least give us some breathing space. “You’ve been inside?”

Gabe pulled the roller door down to contain the corpses, giving it one last push.

“Had to hide there once,” he said. “There’s no food or water, but the house is solid. None of the doors have been kicked in.”

Gabe smacked him lightly on the shoulder as the first of the corpses crashed into the metal on the other side. “Lead the way.”

We took off at a jog through the rapidly cooling night, keeping our heads up and our eyes open. Darkness had set in fast, turning the grey shadows to black, but the moon glowed from a cloudless sky to guide our way.

We followed the side street that took us back to the road where we’d parked, then stopped at the corner. I performed a quick head check to take in the activity outside the store. At a guess, a couple of dozen corpses were still swarming at the entrance, lost without a leader or a human target to follow. Most of them would be inside the shop and storeroom by now, loitering until they had a reason to turn around and come back out.

Tae tilted his head to the left to let us know which way we were going, and the three of us fell into an easy run again.

“I can’t believe we made it out alive,” he said, holding his forearm as he ran awkwardly. “It wasn’t looking good for a minute there.”

“It’s still not looking good.” I frowned at his rapid, shallow breathing and wondered if he was on the verge of a panic attack. “We need to get a bandage on that arm. Keep the pressure on.”

“Under control. Just up here.” He gestured to the other side of the road, where a couple of residential homes were wedged between commercial buildings.

Gabe had been watching him, and he slid a look my way, letting me know he’d picked up on Tae’s behaviour, too.

We crossed the street without being detected and slipped behind the house. With the pressure mounting, I removed my pack and dug around inside for my torch.

Gabe did the same, and we shined our lights ahead of us, following Tae into the house.

He’d told us it was empty, but we spent a few silent minutes making sure. As our footsteps took us from one room to the next, the atmosphere grew heavier, the mood a stark contrast to the casual vibe we’d had going on earlier when we were searching the farms. When we returned to the living room, Tae sank onto the couch and rested his elbows on his knees. A beat later, he released a world-weary sigh and looked up at Gabe first, then at me.

“Pretty sure you know what’s going on,” he said, his tone defeated. “I’ve seen the way you’re looking at me.”

Blood dripped from the open wound on his forearm. I couldn’t get a clear look at it from my position, but he didn’t seem too concerned about stopping the flow

anymore.

“Did it happen when I was trying to get the door open?” I sat on the edge of the coffee table and rested my torch on its end. The beam hit the ceiling and dispersed the glow around the room.

He nodded. “And don’t piss me off by trying to take the blame. I wasn’t tracking the movement from my right and got taken by surprise. I didn’t even see it bite me, but one second is all it takes.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” Gabe asked.

“Wouldn’t have made any difference,” he said, his breathing too fast. “I’m still dead, right?”

I’d never get used to someone talking about their impending death while they were still fully functional and healthy on the surface.

“Want me to take a look at it?” I asked.

He gave a half shrug, trying to act nonchalant even though his mind had to be racing. “What’s the point?”

“To stop you from bleeding out so you can make it back to Ellie?” The mention of her name had his face falling, but I wanted him to spend his last hours surrounded by people who gave a shit about him. It was just the how that eluded me.

“We’ve gotta come up with a plan,” Gabe said. “We can’t just sit here waiting for them to move on.” He went into the kitchen and opened several drawers and cupboards. “You know they won’t leave unless we give them a reason—and we can’t walk back to Ro’s in the dark with one of our people injured. That’s got to be our last

resort.” Returning with a banged up first-aid kit, he sat on the couch and searched through the meagre contents, coming up with a gauze pad and a bandage.

Tae’s brow furrowed. “I’m done for anyway,” he said. “It won’t make any difference if they bite me again. I’ll go back and grab the car while you two stay here.”

“No.” I didn’t need to confer with Gabe to know he shared my opinion. Neither of us would stay hidden in a safe house while Tae put himself at risk.

He frowned, misunderstanding my hesitation. “I’ll come back for you.”

“I know you will.”

“What’s the problem, then?”

“Don’t be an idiot. We don’t operate that way.” Gabe laid the gauze pad over the wound without cleaning or inspecting it, then wrapped Tae’s forearm with the bandage. “While everyone’s still breathing, everyone matters. One of us needs to stay with you, and we’re not sending the other out to deal with a horde that size on their own.”

Another idea occurred to me, and I grabbed my backpack and set it on the floor between my feet. It meant drawing Liv out of a secure home and into a dangerous situation, but she’d never forgive me if she knew I could have asked for help and chose not to involve her.

After rifling through the items she’d packed before we left her apartment, my fingers curled around the object I’d been looking for. I pulled the flare from my bag and showed it to the others. “I’ll climb up on the roof and set it off. It’s a clear night. We’re probably close enough for someone to see it from the house.”

“If they’re looking out the window,” Tae pointed out as he fell against the backrest. “Ellie said they keep the blinds permanently closed in the lounge room.”

“We’re late getting back,” I said. “Liv’ll be keeping watch, even if no one else is looking.”

“It’s our best option.” Gabe rose from the couch and held out his hand. “I’ll do it. Tell me how to use this thing, and we’ll get the ball rolling.”

“Instructions are on the side.” I handed it to him and stood, ready to get out of this place. “Do you need a leg up on the roof?”

He turned the cannister over to find the info he needed, then lifted his gaze. “Don’t insult me.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Liv

“What happened to the horses you kept here?” I asked Ro as we about faced to head back past her house again.

We’d been patrolling the front half of her property for the past forty-five minutes.

She’d told me about her husband’s heart attack and subsequent death eight years ago, and we’d both shared summaries of our lives. I had more questions, though. With new people, my curiosity never ended.

“We had to open the gates and let them go,” she said. “I didn’t have any feed left. The owners couldn’t come get them and keeping them was like a flashing sign letting people know we were still living here.”

“Has anyone given you trouble since it’s been just the three of you?”

“Not yet. Not here at least.” She kicked a pebble back into a garden bed as we strolled. “But after the past couple of days, I’m not so sure about this place anymore. We need somewhere with better security to keep the shitheads away—somewhere like the property you told us about.”

The thought of her and the girls joining us momentarily took my mind off Cruz and the others. I raised my brows as we turned and backtracked again. “Does that mean you’re close to making up your mind about leaving here?”

Ro nodded and looked off into the distance. “We won’t get very far with just the

three of us,” she said. “When you broke us out of the mechanic shed, I wasn’t only relieved to be free. It was a relief to see good people again—to know they exist.”

“We’re on the same page as you,” I said. “Without a community, I think it’ll be tough for anybody to progress long term.”

We stopped walking and looked out across the fenced off paddocks. The cold, cloudless night created a rolling mist that hovered above the grass, the chill seeping through my jeans and shirt. Rubbing some warmth into my arms, I focused on the driveway and the road beyond, hoping to see headlights in the distance. Hear a noise. Anything to let me know they were still alive. The longer they stayed away, the more my concern grew.

With my stomach twisted in knots, I took in the starry sky and the full moon.

Seconds later, I froze and forgot to breathe. A spark of red glowed like the lights on planes when they used to travel at night, the dot standing out against the darkened backdrop. “See that?” I pointed and frowned, sharing a look with Ro. “Does that look like a flare to you?”

She nibbled on her lower lip and watched it for a moment. “Were you carrying flares?”

“I put one in the bottom of both our packs, but I don’t even know if Cruz remembers it’s in there.”

“Looks like it,” Ro decided. “I mean... what else could it be?”

No other explanation made sense—and what were the odds of a stranger having a flare and setting it off at exactly the same time that members of our group were missing? It had to be our people.



Nervous energy flowed through me, and I stared at the glowing dot as if it held all the answers to my questions. About a minute later, it fizzled to nothing, and the disappearing flame ignited a fire in me. There were too many hours between now and morning, and I couldn't wait around until then to find out if they'd come back on their own.

Still staring at the spot, I asked Ro, "If you had to guess, where do you think it came from?"

"A couple of kilometres from here at a really wild guess, on the edge of the town centre. There's a library there, an art gallery. A few shops before it turns residential."

We didn't know if they were trying to evade humans or if they'd been rounded up by the dead, but it was impossible for three of them to guard a large premises and catch any sleep overnight. They'd want a smaller house or business with lockable doors, where they could stick together and take turns keeping watch. If I aimed for that direction, I had a feeling I could figure out where they were just based on the trouble lurking nearby.

"You're going after them, aren't you?" Ro said, her tone dry.

"I am."

"Can I trust those boys of yours here with my girls?"

"You can."

She turned to me and smiled. "All righty then, let's go on a little joyride."

"Cruz is going to kill me for not stopping you." Jonah stood beside the driver's door with Remy, both of them appearing torn.

Remy wanted to come with me to find his brother; Jonah didn't like the thought of me taking off into the unknown after my admittedly reckless behaviour earlier in the day.

After exhausting every argument, they'd finally accepted there was no stopping us.

"We won't be long." I clutched the steering wheel and looked up at them through the open window. "And like I said, if it's too big of a task, we'll come back and get you."

Ro leaned her elbow on the console and dipped her head to speak to him. "Remember to keep your hands to yourself while we're gone, otherwise I'll remove your fingers one by one when I get back. Okay, cuties?"

"On second thought..." Jonah gave me a pointed look. "Take her as far away from here as you can."

Ro laughed and slapped the dash. "Let's get moving, honey."

We exchanged goodbyes, and I left with a promise to Remy that we'd have his brother with us when we returned. It reassured me knowing he'd be here with Jonah to monitor the place while we were gone.

As I ambled down the driveway with the parking lights on, I slid Ro a look. "You just love terrorising men, don't you?"

"It's a thankless job, but someone's gotta do it."

I snorted. We were potentially driving straight to our deaths, but she had a way of making the mission feel like an adventure. We'd packed a shovel, an axe, a crowbar, and had two knives and a sword between us. Despite being physically equipped to handle most scenarios, I prayed it wouldn't be one involving more humans who wanted to cause us harm.

When we reached the gates to her property, Ro pointed to the left. “I’d say we head that way and go back past the spot where Ellie was attacked.”

She was familiar with every road and had a better idea of where the men might be, so I turned in that direction and drove slowly to compensate for the lack of visibility. We had just enough light to see the immediate area ahead of the car and not much beyond that. None of the dead were around, but the frightening thought occurred to me it might be because the horde had gathered all the strays.

As we approached the intersection where Dane had struck Ellie, my body flooded with the same emotions that rushed in straight after the event. With a passing glance at the area, my face grew hot, and I tried to shut it all down.

“I’m guessing you’re feeling some type of way about killing that weasel now you’ve had time to think,” Ro said too casually.

“I’m definitely feeling some type of way.” I kept driving and steeled myself against the carousel of images playing in my mind.

“And how are you going to handle that moving forward?”

“Suppress the thoughts and pretend it never happened?”

Ro laughed. “Because that always works out so well, huh?”

I smiled and scanned the area on either side of the car. “I can’t exactly go to therapy and talk it through with a professional, so I’ll just have to work with what I’ve got.”

A beat of silence passed. “You’ve never hurt a good person before.”

“No—and as hard as it might be to believe, I’ve never actually hurt an asshole who

didn't come for me first. Not until today, at least."

"That's not hard to believe."

"Thanks." I sent her another smile. As I pulled up at a t-intersection, I told myself it was time to put the conversation and the feelings it brought up behind me. We were at risk, outside at night without backup, and Ro and I couldn't afford a single distraction. "Which way now?"

"Take a right and head down to the library end of the main street."

I hadn't been out in this kind of darkness since the disastrous morning when Cruz and I left my apartment. On edge and ready for anything, I followed her instruction and crept along, going a little faster than walking pace—until I encountered a major obstacle that had me hitting the brakes. "Shit."

"Oh, hell."

The infected. Swarming and swirling around the entrance to a store that took up about a quarter of the block. I let the car idle as we sat and absorbed the scene. So many dead had congregated in one area that the sound filled the car's interior, a collection of low level moans blending into one monotonous sound.

They were gathered at the shop window several bodies deep and covered more than half the street. As they moved, I caught glimpses of the vehicle parked at the curb and let out a loud breath. "That's our car."

Cruz had been here at some point—inside the store.

"No wonder they set off a flare." Ro gripped the handle above the door and turned in her seat to look behind us.

With the absence of streetlights, I couldn't see movement in the rearview, but I doubted we'd find anything back there. It looked like we had the town's entire population of infected right in front of us.

"So, the part we need to figure out now," I said, "is whether they're still inside or they escaped and found a place to wait out the horde."

A few of the stragglers on the periphery turned toward the sound of the car and hobbled in our direction, their movements drawing the attention of several others. It wouldn't take long for the numbers to grow and the risk to increase. If we didn't make a move soon, we'd be in just as much trouble as the men.

"That's Wilson's—a gun store," Ro said. "I haven't been inside in years, but it used to have steel bars across the doors. If the entrance isn't damaged, there's no way the zombies are getting through."

I nodded slowly, contemplating our options. They wouldn't have used the flare if they were safely tucked away inside. "Which means the doors must be wrecked. Do you know if there's rear access for deliveries?"

"There's a laneway. Never been down it, but I know it's there."

With the dead crowded together, I couldn't get a clear view of the front doors, and the outlying infected were steadily gathering, coming closer and closer to us.

"Could they get up on a roof that high to wave the flare around?" Ro asked.

I scanned the top of the store and the adjoining buildings. It looked too tall even for Gabe to parkour up there. "I doubt it."

The glow from the parking lights showcased the gruesome features of a woman as

she scratched the bonnet of the car. A man with a bare torso that had been torn to shreds came up on Ro's side and opened his mouth in a crooked moan. We'd run out of time to consider any other options. All we could do was lead the horde away and hope it was enough to help Cruz and the guys.

More of them turned from the rear of the pack to follow the infected coming our way, stumbling toward us in numbers that would have been terrifying on foot. In a car, we were okay—for now. I shoved the gear shifter in reverse and backed up slowly. One of the dead tripped over the wheel of a fallen motorbike and smacked the asphalt face first. Another three tumbled along with it, creating a pile of writhing cadavres on the road.

We needed more of them following, but they were too focused on the storefront, and their incessant wailing drowned out the engine noise that should have attracted them. I continued reversing and beeped the horn a few times.

The car was old enough to have a CD player, and Ro pressed the eject button. Finding it empty, her focus turned to rifling through the glove box. "Up for some Metallica?" she asked, pulling out a plastic sleeve.

"Why not?" The butterflies in my stomach were out of control, and my fingers tightened around the steering wheel.

Ro lowered the side window and set up the music. Soon after, the opening notes of Enter Sandman filled the car, and she turned the volume up to an almost unbearable level. While I focused on not crashing, she leaned out the window and shouted abuse at the dead, her threats as creative as they were shocking and amusing.

With the abandoned cars and other objects in the way, there wasn't room for me to do a three-point turn, so I continued backing up as carefully as I could, alternating between checking the side and rear mirrors while Ro monitored the horde.

We didn't know where the guys were, if they were still in the store or they'd found a temporary base nearby, but at least we were doing something .

Ro leaned her upper body out the window to examine the road behind us. "Looks like you can swing around just up here," she called out over the music. She pulled her head back inside and sank into her seat. "Stop for a second and let me out to make sure."

"You're not getting out here." I could only drive at a speed that left around twenty metres between us and the dead; enough room to keep us safe, but not enough space to allow for mistakes. If she stumbled or fell, if she took her eyes off them for seconds, the result could be catastrophic.

"Trust me. I'll keep walking alongside the car and look for crap on the road." She twisted in her seat and leaned through to the back to grab the shovel we'd left there. "We're in more danger if we stay in reverse like this, driving blind with no lights. If we don't turn around now, we might get to a point where we can't."

The music was effective at catching the attention of anything living or dead in the vicinity, but my eardrums couldn't take much more. The group of infected had grown so large they were a mass of moving bodies. If the guys had hidden somewhere nearby, I hoped they were aware of the opportunity we'd given them and were ready to take advantage.

