



TEN SIMPLE TIPS
FOR SURVIVING
THE APOCALYPSE



CARL Z

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

TEN SIMPLE TIPS FOR SURVIVING THE APOCALYPSE

By Cari Z

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

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The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

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Photo Description

A person stares out at you, someone clearly no longer human. His hair is white, his skin is dusky purple, and his eyes are the color of honey. He's scarred, a cut spanning his face from cheek to cheek, and he's looking at you like you might be lunch.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Those of us who survived the virus that wiped out 50% of the population are the lucky ones. Those of us who survived the subsequent wars that decimated the world as we know it, throwing us back into a pre-industrial era are the lucky ones. Those of us who survived are the lucky ones.

Except... Some of us are different. Some of us are changing. Some say the virus mutated. Some say it is a result of genetic warfare. All I know is that I can see better in the dark, I can hear from further away and I am stronger now than I ever have been before. And I have claws.

We may not be the lucky ones after all.

Sincerely,

Jenni Lea

Story Info

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Content Warnings: graphic violence

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(In which I blatantly abuse biology, geography, and Shakespeare. You have been warned.)

Chapter One

Lie, Lie, Lie!

Okay, let's start with a basic premise: you, whoever you are and whatever your circumstances, want to live. We have to agree on this before you read any further.

Why bother laying that out? Isn't it obvious, you might think, that people want to keep on living? Haha, oh, keep sipping on that sweet nectar of delusion. Or rather, don't. Because it's not going to save you.

But wait, isn't this chapter all about lying, you ask me? Well, yeah, it is, and I'll get into that in a second. However, my tips won't work if you're lying to yourself about *this*. Even worse, my tips won't help the people who are *stuck* with your deluded ass if you're harboring suicidal tendencies, because I've been on the receiving end of that, and it sucks. Okay? It really, really sucks. If you're feeling blue, or perhaps purple depending on whether or not you've caught the Plague, and that's getting you so down that you can't live with it, then stop. Put this down. You might as well already be dead. Because my advice won't work for you, and in fact, it may backfire at the most wildly inappropriate time and end up taking all of your friends (if you have any left) with you.

I'm sorry, I really am. I know how much everything is awful. I wish it wasn't. I wish it were sunshine and daisies, or fuck it, at least as familiarly screwed up as everything was before P-Day, but it isn't. And that's where delusion will trip you up.

Now that that's out of the way, let's move on to my actual tips for surviving this clusterfuck with a minimum of damage.

Apocalypse survival tip number one: lie, lie, lie. Lie your *ass* off. Lie about everything, lie to yourself, and lie to the people around you. The truth will not set you free during the apocalypse, folks. The truth's just going to turn you into a victim. You want to make it to your grandfather's cabin in the Cochetopa Hills alive, the last thing you do is tell people that's where you're heading. Lie about being friends. Lie about being enemies. The only person who needs to know the truth is you, and even that's negotiable.

Think I'm making this shit up? On the contrary, *mi amigo*, I walk the walk and talk the talk. I am a *fantastic* liar.

It's an odd skillset to be proud of, I know. Why would lying ever be described as fantastic? Neither my Catholic mother nor my Jewish father would have been pleased to hear me talk about lying that way. Lying was for people who were trying to cover their tracks, who wanted to avoid taking responsibility for their own actions. Lying was for the morally corrupt, completely debasing to the mind and spirit.

Never mind that lying had helped me get a date to prom (hey, she didn't *know* my family didn't own a limo until the day of, and by then she didn't care because I could make her laugh), helped me hide my rather flexible sexuality until I'd moved safely away from my family (you say it's better to come out, I say you haven't met my mother), and let me land the job of my dreams (sure, I can program in LabView, why?). I've always been a fan of the lesser sins, personally. Some of the major ones too, but the ability to spin a little white lie into something that opens doors for me: I'm an expert at that. I'm convinced that's why I'm still alive right now. I know how to lie to myself.

Obviously it can be taken too far. Like, for instance, lying to myself about whether or not I actually saw something moving in the bushes over there. My basic assumption has always been, and will always be: yes, I sure as hell *did* see something moving over there, and it's probably going to try to kill me, so let's shift my ass somewhere safer right goddamn *now*. That assumption, that little bit of paranoia, has probably saved me half a dozen times since being on my own. Not that I know for sure because I never stuck around to find out, but that's all in the past now. Now I lie to myself about other things.

Mostly I lie to myself about the fact that the guy I'm traveling with right now is a good person. I'm pretty sure he's not, honestly, but he hasn't hurt me and I don't think that's his game plan. Is he a badass who could probably kill me with his pinkie finger and a roll of dental floss? Well, yeah. I came upon him in the middle of a mountain road just outside of Yucca Valley, with a pistol in one hand and a machete in the other, surrounded by five still-bleeding bodies. *Five*. All normal humans, from what I could see of them, and all better armed than this guy. He was wearing a dirty black three-piece suit, sunglasses, and a very disappointed expression.

This was one of those times that my *see danger, shift ass* instinct kicked in hardcore. Unfortunately, I was going downhill on a mountain road riding a pink Huffy bicycle that was way too heavy to just turn around and pedal out of sight, not to mention I had a little trailer full of stuff attached to the back that slowed down my reactions.

I was staring right at him the moment he lifted his head and saw me. That was when I abandoned any dignity or illusions of badassitude, jumped off my still-rolling bike and booked it for the tree line. I was wearing my pack, so at least the most important stuff was with me. I could just run; I could find a new route and get a new bike and everything would be okay as long as I—

That was when I fell over a stealth tree root and flat onto my face. This little stretch of forest didn't have leaves, it had *pine needles*, and I felt every single one of them as I tumbled another ten feet down the unfortunately steep slope. There weren't a lot of rocks, but the ones that were there said hello to my shoulders, knees, and head until I finally managed to stop my fall.

I rolled onto my back and stared dazedly up at the sky, the faint patches of blue just visible beyond thin brown clouds. I wondered if I'd ever see actual white clouds again, or if all the bombs that had gone off had changed their color forever. Maybe once I got further from L.A. it would clear up some. That would be nice. Some fluffy, white...

A man's blurry face intruded on my view. Sunglasses rose for a moment, and I could just make out the blue of his irises before the glasses were replaced. "Hey there."

"Fuck," I moaned, because that seemed to sum it all up rather cohesively.

"Yeah, you don't look at all comfortable."

"No, not... *me*," I muttered, because he was right, I wasn't comfortable, but that wasn't why I was pissed. "*You*... fuck. You being here. Fuck. My head hurts."

"You might have a little concussion. It's probably best for you to stay pretty still right now."

"Yeah?" I rolled to the side a bit, pulled Gina's Beretta out from my waistband and raised it in my surprised attacker's direction. "It's probably best for *you* to leave me the fuck alone." The fact that I was almost whispering the words definitely didn't help make my case, but my hand was steady. Mostly.

The guy held up his hands, now empty of weapons, and backed off a few feet. "Sure, no problem. I don't want to cause any trouble, okay? I just came down here to ask you a few questions, nothing else."

"I don't believe you."

"Why would I lie?" He sounded genuinely curious. "If I wanted your gear I could have just shot you in the head while you were taking your dirt nap and pulled it off your corpse."

Given that there were five dead guys back up on the road who could attest to this man's abilities, I had to hand him that one. "Fine," I said, forcing myself up into a sitting position. It made my head feel a little like it was filled with water, swooshing perilously inside my skull, but at least my vision was clearing. "What's your question?"

"It's very simple. I just want to know if you've seen anyone else in this vicinity apart from us? Say, within twenty miles of here? Preferably someone well-armed?"

What kind of person went *looking* for armed groups of marauding assholes in this brave new world? This guy was crazy. "Nope." And that was completely true because I'd been practicing my excellent *hear noise, move ass* strategy since the end of Phase One of my most horrific adventures. "No one."

"Shit." That was definitely disappointment in his voice. "The last thing I want to do is draw this out. But actually, maybe you..." He looked me over, and I looked right back. Despite the dirt, he was a good-looking guy. Taller than me, clearly ripped under his suit, tanned skin, and dark-blond hair cut high and tight. If I'd met him a year ago I'd have been begging to crawl into his lap, not holding a gun on him. "No, you're not going to do it for me."

Well, *that* was rude. I didn't even know what he wanted, so how could he know whether or not I could do it? "Do what?" I persisted.

"Nothing, don't worry about it. It'll take care of itself eventually, I'm sure. You're traveling alone?"

"Obviously." Because there was being polite and then there was playing dumb, and I wasn't going to bother playing dumb with somebody who looked like as much of a shark as this guy.

"Where'd you come from?"

"Los Angeles."

His eyebrows rose. "That's over a hundred miles from here. You made it this far on your own?"

"Sure did." Actually I hadn't, but he didn't need to know about the utter failure of Phase One. Lie, lie, lie.

"Then you're a lot more resourceful than you look." He ran his empty hand over his short hair and took a deep breath. "Okay, this is going to sound weird, but hear me out. I'm... newly independent, and I think I could use a companion

on the road. As you see,” he waved back up the hill toward the road where he’d left his dead, “I’m pretty handy in a tight spot.”

“So you want to travel with me?” I wasn’t sure I was hearing this right. Maybe the concussion had affected my hearing. “Because... why, exactly? And don’t say it’s out of the goodness of your heart.”

“Oh no,” he said with a dark smile. “It’s not for your sake, it’s for mine. I’m a mission-oriented person, and I don’t do well on my own.”

It didn’t look like he did well in groups either, honestly. “You don’t even know where I’m going.”

“I don’t care.” He sounded totally serious about that, too.

“You don’t even know my name.”

“Let’s fix that.” He shuffled over to me on his knees, nice and slow, and held out his hand. “I’m Conrad. And you are?”

“Call me Javi,” I said, shaking gingerly with the hand not holding the gun. No last names were fine with me; no last names were always fine with me; to be honest, mine had brought me a lot of grief over the years. “And look, I’m sorry, but I just don’t think traveling together is a good idea. I mean, you seem mostly sane despite all those dead dudes, but how do I know you won’t shoot me in the back, take my stuff, and rape my corpse five miles down the road when, I don’t know, your mood changes or something?”

“You don’t,” Conrad said with a shrug. Not even a lie, I could tell. I almost admired his honesty, except for how it made my skin crawl. “But most of the open land between here and Arizona has been claimed and patrolled for the past three months. You can bet that these sorts of encounters,” he gestured around himself, “are only going to happen more frequently. And you, Javi, don’t look like the sort of guy who deals well with this kind of violence.”

That was, unfortunately, true. That was another thing I’d been lying to myself about: that I could handle defending myself now that Gina was gone, that taking potshots at rabbits really was good training for shooting human or mutant stalkers in the head. Those lies were harder to swallow than most of the other ones I’d been feeding myself, though. “I’m not so bad. I mean, it’s not like I’m swooning at the sight of gore,” I pointed out, and Conrad nodded. “And I’m holding a gun on *you* pretty easily.”

“True,” he agreed. “Of course, if you’re coming out of L.A. I assume you’re just inured to the sight of death at this point, even if you’re not used to causing

it.” Yeah, that was probably right. “Also, and I’m reluctant to tell you this, but hey, take it as a goodwill gesture: your safety is still on.”

