



Chapter One

Life left behind clues.

Griff Callan's boots made a dull thudding sound on the cracked pavement. He gripped his carbine, eyeing the remnants of the abandoned town his squad had entered. The morning's thunderstorm had ended, and in places, dirt had turned to mud.

Ahead of him, a small, vibrant-green weed was sprouting through the cracks. New life fighting back through the destruction. It had been almost two years since the aliens had invaded and destroyed the Earth. The remaining human survivors were like that damn weed. Fighting back against the dinosaur-like Gizzida, struggling to stay alive, and never giving up.

He spotted a footprint in the mud, half filled with rain from the storm. He frowned. The footprint was fresh. Lifting his chin, he scanned the abandoned houses lining the street. A door hung off its hinges. Windows were smashed. A car sat in one driveway, rusted and missing parts.

Ahead, he saw some historic stone buildings—a couple of churches, an old pub. And in the distance, he saw the large, crumbling stone walls of the Old Berrima Gaol. His mission briefing said it had been built in the 1800s using convict labor, and over the years it had been a prisoner internment camp and a low-security corrections facility. Now, it was just a ruin.

This town, Berrima, south of the once-vibrant capital of the United Coalition, Sydney, had at one time been a bustling little community. Now it was dead.

The sight left a hollow echo in Griff's chest. *Life just loves messing with people. It teases you with the good, then snatches it away.*

He listened to his squad as they fanned out around him. The only sounds were the whistle of the breeze, and the men's deep, quiet murmurs. He heard Hemi Rahia snort at something his brother Tane—their squad leader—said. Both had Maori heritage, and it showed in their brown skin and features. Tane was tall and intense, while Hemi was shorter and stockier, and a lot louder than his brother.

Ash Connors and Levi King were walking ahead, trading jokes, even though the former bikers were alert and watchful. Beside Griff walked the final member of their squad, Dom Santora. As usual, the dark-haired man was silent. He wore the same high-tech armor they all did, holding a carbine with practiced ease, although the collection of knives Dom preferred were sheathed at his waist.

Squad Three had become Griff's friends and brothers. They were a wild crew. At their hidden base of survivors, they were known as the berserkers. They were men that Griff would never have crossed paths with, pre-invasion.

"Anyone see anything?" Tane's dreadlocks framed his tough face. When his dark eyes met Griff's, Griff lifted his chin.

"Saw a fresh footprint."

Tane nodded. "Saw some drag marks that looked fresh as well."

Griff had a talent for seeing the little details that other people might miss. In his previous life—not just before the alien apocalypse that had decimated the Earth, but before the huge

betrayal that had landed his ass in a supermax prison—he'd been a police detective. He'd loved it. All he'd ever wanted to be growing up was a cop. It was in his blood. He loved looking for the clues and picking things apart, then piecing the story together.

He stepped over some rubble and spotted another footprint. This one was smaller and narrower. Female.

Yeah, he felt an itch in his gut. People had been here. Recently.

He moved forward, his boot hitting a discarded tin can. It clattered across the ground, and he realized that it wasn't dented or rusted with time.

It set his instincts burning.

Although, instincts could lie, as well. He'd learned that the hard way.

Tane paused and looked back. "Griff? Your take?"

Griff scanned the empty street again. "People are using the town. They're here, somewhere."

But where were they now? And why were they hiding?

"You guys find anything yet?" A bold female voice came through their earpieces.

"Not yet, babe." Hemi grinned through his beard. "But as soon as we find something, you'll be the first to know."

"Well, get a wriggle on. I need a beer, and I can't leave the comms office until you guys get your booties back here."

Indy Bennett was Squad Three's comms officer. Mouthy, tattooed, and without a shy bone in her body. Griff had known her since she'd been a young girl, when she'd been his best friend's annoying little sister, then later, a gorgeous, tempting tease who set his blood alight. Fighting his desire for her had become a damn art form.

As he listened to her laugh at something Hemi said, Griff's blood began to burn. Indy Bennett made him want so many things.

Suddenly, Griff heard a noise. The thump of something hitting the ground and then rolling. He spun, staring down the sights of his carbine. His team all froze, whipping their carbines up as one.