Cursing the need to put Ro's life in danger, I stopped the car, and my heart fluttered as she jumped out and left the door hanging open.

One mistake. That's all it took to change the course of our night.

Without her in the passenger seat as my second pair of eyes, my gaze darted in every direction.

Ro stayed out of my way as I backed up, jogging off to the side, where I could track her movements in the mirror. Every time I needed to use the brakes, the red lights lit up her features, and the resolve in her expression strengthened mine.

“You got about ten more metres,” she yelled over the music, “then you’re going to swing around to the right and do a three-pointer.”

I’d had about enough of the song blasting from the speakers and turned it down as I checked on the horde again. Still more had joined the group, coming from inside the store after catching onto the ruckus out here. We should have cleared enough of them now that Cruz and the guys could fight through the rest to reach their car.

Ro clanked the shovel against the rear panel. “Now!”

I trusted her to keep clear as I turned hard and veered off to the right. Clenching my jaw, I completed the manoeuvre and straightened, facing away from the infected.

My pulse thudded in my ears as I stopped and waited.

Ro ran around to the passenger door and tossed the shovel in the footwell. She jumped in the car and let out an excited woo as we shared a smile.

“Let’s get out of here.” Just as I touched my foot to the accelerator, a blur of movement came at us from the front.

I jammed my foot on the brake and braced for impact.

A kangaroo bypassed the car at the last possible second, heading directly for the crowd of infected behind us. Another bounded straight into the windshield with one impressive leap.



“Holy shit.” Ro grabbed my head and dragged me below the dashboard, holding me down. I pushed my foot harder on the brake and waited for the pain to follow. All I felt were pieces of glass raining in my hair and cold air blowing through the frame where the windscreen used to be.

My heart tripped, my body trembled with adrenaline.

We were okay. We were good—but if we didn’t get moving now, the infected would swarm us.

I lifted my head, my eyes widening as I took in the damage. The kangaroo hadn’t died on impact, and a desperate screeching and clambering followed. It somehow scrambled off the bonnet and landed with a thud beside the car, leaving the smell of urine and fur behind.

I wanted to help it, or at least jump out to see if it could be helped, but the delay would be a death sentence for Ro and me.

“We need to go, Liv.” She used the shovel to knock out the remaining glass from the windscreen, and I checked the rearview. Some of the dead were distracted by the kangaroos, but the rest were still locked onto our car, their frightening features lit up by the glow of the brake lights.

Ro dropped the shovel in the footwell and slapped my thigh to snap me back to reality. “Floor it, honey.”

Several of the infected were already at the car, closing in on the rear and moving up on both sides. Rather than floor it, I rolled down the street at a steady pace, keeping watch on our surroundings as we extended the space between us and the bulk of the horde. Both of us were breathing fast and my heart thrummed away in my chest, still hanging in there after all the excitement. The danger made me feel completely, utterly

alive.

I looked across at Ro and grinned. She smacked her own thigh this time around and threw her head back with a laugh. “This is the best fun I’ve had in a long time.”

She had a strange idea of what made up fun. I laughed and veered across to the other side of the road to avoid a bike, flicking a glance at the side mirror as I drove. My new position gave me a better view of where the other car was parked, and although I caught some movement around it, it was too dark to know if it was a human figure or the infected.

When the car’s brake lights suddenly lit up, my body jerked to attention. “Someone made it back to the car.”

Ro swivelled to get a look, but she didn’t have a direct view from her side. “All of them?”

“I can’t tell.” Every muscle in me tightened and my breath stuck in my throat. I checked again, careful to spend more time watching the road ahead than the scene behind me. No more agile bodies were moving around back there. Just a single human, as far as I could tell. “Pretty sure it was just one person.”

My stomach dropped, but Ro didn’t seem to see it as bad news.

“Good. That’s good.” She faced the front again. “They only need one of them to grab the car. Go back to my place. We’ll catch up with them there and find out what’s going on.”

I nodded. It made more sense to go to a place we all knew rather than circling around and trying to meet up somewhere on the street. I continued straight for a while, paying close attention to the road surface, flicking occasional looks at the mirror to

make sure there were plenty of moving shadows back there. Some of the horde would have branched off and backtracked when they heard the other car, but the bulk of them still followed us.

“I’ll lead them toward the western exit before we head back,” I said, my stomach knotted with concern. “I don’t want them anywhere nearby when we drive east in the morning.”

My mind whirled with questions that currently had no answers, at least not while we were out in the dark with no way of communicating with the others.

What if two members from our group were gone now?

God, I couldn't even imagine the impact it would have on us after already losing one.

What if Cruz was one of them?

His loss would leave a gaping hole in my chest that could never be filled.

I needed to know he’d survived.

Ro clicked her seatbelt on again, oblivious to my turmoil... or choosing to ignore it so I wouldn’t go completely off the rails. “If you take a right up here and the next right again, even if they don’t leave town, they’ll keep walking that way until something else grabs their attention.”

And so I led our creepy convoy away from the main road and down a side street, turning again where Ro suggested. It delayed my reunion with Cruz—if he was still alive—but it made our departure tomorrow safer, and I needed to focus on the big picture until I’d confirmed whether that picture had been shattered.

By the time I could finally increase my speed and zip away from the horde, I'd become desperate to see him again.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Cruz

As the car lured the majority of the horde away, I sprinted alone down the street, making the most of the opportunity I'd been given.

Several corpses had hung around the front of the store, and they all turned at the sound of my footsteps. Gathering my strength, I knocked one off its feet with a forearm to the chest and smacked the next in the skull with my hatchet.

Adrenaline and willpower kept me moving. I didn't know how long Tae had left, whether his condition would worsen rapidly or we'd still have him with us by morning. Either way, we needed to get him out of here and back among familiar faces.

I leapt over a lone tyre and rammed a shopping trolley into two more corpses, mowing them both down and clearing my path. When I was almost at the car, I fished the fob from my pocket and unlocked the door, tossing my hatchet on the passenger seat before I dived inside.

With a silent prayer, I tried the engine, swearing with relief when it turned over.

Not two seconds later, a pair of hands hit the window and slid down the glass. The corpse leaned closer to peer inside, and as its vacant eyes met mine, I eased away from the curb.

A short distance down the road, I pulled over and tapped the steering wheel with my thumb. Gabe emerged from the darkness first carrying both of our backpacks, with

Tae close behind.

Gabe's eyes glittered with relief as he rounded the car, and I moved my hatchet off the passenger seat to make room for him.

"Did you have any trouble?" he asked, shoving one pack into the footwell and keeping the other on his knee.

"Most of the corpses were already gone," I said, still catching my breath. The feeling of urgency wouldn't disappear until Tae was safe, and I'd set eyes on Liv again.

Tae dropped into the rear seat on Gabe's side and closed the door. His features were twisted in pain and blood had already seeped through the bandage on his arm.

We'd need to give it proper attention when we were back at Ro's, but for now, all I could focus on was getting him there.

I flicked the headlights on and touched my foot to the accelerator. Other than the injury itself, his health had shown no signs of deterioration. No fever or light-headedness, no confusion. The coughing I remembered from the early days of Ultimus hadn't kicked in yet, either. If he was lucky, he'd live to see at least one more sunrise.

"How are you feeling?" I asked him.

"All right. Just pissed about what happened, that's all."

I took a right and stared into the darkness. "I'm sorry, for the record."

"Not your fault."

“But still. I wish I’d got the door open faster.”

“You could have got it open slower, and we’d all be dead.”

“Still no symptoms?” Gabe asked, twisting in his seat to look at Tae.

“I can hardly breathe, but I think that’s just the anxiety kicking in,” he said. “At least there’s no fever yet, so I’ll get to say goodbye to everyone before it goes downhill.”

It blew my mind that we could have this conversation when he seemed so fine, especially knowing how fast his health would decline over the coming hours.

After another couple of turns, I pulled into Ro’s driveway and switched to practical mode. “I’ll see if I can find some pain meds. I’m sure Ro’s got some lying around.”

“If it gets bad, just use one of those bullets on me.”

“Tae...” I hated talking about this, but I wasn’t the one with a death sentence hanging over my head. “Just keep me aware of how it’s going, okay?”

I followed the drive around to the rear of the house and parked, noting the empty spot where the other car had been. Not back yet, which could mean one of many things—all of which I’d try not to dwell on.

“Probably luring the dead ones away first,” Gabe said as we all jumped out.

I rounded the car and grabbed my pack from his extended hand. “Thanks.”

Jonah was already standing at the sliding door as we headed for the house. He moved back, his eyes zeroing in on Tae’s arm first before me. “Did something bad happen?” he asked as Tae passed through without a word.

“I’ll explain inside. All good here?”

“Don’t get pissed...” He struggled to hold my gaze as Gabe stepped around him and disappeared inside. “But Liv drove off with Ro to look for you guys. She was pretty sure you set off a flare.”

“I did. It’s fine. They’re the reason we made it back.”

His tense posture deflated. “Thank God for that.”

I forced a smile and went inside to find a few solar powered lanterns set up in the kitchen and living room. Ellie was stretched out on the extended recliner with a blanket draped over her, all alone until we walked in.

We dropped our backpacks in a pile, and she glanced up at Tae. “Hey,” she said. “Welcome back. Willow’s gone to bed, and Remy’s...”

Remy appeared from the hallway, dressed in a fresh set of clothes. With a wide smile, he strode over to embrace his brother, and it took him all of two seconds to spot the rifle. “What the... are you serious ?” he asked. “Where’d you find that?”

The tremor of excitement in his voice momentarily lifted my mood. “In a shop in the middle of town.”

“Loaded?”

“Six rounds.”

He raised his brows, impressed.

Ellie caught sight of Tae’s injured arm and lowered the footrest, shooting out of her



seat to go to him. Their voices blended together, rising in volume, and when her anguished cry rose above all the noise, I sighed. The next few hours wouldn't be pretty.

A car pulled up outside, and my heart felt like it could pound straight through my chest. "Back in a minute," I said to Remy.

Forgetting about Tae for the moment, I opened the door and searched the darkness. Liv had parked on the other side of our car and had already started walking toward me with Ro, her steps smooth and unhurried.

Upon first inspection, they both appeared unharmed, and the tightness inside my chest eased. "Thank God for that." I rubbed my hands down my face and sighed into my palms. "Thank God."

When I pulled my hands away, Ro was smiling. "There's mister tall, dark, and gorgeous," she said. "Told you," she added for Liv's benefit, giving the impression she'd been worried about me, too.

The corner of my mouth turned upward. I'd never been this happy to see someone I barely knew. "Thanks for the help, Ro."

"No problem," she said. "It's good to see you back in one piece. Everyone okay?"

"Right now, yeah. You're needed inside, though." I didn't see the point in getting into it when she could learn everything she needed to know from the man himself.

She frowned a little on her way past, leaving me alone with Liv.

With the mist and darkness behind her, she appeared ethereal somehow, and the moment I set eyes on her, the noise in my head went quiet. "Mi amor. "

Liv rushed the final few steps that separated us and slipped her arms around my waist. “I’m so glad you’re okay. What went wrong? How did you get trapped?”

I hugged her tightly for a minute, then eased back from her. As I opened my mouth to give her the condensed version, I frowned and picked a couple of pieces of glass from her hair. Once they were gone, I cupped her chin and turned her head to the side, noting the droplet of blood on her temple. We weren’t the only ones who’d run into trouble. “Forget that. What happened to you?”

“A kangaroo.” She looked over her shoulder. “You can’t see the car from here, but it’s a complete mess. The whole windshield’s gone.”

“You ran into it?”

Her gaze came back to me. “It went through the windshield while we were stationary, so I guess it technically ran into us. Where are the guys? Is Gabe okay? Tae?”

“Gabe’s fine.”

“And Tae?” Her gaze moved over my features. “Why do you look so cagey? What happened?”

“He got bitten.”

Her expression shifted from shock to sympathy to grief all in the space of a few seconds. Before she could comment on the shitty news, a loud cackle came from inside the house.

A laugh like that could only have belonged to Ro, but the sound didn’t fit with the seriousness of Tae’s condition.

Liv huffed in disbelief. “She’s lost her mind. That’s the only explanation. I’ll find out what’s happening.”

Neither of us had the chance to move in that direction. Gabe barged outside, his expression animated. “You’ve gotta come see this,” he said. “Get in here.”

He ushered us both inside, and the noise and happiness that greeted us had me frowning. Tae sat on a barstool with his arm resting on the kitchen bench, the lantern highlighting Ro’s features as she flushed his wound. Jonah, Remy, and Ellie crowded around to inspect the damage like a group of high school kids watching a demonstration from a science teacher.

“See?” Ro pointed at the exposed wound as I moved closer. “No teeth marks. You cut it on something—and you cut it good—but whatever it was, you weren’t bitten, you big doofus.”

Tae’s head fell back, and he let out a long, loud breath that encapsulated every feeling swirling in the room. “Not a bite.”

I smiled as the heaviness inside me lifted. Maybe we would have figured that part out ourselves if we’d paid more attention to his injury. “After the night we’ve had,” I said, “it couldn’t have ended any better.”

Tae laughed and gave his forearm an incredulous look. “I seriously thought I was dead. Must have been the metal racks near the door.”

Gabe clapped him on the back in congratulations, and Ellie gave him a side hug.

We’d been living with permanent exhaustion, pushing through shitstorms from one day to the next—most of the time just trying to keep our heads on straight so we wouldn’t make any monumental mistakes—and seeing the support from our group

soothed something inside me.

“So... how do you feel about stitches?” Ro pressed the edges of the laceration together. “Sorry to tell you, but this isn’t going to heal on its own.”

“You’re not sorry to tell me. You’re smiling . Don’t worry about it. It’ll be fine.” Tae tried to pull his arm away and winced when she held on tight.

“Well, that’s tough. If we don’t sew you up, you’ll just tear it open again every time you move.” Ro appealed to the group. “I’m gonna need two people to hold him still.”

“What?” Tae’s eyes went wide. “Wait!”

“Make that three people,” she said. “No time to wait, sweetheart. Let’s get this done. We need you ready to leave in the morning with the rest of us.”

My brows shot up. All we’d done was float the idea of her group coming to Bridgehill, and she’d already made up her mind. “You’ve decided?”

Ro shrugged. “What the worst that could happen? We find out we don’t like it and come back here the next day? It’s only an hour’s drive. You get my car running, and we’ll be along for the ride.”

Tae tried to drag his arm away while she was distracted, but she pulled it back without looking at him. The last part of our trip could be a hell of a lot more complicated than hanging a U- turn and heading home, but I wouldn’t ruin the moment with the truth. “I can do that. We’ll talk more in the morning,” I said. “You under control here? I’m about done for today.”

“All good.” She smiled. “The girls and I are using the first bedroom on the left. Take your pick from the other three—and there’s the couch for anyone who wants to stay

out here.”

“Thanks for the hospitality,” Liv said. “And for riding shotgun with me. I got a kick out of being Thelma to your Louise.”

Ro laughed. “Not a problem.”

As the others went about rustling up supplies for Tae’s stitches, I left Liv in the kitchen to grab a lantern from the lounge room.

When I turned around, she was still standing in the same spot, smiling at something Ro had said to her—the two of them had clicked so fast it was like watching a couple of lifelong friends in action.

As our gazes met, her humour disappeared, and she gave me a small smile. The connection sent heat thrumming through my veins, and my fingers flexed around the handle of the lantern, but I stayed right where I was, watching her a little longer.

She’d been through a lot today, but it didn’t seem to matter.

When I tilted my head toward the hallway in invitation, she smiled and stepped away from the others to follow me.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Liv

Cruz chose the bedroom at the far end of the hall, putting as much distance as possible between us and the activity in the rest of the house.

He positioned the lantern on a wooden chair in the corner, barely giving me time to engage the lock before he had me backed up against the closed door. His body surrounded me, caging me in, his closeness making my pulse quicken in the best type of way.

He said he'd come for me the second we were in a secure location, and I loved knowing he was a man of his word.