“My what?” I glanced at the gun and resisted the sudden urge to facepalm. Yep. Safety on. Fuck, how many times had Gina told me to remember the safety? Of course, she was usually telling us to remember to put the safety back *on* because she didn’t want me or Phin shooting ourselves in the ass, but still. I should have remembered.

“And yet, I didn’t take advantage of that fact, did I?” Conrad smiled winningly, and his teeth were just as brightly white as I’d expected them to be. “Look, how about we just give it a try. There will be no raping and no torturing you, I swear. I’ll even pedal your ridiculous bike and let you sit in the basket on the handlebars, or back in your trailer, until we pick one up for me.”

“There’s something very wrong with you,” I told him.

“True. But my offer to help you is genuine.”

It actually seemed like it was, as crazy as this guy sounded. I also knew that I was probably just as bad at being alone as he claimed to be. First Phin, then Gina... if I was just a little more honest, I’d probably have shot myself in the head already because there was still so far to go, and so many things that could go wrong. Including this, but fuck it. I needed the muscle and he needed a mission. “Fine. We’ll go on together for a while and see if we can stand each other.”

“Great.” Conrad stood up, then offered me a hand. I let him pull me carefully to my feet. “Let’s head back up, and as soon as I get whatever’s useful off of those guys, we can leave.” He then helped me up the hill, pushed my canteen at me and encouraged me to have a few sips, then looted the corpses while I watched.

How did I go from being a mild-mannered geek to standing by and watching this kind of fuckery with detached aplomb? If you’re reading this, you know how. We adapt to survive. Whether we catch *Porphuraviridae* or not, we all adapt to survive. I’m not proud of myself, but I am still alive, which is way more important to me.

That was one week and seventy-five painstaking, blood-soaked miles ago. Conrad and I were rather more casual with each other at this point—a side effect of watching him kill two guys who had wasted good booze making

Molotov cocktails to throw at us—and way more blatant about being a pair of lying liars. We even played the one truth, two lies game on a regular basis. It was a decent way to pass the time when I didn't feel like reading.

"I was the class valedictorian. When I was five I had a pet bunny named Bunnacula. Before the apocalypse began, I'd never shot a gun before."

"I'm so tempted to say it's the last one," Conrad said from where he was cleaning his Glock, "given how bad you still are at shooting things. But you actually had a bunny named Bunnacula, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did." But I thought the first one had been really convincing too; I mean, I'd been salutatorian—it was close enough. "What gave me away? Some twitch? A hesitation in my breathing?"

"Your heartbeat," he said, and oh, that was just cheating.

"No using viral mutations to break the rules, you jackass."

"It's not like I can turn them off," he replied with a shrug. "You just need to get better at the art of diplomacy."

I snorted. "Lying is diplomatic?"

"Oh, hell yes. I did it every day in my job."

"Which was... what exactly?" Because a week was a week, but there was still a lot of personal ground we hadn't gone over with each other.

"My turn, then?" He continued before I could reply. "I was the baby of the family. I did one tour each in Afghanistan and Iraq. I was married once, and it was a complete disaster."

"Ooh, tough." And he delivered them all like he was reading them off a teleprompter, with reporter-type inflection. Conrad had done some major public speaking at some point. "I know you were in the service, but I'm betting you did more than two tours because you're way too in love with guns to give up using them on a regular basis. I can totally see you being married and it being a disaster, but I'm not so sure you'd leave her—him—whoever it was even if it sucked. You seem to have a thing for suffering."

"As evidenced by my sticking it out with you," he agreed.

"Asshole. So, I'm thinking... you're the baby of the family."

He gave me a little smile and nodded. The virus's telltale purple color had started to permeate his skin's thinner membranes, tinting his lips and making it

look like he had two black eyes. Well, from what I could see of his eyes beneath the sunglasses he persisted in wearing, even though I knew they were the color of honey now. “Youngest by twelve years.”

“A surprise baby.”

“Surprise hell, my father negotiated hard for me. I cost him a private jet and a month-long vacation in Mallorca for my mother.”

“I can see the silver spoon shining out of your ass from here.”

Conrad clucked his tongue disparagingly. “Spoken like a true plebeian, Javi.”

“Augh, the silvery glare!” I shielded my eyes. “It grows stronger when you haul out ten-cent words that you think will impress me, stop it! Clench your cheeks, I beg of you.”

“This from the man who uses Shakespeare like it’s colloquial.”

“Shakespeare *is* colloquial,” I argued, reaching in my pack for my favorite book. “Look, I can prove it to you—”

“No!” He held up a hand. “No, not tonight, it’s too late, and it’s getting dark, no. Nope. Thanks but no thanks.”

“Philistine. You know that one, right?”

“Oh shut up, Javi.” And I did, for the time it took for the sun to set and the night to start to get cold. Then Conrad put down his gun, and I put aside my book, and we settled onto our sides on a gray tarp covered by my grandmother’s hand-knitted woolen throw. Conrad pulled me into the little-spoon position, and I went, gratefully, because one of the best things about having a travel buddy was nighttime snuggling. *Goddamn*, it could get cold out here at night even though it was July, and Conrad put out enough heat to make a dragon want to retire, no joke.

We lay quiet for a while, but I was too antsy to fall asleep immediately, even though I was tired. “I have a twin brother,” I murmured into the darkness. “I miss my parents. My favorite dessert is coconut flan.”

“Hmm, it’s trickier when you’re sleepy,” Conrad mused. “You don’t miss your parents, though.”

“No.”

“You... no one can like coconut enough for it to be a favorite, can they? Because that’s just weird.”

I smiled. “It actually is my favorite dessert.” Rich and creamy and delicious, what wasn’t to love about it?

“Your heartbeat didn’t change at all when you talked about a brother.”

I didn’t have to explain, that wasn’t part of the game. I decided to anyway. “I had a brother. I don’t anymore—he died when we were two. Accidentally drowned in a swimming pool.”

“I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “I barely remember him.” I stared out into the darkness waiting for Conrad to say something, to continue the game.

I fell asleep to the sound of his silence.

Chapter Two

The Three Fs: Family, Friends, And Frenemies

Okay, on to apocalypse survival tip number two: Count on the three Fs to get you through.

This one is an evolving tip, so you know. At first I thought family would be enough, but then I remembered who I'm related to. When *Porphuraviridae* first hit L.A., there were still a lot of basic services available even though more people were afflicted every day. My phone worked. The Internet worked. The roads hadn't completely jammed yet. I called my folks back in Rochester and told them what was going on.

"Are you sick?" my mother had asked me first thing.

"No, I'm fine." Which was astonishing but true, given all the people I'd come into contact with since the virus first expressed.

"Are you absolutely positive?" She went on before I could reassure her, "Because I heard that it doesn't kill everyone who catches it right away. It lies dormant in some people, then gets them after they've already traveled and spread it to a whole new place."

Well okay, that was true. If you caught the virus, odds were you'd die of a grotesque hemorrhagic fever before you had much of a chance to pass anything along. The Purple Plague worked superfast for the most part. In some people, though—and this was just getting into the news—it didn't kill them. They still got some of the symptoms: the breaking capillaries that turned their bodies into one big bruise, the jaundice in their eyes that somehow affected the iris as well as the sclera, the loss of body hair. But these people didn't go on to die. Reports were mixed, but the claims ranged from verifiably sharper night vision and sense of hearing to hysterical tales of people growing claws and drinking blood. To which my first reaction was, *Ha, bullshit.*

In retrospect, it's funny that everything I thought was reasonable turned out to be wrong, and everything I thought was ridiculous turned out to be right.

"Mom, I just got tested this morning at the clinic down the street, and I'm fine," I assured her. "Listen, how's everything where you are? Are you staying in Rochester?"

“For now,” my mother affirmed. “Although we’re thinking of going to your grandpa’s cabin if things get much worse. It’s got all the basics, you know, and the generator works and it’s nice and rural. We’d probably be safer there until things die down.”

“Yeah? Is Rommie bringing the girls there too?” My aunt Romelia was my mother’s only sibling, and she had two little daughters who I loved.

“Yes. So you see why you can’t go there, Javi.”

I... huh? “Why’s that, Mom?”

“Because you wouldn’t want to infect the girls if you’re carrying the plague!”

“Mom, I just told you that I’m *not* carrying it.”

“For now. That could change in an instant; it’s so big and filthy in L.A. Honestly, I don’t know how you stand it there.”

“Mom...”

“Javi, just don’t. Stay where you are, and if it gets better, and you stay healthy then you can join us at the cabin later, okay? I have to go now; I have to help your father with Grandmama.” That referred to my father’s mother, my only grandparent who was still alive at the time. “Her home health aide didn’t show up today, and she’s been feeling under the weather. We’ll talk later, all right?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Good.” Then she hung up. That was the last time I spoke with my mother; two days later the first tactical nuclear weapon hit Los Angeles, fired from an Air Force base in Arizona. Over half a million people died in a single day, and that was the real beginning of the end.

I had no clue if any of my family had made it to the Cochetopa Hills cabin. At this point I didn’t care. It was a goal to shoot for, the same way Gina’s family ranch had been a goal before they’d refused to take all of us in. Gina was all right, but her fiancé Phin wasn’t, and me, the stray they’d picked up on the outskirts of L.A., *certainly* wasn’t. We’d arrived, we’d bargained, and we’d left, but not before one of her uncles had managed to wing Phin with a bullet. Gina’s answering shot had been far more accurate.

But that was all Phase One, and Phase One was in the past. Phase One had been what happened after relying on family had failed. I’d moved on to trying

to rely on friends instead, and it totally would have worked if Gina's family hadn't been so douche. Now I was well into Phase Two, which wasn't about family or friends: it was about having a frenemy. And I didn't like to brag, but my frenemy was the best.

What was so good about a frenemy? Well for starters, there were no illusions here. Our relationship was based on the concept of mutual use. Conrad, being the badass mutating train wreck that he was, kept us alive. I, in turn, kept us focused on the end goal, which I hadn't shared with him yet. Astonishingly, he hadn't been kidding about needing a mission. I honestly don't think he cared where we were going as long as a plan was in place, and he had a job to do. And apparently keeping my ass alive was a big enough job for him.

"Check the rock before you sit down."

"It's fine."

"You said that three days ago and ended up getting stung by a scorpion."

Yeah, that had been a bit of a shock. "I recovered in less than a day. I'm fine now."

"That's no reason to let it happen again."

"Shouldn't you be more worried about mice biting me or something?" I asked after dutifully checking the rock. "A mouse bite could give me the plague." Mammals and birds were both susceptible to the Purple Plague, but that was it as far as animals went. Shit, that was enough, too. After experiencing a massive die-off, a lot of those critters who remained had also mutated, becoming stronger and faster, and way deadlier. Remember that funny story about packs of feral Chihuahuas terrorizing kids in Tucson from a few years ago? Yeah, now imagine those Chihuahuas on steroids, with absolutely no fear and a desperate hunger driving them. That's some frightening shit.

"If you were going to get the plague, you would have by now. The incubation period can take up to twelve months, but we're going on fourteen."