Tane lifted his arm, giving a hand signal, and Griff nodded. He was closest. He moved down the narrow gap between two houses.

All he heard was the wind.

He glanced back and saw Dom moving in right behind him, as silent as a ghost. No one heard Santora coming, and he was as scary as hell in a fight. There were no sounds coming from the back of the house.

Turning the corner of the old, wooden house, Griff scanned the yard...and watched the raptor rise up from behind a hedge just meters away.

The reptilian humanoid was over six-and-a-half feet of densely packed muscle, covered by thick, gray-mottled, scaly skin. Its eyes glowed red and it opened its mouth, revealing sharp teeth.

The fucking alien was too close. Griff tried to get his carbine up, but the raptor let out a guttural growl. Behind him, Griff heard the shouts of his teammates.

He ignored them and focused on his enemy. He dropped his carbine and yanked his combat knife off his belt. He launched himself at the alien.

"Raptors," Dom barked over the comm line. "Griff has engaged."

"Acknowledged." Indy's voice held an edge.

The raptor grunted and Griff went in low, slashing out. His blade sliced into the alien's skin, just above the waistband of his thick trousers. Damn, the aliens had tough skin.

"More raptors incoming," Tane yelled. "Take 'em down."

The alien swung a giant, clawed fist, and Griff leaped back. As the raptor swung again, Griff ducked. Anger welled inside him, brewing like a thunderstorm.

Every time he fought, Griff felt it. Anger at what these aliens had done. Fury that they'd invaded the Earth. Rage that they'd killed billions of people, and were trying to take the planet for their own.

But it wasn't only that fueling his fury. No, it was the ugly, acid inside him that had been building for years. Borne of a betrayal that had destroyed his life and sent him to prison.

Griff brutally swiped out his knife. He caught the alien's gut and heard a grunt. *Yeah, take that, you bastard.*

Ducking and weaving, Griff kept up the fight. He fell into the red haze of his battle rage. He avoided the larger alien's fists and got more swipes in. Blood dripped down the raptor's scaly chest.

After a hard kick, the alien staggered back. Griff advanced and rammed his boot into the raptor's gut. The alien soldier fell, and Griff was on him in a flash. He swiped his blade across the alien's throat. He made a horrible gurgle. Then Griff jammed his knife into the raptor's chest, working hard to get the blade between his ribs. Then he stabbed him again and again.

"He's dead, *amico mio*."

Blinking, Griff looked up at Dom.

His friend watched him steadily with eyes so dark they looked black, and Griff heaved in air, slowly trying to regain some semblance of control.

“You okay?” Dom asked.

“Yeah.” Griff rose.

Hell, the ex-cop and the ex-Mafia enforcer. The apocalypse had sure forged some strange relationships. If anyone had told Griff that one day his best friend would be the deadliest enforcer for the worst Mafia crime family in Italy, Griff would never have believed them. Now, Dom was one of the few people Griff trusted at his back.

Although, not that long ago, if anyone told Griff that he’d also no longer be a cop and rot for several years in a supermax prison, he wouldn’t have believed that, either.

Suddenly, shouts echoed from a neighboring street.

Boom.

Frag grenade. He and Dom broke into a run.

“Motherfuckers are over here,” Hemi called out.

They turned a corner and saw the rest of the berserkers battling more raptors. Several alien bodies already littered the muddy ground.

“Bring it on.” Levi opened fire on a raptor.

Tane tore through two more raptors, fighting hard and dirty.

Ash fired his carbine with deadly precision.

Dom sprinted ahead, yanking out a knife. He tossed the blade and it arrowed through the air, cutting into the neck of a raptor.

Griff shifted, then felt something clamp around his ankle. For a second, he was back in prison, with some criminal asshole intent on taking the cop down.

With a roar, Griff kicked his boot. He looked down and saw one of the fallen raptors wasn’t quite dead.

He viciously kicked the alien, the ever-simmering fury breaking free. The raptor rolled away and stood. Griff charged the bastard. They collided, grunting and straining, shoving at each other as they crashed through a sagging fence and toward the front of one of the houses.

With a grunt, Griff stabbed at the alien. The raptor gripped his arm, claws digging into his skin. They careened through the front door.