"Tired?" he asked, leaving a kiss on my temple.

Every hard line of him imprinted on me, sending my nervous system into overdrive.  
"Exhausted."

"Too tired?"

"What a silly question."

Cruz smiled against my cheek, then kissed his way over to my lips.

He captured my mouth with a confidence that stole my breath, and my heart stuttered as I clung to him. As the kiss deepened, he slipped his arms around my waist and pulled me flush against him, letting me feel what my closeness did to him. When his

tongue swept across mine, I made a funny sound in my throat and arched my back, embarrassingly eager.

“Easy,” he murmured. “We’ve got time.”

He wanted to go slow. I wanted to rush. Somewhere along the way, we’d find the perfect pace together.

His lips went on a journey, kissing a trail down my neck, teasing and admiring every new place he visited. As his scruff scraped my skin, I tipped my head back and felt his tongue dip into the hollow at the base of my throat.

The touch of his lips had become my weakness, my craving. An addiction I never wanted to overcome.

When his mouth returned to mine, I sank my hands into his hair and released all the feelings I’d suppressed during our travels, pouring it into the kiss until he groaned and grabbed my ass, clamping me to him.

“Easy,” I said against his lips, making him smile.

He gave me another hard kiss, then pulled back to look at me, appearing very much like a man who was hanging on by a thread.

Struggling for breath, I pulled my t-shirt over my head and let it drop on the floor. “Do I need to point out I’m gross and I smell?”

His gaze passed over me. “I like it when you talk dirty.” He cupped the back of my neck and pulled me in again, smiling when I dodged his mouth.

“I’m serious,” I said with a huff of laughter. “I need a bath. You don’t want this, trust

me.”

It didn't mean I wouldn't give it to him.

Tae's howl of pain drifted from the kitchen down the hallway, but it didn't seem to register with Cruz.

“I like you dirty.” He grabbed my face and kissed me, his tongue playing with mine, his lips warm and needy. “I like you clean.” He kissed me again, drawing it out with a long, heavy breath that had the hairs on my forearms rising. Cruz hadn't washed up either, but I wanted to tuck my face against his neck and inhale his earthy scent. “In case you haven't noticed, I like you, querida .”

I slipped my hand down the front of his body, curling over the bulge in his pants. With a slow, deliberate squeeze, I smiled, shameless. “Seems as if you like me a lot.”

With a tortured laugh, he reached behind me to unclasp my bra. “I love seeing this side of you.” He slipped the straps down my arms, then his hands closed over my bare breasts, his thumbs teasing my nipples into aching peaks.

“Why?” His touch, his closeness, had desire charging through me, and a shiver passed over my body.

“No one gets to see it but me.”

Affection flooded me in a warm, all-encompassing wave. I smiled and toed off my boots, holding onto him to keep my balance. As soon as I was done, I grabbed the hem of his t-shirt and dragged it up his torso, dropping it with the rest of our discarded clothing.

We were both still wearing pants, belts, and weapons, but we were making progress.



As I slipped my arms around his waist and pressed myself to him, his chest hairs tickled my bare skin and set off sparks inside me. “I’ve waited so long for this,” I said, trailing soft kisses across the underside of his jaw. “Too long.”

“It’s only been days, carino .”

The amusement in his voice made me smile, but when his calloused palms swept up and down my spine, the familiar desperation kicked in again. “It feels like years.”

His hands rose to cup my face, his thumbs tracing a delicate path over my skin. “Better end the torture, then.” He dipped his head to kiss me, his mouth firmer this time, his pace more urgent.

All I could think as my stomach bottomed out was yes .

While my mouth kept pace with his, I unfastened his belt and lowered his fly, eager to see and touch more of him. My palm skated across his abdomen, and I eased his pants down just enough to slip my hand inside. A moment later, my fingers closed around the length of him, hard and ready, and a rush of excitement took hold of me.

Cruz pulled back to look at me, and his mouth dropped open with a sigh. The lantern lit up the ceiling and white walls, casting shadows over his features. His eyes were dark and filled with desire as they held mine. I tightened my grip and an overwhelming mix of love, lust, and desire crashed around inside me. He leaned his cheek against mine and released a guttural sigh, bringing to life parts of me that hadn’t seen the light of day in years. “Olivia.”

I worked him over, massaging and tugging, feeling his heat, his silky skin beneath my fingers. Heavy breaths eased from him as he manipulated my belt buckle and tugged it open. Before I knew it, my jeans and underwear were around my knees, and cool air was whispering over me.

We separated just long enough to step out of our remaining clothes and kick them away, losing the bulk and weight of our weapons, our socks.

With no barriers between us for the first time, anticipation zipped through me and my body turned fever-hot.

Cruz grabbed me again and dived on my lips, taking my mouth with renewed enthusiasm. His tongue played with mine as his heat pressed against me, so tempting I could barely control myself. My stomach filled with the same swirl of attraction that had come over me when we first met, and I kissed him harder, clutching his hair, grinding against him.

His hands slid down my back and curved over my ass, encouraging me even closer.

I savoured every touch, lost in his scent, his warmth, the feel of him against my skin.

We stayed like that for a long while, exchanging kisses and caresses, building the heat, touching everywhere we could reach. Cruz even pulled the tie from the end of my braid and loosened my hair, so he could sink his hand into the lengths. He kissed me hard, rolling his hips in a promise of what we'd be doing for real soon enough.

I broke the kiss and turned, pressing my cheek against the door. With my hips tilted backward in invitation, I sent him a teasing look over my shoulder.

His eyes were soft with affection, his mouth lifting on one side. He rested his hands on my hips and flexed his fingers against my skin. He'd never seen me like this before, completely exposed, and the realisation had heat creeping up my neck.

I hadn't been with a man in such a long time; the last thing I wanted to do was disappoint him.

Cruz cupped my breasts from behind and stroked my nipples, teasing them into tightened buds. I trembled as he rested his mouth beside my ear and murmured, “You’re beautiful, querida .”

I sighed and pushed back against him. “Says the most handsome man in all the lands.”

His huff of laughter made me smile, then his hand slid up my spine to give the back of my neck a delicious squeeze. As the muffled sounds of someone settling into the room beside ours drifted through the wall, Cruz nipped my earlobe and whispered, “Can you be quiet?”

I made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a moan, unsure of the answer. When he thrust against me with one slow, purposeful roll of his hips, I was almost certain it was no . “Let’s find out.”

He tested my patience, my self-restraint. In seconds at most, he’d have me falling to pieces.

He kicked my feet apart like he was about to frisk me, then slipped his hand between my legs from behind. The moment his fingers dipped inside me, I let out a tortured whimper loud enough to carry through the door. Cruz was a man with solutions, though; he used his other hand to cover my mouth, easing my head back until it rested on his shoulder.

My breasts pressed into the door, my hands flattened against the wood... and his fingers, God , they moved inside me maddeningly slowly. I rocked my hips backward to meet his steady gliding motion, listening to him breathing beside my ear, feeling his chest muscles flex against my back.

He spoke to me without words, touched me in ways that went beyond the physical.

His hand left me for a moment, then slipped between my legs from the front, creating a whole new set of sensations. A hoarse sound broke in my throat, and I stood on my tiptoes as he rubbed and teased, touching me with just the right pressure, at exactly the pace I needed.

I loved him. Every part of him. His mind, his body, the way he could be so careful with me one minute, then firm the next.

As he eased me closer to the brink, the meaning of the words he'd said to me in Spanish suddenly clicked into place.

Te amo .

He loved me, too.

My throat ached with emotion, and the realisation sent me over the edge. I closed my eyes and came quietly against the door, moaning into his hand, my legs shaking as it overcame me. My entire body trembled with the rush.

More footsteps travelled down the hall, followed by another closing door.

As his hand left my mouth, I lowered my feet flat to the floor and turned to face him.

Cruz looked me over and made a rough sound in his throat. His eyes glinted with intensity, and he lifted me into his arms, mumbling something that sounded like *mi corazón* as he headed for the bed.

With my legs wrapped around his waist and his length nudging me intimately, I'd grown so desperate to have him inside me, I struggled to contain myself.

Still breathless from the high he'd taken me to, I dragged in a gulp of air and hoped I

could handle whatever came next.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Cruz

Liv made a soft huffing sound as she shifted underneath me, more bothered than I'd seen her. She'd called herself gross, but I inhaled the tang of sweat clinging to her skin like she was wearing expensive perfume.

She was beautiful.

Real.

Mine.

I kissed her harder, thrusting my tongue into her mouth. When I clasped her breast and squeezed, she rewarded me with a sultry moan and an arched back.

Her reactions made each minute we shared more intimate and memorable. Every part of her tempted me, each patch of skin my lips touched leaving me wanting more. The pulse point below her ear, the curve of her jaw.

I couldn't get enough.

"Sure you can be quiet?" I asked in a low voice.

"I think so," she said. "This is the best and worst kind of torture."

Her impatience made me smile. Her heat drove me crazy. I took her at her word and pulled her nipple into my mouth, giving her one long, deep suck. A harsh breath left

her, but she kept the volume low enough that no one else could hear.

I pulled back to take in the pink bud glistening in the lantern light, then sucked her nipple again, squeezing her breast and drawing as much as I could into my mouth. She whimpered a little louder and moved restlessly beneath me, her legs separating as if inviting me in.

The internal and external pressure grew, the need to take this further clashing with the desire to draw it out and make it last for as long as possible.

“I should probably mention there’s nothing stopping me from getting pregnant,” she said, her voice a rushed whisper.

I lifted my head, reminding myself not to get so wrapped up in her I stopped thinking about what happened beyond tonight. “Don’t worry about a thing. It’s under control.” I touched my lips to hers.

As I kissed her again, she wedged a hand between our bodies and gripped me, sending my heart into a thudding gallop. Her tongue swept across mine, her fingers encasing my length. When her thumb slid over the wet tip, my stomach clenched and recklessness tore through me. I yanked my mouth from hers to kiss her neck, her jaw, the lobe of her ear. I’d never been this turned on from a simple touch.

While muffled sounds drifted through the walls, her stormy eyes held me captive, and she guided me inside her.

As the overwhelming heat of her surrounded me, conflicting emotions rolled through me. Love and lust, relief and uncertainty. Her mouth dropped open as she accommodated me, and I had to hide my face against her neck to focus on my breathing. When my chest came to rest against hers, the softness of her breasts, the sensation of her stomach tensing beneath mine, had those emotions growing until

they were too big, too much.

She was ready for me—but I wasn't ready for her. For this.

Liv was everything I'd ever wanted, and the two of us were only ever going to have each other. No family or shared friends, nothing but the love we were building together.

My throat hurt with the effort of suppressing it, and I dragged in a ragged breath.

I couldn't move, couldn't speak.

If I'd had the power to form a coherent thought, I might have even been embarrassed.

Her body stilled beneath mine as if she sensed the need to tread carefully. "Are you okay?" she asked, stroking my hair.

Her perceptiveness helped in some ways, made it worse in others.

I nodded against her neck, turning my head to kiss her there. In every other aspect of my life, I could control myself—my actions, my words—but with her the rules were different. "I just need a minute."

"It's all right," she said, urging me to lift my head and look at her. Her gaze connected with mine, and she let me see everything she was feeling. "It's just you and me, Cruz. It's always just you and me. No matter who else is with us, no matter where we go."

Her eyes were soft, her expression open and understanding. Liv accepted every part of me without question, her patience beyond anything I'd experienced. I took in her flushed cheeks, and her lips, soft and puffy from our kisses. I hadn't been in love



until now, and the realisation hit me like a truck.

“Te amo,” I said again, feeling it with my entire body.

With the hint of a smile, she traced her fingertips from my temple to my jaw, her touch mesmerising. I was still buried deep inside her—I’d almost forgotten that part, which was crazy in itself—and my hips began moving with a mind of their own, the slick warmth of her the most addictive kind of torment.

She didn’t ask me to translate for her this time around, instead putting the pieces together with her usual perceptiveness. Her eyes were deep pools of emotion, and she stared up at me with so much feeling, I almost wanted to look away.

“I love you, too,” she said.

Her words set off an explosion of light inside me, and my heart felt too big for my chest, like it might burst from me any minute. “How did you know?” I asked, holding back a groan when her inner muscles squeezed me,

“The look on your face when you said it outside.” She ran her fingernails so gently up my spine, I shivered. “And you’ve been telling me a million different ways for a while now.”

She’d brought the softness into my life that had been missing for too long, and I had no clue how I’d made it this far without her. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me .”

We were both smiling as I dipped my head and kissed her, and my hips moved against hers in a lazy, grinding thrust.

Her tongue played with mine, the kiss going on and on, teasing and arousing as she

alternated between trailing her fingertips and nails up and down my back. Every place she touched seemed to come to life, my entire body desperate to know her.

“I don’t want this to stop,” I told her, hearing the roughness in my voice.

“Go slow,” she said. “Nice and slow, Cruz. Let me feel every inch of you.”

Jesus . I blew out a hard breath and continued my easy, steady rhythm, losing myself in her, revelling in every surprised gasp she made when I bottomed out inside her.

“You’re everything to me,” I said beside her mouth.

We fit each other perfectly, her curves moulding to my body like she was made specifically for me. I gripped her hip and experimented with more force, taking her harder, driving deeper, again and again, until I could barely hang on.

When she cried out and clutched my back, I leaned in close and said beside her ear, “Press your face into my shoulder. Make all the noise you need.”

“Cruz... God .”

She tucked her face against my neck and rocked her hips to keep up with my pace, her entire body seeming to scream for release. The tension built, and her inner muscles tightened around me as she reached the precipice.

When she dragged in a breath and shuddered with her climax, I plunged inside her, giving her everything. All of me. My body clenched, the feeling building deep in my groin until I hit the tipping point.

Seconds later, I pulled out and made a guttural sound as I came, marking the pale skin of her stomach.

Heat flooded me, and as my body jerked for the last time, my fingers dug into her hip for the beat it took me to come back down to Earth.

A long minute ticked by while we both recovered, and our laboured breaths were the only sound in the room.

I lifted myself off her and sank back on my heels, dragging in air.

The storms in her eyes cleared, and she ran her hands over her breasts as she gazed up at me. "I'm even more annoyed at you now for making me wait as long as you did."

With an amused breath, I leaned down to kiss her again. "Don't move."

I left the bed and rustled through the nightstand, finding a bundle of folded handkerchiefs in the second drawer.

Liv watched me in silence as I leaned over her and cleaned her lower belly. When my gaze locked with hers again, a tender look passed between us, and I smiled a bit. We'd opened a door that would never shut again, and I didn't know how I'd keep my hands off her when we left the room in the morning.

I turned the lantern off and found my way back to her in the dark, climbing into bed and pulling the covers over us. She rolled onto her side and hooked her calf over mine. Then her hand sank into my hair, and she raked her nails over my scalp.

"You've got ten minutes," she said, her voice a seductive murmur, "fifteen max, then I'm going to need you to rally and get ready for round two. I plan on making up for lost time."

I planted a smacking kiss on her mouth, more content than I'd felt in a long time. "Give me five. That's all I need."

Cruz

“The kangaroos did a number on the windshield.” I gave the jagged frame a passing glance as Ro and I transferred the supplies from our car to her Land Cruiser.

Remy and Gabe had already taken care of the jumpstart and refuelling of her vehicle, and left it running to blow out the cobwebs. We were almost good to go.

She handed me a plastic tub filled with vegetables, then grabbed the last one for herself. “Lucky they only took out the glass,” she said, as we went over to where her car was still parked in the shed. “Liv almost lost her head.”

There were a dozen ways last night could have gone horribly wrong, and I didn’t want to think about any of them now we were safe and well. “She told me you pushed her down to keep her safe. Thanks, by the way.”

“Wouldn’t want her ruining that pretty face.” She deposited the tub in the back and waited for me to add mine. “It’s almost as pretty as yours.”

The wind picked up and blew dead leaves across the ground, bringing the faint smell of decay that hovered in the air no matter where we were. I stepped back from the car and raised my brows. “Are you flirting with me, Ro?”