Yeah, I was intimately acquainted with the plague's sense of timing. "Well then, I could get rabies. What happens if I get rabies, huh? I doubt I'm immune to that."

"If you get bitten by a rabid mouse, I guess we'll just have to cauterize the wound and hope for the best." Conrad hoisted the cooking gear out of the trailer and set it down, then started looking through our dehydrated food options. I

went into my solo trip with a lot of supplies left over from Phase One, but that surplus was rapidly diminishing thanks to Conrad's ravenous appetite. He tried to hide it, but I knew that every night he went to bed still hungry.

"Hah, *no*. There will be no burning of my too, too solid flesh."

"I heard that reference, smartass. Rein it in."

"I don't understand your weird hang-ups regarding classic literature, man. I'm going to wear you down eventually on this, you know that, right?"

"I doubt it," Conrad said, throwing me a package of Noodle Surprise. No milk to cook it with, no butter, but there were carbohydrates and protein and maybe vitamins if you squinted just right. It was better than starving, at any rate.

"No, really," I said as I set up the biggest pot on the little fire that had been Conrad's first move when we settled into our campsite for the night. It had trees (but not too many trees—that was important), water in a nearby creek that I did my damndest to purify before using, and a spot for the bikes.

You'd think that there would be more actual vehicles available if most of the people in the US were dead or infected, but most of the major urban centers were gone, and their cars were gone with them. A lot of the rest had been set on fire because who doesn't enjoy some good ol' mindless rioting, and of those that remained, the best had been skimmed from the top while the rest had their fuel siphoned off. It was surprisingly Mad Max-ian, all things considered, which gratified the nerdy fanboy in me but irritated the reluctant cyclist I'd become.

"You'll learn to love it if you don't already. I promise."

"Or I'll learn to hate the sound of your voice and have to restrain myself from slitting your throat in order to keep you quiet," Conrad offered.

"So grumpy. Sooo mean. And you won't do that." I was pretty well assured of that by this point. If Conrad hadn't killed me while I'd whined like a puppy who'd been locked out of the master bedroom when that scorpion stung me, he wasn't going to murder me for indulging my happy place.

"No, I won't." He sat down and pulled off his boots, which he'd exchanged for the incongruous dress shoes I'd found him in on that first day after he discovered that one of his five attackers was also a size eleven. "Now get to work, Betty Crocker."

“There are plenty of good male chefs, you know. You could compare me to one of them,” I said, watching the pot for bubbles in the water. “Like, Gordon Ramsay. Every night is another Michelin experience with me.”

Conrad smiled, and I mentally gave myself a point. I was totally winning the war. “I’ll be happy if you just don’t poison me.”

“Do you think I could, at this point?” I gestured at his face, where the purple was edging down his cheeks and across his forehead now. Conrad assured me it didn’t hurt, but it looked painful. He always kept the damn sunglasses on, too. “I mean... the media didn’t have too long to report on it before everything went to shit, but I remember something about increased immunity and resistance to disease. Maybe Montezuma’s Revenge is a thing of the past for you.”

“Well.” Conrad’s voice was flat. “That would certainly make me feel better about the whole mutation thing. Clearly this is all a blessing in disguise, and I should just be grateful for it, huh?”

Oh boy, this conversation had gone south fast. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to, it was implied,” he snapped at me, “and if you smear me with any more of your bright-side bullshit I really *will* slit your throat.”

Ah, no. That wasn’t the sort of thing I could take lying down, or even sitting. I stood and swung a hand in Conrad’s direction. “See now, this! This is what I was talking about when I said I was worried you were going to go crazy and kill me—when you *actually* go and threaten to kill me! And not as a joke! I can tell the difference, you asshole, and that’s not you being funny, that’s you trying to scare the fuck out of me.”

“Javi.” Conrad deflated as quickly as he’d puffed up. “I’m sorry.”

“Good for you.”

“No, I am. Look, I’m hungry and I’m tired and my whole body feels like it’s been scrubbed with a Brillo pad. I’m not... fuck.” And now he looked away from me, straight up at the darkening sky, and pulled off his sunglasses. His irises glittered yellow in the light of the sunset. “I’m not supposed to still be here,” he murmured. “I didn’t think I’d still be here.”

“Where did you think you’d be?” I asked because he sounded... lost, when he said that. Hopeless, and weirdly young. Conrad was a decade older than I was—he wasn’t supposed to sound like a scared kid.

“Not in the middle of nowhere,” he quipped readily enough, but I knew that wasn’t what he meant to say. “I’m sorry. I’m not going to hurt you, but I’ll stop with the threats.”

“Well, don’t stop completely. Otherwise I’ll worry you’ve got brain damage or something.”

He gave me a cautious half smile. “Got it.”

“Okay... good.” I crouched down again and got back to fixing dinner, but the mood was weird now. I was never very good when it came to dealing with silence. The best way to get me to confess to something when I was a kid was for my mother just to stare at me. I’d squirm like a worm impaled on a hook and then confess everything and anything she might be mad at me for, just so she’d speak to me again.

“Tell me something,” I said as I poured the dried noodles and powdered sauce into the pot.

“Like what?”

“I don’t care, just talk.”

“Or what, you’ll soliloquy me?”

“Oh, you think I won’t?” I challenged. “I will soliloquy the fuck out of you if you don’t start talking. And don’t think I’ll start with the big boys like Hamlet or Macbeth. I’ll jump right down to the Tempest and go all Caliban on your ass.”

“Ah, let’s not tempt fate tonight.” He finally took off the sunglasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. In the gathering dark, I almost couldn’t tell that he was changing, except for the insistent shine of his eyes. “It’s my niece’s birthday today.”

Holy amazeballs, Batman, a personal revelation? I felt like I’d fallen into a parallel dimension for a moment. “I didn’t know you have a niece.”

“I had four, actually, and one nephew. Evie was the oldest; she would be turning twenty-five.”

Ah. Shit. “My age.”

“Yeah.”

“And she... um.” I really didn’t know when to shut up. “She’s...”

“Dead, yes.”

I winced. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

Well, now I wished I hadn't made him talk. I had always done this, dug into places when people would rather I just kept my mouth shut, poked at the soft spots until they bled. I was under no illusions as to how my own family felt about me, and because of it I tended to be ruthless when it came to other people's personal lives. I looked down into the pot and stirred the noodles desultorily.

After a few minutes of quiet, though, Conrad started talking again. "Evie was a really active kid, even as a baby. I was usually the only person left to look after her who wasn't paid to do it when she was little. My parents worked hard, and my sister and her husband traveled a lot. I was the only family with Evie for her third birthday. We went to Legoland with a nanny." His affection for her suffused his voice. "Evie loved it. She loved building things; her bachelor's was in mechanical engineering. She made epic cushion forts by the age of five."

Conrad stared a few feet to the left of me, his eyes blank, not focusing anywhere as he spoke. "She died... damn... almost eleven months ago, I think. We didn't find out for sure for a long time because the damage was so widespread and it was so hard to pin down where her unit had been sent and the chain of command was disintegrating so quickly."

"Unit?"

"Evie was in the National Guard. She was sent to Houston to try and stabilize the refineries right before the big boom."

"Oh, shit." I'd heard something about a massive bomb going off on the coast of Texas, but I'd been more concerned with my own survival at the time to wonder too hard about what that meant.

"Yeah. Like I said, we weren't sure for a while... my sister and I called in every favor we had left to find out what happened to her because there was no body, but in the end there was no question. She and over a hundred other guardsmen were incinerated, along with three hundred regular soldiers." Conrad shut his eyes and rubbed his face. "Her commanding officer survived, and eventually tracked us down. He had the gall to tell us that at least it had been fast. Like that helped."

For once I had nothing smart to say. Luckily there was another avenue of communication I could take. "Here." I spooned out a good two-thirds of our mushy meal into a cup and handed it over to him. "Dinner."

Conrad accepted the cup, toasted me silently, and started to eat.

Frenemies. As long as you've got respect, you don't have to be friends to survive.

Chapter Three

Fun In The Time Of The Purple Plague

So, this is the chapter that's all about fun.

Yeah, I did say fun. You've got to have some fun in life, even if life currently blows a pygmy goat. If you haven't turned away with a disgusted huff at my callousness yet, then let me explain what I mean by this concept. *Fun* is a necessary component of living a healthy life. I'm not pulling this out of my ass: play is therapeutic for children and adults alike. We might play in different ways, but that kind of release is crucial in allowing us to deal with the shit that goes on in our lives. Having fun is important, whether you're having it by yourself or with someone else.

Apocalypse survival tip number three: find your fun and keep it because it's more precious than gold. Just don't be an asshole about it. By that, I mean I don't care how fun you might find it, if you're getting your laughs by staging ironic reproductions of the *Hunger Games* in your walled-off Domsday Citadel, you're doing it wrong. That's just being a fucking sadist, and when your version of Katniss shoots you through the eye, you totally deserve it.

Unlike tip number two, I never had any problem wrapping my head around this one. It was obvious, especially during Phase One—if I couldn't keep my sense of humor and find ways to laugh at things I wouldn't last. It was easier during that phase—it's one of the few things that was, in the end. Phin was naturally a funny guy, always cracking jokes and outdoing himself trying to get me and Gina to laugh. Gina was the hard sell because she'd established right at the outset that she was the leader of our little band, and that made her more serious than she had to be. What, was I going to stage a revolution and overthrow her? Hell no! I didn't want to be in charge. I was happy to be a follower, to let someone else do the worrying and the heavy lifting.

This was before I had my own plan, before I ever thought I really needed one as anything more than a backup. Gina was the one with the plan. We were going to her ranch, where her well-armed and open-minded family would welcome us into the fold. I would find a hot cowboy to bang the days away with, she and Phin would do the apocalypse's version of marrying and everything would be fine. Peachy, even.

Gina was the kind of person whose strong soul would have hardened to stone without humor. Phin was good for her, and good for me. He was a goofball with no sense of shame, and would pratfall into a cactus just to get Gina's lip to curl a little. Actually, falling into the cactus had been an accident, but he'd carried it off well when he found out it made her laugh, even while she was scolding him and picking needles out of his ass.

This isn't to say that Gina didn't have her own sense of play. It was just a more subtle version of the same elixir. Where Phin would be a joker, and I made everything into a pun—shut up, puns are the most accessible form of humor—Gina got her kicks by teaching us to shoot. We learned how to handle her gun taking potshots at rabbits, and we were both so bad. I was only marginally better than Phin because he was nearsighted and had irretrievably lost his glasses during the riots. No rabbits were harmed in the shooting of Gina's gun unless she was the one doing the shooting. She thought our attempts were hilarious though, and I was too happy to see her smile to be offended.

My sense of fun had evolved since then, become a little more refined. It was slyer, less about laughing at myself, more about driving Conrad up the proverbial wall. Why antagonize him? Because he fucking deserved it, that's why. Conrad took the concept of "mission" and turned it into a damn expedition. We made great progress on the roads, but I never stopped being sore, my lungs and legs aching anew every night.

More disconcertingly, Conrad was really good at keeping us safe. By really good, I mean that he sniffed out people we might clash with (literally in one case; the mutants in question had pretty much lost control of their higher functions and let go of the concept of a latrine) before they could get to us, then cheerfully set out to assassinate them.