Glass and wood crunched under their boots. Griff shoved the bastard, using all the increased strength that came from the slimline exo-skeleton built into his armor.

With a shocked cry, the raptor fell, slamming into the floor. Griff brought his boot down and stomped on the raptor's head. And then he stomped again. And again.

“Griff? Griff? Respond, damn you.”

Chest heaving, rage turning his vision red, Indy's voice was no more than a drone in his ear.

All of a sudden, he heard an ominous creak. The floor gave way, and he and the raptor fell into the house's basement.

Griff smacked onto the concrete floor. He groaned and coughed at the cloud of dust filling the air. He lifted his head and saw the raptor was dead. It'd been impaled on a broken post, which was now protruding through its torso.

Pulling himself back, Griff sucked in some deep breaths. He stood there, staring, battling back the mass of anger in his chest.

“Griff?” Indy's voice—one part panicked, three parts pissed—finally broke through the fog in his head. “Answer me!”

Hearing her voice was like a cool breeze washing through him. “I'm here.”

A frustrated expulsion of air. “I've been calling you for *ages*.”

Shit. He stared at the wall. Had he been standing here longer than he'd thought? Maybe. "I was busy fighting for my life."

"You could still answer my hails!"

"And get myself killed?"

"Like I care, anyway," she snapped. "Meet the others. The Hawk is on the way to pick you guys up."

Griff sucked in a steady breath. "Got it."

With a sniff, the line went silent.

Indy Bennett. The woman he wanted more than anything in his life. Griff rubbed his forehead. Hell, he was a glutton for punishment.

She made no effort to hide her annoyance with him. At one time, she'd been his best friend's little sister and completely off-limits. She'd made a pass at him once, and he'd shut her down. Harshly.

But everything was different now.

Not too long ago, he'd watched his former squad mate, Manu Rahia, with his woman, Kate. The tough pair had been through a hell of a fight with the aliens. They'd both barely survived with their lives. But Griff remembered the way the injured couple had clung to each other. He remembered every word Kate had whispered to the unconscious Manu. She'd told the man that he'd brought color back into her life.

Griff felt the same. Ever since he'd broken out of prison in the middle of the invasion, he felt like he'd been sleepwalking. Eat, sleep, fight. That was all he'd focused on. He'd been drowning in his own pain and anger.

Even as he'd fought alongside his fellow berserkers, he'd felt like he'd been doing it on autopilot.

But now, when he looked at Indy, he felt like he'd woken up.

He'd spent all his life denying how he felt about her. Now, he wanted her with a need that was terrifying.

Griff knew he had a far bigger fight on his hands than anything the Gizzida could throw at him, if he was going to somehow convince Indy to be his.

Indy Bennett threw her headset down on her desk.

She blew out a harsh breath. Her squad was on their way back. On-screen, she watched the Hawk quadcopter tracking back toward the Enclave. Soon, the berserkers would be touching down in the underground Hawk hangar. Safe and sound.

She pulled in a shuddering breath. When Griff hadn't answered her...

She didn't care. She tossed her long ponytail over her shoulder. Griffin Callan was a part of her past. Her brother's best friend. The man who'd broken her young heart without a single thought.

Now, he was just a member of the squad. That was *it*.

Indy still sometimes woke up in the dead of night, hearing his deep voice telling her that she was just like a little sister to him. That he didn't feel anything for her.

Fuck. That had been ten years ago. A lot had happened since then, so why the hell couldn't her brain let it go? He'd gone to jail, the Gizzida had descended, her brother and parents had been killed. A lot of shit had happened since that long-ago day.

Thinking of her parents and Gareth made her throat tight. She and her parents hadn't always seen eye to eye, but they'd loved her. In their own way. And Gareth had been the kind of fun big brother every girl wanted. He'd been a little reckless, always forgetting family dinners and birthdays, but a loveable rogue.

He and Griff had been total opposites, but the best of friends despite it. God, she missed her brother. The Gizzida had killed her family in the first wave of the invasion.

"Are you okay?" a quiet voice asked.

Indy turned her head and looked at Arden. The woman was Squad Nine's comms officer, and even though the two of them were like chalk and cheese, they'd become good friends.

"I'm okay," Indy said.