She grinned and closed the boot. “Not me. I know a taken man when I see one. Plus, I’d break you, and that wouldn’t be fun for either of us.”

With a startled laugh, I left the shed and spotted three figures strolling toward us from

the direction of the dam—one brunette, two blondes—caught up in a conversation we were too far away to hear. Their faint chatter carried on the breeze, reminding me of more carefree times when no one had needed to worry about dangers lurking in every shadow.

Ro stood beside me, her shoulder brushing mine. “She looks happy with the girls, more relaxed. New day and all that.”

My heart swelled seeing Liv experiencing this kind of peace. “We had Jonah’s mother with us until a couple of nights ago. Liv was excited about being around other women again.”

“Your group’s almost even now.”

“Our group—you’re a big part of it.” I threw her a smile. “A loud part, too.”

“Watch it,” she said, her tone amused. “That face’ll only get you so far.”

The rear door to the house opened, and the guys poured out with their backpacks and weapons. Gabe clapped his hands together like a coach rousing his team. “Last leg, people. Let’s do this .”

“You’re clear about the drive there?” I asked Ro. There was one small town between us and our destination, and we were making an express trip through to avoid unnecessary dangers.

“Yep.” A smile hovered at her mouth as she took in Gabe’s enthusiasm and energy. “Tae and the girls are coming in my car. We’re following you. No stops for any reason other than medical or mechanical.” She switched her attention to me. “No running zombies over—and stay on the road wherever possible. Avoid the soft edges.”

No one could accuse her of being a terrible listener. “And flash your lights if you need to get our attention. No honking the horn.”

“It’s all locked in here.” Ro tapped her temple. “I might come off like a loose cannon sometimes, but you don’t need to worry about me.” As Liv and the girls crossed over from grass to asphalt, she smiled. “We’ve been stuck in one place for so long, I’m more than ready for something new. This is pretty bloody exciting.” She switched gears and called out to her nieces in her no-nonsense tone, “Come on, girls, pick up the pace. We haven’t got all day.”

“What’s your hurry?” Ellie threw back. “Keep your pants on, lady.”

Ro snorted. “You hear the way she talks to me?”

I bit back a smile. The girls’ true personalities were emerging now, and although Ro wasn’t Ellie’s mother, they clearly shared the same genetics.

My eyes locked with Liv’s, and I lifted my arm for her to slide under. She had a damp spot on her shirt from the ends of her ponytail, and as she pressed herself against my side, I tightened my hold and left a kiss on her hair. “You smell good,” I said. “Ready to go?”

She flattened her palm against my abdomen, letting out a slow breath as if trying to keep her excitement in check. “So ready. This is it. We’re going to find our new home today.”

We’d had that same thought for a few days now, but this time around it might actually be true.

Remy drove east through town with Gabe beside him, checking at regular intervals to confirm Ro was still following. Jonah and I sat in the back with Liv sandwiched

between us.

We travelled down streets we'd never see again after today, keeping the mood light to offset the concern we were all feeling. Not knowing the location of the horde meant we couldn't take our eyes off the scenery for long, and I scanned every side street as we passed.

Smoke still drifted from the rooftop of the burning building, and the almost black colour from yesterday had faded to lighter grey with wispy plumes of white.

As we approached the shed where we'd first encountered Dane, Liv turned in her seat to stare, no doubt remembering all the shit we'd been through yesterday—and every day before that. Since no bodies were lying on the gravel, I could only assume whoever had lost their lives there now wandered aimlessly as the newest members of the horde.

Liv faced the front again and sighed, briefly resting her cheek on my shoulder.

We were so close to our goal now.

All we needed was one good hour.

Remy swerved around a delivery van and a few splattered corpses. A cat raced behind a telegraph pole, and a magpie with a death wish flew by, clearing our windscreen just before impact.

When we reached the town boundary and the sign farewelling us from Darby Downs, Remy picked up speed, and we left the memories behind us.

The car fell silent as we disappeared into our own thoughts, and I contemplated what we'd been through, where we were going—and how the hell we'd keep nine people

safe when we got there.

Several kilometres down the road, Liv was the first to speak again. “I’ve been thinking about those kangaroos,” she said, her thoughts taking a different direction to mine. “We’ll need meat once we get settled, so we could hunt them in the wild. Imagine how much their numbers would have multiplied in the past few years with no humans around to do the culling.”

“Okay, but... what do you know about hunting?” Jonah asked. “Didn’t you grow up in the city?”

“I don’t know anything about hunting,” she said, “but I had no other survival skills when this craziness started, either. Even if we can’t find the right weapons to take down kangaroos, there are still rabbits to trap—and we’ll be right next to the ocean. Anyone know how to fish?”

“Not yet,” Gabe answered.

The thick cover of trees and shrubs along the roadside petered out until all that surrounded us were empty paddocks and dry, overgrown grass. I gave Liv a sidelong look. “The only thing I know how to do in the water is surf, and I can’t see that being a useful skill.”

“Not unless you can grab a shark in a headlock,” she said, resting her hand on my thigh.

I took her hand and intertwined my fingers with hers. “I prefer having all my body parts attached if it’s all the same with you.”

“I prefer them attached, too,” she said, then her mouth closed in on my ear and she whispered, “especially the one I got to play with last night.”



“Olivia,” I said in a warning tone, sliding my thumb across hers. My pulse picked up, and the memories rushed in, throwing me for a second. I didn’t know if the others had overheard, but when Jonah choked on air and Remy met my gaze in the mirror, I got my answer.

Liv sent me an apologetic look. “Sorry.”

I shifted in my seat to make room for the reaction she’d stirred in me. “No, you’re not.”

She didn’t say another word, but her laugh was all the response I needed.

“What’s one thing you guys miss from the old days?” Remy asked.

“Beer,” Gabe said, needing no time to think it over.

We’d already made it to the halfway mark, with a long stretch of straight road ahead and clear skies in the distance. Liv’s forehead creased in a frown, then she answered, “Bread.”

Remy slowed to avoid a cluster of corpses, then gradually increased his speed. “Bread? Seriously?”

“I know. I was going to say pizza, but I miss everyday foods more than the rest,” she said. “Toast, fresh bread rolls with butter, sandwiches loaded with meat and vegetables. I had a favourite bakery on my street, one of those artisan ones. Kind of fancy and expensive, but my God, the smells...”

She gave me a look similar to the one we’d exchanged last night—and again this morning—and I didn’t know if I should be amused or offended that bread could turn her on in the same ways I did. “All right, we’re getting the picture.”

Picking up on my deadpan tone, she smiled. “It’s okay. You don’t need to be jealous of toast. What about you, Jonah?”

“Boobs,” he said without hesitation.

I kept my eyes on the scenery, not wanting any part of this conversation.

“You’ve always gotta take it there,” Remy said.

“What? I’m young. I’m a guy. There’s no Internet anymore. It’s torture.”

The barren landscape gave way to houses on large parcels of land, rural bus stops, a water tower. Trees on either side of us reached across the road like arms, their fingertips touching in the middle. We’d reached the last town before Bridgehill, a monumental achievement given all the challenges we’d faced along the way. “Pay attention, everyone,” I said. “Eyes open.”

“We’re sticking with the plan and not stopping, right?” Gabe confirmed.

“Right.”

Remy slowed, and we scanned the roadside. A couple of corpses loitered in the front garden of a house on the right, and a few more were on the left near a row of bushes. The road was pockmarked with damage, covered in weeds and dead foliage.

The town looked to be similar in size to Harriet, only more modern and in better condition—or at least it had been before everything turned to shit. I eyed off the small supermarket, then pulled in a breath when a couple of figures ran straight out the front door, waving their arms and yelling.

“Woah.” Remy braced himself with his hands on the wheel.

My eyes shifted from one detail to the next as we approached. There were no signs of others around and no car or motorbike to suggest they'd broken down.

A young couple—a man and a woman—both with backpacks.

Were they living here or passing through? Had someone stolen their car while they were making a pit stop, just like others had tried multiple times with us?

There were too many unanswered questions, a risk we weren't willing to take.

"This isn't like when we found Willow," Liv said. "I'm getting a weird feeling..."

I shot her a look, my gut telling me to keep moving. "Yeah, me too."

"Don't worry, I'm not stopping," Remy said.

As we closed in on the area, the man came straight for the car, holding his palm up as if he was used to people obeying his instructions. He wore clean clothes and had a neatly trimmed beard, his body the type of lean that suggested he'd been eating regularly rather than starving. The young brunette woman wore her hair in a similar style to Liv's and for a moment, just a moment, I nearly lost my mind and told Remy to hit the brakes.

He drove past and swore when the man ran close enough to give the side panel of the car an angry slap. I checked over my shoulder, relieved to see Ro dodge the couple and keep moving. Not only did I not want to stop in a place where we were exposed and potentially putting ourselves in danger, but our cars were full. We had no room for strays.

"Good call." Liv twisted in her seat and let out a whoosh of air. "Definitely a good call. Three more people just walked out of the supermarket."

I looked back there and caught the movement. All men, and the casual way they approached the other two told me they were well known to one another.

Confirming we'd made the right decision didn't relax my muscles, though. It only sharpened my focus and served as a reminder that it could be the first of many traps between here and Bridgehill.

"Stay alert," I said. "That might not be the last attempted ambush, and we need to be ready for anything."

"Great," Jonah said. "Just when I thought we were cruising."

"We're never cruising," I said, as we left the town behind. "Safety's an illusion."

Liv slipped her hand into mine as we passed the sign welcoming us to Bridgehill. "This doesn't even feel real," she said. "There were so many times I thought we'd never make it, but we're here."

I felt the slight tremor in her hand and squeezed her fingers. The most challenging part may have been over now, but we had no clue what was going on in this part of the state, and we couldn't let our guards down for a second.

"Why don't we split up and scout the town straight away?" Jonah said, leaning forward to look at me past Liv. "If we move fast, we could find the place before dark."

"Maybe we should take it easy," Gabe said. "Set ourselves up at a base first and come up with a plan from there."

I watched the trees go by, preferring Gabe's idea over Jonah's. "We need to stop and catch up with the others, anyway, so we'll talk as a group before we make any

decisions.”

Remy crossed a pristine concrete bridge that looked to have been built within the last ten years. A dilapidated wooden version ran parallel to it, with a deep gully below.

As we officially entered the town, he eased off the accelerator, and I lowered my window. Even on the outskirts, the near-the-sea smell filled the car, and I breathed in the reminder of my previous life.

“Salty air,” Liv said, keeping her eyes on the road.

We passed a caravan park and a few industrial buildings, then headed toward an avenue of honour marked by rows of gargantuan pine trees. Whenever there was a gap between the taller buildings, rolling hills in the distance appeared.

An expansive playground adjoined a car park and community centre on the left, followed by several bed-and-breakfasts and a pub advertising upstairs accommodation.

As we drove into the town centre, shops on both sides were painted in yellows and blues. There were restaurants and cafes, takeaway food shops, clothing and souvenirs.

It would have been a tourist hotspot back in the day—especially over summer. Now, all the doors and windows were boarded up.

A missing detail suddenly registered, and I frowned, wondering if the others had noticed.

No corpses. Not one.

No sign of chaos, either. It was as if the rioting and looting in other parts of the

country hadn't touched them here in Bridgehill.

"Where are the dead ones?" Remy asked.

"And why's it so clean?" Gabe added.

"Has Ro turned around and gone home yet?" Jonah asked, only half joking.

We were on the eastern coastline with nowhere left to go.

As far as residents went, the permanent population would have been small, and tourists weren't travelling during the lockdowns that dragged on for endless months. Corpses must have been landing in town, swarming around for a bit and leaving, or they just weren't heading this far from densely populated areas in the first place.

"This is... unsettling," Liv said.

"Not what we're used to anymore." We needed a break and a chance to talk to the rest of the group, so I pointed at a town map on a notice board up ahead. "You want to pull over up there, Rem?"

"Sure thing." He parked at the curb, and Ro stopped behind us.

"What was up with that couple at the supermarket?" she asked as we all assembled on the footpath. "I nearly hit the guy—and not on purpose, either."

"Just another a-hole," Liv said. "We've seen a few of them. All they want to do is steal your car."

"So, you're saying I should have clipped him?"

Liv squinted against the sun's glare and turned to survey the quiet street. "I'm saying it wouldn't have been a tragedy if you had."

She drew her sword and strolled a short distance away, giving the boards across a window a testing tug while Gabe headed over to the map with Tae.

"This place is so weird." Willow stared at the deserted street—a stark contrast to the scenes she was used to seeing in Darby Downs.

"It can't be normal for a town to be this quiet," Ro said. "Or tidy. I haven't left home since Ultimus kicked off, but this has gotta be strange, right?" She looked at me for confirmation.

I didn't see the point in hiding the truth. "I haven't seen anything like it before."

Harriet was quiet when we arrived, but we'd put that down to the horde collecting resident corpses on the way through. For all we knew, it could have been a ghost town before the horde arrived. Maybe this was how rural areas looked now.

I had to admit; the silence was eerie. If the sea breeze hadn't been blowing through, there would have been no sound at all.

"Why are all the windows and doors covered?" Jonah asked.

Remy pulled the long-handled screwdriver from his belt. "Maybe to stop looting—or they were repairing damage that was already done."

Other than dead leaves, there was no rubbish blowing around, and no abandoned cars or bikes in sight. I couldn't even pinpoint areas where they once were and had now been cleaned up.

“It should feel safer here with no dead around,” Liv said, returning to the group, “but it’s the opposite.”

She huffed out a breath and met my eyes, sending a message with no need for words. Her mind had already processed all the explanations, and she wanted to run through them with me in private.

“We should get off the main street in case someone’s watching.” Ellie swept her gaze over the shopfronts and wrapped her arms around herself. “I don’t like being out in the open when we don’t know what’s going on here.”

Our first task had to be finding a temporary base to keep everyone safe while we searched for the property over the next couple of days. It was already early afternoon. The thought of being out in the elements when the daylight disappeared had unease travelling down my spine. If we were clueless about what was going on here during the day, we had even less of an idea what happened after nightfall.

Tae and Gabe rejoined us after studying the map.

“Find anything?” I asked.

“The town centre’s made up of four main roads where all the businesses are,” Gabe said, “then the smaller, residential streets branch off it until you head up that way...” He pointed west where I’d spotted the hills on the way into town. “It looks like the bigger properties are spread out in that direction.”

“Let’s find a place to set up for the night before we do anything else.” Liv sheathed her sword and turned to Jonah. “I know you were ready to get searching right away, but if we can find a safe house, it just means some of our people can stay behind while we’re out looking.”



“It’s fine,” he said. “I’m good with that.”

“I don’t know if we should be excited or scared.” Willow nibbled on her thumbnail and shared a look with her sister.

Seeing someone else display Dawn’s anxious tic was like a kick to the gut, and I vowed to make sure nothing bad happened to her. “Both,” I said. “You should be both.”

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Liv

“Now it’s just us again. Tell me what you think’s really going on here.” I clicked my seatbelt into place, still shaken from what I’d seen out there—or more to the point, not seen.

Remy pulled away from the curb and drove to the next intersection, heading west as Gabe suggested. “Someone’s been maintaining the town,” he said. “Not just at the start, but now. Today.”

“It’s too clean and organised,” Gabe agreed.

“And more work than one or two people can handle,” Cruz added. “It has to be a bigger group like ours.”

“Hopefully, a group exactly like ours,” Jonah said as his knee jittered up and down beside mine. “You know, normal.”

“I knew what you meant.” I wished the thought of a team of humans tidying up a town eased my concerns, but it was so outside my experiences post-pandemic that the hairs on the back of my neck rose.

With a frown, I stared out the side window, moving my attention from one area to the next. I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were being watched, but there were too many places for people to hide and no chance of spotting them while we were driving. “Why, though?” I said absently. “Why would they do that?”

My stomach had been a ball of knots from the moment I noticed the missing infected. I wouldn't expect to see them in large numbers this far from other places, but to have none in a town where the main road was still open and operational? Strange.