Yes, cheerfully. Whistling "Dixie" cheerfully. Bright smiles and jaunty waves cheerfully. Conrad was getting all his fun through killing, and while that saved me a lot of angst, it also felt like a glass of ice had been dumped down my spine every time. I didn't kill people; I didn't have to. Yay for me. But the more Conrad changed, and the more he started to hunt around for something, anything, to go after, the more nervous I became. Murder was a bad way to get your kicks; it didn't take a genius to know that. Hence, distracting him with my own fun. In this case, William Shakespeare.

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, a nine- by two- by seven-inch glory of a book, weighed four-point-eight pounds. How did I know this? Why

did *anyone* who wasn't shipping internationally know this? Good question, sit back and let me tell you why. I knew how much the book weighed because I'd been lugging it around on my back, wedged between my underwear (all freshly washed, honest to god) and my well-insulated stash of toilet paper for the past three months.

Why, in the middle of the goddamn apocalypse, was I carrying a book that weighed almost five pounds around? Why didn't I save the room in my pack for, oh, more *food*, maybe? Or ammo? Or something else objectively useful in a world gone completely to hell?

I could say it was for the invaluable cultural knowledge that I was preserving. I could say it was because I had a little thing for Shakespeare, like most English-speaking people who were forced to read him in high school. I could even say it was because the book also functioned quite well as a bludgeon (the one time I'd had to use it defensively was back in L.A., and it had knocked the fucker who'd been after me unconscious, no joke). In fact, all of those things were true, but the real kicker? It was *my* fun, my way to relax, and ever since I found out just how intensely Conrad disliked it, I made sure to haul it out every evening.

Some might point out that antagonizing my trip buddy was perhaps the worst thing I could do because what if I drove him to kill me? Or to leave me? To them I say: I didn't worry about Conrad losing it and taking me out, not since the night he came clean to me about his niece. I *did* worry about him getting bored and deciding he wanted to go hunt some poor fuckers without being properly prepared, and that meant I needed to distract him. Any opportunity to mock me or heap me with literary loathing was just another way for Conrad to have some fun that didn't involve risking his neck, which was A-OK with me.

"You could totally be Hamlet," I said as we lay together three weeks into our trip. We'd pissed each other off enough that day to the point where, yes, I had indeed soliloquy'd him. He'd interrupted me every other word with a curse, which definitely helped to let off some steam. Then he'd paid me back by singing "Hotel California" ten times in a row. Conrad was good at a lot of things, but singing wasn't one of them.

"Not that asshole again."

"I'm serious! You've got that broody yet manic quality about you. I bet if you were alone you'd be talking to apparitions and staring at skulls."

Conrad snorted. “Don’t confuse the two of us. You’re the fanciful idiot, and I’m the badass operator keeping you alive.”

“Oh, please. You’d be so bored if I weren’t here, keeping me alive is to your benefit.”

“Maybe.”

No, no prevarication. “Definitely.” I snuggled deeper into his embrace. It was funny, how quickly I got used to sleeping practically on top of someone. I’d never puppy-piled with Gina and Phin; they had been their own thing and had absolutely no interest in branching out. Not that I really wanted to have sex with them, but having a cuddle buddy was actually really nice.

Also, it was entirely possible that I *did* actually want to have sex with Conrad, even though he hadn’t shown the slightest interest in fucking. That was fine: he had other things to worry about, like keeping us alive and how quickly he was mutating. And that did worry him, I could tell. The pair he’d killed fifty miles ago, two males who might have been brothers, they’d looked so similar... he’d killed them with a smile, but afterward he’d frowned for two days straight. I could only assume he was thinking about himself. Those two had been animalistic, their fingers and toes tipped with thick nails grown into claws, skin as purple as twilight and hair completely white. They hadn’t spoken, just growled. Was that the inevitable result of catching the Purple Plague? Were there variations on the toll it took, or was everyone who caught it destined to end up as little better than an animal?

Gina had thought the latter while I was determined to believe the former, now more than ever. The two mutants he’d killed had changed together, but Conrad had me. And I would forcibly remind him of his human side as often as I could if that was what it took. “We should read some of it aloud together tomorrow,” I said sleepily. “The parts with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, maybe. You can be Rosencrantz.”

“If I had to pick, I’d rather be Guildenstern.”

“Everyone would. I know how they feel, I’m a Lipschitz.” There, I’d said it. At last, I’d said it. I waited for him to laugh. Aaaand...

“You’re kidding me!” Yep, there it was, the rumble of a genuine chuckle. If there was a god, I hoped I got some points for offering my name up as a sacrificial humor lamb.

“Hey, I share that name with a famous mathematician, I’ll have you know. My name is a mathematical *constant*.”

“Oh, well, forget that it’s a dirty homonym as long as it’s a *constant*.”

“It might have made me a little overly sensitive when it comes to rimming,” I confessed, and grinned as Conrad laughed again. The warm rumble passed from his chest through my back, and I curled as close as I could get.

“God, you are something else.”

“Yeah, well, that was your freebie for the night. You should reward me for changing the subject from Shakespeare.”

“What do you want?”

My heart skipped a beat, and I’m sure he heard it. But I wasn’t going to ask for that. It didn’t matter that I wanted it; my body didn’t get to run roughshod over my better judgment. “How about your last name? Quid pro quo and all that.”

For a long moment, there was silence, and I gradually resigned myself to having pushed too hard when he finally spoke. “Temple. Conrad Temple.” And then he barely breathed, like he was expecting some sort of reaction out of me.

Well, I was going to have to disappoint him on that front. “It totally suits you.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because your body is a temple, baby.”

“Oh my god,” Conrad groaned. “No puns, come on!”

“Are you kidding me? It’s the perfect pun! You can’t tell me no girl has ever tried to pick you up with that. It might be lame, but it’s too obvious to pass up.”

“Shockingly, no, women have had better taste than to try that with me,” Conrad said. He added a moment later, “Although a couple of men have gone there.” And my stupid libido did a little happy dance. “But I didn’t fuck either of them because I instantly understood that they were tasteless jackasses,” he continued. “Don’t aspire to be like them, Javi.”

“I’ll see what I can do about that,” I promised.

It was one of our better evenings, all things considered.

Chapter Four

Better Health Through Hygiene

On to the stuff that nobody wants to talk about. Hygiene. Bodily functions. The dirty laundry, so to speak. Yeah, tip number four is all about the importance of making sure that you are holding yourself to a higher standard of cleanliness than your average bike-riding, grunge-wearing, dirt-grubbing apocalypse survivor. Because here's the thing: if you don't take care of business, as unlovely as it might be, you won't be a survivor for long. So yes, apocalypse survivor tip number four: keep it clean, and by it I mean you.

This might just be the hardest tip of all to follow. I completely understand your reluctance to focus on things like making sure your clothes are clean when you're concerned with marauding mutants, hysterical humans and potentially deadly wildlife. Who has the time, you ask, to bother with making sure your water is completely sanitary when you don't even feel safe pumping it? Why take the time to bury your shit since you're not going to be staying there for more than a day before you scarp off? Who the fuck is going to carry soap around when that space could be put to better use by packing, oh, *guns* and *ammo* and *food*, Javi. Yeah, yeah. Point taken. All the cleanliness in the world isn't going to save you if you get jumped down at the watering hole.

But here's the thing. While there are circumstances that occur where it makes sense to let things slide, to let the grime build up a bit, to forget that you got that little cut and why does it matter anyway... well, then you're tempted to let it happen more and more frequently. Haste becomes the new norm, urgency forever superseding common sense, and the next thing you know you have an infection that you can't treat because there are no more antibiotics, you dumb shit, and then you die. Awfully.

If I make this sound kind of personal and dramatic, well, it's because it is. Ignoring this tip was the beginning of the end of Phase One, and I blame myself for it. Not entirely, that would be stupid, but the thing is, I *was* prepared. I had the supplies to treat small wounds, alcohol wipes and Neosporin and bandages to keep the nasty out. I'd emptied out my medicine cabinet and risked life and limb during a run on a pharmacy to grab whatever I could, and that meant I was better prepared than either Gina or Phin.

Yeah, Phin was the one who'd been creased by the bullet. Technically it was his responsibility to look after himself, and yeah, Gina was the leader of

our little cabal, but I was the practical one. I should have *forced* Phin to slow down and let me look at his wound beyond wrapping a T-shirt around his calf to stop the bleeding. He'd insisted that speed was more important, that he was fine, that there was nothing wrong. And I believed him because I was a moron.

It was barely more than a cut, the sort of thing you'd get falling off your skateboard onto the sidewalk. Gross, but hardly life-threatening. And maybe if Phin's immune system had been up to snuff instead of stressed from little food, bad sleep and constant hypervigilance, he would have kicked the resulting infection no problem. But he didn't kick it. He didn't even mention it for the first three days, just wore long pants for a while and insisted he was all good. It took Gina to notice it at last, and by then... well, the wound was red, puffy, weeping, and definitely ugly. I broke out the wipes and the ointment and bandages, but it was too little, too late.

If Phase One taught me anything it was that the little things shouldn't be neglected. If there was even the barest sliver of time for me to wash my hands, I took it. If I had an extra five minutes in the evening, then I was off to brush my teeth and floss. Yep, I flossed. Gingivitis is no joke.

And there may not be a lot of water in the vastness of Kaibab National Forest, but wherever we could camp close to it we did, and whenever that happened I bathed from head to toe and made a point of washing out my clothes. You don't stop smelling yourself when you're filthy, people. You might pretend that you do, but unless you're anosmic you're going to get very well acquainted with your own stench after a few days of heavy exercise while wearing the same few outfits and sporadically bathing, and a rose I was not, nor did I smell as sweet as one. I changed my underwear every damn day, and I hoarded my toilet paper like gold.

Conrad wasn't as fastidious as I was, but at least at the beginning of our epic journey he'd joined me in washing up whenever I did. By the end of our first month together though, he'd stopped. Even when we had an entire pond's worth of water that looked mostly clean to bathe in, he declined to strip down and get clean. And maybe I shouldn't have pushed it, but pushing was what I did after the failure of Phase One. Besides, I had to sleep next to the guy, and as lovely as he was, he was causing me undue suffering with his smell.

I bathed in the pond first. Then I washed my shirt, shorts and four pairs of underwear, and hung them up to dry. Conrad stuck stoically to cleaning the gun collection the whole time, but even the smell of gun oil couldn't cover up the smell of lived-in at this point.

“Conrad.”

He ignored me. Of course.

“Cooooonrad.”

Nothing.

“The silent treatment doesn’t work on me, it only makes me more determined,” I said. “But as long as you’re not in the mood to argue, let me say for, what, the fifth day in a row—you need to fucking clean yourself up.” I pointed to the flies buzzing around his boots. “You’ve still got blood on you from two days ago. Look!”

“That’s on my boots, not on me.”

“And what, you’d rather not wear them again, so you might as well let them start smelling rotten so nasty things are drawn to us? I’d rather not have to watch you gut another coyote in the middle of our camp.”