"The berserkers are on their way back?"

"Yeah. Touching down shortly."

For the longest time, Indy had watched Arden's sad eyes and quiet manner. The woman was an excellent comms officer, and did her job competently, but she always held herself apart. Even from her squad.

But recently, Indy had seen signs that the woman was slowly coming out of her grief. The poor thing had lost her husband and kids in the invasion. Indy rubbed the ache in her own heart, thinking of her own family. It was something that left deep scars.

Like a bloom, Arden was slowly flowering. Slowly. Maybe Indy had something to do with that. She bullied the woman relentlessly into hanging out at the rec room, or joining her for a meal, or the two of them sitting quietly scribbling in their sketchbooks.

Indy looked at the screen again, and felt another shot of the fear she'd felt when she'd thought Griff had been hurt. *Screw this*. As she always did, Indy was going to embrace life and have some damn fun. "I need a drink. And you're coming with me."

Arden's nose wrinkled.

Indy held up a hand. "I won't take no for an answer."

The other woman heaved out a sigh, but smiled briefly.

Soon, both of them strode into the rec room. At the self-service bar, Indy wasted no time lining up a couple of tequila shots.

Arden grimaced. "I don't really like tequila."

"You do today." Yeah, the elegant, composed Arden was more a crisp, white wine kind of lady.

Indy was not.

With a laugh, Indy clinked her shot glass against Arden's, then tossed the liquor back. She watched Arden down hers with another grimace and a shiver.

Taking pity on her friend, Indy poured her a glass of white wine. She grabbed herself a homebrewed beer.

"Gah, I hate this song." Sickly-sweet pop was not Indy's thing. One silver lining of the alien invasion was that there wasn't a new crowd of pop divas and boy bands to suffer through.

She headed for the comp that controlled the music, and dialed up something more her speed. The rock song made the speakers thump, the drumbeat pounding through the rec room. For a second, she was back in her old, pre-invasion job. She'd managed a trendy nightclub back in Phoenix. She'd been damn good at it, even if her parents had thought she'd been wasting her life.

Letting the music take over, she wiggled her hips, and Arden gave her a small smile.

“You just let loose, don’t you?”

“Yep.” Indy took a sip of her beer. “Life’s too short, Ard. It was before, and it especially is now.”

Arden’s smile faded. “Yes. Yes, it is.”

Damn, Indy hadn’t meant to remind the woman of her loss. “Come on, let’s play some pool.”

“Do we have to?”

They headed for the pool tables, and Indy had barely chalked her cue when a young guy appeared.

“I’d be up for a game,” he said, with a smile.

He was cute. Probably a few years younger than Indy, with thick, blond hair and a hard bod that said he worked out at the gym. Although he was no soldier, by the look of him.

Arden waved a hand in a “go ahead” gesture and sat on a nearby stool.

Indy cocked her hip at the man. “I’d be up for accepting your offer. How about we bet a month’s worth of clothing credits?”

Everyone in the Enclave was given a strict credit allowance at the clothing store. Indy was always desperate for more.

The man’s smile widened. “You’re on. I’m Mike, by the way.”

They weren’t far into the game when she heard the berserkers arrive. They were only silent when they had to sneak up on the Gizzida. She looked over, and when Hemi caught her gaze, she blew him a kiss.

The others were already at the bar, and she surreptitiously looked at Griff.

Damn him. Damn him for being so handsome and lickable. He might annoy her, but he sure floated her boat. He had ever since her hormones kicked in and she’d grown breasts. His hair

was an oak-brown color and was cut short, and his face was classically handsome. He had sexy gray eyes that could be serious one second, and teasing the next. He was all rock-hard muscle with honey skin.

He'd always been a little straight, a good guy, the one who followed the rules and did the right thing. He'd done well at school and been star quarterback of the football team. The perfect kind of guy to become a cop. She'd always enjoyed teasing him when they were kids, telling him to live a little. He'd give her a slow grin that used to light up her insides.

Now he rarely smiled. She realized she'd give anything to see that grin again.

Then she snorted, shutting the thought down. She looked up and saw her cute opponent grinning at her.

She shoved Griffin Callan out of her head. With a wide smile at Mike, she bent over the pool table to take her next shot.