Cruz cupped my knee and swept his thumb back and forth. "That's the part we need to figure out if we're going to stay here."

"If?" My head swung in his direction. "You're already having second thoughts?" It was too soon to make a big decision like that, especially when every person in our group deserved an opinion on their futures.

He kept his eyes on the road as Remy turned another corner and left the business district behind.

We entered the first residential street—and none of the dead were wandering around in this area, either.

"Not serious doubts," he said. "Not yet."

The houses were mostly orange or yellow brick, built around the nineteen seventies or earlier, with matching brick fences and garages separate from the houses. No windows or doors were smashed, but the grass and gardens were just as unruly as the other places we'd passed through. Strangely, it calmed my nerves seeing signs of neglect. If the street had been mowed and well maintained, I would have been yelling at Remy to floor it and get us out of here.

"I think you're right about it being a group doing the cleaning and maintenance here," I said, "and what are the chances of a gang of thugs putting in all this effort? People like that thrive in chaos and don't care one bit about mess."

Surely that meant they weren't dangerous—but then I reminded myself serial killers

could be neat and methodical, too, so I should stop assigning personality traits to people I hadn't met yet.

"Why don't we agree to be cautiously optimistic?" Cruz said. "People worked hard to board up all those businesses as if they plan on using them again, which means they care—or they did at one point."

Remy pulled over in front of a white weatherboard house with blue shutters. The yellow starfish and seahorse on the front door gave off a welcoming vibe that I hoped carried through to the interior.

"Maybe we'll find out who they are today." I jumped out and grabbed my backpack.

While the rest of the group did the same, Ro stepped onto the footpath and her eyes locked with mine, her expression matching all the emotions whirling around inside me.

We both knew exactly what we were risking here—and how terribly it could all go wrong.

In a new location with an unknown presence potentially lurking, this could be our biggest mistake yet.

We split up to clear several houses on both sides of the street, making sure the homes surrounding our base didn't contain any threats, dead or otherwise. Infected were loitering in three of the houses—our second sign of normality since we'd arrived in town.

When we were done securing our surroundings, Cruz and I parked the cars outside homes we weren't occupying and went inside the white house with the starfish and seahorse on the door.

It had been a well loved family home at one point, with toys scattered over the worn carpet, and an arts and crafts station set up in a corner of the kitchen. Four bedrooms contained enough beds for most of us to sleep in, and the lounge room had an oversized corner couch where those on duty could keep watch overnight.

None of the dead needed to be cleared out before we made ourselves at home, which left a stale smell in place of decayed flesh.

As each of us busied ourselves with our separate tasks, I wandered into the kitchen to set my backpack down, catching sight of Remy and Gabe through the rear window.

The twins were checking the stability of the fences surrounding the property, and Gabe suddenly gripped the top edge, catapulting himself up to look into the neighbouring backyards. Whatever he saw there must have satisfied him, because he dropped to the ground and returned to the house with his brother.

Their relaxed gaits influenced my mood, and I breathed a little easier knowing we'd locked in our temporary residence.

While the others set out food on the dining table, I retrieved the magazine article from my back pocket and unfolded the pages, smoothing the folds on the kitchen counter.

Elbows resting on the bench and forehead in hands, I blocked out the noise and searched for clues.

There were six photos, a larger one as the focal point on each page, with smaller images scattered throughout the article.

The first page showcased the house in its entirety: a grey building with a flat roof covered in rows of angled solar panels. The high fences around the boundary were only just visible, made up of what looked to be cast iron—another detail to keep an

eye out for when we went searching.

I reminded myself it might not look the same anymore, but it gave us a starting point, and the thought of seeing it in person for the first time had my heart fluttering.

Gabe leaned in beside me and pulled the second page toward him. “See anything useful?”

“Just checking out the fencing.” I pointed at the bigger picture. “Black iron from the looks of it.”

“Mmm.” He surveyed the photos, then tapped his thumb on the image centred on the second page. “See the skyline? No trees or houses on this side, which means it could be near a cliff.”

“Maybe.” It could also be a five or ten-minute drive away, close enough to still be classified as Bridgehill, but far enough away that it would take longer than we wanted to find it. The pristine condition of the town had me suspecting the house would already be occupied, too, but I kept those thoughts to myself.

The bigger blocks of land were always further from the town centre, so we’d need to widen our circle—and keep widening it until we eliminated every possibility. We only had a few hours left to play with before it got dark, but it gave us enough time to make a decent start.

“You want to go out on the first run?” he asked, slanting me a look.

“I do,” I said with a smile, wondering how he’d read me so easily. “I need to keep moving.”

Cruz came up on the other side of me and rested his hand in the middle of my back.

The warmth from his palm penetrated my shirt, and his nearness sent my pulse skittering. “What are you two looking at?”

Gabe pointed out the features we’d already discussed, and Cruz took his time checking out the images. We’d both seen the photos countless times, but the details were more important now. It was no longer just an idea we hoped to turn into reality one day.

The thought sent a subtle tremor through me, and I tried my best to keep my expectations realistic. I wanted this too much, and I didn’t know what I’d do if the dream was ripped away from me.

With his usual perceptiveness, Cruz slid his hand up my spine and clasped the back of my neck, giving me a firm squeeze as if he’d picked up on my nerves. “Might as well make the most of the daylight and get a team out there.”

“We were just saying the same thing.” Gabe straightened and gave the photos one last look. “Why don’t Jonah and I come out with you two—split into pairs and cover more ground? Remy can monitor things here.”

“Sounds good.” Cruz’s hand lingered before leaving my neck, and I immediately missed his touch. “If you and Jonah cover the eastern side of town, I’ll take the west with Liv. We can meet back here in an hour.”

Gabe nodded. Then we stared at one another in shock as a car passed by—not down our street, but close enough for the sound to carry. Moving fast.

“What in sweet fuckery is going on in this place?” Ro said from the dining room.

“I don’t know,” I answered, more confused than ever, “but we’re going to find out.”

“Better leave our packs behind and head out on foot.” Gabe folded the article and handed it back to me. “Until we know more, we’ve gotta stay off the radar of whoever’s running this place.”

Being in a car only increased our chances of being seen and trapped, and now wasn’t the time to stumble onto new people—not until we’d learned more about the town and its inhabitants.

“Make sure you bring that rifle,” I said to Cruz.



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Cruz

Liv sighed and gave me a disappointed look. “I don’t think we’re going to find the place today.”

I shifted the rifle strap higher on my shoulder and followed her line of sight. “Probably not, but now we’ve got less ground to cover tomorrow.”

We were on the outskirts of the main town grid, with standard houses on one side of the road and acreages on the other. After passing several properties that shared similarities with the pictures in her pocket, nothing had been close enough to consider a match.

Liv stood with one hand shading her eyes and the other resting on the hilt of her sword. She gazed up at the long stretch of open road that led to even more acreages at the top of the hill.

With the ocean views, I’d bet anything all the money was up there—along with the house we wanted—but with only half an hour to go until we had to be back at the house, we’d run out of time. “C’mon. We’ll check out the rest of this row, then call it a day.”

Distracted, she nibbled on her lower lip as we took off walking down the centre of the road. “Do you think it’s like the town on that TV show?”

I frowned and looked over the top of her head, searching for nothing, everything. “What town on what TV show?”

“The one where you drive in there, but you can’t leave. A lot of weird stuff happens.”

“Isn’t that the Hotel California?”

“The what?”

Jesus. We weren’t that far apart in age. “Don’t worry about it. It’s a song, not a show.”

She sent me a sideways look. “Well, now I’m curious. Why don’t you sing it to me?”

“Because I have a terrible singing voice, and I don’t want to give you any reason to stop sleeping with me?”

Her eyes shined with laughter. She stopped walking and snagged my elbow to halt my steps, too. “There’s literally nothing you could do that would turn me off you, mi amor.”

Affection rolled through me whenever she attempted Spanish, the feeling warm and sweet and addictive. “Nothing? You haven’t seen me dance.”

“You could look like a big, goofy idiot, and I’d still want you.” After giving me a lengthy look from head to toe, she added, “I might even want you more.”

“Funny.” There wasn’t a chance in hell of me testing that theory by dancing outside on a deserted street. We’d already taken cover once to avoid a passing car, and people could be watching us from inside any number of houses at this very moment—but that didn’t stop me from appreciating her dilated pupils or the flush in her cheeks.

“Come here for a second.” With my right hand gripping the loaded rifle, I slipped my left around the back of her neck and pulled her closer.

Keeping my ears tuned into our environment, I dipped my head and kissed her. When my mouth captured hers, all I heard was the screech of cockatoos as a flock passed by overhead and the wind rustling the trees. No cars or footsteps—and that same unnatural lack of shuffling, moaning corpses we'd had in our lives for years.

It was quiet here; the solitude wrapping around us like a protective blanket. Maybe that was why I let down my guard when it should have stayed firmly up. The notion of finally being here made me feel invincible.

Liv grabbed the front of my shirt with her free hand and rose on her tiptoes, kissing me back with an eagerness that would easily have me spiralling if we didn't stop soon. Her tongue met mine, and she pressed herself against me, taking the kiss deeper, sending my heart rate into a thudding gallop.

The knowledge that we'd hear any cars long before the occupants spotted us had me giving myself over to the moment—just a few seconds, a minute where all we did was lose ourselves in each other.

She made a satisfied sound against my mouth and slipped her hand under my shirt, running her fingertips over my abs, sliding higher to skim my nipple with the edge of her thumb.

Every part of me turned hard and ready for her, my tongue thrusting deeper, my grip on the back of her neck tightening.

I wanted to sweep her away somewhere private. Behind a fence, amongst some greenery. A secluded place where we could take our time and indulge every single urge without worrying about being seen.

Her soft breaths turned the ache into desperation, and I didn't know how much longer I could hold on. She kissed me with a fierceness that nudged me even closer to the

edge, then dragged her mouth from mine and said, “Let’s find a house.”

It was exactly the right and wrong thing to say to me. “We’re supposed to be on duty.” My protest sounded weak even to my ears.

“You are,” she said, rubbing herself against me. “I can feel you standing to attention. Very impressive, by the way.”

With a frustrated laugh, I cupped her cheek and contemplated taking her up on the offer when something hit me smack in the middle of my back.

“What the...” Liv pulled away and checked the ground, staring past me, then at me. “It’s an apple.”

Before it had even rolled to a stop on the road, she’d unsheathed her sword and readied herself for the unknown threat.

My heart gave a hard thump, and I yanked the rifle up in front of me, wondering how the fuck I’d been hit by an apple when there were no trees within fifteen metres of us.

Liv and I separated to perform a one-eighty, neither of us speaking as our eyes darted around.

She moved into a fighting stance and lifted her sword, her lips still puffy from our kiss, her chin pink from the rub of my scruff. “I love you,” she said.

“Stop.” I aimed the gun at one house, then another, watching through the sight. Waiting for a signal that we’d found our target.

“I need you to know. Just in case.”

“I love you, too—more than my own fucking life—but this isn’t the end.” A jolt moved through me. There. A glint of white light in the shadowed area beside the brick house. Hidden amongst the bushes beneath an old, gnarled apple tree. “Did you catch that?”

“I did.” Liv walked toward the area, keeping her steps slow, her shoulders pulled back. All confidence and grace, but in a measured way that reassured me she wouldn’t rush into the situation unprepared. “Are we a hundred percent sure it’s not Jonah and Gabe pulling a prank?”

“They know better. Stay out of my shot, carino,” I murmured.

We approached the house together. Whenever she turned her attention left or right, I kept mine straight ahead, ensuring one of us always had eyes on the target. Nothing moved. My muscles were taut, my pulse thundering. Whoever threw the fruit wanted to get our attention, but were we closing in on a single person, or did we need to expect an ambush?

The light flashed again, only this time we were close enough to see it was a torch. On. Off. On. Off. Sending a message, but going about it in a way that was almost as off-putting as the town itself.

If you want to talk, show yourself.

“Is that supposed to be morse code?” Liv whispered.

“No clue.” I didn’t feel a prickle of unease to warn me we were heading straight into danger, but I wouldn’t relax until I’d confirmed it for myself. “If I had to put money on it, I’d say it’s a woman.”

As we reached the curb, the figure emerged from the shadows, proving me wrong

about one detail. A man. Late forties to early fifties, with salt and pepper hair and a full grey beard. He looked to be about my height with a strong build, someone with a base and a stable life.

“Get over here,” he said in a harsh whisper, waving us toward him. “You idiots are gonna get yourselves killed.”

Liv and I exchanged a look as we approached, then she raised her brows and turned her attention to the man. “Hello to you, too.”

“No time for pleasantries,” he snapped. “You’ve got no idea what you’re dealing with here. Point that gun somewhere else—and get off the damn street .”

His hands didn’t move toward a weapon, despite him having a few attached to his belt.

He maintained eye contact with me as we closed in on his location, his direct manner relaxing my hold on the rifle.

I lowered it to my side and said to Liv, “Stick close to me. Don’t make a move yet.”

I stepped over the knee high brick fence and paused as she did the same, then made my way down the side of the house with her to meet the man.

The sound of a vehicle registered in the distance again, and after three circuits in less than an hour, I concluded it had to be a patrol. We may not have known who was behind the wheel, but going by the sudden strain in his features, this man did.

“Who’s driving the car?” I asked as we joined him. “And why are you hiding?”

“And who the hell are you?” Liv demanded.

His eyes were grey, his skin weathered in a way that suggested he'd spent most of his life outdoors even before the pandemic. I pictured him on a boat in the middle of the ocean or on the end of a pier fishing. He wore a black and red flannel shirt and faded jeans, with boots that were so worn on the toes, they showed glimpses of the steel caps beneath.

"Garrett McKenzie," he said, "and you just stumbled into a shitload of trouble."

Didn't we always? Every safe place had been obliterated. Even when we thought we were secure, it was just temporary self-delusion.

I introduced Liv and myself, then moved deeper into the shrubbery to keep out of sight until we'd decided how to handle him.

"Are you alone?" I asked.

"Right now? Yeah. I'll bring you up to speed inside." He jabbed his thumb at the rear door, his hand just as leathery as the rest of him.

I took in the house and frowned. "You live here?"

"Shit no. I've been holed up here for the past few hours."

Hours, not days. I kept close watch as he turned his back on us and headed for the door, leaving himself open to attack. He wasn't scared of complete strangers, and yet something or someone had spooked him enough to have him hiding out like a fugitive.

He opened the screen door and passed through, holding it open for Liv. I followed her inside, and we moved into the kitchen, immersing ourselves in aged laminate, brown vinyl, and a feature wall of ugly seventies tiles.

It was dark and dank. Depressing.

Garrett sat on a wooden chair that had already been pulled out from the table and waited for us to join him.

Liv stowed her sword and took the chair opposite him.

I remained standing for now, leaning against the wall beside a retro refrigerator covered in magnets. “So, what’s going on?”

Rather than answer my question, he eyed up the rifle and the bloody strap slung over my shoulder. “How much ammo have you got?”

“Enough. Explain the town to me.”

“Why is it so clean?” Liv rested her elbow on the table. “And who’s doing the upkeep?”

Garrett gave her his full attention. “I am. We are.”

“We?” She looked my way, then returned her attention to him. “You said you were alone.”

“ Right now . I have people. I just can’t get to them.”

I pushed off the wall and grabbed the seat beside Liv. “Let’s take it back a few steps. Where do you live?”

He leaned his forearms on the table, clasping his hands in front of him. “A place up on the hill called Harmony Ridge.”



“Has it always been yours?” Liv asked.

He regarded her first, then me. “No. It belonged to my friends, Joe and Alicia Barker. One of those fancy off-grid places. Fully self-contained.”

My heart beat faster, and Liv slid her eyes in my direction. What were the chances of two houses matching that description in a beachside town? It had to be ours. “Why would you move in there when the streets are free of corpses?” I asked.