That had happened two nights ago. The critter had slunk into camp, probably drawn by the smell of cooking. I hadn’t even seen it before Conrad had leapt to his feet, drawn his knife, and grabbed on to what looked at first like a silver shadow just beyond the light of the fire, almost invisible except for the glowing yellow of its eyes. He’d held it back by the throat with one hand and slit it straight down the middle with the other. It hadn’t made a sound. It just stared at Conrad as it bled out, and he stared right back until the light in its eyes extinguished.

Remember tip number one? The one about lying? Yeah, that came into play in a big way two nights ago. I pretended not to see the blood on Conrad’s fingertips, where his nails were starting to harden and sharpen. I pretended that there was nothing at all weird and frightening about him dragging the carcass half a mile away and leaving it for other creatures to scavenge. Just like I pretended he didn’t smell, and pretended he wasn’t more aubergine than tan at this point, but lying loses precedence to health, and Conrad definitely wasn’t being healthy right now.

“Please, just bathe,” I said point-blank. “I can’t take much more of your manly aroma, and your clothes really need to be washed.”

“Aren’t you the one who floated the idea that I can’t get infections now?” he replied languidly. “It’s not like I’m going to die from wearing dirty clothes.”

“No, but I might.” I held up a hand. “Hear me out! We sleep together for warmth, and if you’re all gross, and I’ve got a cut and your grossness gets into

it, then I get a staph infection and bad things happen.” I batted my eyes at him. “I don’t want to give up our cuddle time, Snuggle-Muffin.”

Conrad sighed, sounding very put-upon. “You just want to see me naked.”

I nodded hugely. “Absolutely, chalk my insistence on hygiene down to prurient interest if it makes you happy, man. I *really* do want to see you naked, preferably up to your chest in water, making liberal use of the soap.”

Conrad’s lips thinned. “Fine.” He jerked off his clothes in a few quick motions and handed them to me. “Make yourself useful then, Javi.”

“Happily.” Fuck it, I’d do his laundry if it meant it would get *done*. It also gave me an excuse to go back to the pond with him, which... there was definitely some prurient interest there. I mean, I wasn’t a saint, and the guy was still incredibly hot, purple or not. Mostly purple at this point, actually. It went aaaaall the way down, that purple. Blowing him would be like deep throating a plum.

Conrad paused in his rapid scrubbing to stare at me for a moment. I cleared my throat and looked back down at his clothes, but...

“Heartbeat.”

“Fuck off.”

“It’s getting faster, Javi.”

“Fuck *off*.”

“I could help you take care of that, you know.”

Shit, just the *thought* of getting a helping hand right now was almost enough to make me hard. I had only jacked off twice in the past month, and as I got more used to being on the run and dealing with Conrad in all his weird glory, my inhibitions were falling further and further away. I took my excess energy out on Conrad’s pants, which were a decent distraction until—

“Uh, no?” I said as he started to climb out of the pond.

“No what?”

“Hair?” I gestured at his head. “You should wash that too.”

I got a scowl so heavy it was almost comedic for my trouble. “My hair is fine.”

“Oh my god, are you kidding me?” I dropped his pants and started counting on my fingers. “Lice, psoriasis, lice, ringworm, eczema, lice, scleroderma,

lice... need I go on? You need to keep your head clean, otherwise you could, I don't know, grow spots or go bald or play host to a bunch of parasites who would then make the leap from your head to mine."

"Javi—"

"No. Seriously. Give me one good reason for why you don't want to go all the way and just wash your hair."

"You want a reason?" Conrad snapped suddenly. "Fine, I'll give you a reason." He bent over and dunked his head in the water, scrubbing viciously. I sat back on my heels and watched, looking for something, for anything to explain why he was being so weird, when he finally straightened up, then held his hands out to me. They were... I looked closer.

They were covered with dark-blond hair.

"Oh." Oh, right. It was a natural progression of *Porphuraviridae*; the infected individual lost their original hair, which was almost always replaced with a new growth that came in silvery white. "I see." I looked up at Conrad, read the tension in his body and opted for diffusing it in the only way I knew how. I started to laugh.

"This isn't funny, Javi!"

"No, it is, it really is. I had no idea you were this vain," I marveled, watching him glare at himself in the scummy pond, his reflection somehow even scarier than he actually was. Which was a *lot*, I mean, the guy was scary as hell, but now wasn't the time for me to talk about fear. "I mean, c'mon. You held a damn coyote at bay with your *claws* two days ago. You're the color of an unripe eggplant. Your eyes practically *glow in the dark*, and you're worried because your hair is falling out?" I shook my head. "We knew this would happen. This whole time you've been avoiding bathing, it's been because you didn't want to lose your hair, what, faster? You'd rather pick it out of the blankets in the morning? That doesn't make much sense."

"Given that you're in the *enviable* position of being immune to the Purple Plague," Conrad said, his voice so heavy with sarcasm I thought he might drop it, "maybe you could do me the favor of shutting your damn mouth about something you have no experience with. Does that sound sensible to you?" He rinsed his hands off and stalked out of the pond, forgoing the clothes I thrust his way as he headed back to camp. Not that I'd expected him to wear wet clothes, but at least he could have taken them and hung them up to dry.

Or maybe not.

I took care of the clothes, grabbed the leftover soap and followed Conrad a few minutes later. He was sitting wrapped in my grandmother's throw on the tarp, staring pointedly at the horizon and not at me.

Oh, haha. What had I told him about the silent treatment? It never worked.

I sat down next to him and reached for my pack. "You know, I think this calls for a poem."

"Oh, fuck *right* off," Conrad snarled. "If you even think about reading me Shakespeare right now, I will sew your goddamn lips shut."

"I just love it when you threaten me for my own good, honey, it's such a turn on," I simpered. "No, really, I've got just the sonnet in mind." I pulled out my book and checked the index, then found the right page. Happily, it was still legible, although I probably could have done this one from memory. "And try to relax a little, would you?" He didn't budge. "Seriously, I worry about the state of your spine, hold yourself any straighter and you'll snap it in two."

For a long moment, Conrad didn't move, and I worried that he was actually angry enough to ignore me. But finally he sighed—more of a huff, really—flopped down on his back, set his head in my lap and shut his eyes. "Fine. Read your damn poem."

Wow, this was... unprecedented. This was the sort of vulnerability that only happened when one of us was bleeding, and even then he usually just went off by himself and licked his wounds until they were all better. I set one hand tentatively on his head, pushed my fingers into his rapidly changing hair, cleared my throat and began.

"My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red:
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound.

I grant I never saw a goddess go:
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.”

I felt weirdly awkward by the end of it. “Sonnet 130” was Shakespeare’s ode to an ugly lover, and I’d chosen it because it was funny, but the more I read the more it weirdly seemed to... kind of... fit. Not that I loved Conrad or anything; he was a frenemy, a means to an end, but at the same time, well...

Conrad broke the silence at last. “Aww, baby. You’re so cute when you’re almost nice.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Although as long as we’re being frank, my eyes *are* an awful lot like the sun, don’t you think?”

“Your hair is the opposite of black too, now,” I said, scratching at his head a little. “And I love to hear you speak, but your singing is... more of an acquired taste, I guess.” More blond strands detached and floated away, or clung to me in a last-ditch effort to stay close. Conrad had to be able to feel it, the gradual loss, but he didn’t say anything, just lay on me and let me pet him.

I kept going until my hand began to cramp.

Chapter Five

It's All About Me

This tip can be considered an appendix to tip number three if you like. Hell, it can even be considered an extension of number four, depending on what revs your engine. I decided to set it apart because, like fun and hygiene, the often nebulous concept of “me time” is one of those things that people are more likely to abandon in times of stress, and doing so is a bad idea. Me time is important. *You* time is important. The time we spend doing the things that relax us, whatever they may be, are the moments when our brains get to recalibrate, reset, refuel. If play is mentally therapeutic and cleanliness is physically healthy, then me time is the spiritual component of that trifecta. Survival tip number five is this: make time for me time.

It may sound odd, but I actually had plenty of me time during Phase One. Gina and Phin were a couple: they slept together, ate together, rode a tandem bike together, did everything together, and seemed to like it that way. I was their friend, but I was also somewhat on the outside looking in. That might have bothered me more if I was a really extroverted person, but as it was it meant I got to spend plenty of time with myself. Maybe reading, maybe staring up at the sky trying to guess where the constellations would be if I could see the stars through the ever-present clouds. I loved them both, but I relished the chance to be alone.

After Phin got sick, there was no more me time. Gina and I alternated taking care of him, keeping him drinking and cleaning up after him and doing our best by his injury, which wasn't very good to start with and only got worse as the days went by. We rigged a travois to roll behind the bikes and pedaled in complete silence side by side, the only sounds coming from the bikes and the wind and from Phin, moaning whenever we went over a bump even though he tried to stifle it.

Gina was solely responsible for defense after that while I became responsible for holding down things in camp. She'd set up elaborate traps every evening around our site, trip wires and IEDs, and I made dinner and distracted Phin and did my best to hide how I felt when I saw the black and red lines on his leg.

I failed miserably, of course. After just four days, I couldn't touch Phin without wincing, even though he drifted in and out of lucidity and probably

couldn't differentiate one cleaning from the next. On the fourth night, when Gina had stalked off to set her traps, and I had pulled off the bandages to take a look at how things were going, I just started crying. I couldn't stop it, and I felt awful and stupid for giving in and acting like an idiot when my friend had it so much worse than I did. The tears just kept rolling, though, and after a few minutes I had to stop what I was doing because I couldn't see Phin's leg anymore.

"Hey." His warm hand on my shoulder jerked me out of my crying jag, enough that I could focus on him, at least. "Hey," Phin repeated. He gave me a little smile. "It's okay."

Of course it wasn't okay, it was nowhere near okay, but those words were just the opening my subconscious needed to have a full-on meltdown against Phin. It was me time, forcibly taken after being repressed, and it sucked.

I was determined not to make the same mistake during Phase Two. However, I ran up against some unexpected challenges. Firstly, I was the one in the duo now. It wasn't that Conrad and I were a *couple*, exactly, but, well, we were the only people around. That meant that getting conversation and companionship was easy—surprisingly easy, all things considered. Now that Conrad had come face-to-face with the fact that he was truly, irrevocably changing, he'd made peace with it surprisingly fast. If anything he was friendlier now, less inclined to snap when I annoyed him and more likely to annoy me right back. I was so sick of listening to the Eagles sung off-key, holy shit, you have no idea.

He was also more physically affectionate. I mean, okay, we were already sleeping together every freaking night, how much more cuddlesome could he be? A lot, apparently. I got reciprocal head pets, which were amazing, and my lap was used as a pillow after dinner almost every night, probably because while his head was in my lap it was harder for me to hold on to my five-pound book.

I even got a massage one night, which was the closest to nirvana I'd been since this whole thing started. Seriously, it went from head to toe, and I didn't even mind Conrad's off-key humming during it because I was pretty much boneless with contentment. Well, except for one very persistent bone that was becoming more of an issue.

