

# CHAPTER 1

## *Be Flexible to Change*

**THE DAY OF THE APOCALYPSE** was a really bad day. It was the closest thing people in the twenty first century had ever known to real actual hardship. I know it was for me, Verdell Sonobe, born of the Eighties, recipient of absentee parenting but constant loving care from the TV, educated in the philosophy that if I wanted it then I probably deserved it—but with no power, rampant viruses and limited supplies, we were closer probably to the 1800s on a good day. I was a data coordinator for Mitchellwide Industries. It was an inconsequential job at a now inconsequential company. Regardless, it helped fulfill all I wanted in life, which was falling asleep to true crime shows. I was one of the few people achieving their dreams on a regular basis, but a bad shipment of infected black market organs from China spread quickly. Add to that an ill-timed major earthquake in central Los Angeles, which set off other earthquakes, which caused ruptures in several nuclear power plants across country. The world as we knew it was over, and I was left with a dead dream. Goodbye never-ending episodes of *CSI: SVU*.

The Incident was on a Wednesday. Just before the sirens rang, I sat in the break room with my friend and coworker, Tatiana, a list of pros and cons in front of me, my boyfriend, Bruce's, name headlining it.

"So that's where we're at," I said. My annoyance level at him rose just thinking about it.

She frowned at the list. "He has a steady job and a car," she said, pointing at one of the items. "You can't value that too much in a recession."

I made the same face. "True," I said. "But he's a little too proud of his community theater. Too many fans over the age of sixty-five."

Tatiana nodded. "What have been your rules for breaking up with other boyfriends?" she asked. "Assuming of course you've had them and you haven't settled just for this one."

"Come on," I said defensively. "Give me a little bit of credit. I've had lots of boyfriends. Ask around."

She folded her arms. "So what you're saying is, your heart is not open for business."

"Not true." I looked up at the ceiling and sighed at the flux of emotional failure. "Jake had a nervous breakdown and cried non-stop, then left town in the middle of the night. Michael had more video games and toys than a Japanese teenager, and Randy just wasn't going anywhere."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Like he wasn't serious about you?"

"He was a supervisor at Wal-Mart."

She raised an eyebrow. "Just a guy working an honest wage? You sound hard to please."

"Lived with his parents."

She nodded slightly with her head tilted. "Okay," she said slowly. "He's loyal. What price could you put on that?"

"Used the letter z for pluralizing words in texts."

"Yikes."

I nodded. "Tell me about it."

"Hey babe!" Bruce wandered in and grabbed a can of soda sitting in front of me, one I had just opened. He tilted his head back and drank deeply from it.

I squinted and tried to assess his attractiveness again. I studied his stocky frame, dark hair and round face. He sort of reminded me of a clean-cut hobbit in Gap chinos, trying to test the waters of any infatuation that might be there. I tried to imagine him petting a puppy to enhance his appeal, then immediately felt bad for the puppy.

"Hey." He smacked his lips. "Ready to have lunch? You wouldn't believe the traffic on the freeway."

He noticed the piece of paper we'd been huddled over.

"What's that?" he asked and pointed to it. "Is that my name?"

I quickly crumpled it. "We're writing a novel."

"You should write a play," he said. "And then write a part for me."

Warning sirens suddenly blared and a fire alarm went off in our building, which was then quickly silenced followed by a moment of no power. We waited powerless in the darkness when the high-pitched echoes came back on again. People in the hall stopped for a moment and then went about their business as if it were just another day. I, on the other hand, sat up, rigid in my chair, a sense of panic exploding in my every fiber.

"What's that?" I asked, breathing hard. I rose to my feet and looked in every direction.

Tatiana shrugged. "Who knows anymore?" She pulled out a gas mask from her purse and held it up. "Maybe we should have been wearing these like we were supposed to." She shifted moods and smiled brightly at me. "Want to come to karaoke night tomorrow? It's totally going to be stupid, but at least we can vent all this frustration."

I was tense and gripped the table. "Do we have any other safety protection?"

Bruce, on the other hand, grabbed Tatiana's Cheetos and shook his head, shoving his hand deep into the bag. "You can't go tomorrow," he said. "It's opening night of my play. But thanks for lunch."

I looked at Tatiana, momentarily calming down. "Is that a pro or a con?" I asked.

"Verdell," she said slowly, eyeing her Cheetos. "I think you know where that goes."

Bruce looked out one of the windows and continued to munch. "Maybe I should head back. Traffic looks backed up."

When I look back on everything that happened, perhaps I could have been more empathetic in the aftermath, but there's no telling if empathy could have been my cause of death. Maybe had I had gone out to find my family, I would have ended up in some ditch with others with likeminded goals. I cowered inside, watching and hearing the riots outside. The thought of going out in it made me fearful of my inability to fight back or outrun anyone.

I watched my coworkers' faces as they registered the fact that a real emergency was happening. Their gazes slowly traveled up in the direction of the sound of the alarms as though the world were traveling in slow motion. I felt my phone go off and checked what was incoming. My parents were calling, my roommate was calling, and my cable company was calling, presumably because I hadn't paid my bill in two months. Instead of picking one or the other to talk to, I pulled out my gas mask issued when the first virus outbreak came out. It seemed a little thin and flimsy as I stared at it in the fluorescent lighting, so I threw it into the trash and then crawled under my desk, and hoped everything would just work itself out.

In some respect, it did. Those of us who survived were locked in the building, effectively cut off from the rest of the world. In the days that followed, we made unfruitful searches on the news, which then turned into rumors that I suspected people were just making up.

"I heard," my direct supervisor said on the second day into our forced stay at the office. "That pet shelters were selling hospitals infected organs. And that's what happened."

I shook my head. "Maybe you should check your sources on that," I said. "Remember when that got disproven six months ago?"

She thought about it. "Was that where I heard it?"

"That's where everyone heard it."

The lack of constant information is hard, especially when you come from a time when it was so easy to get. No media, no Internet,

nothing. I even lost all my high scores on Tetris on my phone. Welcome back to the Stone Ages.

We were told by the suits upstairs that this office building was our new home until further notice and that we should continue to work despite the circumstances. I thought about those times I called in sick to binge watch *Third Rock from the Sun* when I could have been doing something useful or how I could have owned a dog or talked to my family more. I checked what traffic was like on Google Maps, forgetting there was no Internet, so I would look outside where our offices overlooked the freeway. The cars there hadn't moved for days and didn't look as if there was any chance of that changing.

There was no actual work to be done. We sat quietly at our cubicles, staring at clocks as if we waited this thing out so we could get back to doing what we truly loved—entering numbers in Excel spreadsheets. I, on the other hand, felt the heaviness of what was going on in the world, so I took some sheets of printer paper and started a letter to my family. It was harder than I thought. I threw it away and then started a break up letter to Bruce. I wrote and rewrote that a number of times, but could never quite get the right tone or theme for it. I wished for access to the Internet just to have examples, but now I had to face the question of, how does one write a breakup letter?

On one extremely quiet afternoon, Tatiana aimlessly wandered around the cubicles. I saw her head weave in and out, in and out, until she eventually made it to my desk. She paused and looked down at me and put a finger to her lips, then dropped a folded note onto my desk. Before I could look at it, she kept walking.

I unfolded it quickly.

*My side of the floor hates your side of the floor. They feel you're harboring access to the vending machine. An attack is coming.*

Below that, she had written a list of pros and cons.