Garrett kept his hands clasped, steady and sure. Still no fidgeting or nervousness. “It hasn’t always been that way. We’ve invested a lot of time in cleaning up the town.”

“How many people live on the property?” Liv asked.

“All the survivors. Twenty-three of the immune moved in there when everything went to shit. It’s a community. Babies have been born there—two so far—and we fish, hunt, and grow everything we eat.”

Liv lifted her hip from the seat and snagged the article from her back pocket. “Is this the place?” she asked.

I watched him closely as she unfolded the pages and set them in front of him. Garrett scanned the pictures and frowned, making a surprised sound as he turned them over to examine the backs. “Where’d you get these?”

“An architectural magazine.” She relaxed in her chair and glanced my way. “We came here to find it. It’s taken us days to get here.”

He stared a little longer, then looked up and shook his head in disbelief. “This is it. This is our place.”

A smile hovered at her mouth, but she wouldn't let herself get too excited. Convincing him to make room for nine strangers wouldn't be easy—unless we earned our way in there.

“Where have you been housing everyone?” I asked. “The article says there are five bedrooms.”

“Tents at first, then we drove around collecting caravans. A builder in a neighbouring town used to make custom tiny houses, so we took a few of his unfinished projects and did the rest of the work ourselves.”

I lifted my brows. “Everyone has a home?”

A subtle look of pride filled his eyes. “They do, and there's still plenty of land left over to make room for more.”

“You talked about Joe and Alicia in the past tense,” Liv pointed out. “If they were immune, what happened to them?”

Garrett let a silent beat pass. “She died late last year, a couple of days after giving birth to her son. We don't have doctors or nurses on site, so no one knows why. Complications from labour, I suppose.” He released a gusty breath. “A month after that, Joe went out for a walk and never came back. Pretty sure he took a dive off the cliff.”

Liv closed her eyes as she absorbed the information.

“Sorry to hear that,” I said, “but why aren't you with your group now?” I didn't want to sound callous, but our people were waiting for us and we needed to move this along.

“A crew leaves the compound every morning to work on the town boundary,” he said. “We’re lining up cars end-to-end to keep the flesh-eaters out.”

“Why haven’t you blocked off the main roads into town yet?”

“We’re working up to it. Believe it or not, we rarely get live traffic through here, only the dead ones—and they don’t always follow the roads.”

“Why did you wait so long to secure the place?” Liv asked.

“We didn’t know what was going on in the rest of the country. Most of us thought this was going to pass, and that all we had to do was wait it out. We still don’t know shit about what’s going on anywhere else, so we started rebuilding about six months ago.”

I leaned back in my chair and examined his features. His speech and body language didn’t raise any concerns, but his story had nothing to do with his current position. There were too many missing details, and we’d agreed to be back at base in—I checked my watch—ten minutes. “You haven’t got to the most important part yet, and we’re running out of time. Who’s driving the car?”

He paused as a vehicle drove straight past the house, tearing down the street as if the driver was getting impatient. They couldn’t know our hiding place, but we’d left an apple lying in the middle of the road where fruit didn’t belong.

Liv turned in her seat to gaze in that direction. The wall blocked our view, so we waited. Seconds passed, and nothing happened.

“I don’t know a single thing about them,” Garrett continued. “A group of men—four of them.”

“Your numbers are far bigger than theirs,” I pointed out.

“Fat lot of good that does when they have guns, and we don’t. We were working on the boundary when they showed up this morning. Haven’t seen strangers the whole time, then two groups turn up on the same day.”

“How did they find you?” Liv asked. “You can’t see the row of cars on the way into town.”

“Pure luck on their part. They were circling and scoping out the outlying streets. We heard ’em, but they spotted us before we could make up our minds about hiding.” He cleared his throat and looked past me for a beat. “We’ve never had to figure out if people are safe until now.”

Liv pursed her lips and nodded. “So, they saw you, and then what?”

“Pulled their guns right off the bat. Guessing they’ve seen some things over the past couple of years, and they assume everyone’s a threat—or they’re just assholes who get off on intimidating people.”

“The latter,” I said. “We’ve seen some things, too, and good people are still good, even now.”

He gave me a vague look of appreciation before the seriousness crept in again. “They’ve got two guns between them. A handgun and a rifle. The one with the handgun asked questions about where we were staying, what kind of setup we had, and Dolan... he was shitting himself and started begging them not to hurt him, pleading and all. You know what the guy did to make him stop?”

Liv had been taking it all in with her usual watchful eye. “Killed him.”

Her opinion matched mine. These men were a different type of dangerous. To patrol your own territory and terrorise the people in it was one thing. To drive into an unfamiliar town with its own rules and procedures and bring violence was next-level—and there was only one way to deal with those people. No talking it through, no compromises. Kill on sight.

“Almost,” Garrett said. “Jammed the gun against his temple and threatened to fire. Looked like he planned on following through, so I hit him with a shovel, and the four of us scattered in different directions. We only made it out because we know every inch of the town. I haven’t seen the others since.”

Maybe Gabe and Jonah had run into one or more of them. “Do you know if the men have found your compound yet?”

“I can’t make it that far to check.” Garrett rubbed his hands down his face and sighed. “The road up the hill’s a kilometre long with no cover. I’d only lead them straight there—but if one of us doesn’t make it back in the next hour, our people are going to come looking for us, anyway.”

They wouldn’t have a clue what they were walking into, and we had no way of sending a warning or controlling the outcome. Either way, they were in danger.

Garrett nodded at my gun, his features rigid. “You know what you’re doing with that thing?”

I held his gaze. “I do.”

“You’re prepared to use it? On them?”

I nodded, positive this wasn’t just the right decision, but the only one given what we were up against. “They know you’ve got something worth protecting here, and they

won't stop until they find it. We need to finish this now before it gets out of hand."

Liv didn't look my way or show a shred of concern. She knew, too. If her experience with Dane had taught her anything, it was that dangerous people needed to be eliminated.

He exhaled loudly through his nose and looked from Liv to me. "Why would you do that for strangers? You hardly know anything about us."

"I know enough, and we're earning our way into your compound," I said, leaving no doubt about our motivations. "There are nine of us. If we do this for you, we're doing it with the understanding that we have a guaranteed place at Harmony Ridge—if we like what we see there."

"You've got it," he said without hesitation. "You have my word."

"All right. Let's go introduce you to the rest of our people."

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Liv

Our return to the house with an extra person resulted in an explosion of activity. As soon as Remy caught sight of Garrett, he jumped up from an armchair. “Where’d he come from?”

Tae rose from the couch at the same time. “What’s going on? Who’s this guy?”

“We’ll get to that in a second.” I looked around the room, and when I noted our missing people, my stomach dropped. “Gabe and Jonah aren’t back?”

“Not yet.” Ellie looked up from the middle seat on the couch where she sat with Willow.

“Give them time,” Ro said as she came in from the kitchen. “Still five minutes until the hour’s up.” She scanned the room, and upon spotting Garrett, her eyes narrowed and slid straight to me. Something in my expression must have put her at ease, though, because she visibly relaxed and returned her attention to our new friend. “Who’s the silver fox?”

He grunted and averted his gaze, clearly uninterested in her antics. Any other time, I might have found the situation amusing, but with a gang scouring the town, I was too concerned with the whereabouts of Gabe and Jonah.

Cruz raised his voice to get the attention of the room. “Listen up, everyone.” He waited a few seconds before launching into a recap of how we’d spent the last hour. “This is Garrett McKenzie, and he’s been... displaced from Harmony Ridge—the

property we came here to find.”

“Explain displaced,” Ro piped up. “Are you saying the house is no good now?”

“Going by what we’ve heard,” Cruz said, “the property’s exactly what we were hoping for.”

He described Garrett’s situation and what had led to him hiding out in town, going into detail about the gang and their arrival. Sparing no details, he made sure everyone knew about the guns and danger, and how much we had to lose. As the conversation went on, the mood in the room grew more intense, the urge to take action turning into a palpable thing.

“So, you want help to take care of the guys?” Remy asked.

Garrett gave him a curt nod. Seeing him stand in a room full of strangers and still appear confident told me a lot about his character. “And you want a safe home. Seems like we can all get something good out of a less than ideal situation.”

Willow sent me a wary look. “Does take care of mean...?”

I wished we didn’t have to expose her to this side of life. “Exactly what you think it means.”

“There are four of them,” Cruz said, forging ahead. “If they’re on the move, the chances of me hitting each target with a kill shot are low, which means we need people on the ground to run in and finish the job. If you think you’re up to it, volunteer. Otherwise, I’ll do this with Liv and Garrett.”

I loved that he automatically included me without questioning my ability to back him up—even if he was talking about a murder spree.



Remy and Tae were the first to put their hands up. As the others talked amongst themselves to decide who'd stay behind, Gabe and Jonah came in through the rear door right on time.

My stomach flipped, and elation rushed through me. Although I'd made no promises to Dawn to keep her son safe, the responsibility still weighed on me, and I couldn't have been happier to see his face.

When the two men sidled in right behind him, my relief disappeared in an instant, and I suddenly knew how the others had felt when we walked in with Garrett.

Another round of confusion followed, a mass of voices blending together and rising in volume—twelve people crammed into a room that could barely contain them.

When Garrett wrapped each of the men up in rough, manly hugs, I instantly knew two of the missing members from his crew had been found. Where the third one had disappeared to was anyone's guess.

"This is Dolan," he said, gesturing to a man in his forties with wild brown hair, hazel eyes, and an overgrown beard. His blue shirt had been ripped under one armpit and exposed the skin beneath. "And this is Freddy." He pointed at a tall, gangly man with curly red hair and pale skin scattered with freckles. To his friends, Garrett said, "These people are going to help solve our problem."

Cruz spent a minute introducing each member of our group to the new arrivals, and a burst of chatter followed that quickly grew out of control.

To avoid being distracted from our goal, I used a more commanding tone. "Okay, everyone, we need to focus. We've got limited time before the sun goes down, and we need to make use of every minute of daylight. Who wants in on the next step?"

The room quietened, and some people took seats on the couch while others leaned against the walls.

Ro looked at her nieces before addressing me. “I’m in, provided Ellie stays here with Willow.”

Ellie let out a gusty sigh that insinuated it was anything but fine. She was capable and fast, and a valued member of our group, but Willow needed a loved one here with her, and her big sister knew it. “Okay. I’ll hang around.”

“The three of us are on board, too,” Garrett said. “Obviously.”

Cruz looked around the room with an assessing gaze. “Not you.” He pointed at Dolan. “Nothing personal. This is going to get messy, and you’re better off waiting here. Not you either.” He gestured to Tae. “Your injury needs time to heal—and Gabe, we need you to stick around in case those pendejos accidentally find our base.”

Everyone accepted their roles, some reluctantly and others with relief.

Those of us who were heading out gathered around the dining table to run over our game plan, and as the intensity built, I tried to keep my nervous energy in check.

When Cruz and I were on the run in Melbourne, we were the prey strategising to out-manoeuvre the predators.

Now, we were in charge.

Our new targets had no clue of our existence or what they were up against, and Garrett’s knowledge of every street gave us the distinct advantage.

This was his town. His home.

And soon enough, it would be ours, too.

“That’s the place,” Garrett said, pointing toward the hill’s peak. Harmony Ridge sat right beside the cliff, just as Gabe had suspected. “If we get separated or anything happens to us, head up there and ask for Celia. She’ll take you in.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” I said.

We were standing in the front garden of a house on the same street where Garrett had hit Cruz with the apple—only closer to the eastern end this time. The seven of us had headed out with only our weapons to avoid being weighed down if we needed to run.

As the sea breeze whipped through my ponytail, I listened out for the car engine. The men had already made one pass, but we weren’t ready for them yet.

Cruz turned to address our newly assembled group, running through the plan one last time to ensure everyone had their tasks locked down.

It would kick off with us setting up in a residential street where the smaller houses were, our group split into two and hiding on both sides. As soon as the car entered the street, Garrett and Freddy would run out and wait for the gang to spot them, then head straight back for cover in opposite directions.

When the car stopped and the gang jumped out to hunt them down, it was game on.

“Remember to hit every one of them with lethal force,” Cruz said. “If you use your weapon, go in for the kill.” He scanned each face, his expression dead serious. “Even if you think you can do it now, that could change in the heat of the moment, so just hold them down until someone else can take over. We’re not letting any of them finish the day alive. Got it?”

To be having this conversation at all blew my mind.

We nodded our understanding, and a fluttering started in my stomach. As soon as the fight-or-flight instinct kicked in, I'd stand strong and see this through. I'd done it before, and I would again without hesitation. It was the aftermath that had me nervous, the realisation that once this was over, our new lives could begin.

It almost seemed unreal.

"You've got this under control," Cruz said, watching me intently.

I looked up at him, holding his gaze. "I'm not the same person I was when you met me."

"I know," he said, "but you were strong then, too. You always have been."

"Hear that?" Remy said at the sound of smashing glass. "Are they searching the houses now?"

They could have been doing that all along and this was just the first time we'd heard anything, but it propelled us into action. We took off at a steady pace, keeping our group tight as we headed for the street Garrett had suggested for the confrontation. The breathtaking sunset reminded me of how little time we had left.

Jonah's face set in a mask of determination as we walked. "We've gotta get to them before they can find our people," he said, his tone laced with steel. "With Ellie and Willow there..."

He didn't need to finish that thought. Ro retrieved a long-handled screwdriver from her belt and strode beside me, wired and ready. "If anyone's not sure about dropping these guys, leave 'em to me. I've got a shitload of suppressed perimenopausal rage

just looking for an outlet.”

“Sweet Jesus.” Garrett shot Freddy a look as we turned onto the chosen street.

“If this is you when it’s suppressed,” Remy said with a shudder. “I’m genuinely scared.”

Cruz stopped and pointed at a house with an open front yard and a couple of trees for cover. “This place looks good. Everyone but Remy and Jonah stays with me. The rest of you head over there and get ready.” He nodded at the house on the opposite side of the road, with a massive tree rising from a collection of head-height bushes. “Remember,” he said, “Don’t get caught up in their bullshit. We’re not talking this through. We’re not bargaining with them. You’ve got one job—and when they find out they’re outnumbered, they’ll throw us off course any way they can. Stay focused. Chase down anyone who runs.”

When the engine started up again and the sound came closer, my pulse hammered, and I grabbed Ro’s elbow. “Let’s get moving.”

Garrett and Freddy followed, while Remy and Jonah headed to the other house with Cruz.

We positioned ourselves in amongst the cover of the bushes and waited, pumped and alert.

When the car bypassed the end of the street and continued on its way, Cruz lifted his hand to signal holding our positions. They’d be back in minutes at most. Catching Garrett’s crew had become a game for them now, a way to pass the time in a town where no dead roamed and the people weren’t built for confrontation.

It gave me a morbid thrill knowing how much we were about to surprise them.

As the car swung around to do another loop, I braced myself. If they'd driven by on the last circuit, they'd come down our street for sure the next time around. "Get ready," I warned, hearing nothing but my controlled breaths and the incoming car.

My pulse fluttered in my throat, and I kept a tight grip on my sword.

My limbs were taut, my stomach clenched. Almost go-time.

A flash of blue in the distance had me tapping Garrett's shoulder. "Time to move."

Just as we'd discussed, he and Freddy ran out into the middle of the road and stopped dead like deer in the headlights. They paused for a second to ensure they were seen, then made a show of spotting the car and running in opposite directions back to safety. Although they wouldn't win any academy awards, it was enough to get the attention we wanted.

Freddy came our way again and Garrett joined Cruz on the other side. When I heard the gang's taunting words from their open windows, my heart wanted to burst through my ribcage. They were entertained by the chase, just as Jackson and his crew had been, but it wouldn't be long before we wiped any trace of humour from their faces.

"Here we go," Ro murmured. "Let's aerate these bastards."

Freddy ignored her and stared at the road, panting after his burst of activity.

As the vehicle picked up speed and closed in on our location, I forced my breathing to slow. The car screeched to a stop between both houses, and a burly man with a shotgun jumped out of the passenger seat, yelling at the others to follow.