I didn't have any time to jack off. Yeah, crude, fine, whatever. Orgasms were a very important and constructive part of my me time, and I wasn't doing it. I *wanted* to do it, I was just... look—when your frenemy/maybe friend/

snuggle-boffin has hearing sharp enough to detect your damn heartbeat, it tends to give you pause with regards to your sex life. I mean, maybe I wanked too loudly and it would be intrusive. Maybe I just wanted to avoid the innuendo that would be coming my way (ha, puns are life) after I got off. Maybe I was worried I'd screw up and say Conrad's name at the end. He was basically the only fodder I had for this sort of thing outside of Shakespeare and my own imagination, and while Shakespeare was great for sexy euphemisms, the Bard just wasn't doing it for me.

I labored over what to do about it for two days before I finally just thought to myself, *fuck it*. "Okay, so," I began after dinner. The dishes were clean, and it was still light enough out that Conrad wouldn't be able to play the safety card when it came to leaving me by myself for a while. "If you could make yourself scarce for the next ten minutes or so, I'd really appreciate it."

Conrad tilted his head and looked me over. He almost never wore the sunglasses anymore, and his eyes shone like fire in the light of the setting sun. "Ah. I was beginning to wonder if you were even interested in orgasms."

"Uh, yeah?" Fuck, I was starting to get hard already just hearing him say that stupid word. "I'm really interested in them, and I haven't had one for a while, so if you could just... go away for a bit... that would be awesome. Have some *you* time, do something fun for yourself, just don't listen in, okay?"

"But Javi," he said, completely deadpan, "the most fun I could possibly have right now would be listening in on you masturbating." Which was exactly what I was afraid of. I opened my mouth to tell him off, and he said, "Unless you'd like a helping hand."

Wait. Waaaaait... what? I had a serious case of gape-face, jaw hanging and eyes goggling, so unattractive, but I couldn't help it. Did those words just come out of his mouth? Was he actually offering to...

Conrad shifted uncomfortably. "Unless you're not interested," he muttered. "You can just tell me, you know, you don't have to look so horrified by it. I get that I'm not that pretty anymore, but—"

"No, no!" I interjected way too loudly. My filters were down, but I was still capable of thought, however slowly, and I knew that I didn't want Conrad to get the wrong idea. "No, I'm interested, I have interest! Are you serious?"

"I wouldn't have offered it if I wasn't," he said. "It makes sense. We can both have some fun, and you can stop suffering so severely from your blue balls."

“Don’t mix up the two of us.”

“Cheap shot, Javi, and besides, I’m not the one who’s been celibate for the past month.”

I gaped again. “When have *you* been getting off?”

“First thing in the morning, when you’re still bitching about why there has to be a sun,” he snarked, and... okay, so I wasn’t good in the mornings. Coffee had been my drug of choice, and I would give my left arm for a chance to taste it again, but that was neither here nor there right now.

“You really want to?”

Conrad rolled his eyes. “For Christ’s sake, Javi. Are you a virgin?”

“No!”

“Do you see any other ridiculous guys in the vicinity that I might be propositioning?”

“I’m ridiculously *cute*, maybe,” I defended myself, “but no.”

“Then I must be talking to you, and I already reassured you once. Let’s not make this weird.”

“Oh right. Yeah. Because reassuring someone about sex is totally weird when compared to, oh, you know, the *apocalypse* and all its attendant bullshit.”

“Come here.”

I shivered. It was pure reflex, unconscious, but Conrad saw it. He grinned, and for the first time I noticed that his incisors looked sharper than normal. Not, like, vampire sharp, more like Luke Evans, but I was pretty sure they hadn’t looked like that when we first met. I got up and walked the few feet over to where he was already sitting on the tarp, long legs stretched out in front of him. He held out a hand and I took it, then stumbled and fell straight into his lap when he pulled me forward unexpectedly.

Oh my god. Exactly like I’d imagined it way too many times to count now, during brief seconds of solitude or in the mental lull before drowsing turned into wakefulness. I straddled Conrad’s lap, my arms automatically going behind his neck, and almost forgot how to breathe when he slanted his lips against mine. Kissing... I hadn’t expected kissing. I fucking *loved* kissing. His teeth were just as sharp as they looked, but he was careful with them, not biting or nipping, just coaxing moans from me with his tongue. I was incredibly hard, and we’d barely done anything.

Conrad stroked one hand over my ass. “Better get these off,” he said, and it took a moment for my lust-fogged mind to catch up. Right, my shorts. Yeah. I didn’t want to mess them up; I hadn’t had a chance to do laundry for the past four days. I moved to get up, but Conrad wrapped his arms around my waist and tipped me back onto the tarp, tucking the blanket under my head before he reached down to my waist. He popped the snap and unzipped my fly, and I eagerly helped him get them the rest of the way off.

My cock was so hard it ached. Conrad looked down at me, his nostrils flaring, and I wondered for a second if it was a bad thing, maybe I was dirtier than I thought, still sweaty from the day’s ride. Of course he wasn’t going to want to touch me once he got to see me up close. Then he growled, “You smell amazing,” and wrapped his hand around me.

I think I made a noise. Definitely not a scream because I don’t do that, what, *no*, and not a shriek or a whimper. It was a manly moan, for sure, and I didn’t have long to worry about the sounds that were coming out of my mouth because a moment later Conrad was kissing me again, stifling my noises with his mouth as he worked my cock with his hand. I was slick, way slicker than I could ever remember being in my entire life, was this what saving it up did for you because *fuck*... I already had stars dancing across my eyes, and I hadn’t even come yet, but I was going to. I could feel it rising like a high tide in my blood, ready to peak and crest. I clutched at Conrad like I was dying, that was what I felt like, anything this good had to be bad for you, didn’t it?

“Javi,” Conrad mumbled against my lips. He kissed across my jaw to the side of my neck and, very slowly, scraped his too-sharp teeth along the tendon, all the way down to my collarbone, just as he swept his rough, clawed thumb over the head of my cock. It was—I—

I came, and I went, too. I blacked out for a second, just a second, because Conrad had barely moved, and I knew that if he knew I’d gone unconscious he’d be concerned. Instead he lifted his head up and smirked at me, just like the asshole he was. At least he waited for me to catch my breath before he said, “I take it you had fun.”

“Oh my fuck.” My whole body was still racked by tiny shudders, every nerve lighting up with pleasurable awe. It was like my libido’s way of congratulating me on getting my shit together at last: *nice job, well done you, don’t let it go so long again*. I didn’t think that would be a problem. Unless... I glanced down at Conrad, who was still fully clothed, and what was that all about. “Don’t you want to...”

“What, come?” He smiled. “I was just waiting for you to be coherent again. I’m a gentleman, after all.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I am. I’m so gentlemanly that I didn’t even use your T-shirt to clean off my hand.” He wryly lifted his spunk-covered fingers and wiggled them at me.

“Oh.” Right, clean up. Damn it, this was so much harder without tissues and baby wipes handy. “I’ll just... um...”

“Just open up my pants.”

Why, so he could—oh. I reached down and undid his zipper, watched avidly as his cock sprang free. Ha, I *knew* Conrad went commando; apparently chafing was for the weak. But now, watching him wrap his sticky hand around himself and seeing how it helped the slide—and he had a long way to slide, let me tell you—I could sort of see the point. Easy access.

Conrad came before I pieced myself together enough to offer to help, with a low groan and a satisfied sigh. With his eyes closed and the gleam of the setting sun turning his hair gold he looked almost human again, and it... all right, don’t judge me, but it was a little disconcerting. Not that I was happy that Conrad had caught the Purple Plague. I wasn’t happy about that because he seemed to dislike it so much, and because it injected an element of uncertainty into our future together. What if he went insane, or feral? What if he turned on me, even if he didn’t want to? But I wanted him to look like *him*, not anyone else, so I lifted my head and shut my eyes and kissed him again, seeking out the familiar in that even though it was only the third time we’d ever done it. It felt good, so good, and when I opened my eyes again his honey gaze was on me again, and I sighed with relief.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Guess what.”

“What?” Conrad asked gamely.

“I actually kind of like you.”

Instead of laughing like I’d expected, he looked at me seriously. “Good,” he said. “I kind of like you too.” He kissed me again, slow and sweet, then pulled away and said, “Time for your favorite part: clean up!”

Which meant I'd be the one getting up and hunting down the water and our much-abused rag. Well... that was okay. Kind of the least I could do, really, after Conrad's brilliant idea of turning me time into *we* time.

Chapter Six

Run Boy Run

I was never very athletic before the apocalypse. I was naturally skinny, but that was mostly because I was a twitchy, hyperactive guy who tended to binge on Redbull and not sleep for days at a time in college, a habit I never really grew out of as I got into the working world. I always ate like a teenager, nasty delicious snack food that would make my mother turn red with shame. I'm sure all those pizzas and peanut butter cookies would have caught up with me eventually, but now we'll never know.

Now I'm not just skinny, I'm lean as a rail and can see muscles in myself I only ever imagined existing before. Like, I can individually parse my quadriceps into four different muscles. I've got that weird split between the gastroc and the soleus that only comes from an extreme amount of bicycling. I have visible *abs*, not just a flat, soft plane of flesh.

It took time to develop this ridiculous physique. Plenty of running, biking, and gastronomic privation went into making me look like I just fell out of a Prince of Persia game, and I regret that. I wish, from a purely selfish perspective, that I'd been fitter sooner. It's easy to tell yourself you'll get on the treadmill tomorrow when tomorrow still *exists*. That nebulous, normal tomorrow will never exist again, and neither will that fucking treadmill.

Survival tip number six: Fitness is not optional, it's a necessity. This isn't about body shaming or desiring that everyone look homogenous: this is about living to see another postapocalyptic day. Which, yeah, sometimes not exactly the best motivation, but you know what sucks worse? Getting run down and eaten alive.

I'm not blowing smoke here, this actually happened to me. Well, not all of it, not the eating me alive part, but the running? Yeah. It's one of my absolute worst memories of Phase One. And I'm still not entirely sure what it was that was running after us.

America is... okay, look, I honestly thought the biggest issue would be personal arsenals after the nukes went off. Big cities were toast, military bases were taking each other out in fits of mistrust, but after all was said and done there were still a huge number of weapons lying around. I figured those would be the real problems on the road, and they definitely sucked, don't get me

wrong. One only had to look at Phin at this point, pale despite the heat and insisting he didn't want to drink, to get that guns could do real and horribly permanent damage.

But you know what else people have a lot of in America? Pets. Some of which are massively illegal or at least should be, but people buy them anyway. I'm talking lions. Tigers. Yes, even bears. And sure, alligators and crocodiles and snakes and spiders and all sorts of other things, but it's the mammals I'm talking about here. Because mammals are the ones that can catch the Purple Plague, and it changes them in fierce and unpredictable ways. Not every person reacted exactly the same, and not every animal did either.

That night, the same night that Phin had had to comfort me when I lost my mind a little bit, one of the tripwire grenades went off. It wasn't the first time this had happened, and honestly... okay, when I say "grenades" I mean "mostly smoke and a little bit of fire," not "tiny balls of death with a twenty foot radius." We were working off of found ingredients here—be kind. But it was still noisy, and the last time nothing had bothered us afterward, so while Gina got up to check I settled back down to sleep.

That was a mistake. A minute later Gina screamed and fired her pistol into the darkness. I couldn't see anything, but I definitely got with it when she yelled, "Get Phin onto the bike!"

"Got it!" But Phin was unconscious, totally dead weight, which meant I had to carry him over to the travois. And he had five inches and about sixty pounds on me even burning with infection, and I... well, let's just say I had to drag him to get him over to the sled. I managed to hoist him onto it without too much difficulty, but it was hard enough that I devoted all my attention to it, and missed the creature that bounded into the perimeter of our camp.

I call it a creature because I'm still not sure what it was. It was about five feet long, its hair at that patchy half-silver phase. Its muzzle was long, and its teeth were longer. I didn't think to check for a tail; I was too busy shrieking like a little kid as I turned and suddenly came face-to-face with it. It lashed out at me with a paw, and I rolled away, just catching the edges of its claws across my shoulder. I grabbed the shotgun out from under the travois, turned it on my hairy stalker and fired straight into its face. It went down with an almost human scream, but I didn't get a chance to breathe because Gina was running toward me out of the darkness, two more of the creatures on her heels.

"Get on the bike! Pedal, pedal!"

I got on and I pedaled. She joined me, and we took off down the road, driving through one of our own trip wires and sending a spray of dirt up into my face. It deterred the two that were following us though, long enough that we got as close to out-of-sight as we could verify on a moonless night in the middle of nowhere. By the time we stopped, my throat was so raw I had to vomit from the exertion, and my chest and legs burned like I'd never felt before. Any less time on the bikes at that point, and I might not have made it. Another few pounds on Phin, and I might have been too slow turning to face my stalker and been eaten. I was on the edge of not being fit enough to survive, and that scared the hell out of me.

That's no longer an issue. Like I said, my body got fit out of brutal necessity. Of course, now that I had it going on, I had to be partnered up with a guy who made me look like a hundred-pound weakling. Who kept to an exercise regimen. Yeah, like biking over rough terrain heading into the great unknown wasn't enough for him. He had to go and do push-ups.

"Is this sick urge of yours a leftover from the military?" I asked him one morning as I cooked breakfast, and he did his push-ups. His body was flat as a board; I sort of wanted to sit on him.

Conrad laughed. "This started way before the military. My parents got us up every morning and put us through our paces. Me, my sister, any grandkids who were in the house. I could do a dozen pull-ups and run an eight-minute mile before my seventh birthday."

"That sounds hellish."

He switched to single-handed. "It was good for me. Focused me. Made certain other things in my life easier."

"Like being a ridiculous show-off?"

"Exactly. You can pull a lot of hot people by being desirable."

"You snapped up any and every chance to take your shirt off, didn't you?"

Conrad switched arms, then looked up and grinned at me. "Hey, it worked. I lost my virginity in the back of a Ferrari."

"That sounds..." *Fucking awesome.* "Cramped."

"I was flexible, and he was patient; we made it work."

Oh my god, I bet he had. I could picture him as a young man, someone capable of putting his ankles up by his ears and smirking at you the entire time.

Fuck. I needed to think of something else. “Why the military?” I’d been wondering this part for a while. “I mean, I assume you served well before Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was revoked. What made going into the military worth hiding part of who you are?”

“Part,” Conrad repeated. “Not all. I wanted to serve regardless of my sexual preference. I grew up knowing that I *had* to serve, regardless of what I wanted, if I was going to work for the family company, so... I’d always anticipated doing it.” He put both his hands back down, then did some weird shimmy that ended with his whole body arched, hips low to the ground, head back. It was either some sort of yoga move or something he’d psychically copied out of one of my sexual fantasies.

“What, um...” What had I been going to ask? “I mean, why did you have to serve? What kind of business was your family in?”

“I’m surprised you haven’t figured this out yet, Javi. I *did* tell you my last name.”

I narrowed my eyes. “So it’s well known. A family business under the family name?” I stirred the oatmeal and thought about it for a moment, well aware that Conrad was a few seconds away from humming the Jeopardy theme, at which point I would throw this oatmeal at him. *Temple, Temple...* It hit me like a sucker punch. “Temple Armament! Really?” Of course now that I’d figured it out, it made total sense. “The weapons manufacturers?”

“Mostly just middlemen, by this century,” Conrad said, easing out of his bowed position to sit back on his knees. “Facilitating government arms contracts, doing a lot of international deals, that kind of thing.”

“Shut the fuck up! You were a weapons manufacturer who branched out.” Wow, that meant he had to have all sorts of information on what had actually gone down right before the missiles started falling. One look at his face informed me that now was *not* the time to ask about it, though. Conrad’s lips were thin, his hands clenching against his thighs so hard I thought that his claws might rip through the cloth of his pants. And they were his last pair of pants, too. “Huh. Corporate bossman. That’s not at all where I had you pegged.”

Conrad took my lightness and ran with it. “Oh yeah? What were you thinking?”

“Oh, all sorts of things. Great white hunter? Professional ninja? Secret assassin? Although, it does explain the suit.”

“In fact, I was all of those things,” he said. “You’d be surprised how much of a demand there is for a professional ninja in the business world.”

I nodded. “Right, because of the corporate espionage. People were so busy admiring your latest round of Botox that they forgot to worry about sleight of hand.”

Conrad frowned. “I never had Botox.”

“Whatever, dude, your forehead was *not* natural when we first met, is all I’m saying.”

“I used sunscreen and didn’t frown at everything like you have a penchant for. That was enough to preserve me way better than surgery could.”

“I don’t frown,” I objected.

“I thought it was a kinder description than ‘resting bitch face.’”

“Well, you’re definitely still a professional asshole.” I looked down at the oatmeal slowly turning into a solid glob on the bottom of the pan. “I don’t know if professional assholes get breakfast.”

He sidled over to me. “Aw, Javi, don’t be like that. I *like* your resting bitch face. I think it’s cute. And I’ve never been more than an amateur asshole; even I had to rein it in a little bit in order to not be thrown out of the service. Come on.” He kissed my cheek, all gross and sweaty, and I let him because I was sort of stupid over him.

Being stupid over Conrad, stupid because I liked him more than was strictly good for me, wasn’t the sort of realization that came to me lightly, and it certainly wasn’t one I would easily talk about. I wouldn’t be the one mentioning it first, that was for sure. Conrad liked me; we had a good thing going that occasionally became a great thing when we got each other off. That had to be enough for me. Anything else was asking for complications, and life was so complicated as it was already.

“Here.” I shoved the pot against his bare, glistening chest. “Eat up.”

Chapter Seven

Make Your Own Luck

Hunter S. Thompson once said that luck was a very thin wire between survival and disaster, and not many people could keep their balance on it. I felt like I'd been standing on that wire from the first moment I found out about the Purple Plague. Honest to god, I feel like I should have caught it. It afflicted people with no regard to age, sex, or prior health issues. It burned through major population centers, and I was living in a suburb of L.A. at the time. My boss got the virus. My roommate got the virus. Fuck, the guy who drove my *bus*, the bus I took every day surrounded by grabby, germy people got the virus. By all rights, I should have gotten it myself.

Well, I didn't. Still on that wire. Once the sickness died down to the point where if you were gonna get it you'd have already had it, then the fighting broke out. Not your random neighborhood looting and pillaging either, I'm talking fighter jet, missile strike, tactical nuke fighting that no one had really thought was going to happen. I couldn't tell you what was going down in the highest echelons of the country because the televisions were no longer broadcasting anything, but clearly someone had gotten their hands on the controls and was playing out some Machiavellian revenge porn in their heads. L.A. was toast. The heart of the city went up in a blaze of glory, and again—I didn't die.

At this point, I felt like a pretty good tightrope walker, honestly. No virus, no being blown up, and surprisingly, most of the survivors were more interested in sticking together than fighting it out, so there was even a sense of community to build on. I made connections, I made new friends, I managed to make myself useful in a world that had absolutely no use for a computer programmer. I was lucky. We were lucky! We were the survivors and we were gonna make it and we were, somehow, going to be fine.

Then the changes started to occur in people, and nothing would ever be fine again.

That was when I started balancing on that wire on just one foot.

That was all pre-Phase One, before I'd come to terms with the fact that I was going to have to make a break for it. All the luck I had pre-Phase One was the dumb kind, the kind you can't attribute to anything other than stupid

chance. Luck, though, is one place where you can weight the dice with the right sort of planning. Survival tip number seven: luck favors the prepared, people. I know that. Gina knew it too, for all that we made a huge number of mistakes during Phase One. Giving us an edge was the whole reason she booby-trapped our camps every night. It was a slender edge, a mostly toothless edge, but it did what it was supposed to do: it gave us enough warning to escape impending death. That's always a good thing in my book.

All that being said, there's more than one way to get lucky. Currently, I was waking up to a very pleasant surprise blow job. It wasn't the first time, not after getting each other off regularly for the past few weeks, and by now I knew that Conrad didn't mind when I grabbed his completely silver hair, or when I got a little rough, or the way I almost gave him a concussion with a knee to the head when the aftershocks rocked me. I'd only connected with him once; he got smart after that.

Yeah, we did it enough that there was a learning curve involved. So, so lucky.

Sometimes there was reciprocation involved as soon as I could breathe again, which was always awesome. Once I blinked the stars out of my eyes though, I could see that today wasn't going to be one of those days. Conrad was already dressed, had in fact already cooked breakfast. We were down to two meals a day in order to preserve our rations longer, and soon we'd have to half each of those if we didn't find something to supplement with.

I wouldn't eat Purple Plague meat. I wasn't that desperate yet, and I had no idea what sort of effect it would have on my system. Conrad had tried it already—I didn't know how he caught that armadillo and didn't ask—but his report was that it tasted bad, didn't cook right, and was generally not to be trifled with. That left us hungry. Starving, actually, but there was nothing to be done.

"You'd make it further if you didn't have to feed me," Conrad had pointed out last night as we'd shared one pathetic package of rice and beans.

"I'd have been done with this trip months ago if I could grow wings and fly," I said wryly, handing over two-thirds of the meal, as was my habit at this point. "Wishing doesn't do any good, and I'm not bidding you farewell. Aren't I your mission?"

"Yeah," Conrad said, but he'd been pensive for the rest of the night. Then morning came, and I got a blow job, a cup's worth of delicious mush, and a rather grim weather forecast from Conrad.

“It’s going to rain.”

“Yay.” It wouldn’t be the first time we’d biked through the rain, but it was uncomfortable at best.

“We’re close to Page.”

The town of Page, right. Up there by Lake Powell and the Glen Canyon Dam. Well, we would be skirting that and following a more southerly route into Utah and then Colorado.

“We need supplies.”

“No.”

“Javi...”

“No cities, no towns, no way,” I insisted. “Those are depressing at best and deadly at worst, we are *not* going there. We’ll pass to the south of Page and keep going.”

“We’re going to starve if we don’t get more supplies. That’s just logic.”

“Fuck your logic,” I snapped. “Fine, we need food? We’ll stop somewhere and go fishing. We’re close to the Colorado River, it’ll be fine. We’ll work it out. We will *not* enter Page. We’re not going to come within five freaking miles of goddamn Page.”

Naturally, nature made a liar out of me. It didn’t just rain, it was a freaking *deluge* pouring over our heads all day, turning the hard dirt on the roadsides into lakes of mud and necessitating that we stayed on the pavement and didn’t turn off like I’d wanted. It rained for hours, heavy and wet, and all we could do was keep on going and hope it stopped by the time we had to make camp.