The driver had possession of the handgun, and I'd keep that in mind when I rushed

someone.

All four of them exited the car in seconds and left it running, each of them in ratty clothes and various states of disarray.

None of them spotted us—their first mistake. The notion that they might face some kind of push back genuinely hadn't occurred to them.

“Hold on,” I whispered, ensuring we stayed out of danger.

With Jonah at his side and Remy behind him, Cruz lined the driver up and fired, dropping him with a single shot.

Conflicting emotions clashed inside me, but I ignored every one of them. The handgun clattered from his loosened grip, his body lying splayed across the road. Blood and gore covered one side of his head, and he remained still, his chest no longer rising and falling.

Stay focused. Don't feel bad. He would have done the same to you in a heartbeat.

The second they witnessed their friend smacking the bitumen, the other three reacted fast—but we did, too.

“Go!” I yelled, leading the charge.

Remy and Jonah took off like a shot from their side of the road, their focus on the two rear passengers, one with dark, scraggly hair, and the other a weedy blonde. Neither of the men attempted to rush for the unattended handgun or dive inside the car and drive to freedom. The idiots went straight back in the direction they came from, their steps frantic.

Only one left.

Ro stayed behind me as we ran into the middle of the road, with Freddy keeping pace. The man with the shotgun stopped short and surveyed the scene, his eyes wide. He hadn't planned for resistance and now had to decide whether to take us all on with one gun—if it contained any rounds—or flee the scene.

He went with the latter and turned, just as Freddy wrapped him up in a spear tackle and took him down.

He hit the ground harder than his friend. His head whacked the unforgiving surface, and I winced at the sound. The blow left him disoriented, his words slurred as he called out, "Brett! Cam!"

They wouldn't be coming to his rescue.

Ro and I stopped beside him, and I stood over his body with my sword in a two-handed grip.

As I raised my weapon to chest height and braced myself, Cruz pulled up short and snapped, "Stand back . "

As soon as we were out of the firing line, he shot the man straight through the temple, spraying the road with blood and brains. I flinched at the sight and wished I'd thought to look away before he pulled the trigger. Breathing hard, I averted my eyes seconds too late and swallowed the vomit that rushed up my throat.

"He had it coming," Ro said, her tone shaky. "I'll keep that in mind whenever I feel shitty about the things we need to do. He had it coming."

Cruz didn't wait around for a debriefing session. He didn't say a single word. Two



men were still on the run, and he sprinted in that direction to provide backup for Remy and Jonah.

As Garrett and Freddy collected the guns, I grabbed Ro's elbow. "Get in the car."

I checked the horizon as we hurried to their idling vehicle. We were losing daylight fast, and doing the rest in the dark ramped up the danger, but we'd set the plan in motion now and there was no turning back.

With that thought in mind, I dived in the car and shoved the gear shifter in drive.

Cruz

None of those assholes had fired off a shot. They could have stood their ground, threatened someone's life or taken a hostage, but they ran.

Their guns were useless.

If only we'd known that an hour ago, we could have ended this and been walking into the compound by now.

With my rifle gripped in one hand, I chased the remaining two men. I couldn't risk either of them catching a break and hiding somewhere before we got to them. If they did, we'd be doing foot patrols all fucking night.

Remy had a head start on the rest of us, with Jonah not too far behind him.

As the air puffed from me, I considered stopping and lining up a target to fire off a shot, but Remy kept moving in and out of my sight, and I couldn't risk it.

The car sped up behind me and my heart pounded as the roar of the engine closed in on my location. Resisting the urge to take a look, I kept my eyes in front. With all the men in the gang accounted for, it had to be one of our people.

Remy dragged the closest man to the ground and held him face down with his knee planted on the guy's back. A loud, pissed off exchange of words followed, and the man fought for his life.

Remy had weapons at his disposal and the skills to use them, but all he could do was hold his position and try to stop the guy from breaking free.

Seconds later, Jonah caught up to him, and the two of them restrained the man while his weasel friend left him for dead.

I spared the car a glance as it raced by, with Liv behind the wheel and Ro riding shotgun—a replay of their adventure in Darby Downs. Ro hooted as she hung her upper body out the window, clutching a baseball bat she must have found somewhere inside.

Liv floored it and headed straight for the last man standing. Thirty metres away at most. The moment she reached his location, she braked and performed a neat little half doughnut manoeuvre, while Ro smacked the man with a clunk powerful enough to knock him straight off his feet.

Confident they had the situation under control, I switched my attention to the closest man.

Jonah lifted his knife, ready to end him, but he didn't need to get blood on his hands when I already had plenty of it on mine.

“Move back,” I ordered, waiting for him and Remy to clear a safe distance.

The man switched gears and turned to babbling nonsense, raising his hands and promising to run and never come back, pleading with me to spare his life. When his eyes met mine, the fear in them might have swayed me if we hadn't been taught too many lessons by the people we'd encountered.

His crew spent the morning terrorising innocent lives. They would have killed Garrett and his men if they had the chance.

With that thought forefront of my mind, I clenched my jaw and aimed at his chest, blocking out every conflicting feeling.

When the echo of the gunshot faded, my limbs trembled with waning adrenaline. I straightened and wiped my forearm over my brow, gazing into the distance as my mind switched to Liv. I hadn't seen or heard from her since she drove past.

"We got the last one!" she yelled.

Fuck . It was over. Done. Everyone who mattered was safe.

The setting sun disappeared behind a cloud, and a breath jerked from me. Garrett and Freddy caught up with us and gazed down at one of the four men who'd lost their lives today.

Relief tinged the heavy atmosphere, and no one spoke at first. I could only imagine the thoughts going through their minds. Until today, they'd lived peaceful lives, and we'd obliterated that sense of security in minutes.

Freddy was the first to break the silence. "Is this how you've been living since everything stopped?" he asked. "Is this what it's like out there?"

"Not always—and not everywhere." Jonah slid his knife back in its sheath and looked from Freddy to Garrett.

"It's shocking, I know," I said. "And if there was any other way to deal with people like this, believe me, we'd never go down this path—but this is how we take care of our people now."

Blood had pooled under the man's torso, and a trickle made its way toward my boot. I slung the rifle strap over my shoulder and stepped away from the body.

Liv pulled over and jumped from the car, leaving the door hanging open as she rushed over to us.

At a glance, I knew she was the one who'd delivered the final blow. The lower half of her legs were splattered with red, and her expression mirrored the feelings I was still trying to process.

Guilt and relief. Disgust. Acceptance.

With panting breaths, she scanned every face, then her eyes locked on mine. "You're all okay."

I nodded and held her gaze.

Murder had never been on the cards for us today. We were supposed to show up in town, spend a day or two looking for what we now knew of as Harmony Ridge, then take our time acclimatising to our new surroundings—a bland series of events in a less than ordinary world.

Instead, we'd ended another day in the worst possible way.

I dragged in a long breath through my nose and blew it out again, telling myself the worst had passed now.

When she came over to me and slipped her arms around my waist, feeling her warmth pressed against me helped put it all into perspective.

Ro called out through the passenger window, "Nice work, hot assassin!"

She had a way of knowing when to lift the mood, and a reluctant smile tugged at my mouth. "The thoughts in your head don't always have to come out of your mouth," I

reminded her. “I don’t know if anyone’s ever told you that.”

She cackled. “And where would be the fun in that?”

Liv planted a kiss on my cheek, then whispered, “You did good,” before she pulled away to address the group. “Let’s clean up the streets so no one else has to see this. We’ll put him in the car with the guy Ro and I took down.”

She opened the boot while Freddy grabbed the man’s ankles. Remy moved into position at the other end, and Jonah helped lift the bulk into the car. When he was done, he grimaced and wiped his bloody hand on the man’s jeans.

I’d seen some messed up shit before the fall, but it floored me that we could casually tidy up multiple murder scenes like it was a routine part of our day.

“You want to head back to the house with the others?” I asked Jonah. “I’ll stick around with Liv and Garrett. Freddy, too. We’ll dump the bodies over the town boundary, near the spot they were working on this morning. Send Dolan over if you want, and we’ll take him home before we come back for you.”

“Will do. See you at the house.”

By the time we’d transferred the bodies to the open land outside the new boundary, we still hadn’t run into the missing man from Garrett’s group. I was optimistic about finding Eric, though. Straight after the cull, Liv had been focused on cleaning up after ourselves, but the gang wouldn’t have given a shit about leaving a body out in the open for others to find.

If they’d killed him, we would have come across him at some point.

“Why don’t we grab the rest of your people and head on up to the Ridge?” Garrett

suggested.

We skirted the last car in the unfinished line and headed through the long grass back to the road where we'd parked. With three working vehicles now, we had more than enough seats to transport our group and Garrett's, but I reconsidered the idea.

"Not tonight." I flicked a glance at Liv and hoped for her backing. "We'll come up in the morning after you've explained what's going on."

She didn't hesitate to jump on board. "Cruz is right. Your people are going to be even more worried about you after hearing the gunshots. Showing up with a bunch of strangers just before dark won't exactly put their minds at ease."

"You're sure?" Freddy asked as we stopped at the car.

Dolan appeared around the corner up ahead, slowing as he assessed the scene, then picking up pace.

"It's the best way to handle the situation." I opened the driver's door for Liv and gave Dolan a nod of acknowledgement as he joined us. "We'll drop you off at the gates and come back tomorrow at nine."

The guys climbed into the back while Liv drove. I sat beside her with the rifle across my lap, my muscles still taut, my mind alert. I wouldn't relax until we had all our people together again, safe and under one roof.

"So... you're a stunt driver now?" I asked Liv as the men discussed Eric and his potential whereabouts in the backseat. "Did your dad teach you that trick?"

"Ha. That was accidental. Pretty cool though, huh?" Our headlights cut through the growing darkness as she took one turn, and then another. "I don't know why I ever

wasted my time sitting in an office before the pandemic. I'm clearly made for this stuff."

"Clearly." With a laughing breath, I looked out the window. There were no moving shadows in Bridgehill, no death lurking.

The wind coming off the ocean blew stronger as we climbed the hill, and the temperature inside the car dropped along with it.

The conversation stopped as we turned onto the road running along the peak. After heading to the right for a couple of hundred metres, Liv swung onto the driveway that Garrett had pointed out from the base of the hill, the ocean views cloaked in darkness now.

As she pulled up in front of a set of imposing double gates, my stomach rolled with anticipation. We may have opted out of going inside tonight, but we were right here on the doorstep of our future.

"All set for tomorrow?" I asked as the headlights showcased the ornate metalwork on the gates.

"See you at nine," Garrett confirmed.

"We'll keep an eye out for Eric tonight," I said, "and if he doesn't show by morning, we'll kick off a search."

"I'm hoping he'll come back on his own now it's getting dark."

Garrett and Dolan thanked Liv for the lift, and Freddy reached through from the back to slap my shoulder. "Thanks," he said. "Can't tell you how much we appreciate what you did."



“No problem.”

As they made their way through the gates, Liv waited, giving them time to reach the house with the help of our headlights.

When we lost sight of them, she reversed out of the drive and headed back down the hill.

I looked across at her in the darkness, more thankful than ever to have her in my life. Whenever the two of us were together, we could take on any situation and come out the other side with a win.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” she asked with a smile in her voice.

“Just feeling lucky.”

“To be alive?”

A long breath eased from me, and all the stress of the past years disappeared. “To have you.”

My admission had a different impact than intended, and as we reached flat ground again, the atmosphere morphed into something sensual and dark.

Liv inhaled sharply and kept her eyes on the road as if everything was fine, but it wasn't. She shifted in her seat. Her fingers tightened around the wheel, then she swallowed as if trying to keep it together.

All the excitement and adrenaline from the day had somehow been channelled into sexual tension—and we were so tuned in to each other that we both knew what was going on here.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. “You?”

“Not right now.”

She turned her head and caught something in my eyes that caused a soft whimpering sound in her throat. The energy in the car all but crackled, and before we reached our street, Liv pulled over hard and shut off the engine.

Hunger thrummed in my veins.

Her eyes glittered in the dark.

A pressure-filled minute passed where my fingers flexed around the rifle and my heart thudded like I’d been on a run. With a hoarse groan, I dropped the gun into the footwell and slid my seat back as far as it would go.

“I need you on me,” I wrenched out, reaching for her and dragging her across the console.

She struggled into position in the confined space and settled on my lap, facing away from me.

We barely had any room, but I’d make it work.

“What are you going to do with me?” she asked.

“As much as I can in the time we have.” My hands slid from her thighs to her abdomen, sweeping under her shirt to close over her breasts. When I squeezed, her back bowed, and her sigh cranked my neediness up another notch.

She fumbled with her belt buckle and lifted her hips, shoving her jeans lower. I followed her lead, and desperation tore through me as I loosened my own pants. With the weight of her still on me, I pushed the material down my thighs and felt her bare skin slide against mine.

“ Querida.” I’d never needed someone this much.

The second we were both exposed, both ready, I guided myself inside her, and our combined sighs filled the car.

While the group waited on our return, we fogged the windows and swayed the car, making the most of our last chance to be together before our lives changed in the morning.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Liv

Rolling up to Harmony Ridge in the daylight was a surreal experience. As we approached the entrance, I wondered how it could feel like coming home when I'd never been inside before.

We were visitors here last night, dropping Garrett and his men off when the light was too low to see anything beyond the gate. Now, our convoy of cars had arrived, and we were ready to find our place here.

Ro sat beside me with Tae and the girls in the back.

Garrett stood at the open gates waving us through, a more relaxed version of the man we'd met yesterday. Ro blew him a kiss as we passed by, and he closed his eyes momentarily, as if gathering his patience.

"You're going to get on his last nerve about three minutes after we've moved in," I said.

She gave me a diabolical smile. "That's the plan."

"Do you think we'll be happy here?" Willow voiced the thoughts going through all our minds.

"Yes," Ellie answered, as if deciding it would make it true.

"Whoa, check out the houses." Tae clutched the front seats and leaned through from

his middle position in the back.

Four tiny homes were set up out the front in pairs, surrounded by raised vegetable gardens overflowing with produce.

My attention shifted to the dark-haired boy weeding the path leading to the homes. He looked to be about sixteen, and he stopped and straightened at the sound of our cars, his wary expression matching ours. No wave or smile, but three vehicles filled with strangers had just driven onto the property he called home, so I understood.

“That’s not even all of them,” I said. “Garrett told us there are more around the back. Caravans and cabins, too.”

Once we’d cleared the tiny houses, the main residence came into view. With controlled breaths, I worked on settling the emotion swirling around inside me.

The house I’d spent so much time thinking about looked a little weathered compared to the photos I’d been carrying with me, but to see it at all had a bolt of excitement shooting through me.

It existed.

It was never an unrealistic dream for us to travel all this way.

“This feels so weird.” Ellie unbuckled her seatbelt and met my eyes in the rearview. “I hope they’re nice people.”

“I bet they’re thinking the same thing about us.” I pulled up in front of the garage and cut the engine. “Just take your time and ease into it—and if you run into trouble with anyone, let me know.”

The other cars rolled to a stop alongside us and dust billowed around our group as we assembled near the garage.

“Doing okay?” Cruz asked as he joined me.

“All good,” I said, conscious of putting on a strong front for the others.

Garrett’s boots crunched on the gravel as he strode up the driveway. “Good news,” he said, with the hint of a smile.

Cruz lifted his brows. “What’s going on?”

“Eric made it back here before us last night. Kept everyone in the compound out of harm’s way.” He repositioned his baseball cap and glanced toward the sound of incoming voices. “He was getting ready to leave with another crew when he heard the gunshots. We got back just in time.”

“That’s great news.” Cruz smiled.

A crowd wandered around the side of the garage, and I almost took a step backwards. I’d never seen so many healthy humans in one place after the pandemic, and my pulse hammered as they approached. “How weird is it to see all these people?” I said, looking up at Cruz.

“It’s going to take some getting used to.”

Garrett introduced us to the residents, taking the time to explain each relationship and their connection to the town.

We met Jack and Angie, who were expecting their first child; an artist named Sally with wild blonde curls, and her partner, Celia, who’d been a therapist before the fall.

Eric stepped forward to offer his thanks and shake our hands. There were children and a few elderly folks. A plumber, an electrician, and a man named Robert, who used to run a thriving bakery with his husband before he died.

The young guy we'd seen when we drove through the gates was Jacob, a local football player who'd been the leading goalkicker in his league pre-Ultimus.

Then there was a gorgeous blonde woman named Lacey. She looked to be a couple of years younger than me and couldn't help giving Cruz a second and third glance. At one time, her attention would have triggered a burning need for me to make it clear he was taken, but I trusted him so much, I knew he'd do that all on his own.

Once the introductions were over and we'd reconnected with Dolan and Freddy, the social chatter kicked in.

"I'll come find you in a minute," Cruz said, kissing the top of my head.

I gave him a distracted smile as Celia headed in my direction. Small in stature, the wind ruffled her ginger bob, and she wore a floral dress that swirled around her ankles. No belt or weapons—just like most of the people here—and she had an air of warmth and softness about her that reminded me of a few others Garrett had introduced.

If those men had broken into the compound, they would have taken control in minutes.

"Hello," she said. "Garrett's just told you so many names. I wouldn't expect you to remember mine. I'm Celia."

"Yours is one of the few I do remember." I smiled and scanned the crowd to check on my people. "You're all so welcoming," I said, as I returned my attention to her. "He

must have spent a lot of time talking us up before we got here.”

“Nothing but good things to say.” She linked her arm through mine as if we’d been friends for years. Surprisingly, it didn’t feel awkward. “Come see behind the house. I think you’re going to love it here.”

As we strolled together, more footsteps fell in behind us. Cockatoos screeched from the top of a nearby tree, and the tang of salt clung to the air.

“I don’t know if you’re excited or scared about this,” she said, “but you’re safe here, and I’m grateful for what you’ve done to help us.”

The safe part might be true once we’d reinforced the boundaries and upped the security. As far as the other part went... “I’m excited. New people. A stable home. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted—for me and the rest of our group.”

We wandered around the rear of the house, and the entire back half of the property came into view.

My mouth fell open, and I slowed my steps. I threw a look over my shoulder to share the moment with Cruz, but he was still caught in conversation.

“Wow,” I said, admiring all the thought that had gone into the design.

“It took us a while to get to this point,” she said, “and it’s still a work in progress.”

Rows of caravans and cabins were set up on the right as if to create a buffer from the wind coming off the ocean, and extensive vegetable gardens much like Dawn’s ran straight down the middle—just as abundant and healthy as hers had been. My heart constricted as I took it all in, and a vague yearning came over me. She would have loved it here.



Jonah and Gabe stepped around us first, with Ellie and Willow following. Tae wasn't far behind, and he shot me a smile as he went by, his arm wrapped in the fresh bandage Ro had put on for him this morning.

Their hurried steps took them in different directions, eager to visit every corner of the property.

My eyes drifted to the orchard across the rear boundary, then the adjoining undercover seating area filled with picnic benches where people could gather to eat.

"This is amazing," I said to Celia as Cruz stopped beside me. "It almost doesn't feel real."

"I'll bet. Garrett said you knew about this place before you got here, that you came here specifically to find it?"

"We did." I thought about everything we'd been through, all the risks we'd faced in the hope we'd find this reward at the end. "In the back of my mind there was always the worry that it wouldn't be standing anymore, that we'd get here and have to start over. Again."

"You've been through a lot."

Tears pricked my eyes, and I swallowed to ease the tightness in my throat. Maybe it was her understanding tone or the relief of knowing we didn't have to run anymore. Maybe it was the sadness of accepting that Haruto and Dawn would never get to feel this kind of freedom and peace. Whatever the reason, I nodded. "We have. It's beautiful here."

Cruz slid his palm up my spine and rested his hand on my shoulder, a reminder of his presence even though I'd been aware of every movement since the first day I set eyes

on him.

“Go.” Celia patted my hand and unlinked her arm from mine. “Have a good look around. See what you think.”

She left me standing with Cruz, and the two of us faced the view. My muscles still ached from all the running and fighting of the past few days, but it was easy to push it aside when we were surrounded by order and serenity.

I smiled up at him. “She said see what you think, as if we might do a walk around and turn down the offer to stay here. I can’t see myself ever wanting to leave this.”

“Me either—but I don’t know where they’re planning on housing us.”

“I don’t care. I’ll happily live in a tent until we can get something more permanent happening.”

He smiled and ran his hand down my spine, stopping when he hit my belt. “Will you save room for me?”

We’d shared tighter spaces, and the memory of the last one we occupied came rushing back. “If we can fit together in a car seat so well, I think we can squeeze into a tent.”

With a low laugh that had the hairs on my arms rising, Cruz grabbed my chin and kissed me. “Better stop talking like that, carino , or I’ll have to drag you behind one of these cabins.”

I huffed out a breath and avoided his gaze so I wouldn’t be tempted to make him follow through on that promise.

He took my hand, and together we wandered along a path that took us toward the rear of the property, taking our time and immersing ourselves in our surroundings. The collection of kids' ride-on toys made me smile. There were washing lines between each residence, some with clothes spread out and flapping in the breeze. Work boots had been left at front doors, and push bikes lay on their sides. All signs of a life we used to know.

After leaving the protection of the cabins, the wind made its presence known, blowing the hair from my eyes and clearing my mind. As the tightness inside me loosened bit by bit, I pulled in a deep breath.

Jonah and the others were traipsing around like a bunch of overgrown kids, similar in age and already so close they were like family. In time, we'd feel the same about the people we'd met today, I was sure of it.

Cruz and I stopped at a gap in the tree line, and he laughed and pulled me closer. "Check this out."

My heart pumped harder as I faced the view with him. The ocean. Choppy waves and endless blue-green. Seagulls floating and squawking. Complete, utter beauty.

"I'll be able to see you in a wetsuit in no time," I said, trying to keep the mood light.

Jonah caught on to what we were looking at and let out a whoop, sending us a look filled with happiness.

Cool air swirled around me, flapping my shirt and chilling my bones. My throat ached, and tears I hadn't expected to cry brimmed in my eyes.

Cruz moved in behind me and wrapped his arms around my chest, resting his chin on the top of my head. "Are those happy tears or sad?"

“Happy.” I clutched his forearm with both hands. “I’m just scared I’m going to wake up alone in my apartment and find out everything was a dream—including meeting you.”

A silent moment passed where we stood together and stared out at the waves. Then he said so softly I could barely hear him, “You don’t need to worry anymore, querida . We’re here now. It’s real. This is the forever.”

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:52 am*

Eighteen months later

“Come with me.” I grabbed Liv’s hand and led her down the side of the house, taking her around the back so we’d have some privacy.

We’d just finished our shift in the new watchtower at the entrance to town, and with an hour to go until Willow’s sixteenth birthday party at the Ridge, I wanted to make use of every minute.

“What’s going on?” she asked, hurrying to match my pace. “We don’t have time for your shenanigans.”

“No back chatting, just follow me.”

Six weeks after we arrived at Bridgehill, Liv and I moved out of the compound. After being alone for so long, she’d found it tough to adjust to the noise and activity, so we chose a place just for us.

Within less than a week, the rest of our original group followed, and we now called three houses on the last street before the hill our homes; all in a row, with neat, well-maintained gardens and bikes at our front doors for getting around town. Still close, still a family, but without living under one another’s feet.

“Why the official voice?” she asked. “Am I under arrest?”

I gave the area a thorough scan to ensure we were alone. Just the usual table and chairs where we sometimes ate breakfast, patchy grass, and a tree with oranges

weighing down its branches. No corpses—we only had to worry about those when we left the town boundary.

“Not yet, but you look suspicious,” I said, guiding her toward the rear wall of the house. “I’m pretty sure you’re hiding something.”

“Me?” she asked with a confused look, then she caught on to my expression and gave me a slow smile. “Oh, well, it’s not the first time I’ve heard that.”

I eased her against the wall face first, and as I nudged her feet apart, she gasped in a way that made me desperate to get my hands on her. “Stay nice and still while I pat you down, and we won’t have any trouble.”

This would have broken every damn rule back in the day, but whenever one of us came up with a new game, the other jumped on board without hesitation.

“Yes, Detective Murphy.”

I almost broke character and groaned, but somehow maintained my composure. Her voice had taken on a husky edge, and she flattened her cheek against the wall in complete submission.

Mi amor. My sweetheart, my reason for breathing.

I ran my palms over her, from her hair to her back and around to her breasts. My hands slipped under her arms, then trailed down to her stomach and outer thighs. When I reached her inner thighs, her breath caught in her throat, but she held her position and remained compliant.

“Doesn’t look like you’re hiding anything, but—“

“What?” The word came out sounding like a sigh, and she closed her eyes as if

silently pleading for more.

“I’ll need to do a more thorough search.”

Before she could answer me, I dipped my hands under the back of her shirt and unfastened her bra, sliding my hands around to the front to cover her bare breasts. I drank in every sound, every subtle shift of her body, loving and learning more about her each day. Her nipples were tight and firm, her skin soft as silk. She let out a heavy breath and pushed back against my groin, rocking her hips.

“Did you find anything?” she asked softly. “Am I in trouble?”

“I’m not done.”

Her moan almost broke my self-control. I wanted to yank every piece of clothing off her and lay her down in the grass. Take my time with her and push her until I had her screaming and writhing under me—but we had somewhere to be, and I needed to move fast.

I lowered my hands to her belt, loosening the buckle and slipping it free. As I pushed her jeans and panties down, her breath hitched, and she toed off her boots to step out of her clothing.

“You think I’m concealing something?” She turned to face me, naked from the waist down, and her blue eyes filled with storms.

“Can’t say for sure unless I check.” I lowered my own pants and moved in against her, gripping her thighs to lift her against the wall.

She made an eager, animalistic sound and curved her hands over my shoulders to drag me closer.

Desperate to end the wait, I reached between our bodies and eased inside her, groaning as her warmth surrounded me.

Liv let out a guttural sigh and dragged my mouth to hers, giving me a deep, tongue-filled kiss. As the sound of male laughter drifted from inside the house next door, I kicked off a slow, steady rhythm, pulling back to watch her.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes blazing with desire. A soft sigh moved through her, and she gave herself over to me, just like all the other times.

“Te amo,” she said. “Eres el amor de mi vida.”

You’re the love of my life .

Hearing those words from a woman who meant everything to me had pleasure spreading through my body and my heart pumping harder.

She’d dedicated herself to learning Spanish since we’d settled here, and although she wouldn’t be fluent for a while yet, I loved that she never gave up.

Everything with Liv kept getting better.

Our connection, our life together.

“I love you, too,” I said, burying my face against her neck and losing myself in her.

“I can’t believe they did this for me.” Willow scanned the backyard at Harmony Ridge as our original group stood on the periphery of the action.

Kids were running around playing and adults were gathered in groups, enjoying the food and drinks. Someone had found balloons and decorated the veranda posts, and a table hosted a collection of wrapped presents surrounding a cake.



“Don’t look so surprised,” Liv said. “They love you. We all do.”

Willow had become the resident babysitter in town, and her experiences had led to an interest in becoming a teacher when she was older. She looked more like a young woman now than a child, and I still hadn’t wrapped my head around knowing someone long enough to witness that change. Everything seemed so temporary before I met Liv and the others. Now we had permanence. Routine.

“Go mingle,” Ro said, giving her a push, “and make sure you say thank you.”

Willow rolled her eyes and took her time wandering over to the main group.

The smell of barbecued meat and vegetables wafted toward us, and the early spring sun washed the scene in warmth.

Jacob caught sight of her from the other side of the yard, and his features lit up as he met her halfway. My eyes narrowed as I watched the exchange, but I couldn’t fault the guy. He’d been respectful, kind, and pretty much a textbook gentleman.

“Aw. Cute.” Liv rose on her toes to kiss my cheek. “I can’t decide if you look like a protective big brother or a disapproving father. Either way, I like it.”

I exhaled a laughing breath and drew a lungful of ocean air, telling myself it was all about progress. We’d spent too long trying to survive that it took a while to adjust to the concept of living.

“Come on.” Ellie grabbed Tae’s hand. “Let’s go join the party. See you over there,” she said to the rest of us.

Ro shot me a smile. “Why don’t you look after me the same way you take care of Willow?”

“Because people need protecting from you, and not the other way around?”

She threw back her head and laughed, still as much of a handful as she’d been on the day we met. “Wanna make out later?”

“No,” I said, as Liv choked on a laugh.

Her connection with Garrett—or G-Mack as she called him—had shown promise in the beginning, but fizzled to platonic a few weeks after we moved into Harmony Ridge. Ro was convinced he just needed more time to get used to the idea, but I wasn’t so sure about that. Whatever happened between them, she brought out a lighter side of Garrett that his friends claimed they hadn’t seen in years.

“Speaking of the grumpy silver fox,” she said, “I better go remind him of my presence.”

As she left in search of trouble, I wrapped my arm around Liv and pulled her against my side. She hugged my waist and addressed Jonah, Remy, and Gabe. “Are you guys getting something to eat? It smells good.”

Garrett had taken all three of them on as his fishing and hunting proteges, and they’d found their feet here in no time, making friends, discovering their purpose.

This was exactly what Dawn had wanted for Jonah, and I liked to think of her looking down on him, content that he’d spend the rest of his life surrounded by people who loved him.

“I’m gonna grab one of Celia’s fish burgers,” Remy said. “Those spices are...” He closed his eyes and made an exaggerated groaning sound.

“I’ll come, too. I’m starving.” Gabe accompanied him and left the three of us alone.

Liv watched the twins as they walked away. When her gaze shifted to Jonah, her expression turned bittersweet, and I figured her thoughts must have headed down the same track as mine.

Out of nowhere, she reached for him and made a little sobbing sound as she pulled him close. Her emotions were easily triggered these days, and it never took much to set her off.

He slipped his arms around her waist and threw me a surprised look, hugging her tight for a moment before he backed away. “What was that for?” he asked.

She clasped his face and planted a kiss on his cheek that turned his skin pink. “I’m just proud of you, that’s all. Your mum would have been so impressed with the man you’ve become.”

He swallowed and looked away while he composed himself.

My chest tightened as I watched the exchange, but when his eyes met hers again, the embarrassment had disappeared and an expression I knew all too well took its place. “Does that mean you’re finally ready to ditch this old man and choose me?”

I shook my head and bit back a smile as I tried to grab him. “No matter what Liv says about you, you’re still a little shit. Get out of here.”

Jonah sidestepped me with a grin and did a comical run to join the others.

When we were alone, my heart filled to capacity as I drank in Liv’s features. I swept some strands of hair away from her face and stroked her temple with my thumb. “Are you feeling all right?”

She nodded and blinked away the sheen of tears. “Just a few memories popping up. My hormones are all over the place.”

I pressed a kiss on her forehead. Her face had taken on a fuller, healthier look since we'd been eating better, and the sun had put lighter streaks in her hair. Seeing her happy was all I'd ever wanted, and it felt like the world's biggest achievement to have reached that goal.

She didn't push herself as hard these days and spent her working hours directing self-defence lessons for women, performing security checks, and tending the gardens at the Ridge. In her downtime, she read books on the beach while I surfed.

It was the best result we could have hoped for given how bleak our futures were when we met.

There were still times we had to fight corpses, but Liv had agreed to retire her sword in the short term and stay out of the action.

As her husband, I wanted to protect her. As a father-to-be, I was compelled to guard the life she carried within her.

In seven months or so, our baby would be born, and I hoped for a girl who turned out just like her mum—strong and resilient, soft and sweet, with a take-no-shit attitude that helped her navigate the changed world she'd inherited.

And I'd hold her hand through it, stick with her every step of the way, just like I intended to do with her mother.

THE END