Hope is for suckers. The rain didn’t stop, not once, and by the time I finally called it quits we were within sight of the first sign of civilization I’d seen for what felt like forever. It was a barricade. A barricade made from decrepit cars stretched across the road and to either side of it as far as I could see. There was a sign spray-painted across the front of it that I could just make out through the drizzle: BEWARE. Plain enough.

I turned to Conrad, who’d gotten off his bike and was staring at the distant barricade with an intent look. “I guess we’re camping on the road ton—*huuuuh!*” The last part was the sound I made when Conrad dove at me and tackled me to the ground. I would have bitched—he deserved some bitching because I felt the knee of my jeans tear, and this was the last pair of long pants I had to my name,

except I also heard the crack of a rifle. The bullet struck my bike's handlebars and toppled it over onto its side, and Conrad wrapped his arms around me and kept rolling both of us until we rolled right off the road, into three inches of mud but behind the protection of a handy boulder. Good thing, too, because I felt the rock shudder slightly as another round struck it.

"What the fuck?!" I whispered angrily from my perch on top of Conrad's chest. In the fading light, I could see that his shoulder was bleeding a bit from where he'd scraped it across the pavement getting me out of harm's way. "What the shit is this?"

"This," Conrad said, sounding remarkably conversational for a guy who was being shot at, "is an ambush. We're lucky I saw the reflection of the guy's scope, as poor as conditions are today."

Lucky. Yeah, I was feeling *super* lucky. "Great, a lazy sniper. That's gonna—*fuck*," I said as another bullet hit the boulder. "Does he think he's going to break the rock or something?"

"He's keeping us pinned down. Maybe because someone is coming to finish us off out here, maybe because he's bored."

"Shit." I hadn't had very many instances of helplessness since Conrad and I started traveling together, but this definitely qualified. "So we just have to wait here until he and his buddies come out and kill us?"

"Of course not. Jesus, what kind of pessimist are you today?" Conrad scoffed. "It's going to be dark in half an hour; he won't be able to see us for long. If he sends people out, I'll hear them coming. Once it's dark, we can—"

"Hop on our bikes and ride off?" I asked hopefully.

"Mm, no. I wish," he added for my sake, but I could tell that he didn't actually wish that. In fact, Conrad looked excited, not upset. Naturally: this was his high, his fun. "No, we don't want to give them such an easy target. Once it's dark I'll go hop the barricade and take them out. Then we can move on without trouble."

This sounded like a not very good plan to me. "There's already trouble, and it probably outnumbers us, and you want to go jump its fence and shit on its grass?" I demanded.

"No. I want to jump its fence, stroll into its house, and stab it through the heart while it's still asleep."

“That’s...” Another bullet hit the rock. I shook my head, trying to clear the ring from it. “That’s a genuinely horrific way to carry the metaphor forward.”

“It’s practical.”

“How is that practical?”

“It saves our ammunition.”

I scowled at him. “Oh no, you’re taking a gun.”

“Javi...”

“Shut up.” I took Gina’s pistol out from where it had probably bruised my kidneys on the roll across the road and shoved it at Conrad. “Seriously. Take it. I’ve still got the shotgun. I’ll be fine.” The Beretta was one of the only guns we still had ammo for; we’d jettisoned the others on the way to save on weight.

“Fine.” He checked the safety, then tucked it into his waistband. “But I won’t need it.”

“So you say.”

“Yep.”

The rain was slackening a bit, but the water we were lying in was just as cold. I started to shiver, and Conrad very carefully pulled me on top of him the rest of the way. It didn’t stop me from being miserable, but it did let me appreciate his warmth a bit better. I curled up and clung to him and breathed tightly against his neck, and Conrad rubbed his hands over my back in gentle circles.

Night fell, and still nobody came out to check on us. After another hour or so, Conrad judged it time to go. He smeared his bright hair with mud, checked his weapons, then stripped out of his shirt. With his purple skin and dark pants, I could barely make him out a foot away. The only really visible parts of him were his eyes, and even then only at the right angle.

“This shouldn’t take too long,” he said. “But in case it does, you carefully—very, very carefully—get on your bike and ride back down the road. Don’t look back, don’t turn around, just go. I’ll follow as soon as I can.”

Well, that made zero sense. “Just... ride away without you, like there isn’t someone with a sniper rifle trained on us right now.”

Conrad winked—honest to god winked at me. “Professional ninja, remember? I can guarantee you I’m taking out that damn sniper.” He looked away and took a slow breath, then eased out from behind the rock. No shots

were taken. Maybe the rain and the dark obscured the view, maybe the sniper had finally gotten bored. Either way, Conrad was gone a moment later, leaving me lying in the mud again, counting seconds under my breath.

I heard gunshots at two hundred and seventy-five seconds, and two separate screams. At least one of the shots was from Gina's gun; I had memorized the sound of it. I didn't know what Conrad's scream would sound like, but I doubted it was one of those. Good, he was probably done then. I waited for another five minutes—nothing. Well, fine, it took him five minutes to get there, maybe it would take a while to get back. I waited another five minutes. Another five...

I gritted my teeth and fluttered my hand beyond the edge of the rock. Nothing, no shot fired. I very cautiously sat upright, still shivering, and glanced at the distant barrier. I couldn't see any movement. I also couldn't see anything that might be Conrad. He might be a jackass, but he wouldn't make me worry for no reason. And I was definitely worrying.

And his advice was *bullshit*. There was no way I could just blithely jump on my bike and ride away into the night, with all our provisions I might add, and leave him to do whatever the fuck it was he was doing. At the very least I needed to check the barricade and make sure he wasn't... that his body wasn't...

"You *asshole*," I snarled as I pushed to my feet. I took a moment to drag both bikes off the road and into the mud and rocks—yeah, they might get mired, but at least they wouldn't be so freaking obvious. Then I grabbed the shotgun—I knew the value of a good shotgun—and a leftover bag of grenades from Gina, then stalked off toward the barricade as well as someone whose limbs are numb with cold could stalk, which probably made me look like I had a stick jammed up my butt. "Goddammit, Conrad, you better be dead." *You better not be dead*, I told myself over and over as I got closer.

The barricade was two cars high, but the windows had been broken out. One man was sitting inside the wheel-less GMC truck above the sign, slumped over a rifle. Well, that was well done at least. I climbed over and dropped down on the other side, and saw two more bodies on the ground. Both were normal humans, and beside one of them was a familiar black machete. Conrad was nowhere to be found.

I could see light in the distance, actual electrical lights. There was no reason to burn those sorts of resources if there wasn't a really good reason. Like, say, capturing a ninja assassin mutant. Fuck.

I didn't know that was what had happened. I could still ride away.

I grabbed one of the dead guy's camouflage jackets—living with Conrad had made me comfortably callous—picked up the machete, and slowly walked toward the town of Page.

Chapter Eight

Cities: Just Don't, Why Would You Even?

Cities. Towns. Organized domiciles. These are sure to bring you nothing but grief.

But Javi, you say, these are the melting pots of humanity! The centers of culture and art and music! These are where innovation happens! Cities were vital to the development of modern society and the industrial revolution! To which I say: oh my god, what world are you living in? What is this vast and lovely city you speak of? Because I came from one of the biggest, and let me tell you, it was an absolute shit-show during the apocalypse. Not just because of so many people muddled together in one place passing *Porphuraviridae* from gaping mouth to gaping mouth. Not just because Los Angeles was the perfect target for missile launches from military bases looking to contain the spread of the disease through drastic culling of the population. Those were both bad, but what happened afterward?

Chaos. Mayhem. Agony. Every bad cliché you can think of when it comes to the rapid breakdown of organized society into dystopian sickness: vandalism, rape, murder, factionalism, people marauding as judge, jury, and executioner against their fellows without compunction. This is what happens when shit goes down and there's no clear-cut leader, and no way to enforce the rule of law. Bloody and fast-moving anarchy.

You think Los Angeles was a fluke? It's gigantic, of course it's going to have its problems, but everything else is just fine and dandy? Think again. Gina and Phin and I passed dozens of little towns on our way out of L.A., and they were all the same: either unpopulated and drenched in gore, or populated and inhabited by people who were looking to become gods. I saw sick, sick shit on our way to the desert, crucifixions and decapitations and way more Bible verses than I ever wanted to be conversant in. Even Gina's family ranch was no break from the norm, not a bastion of welcome but a seething cesspit of intolerance.

Apocalypse survival tip number eight is this: stay out of cities. Cities suck.

The day after we raced away from the whatever's that invaded our camp, Gina decided to brave the nearest town in search of medical supplies. It was a ridiculous hope; Phin was unresponsive now, barely able to keep water down. You didn't have to be a doctor to know that he wasn't long for this world. I

tried to convince her otherwise, but she was determined to do everything possible for Phin, and in the end she went into the little town by herself.

There were no screams. No gunshots. Nothing, for two hours, while I sat with Phin and kept him in the shade, tried to get his temperature down, resolutely didn't look at his leg and covered my upper lip with menthol Chap Stick to block the smell. Two hours, and I was starting to fear the worst when Gina came back. She came back, and she was furious with me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she shouted as soon as she was within arm's reach, pulling me to my feet and shaking me. We were the same height, but Gina was stronger than me, and it was all I could do to hold on and get taken for a ride.

"Tell you what? What, fucking *what*, Gina, stop it!"

"Tell me *this*!" She dragged me in close and pointed at her eyes. "Why didn't you tell me *this*?"

I was about to protest again, to claim I saw nothing and didn't know what she was talking about, but then I did see. Beneath the bloodshot red, I saw it. Yellow. "Oh no," I breathed. Now that I knew it was there I saw the other signs, the dark circles under her eyes I'd attributed to fatigue, the mottling around her temples and lips. Gina had dark-brown skin, but I saw the change now. "I didn't know. Not until... right now, I didn't know." She must have seen her reflection in a store window or a mirror. No wonder she was freaked out.

Her face crumpled, and Gina shoved me away from her, and away from Phin. She sank down to the ground next to him and wept, and kicked dirt at me when I tried to get close enough to comfort her. It was the middle of the day, the sun was high and brutal, and we needed to move, to get Phin somewhere more comfortable, to keep going. Instead we sat on the outskirts of that doomed town until nightfall.

Shitty places, cities. And here I was, prancing headlong toward another one. Well, not prancing. Trudging, more like. But I had no real choice. I needed Conrad. I needed him to survive. Yeah, I could bike away now, and yeah there was enough food left that I could ration myself along for quite a ways, but that wasn't enough. I couldn't live like that. Or rather, I could be alive, but the failure to go after Conrad would haunt me, I knew it. I wasn't over Phase One; there was no way I'd recover from a botched Phase Two to hop into Phase Three without a backward glance. No. Not happening. Not unless Conrad was dead and I got proof of it.

Page wasn't a large city. It had probably held no more than ten thousand people before the virus, and it, like everywhere else, hadn't been spared. The inhabitants I could see were clustered around the lights in the middle, one of them a street lamp that was set up to run off a solar panel while everything else was...

Christmas lights. Strings of Christmas lights hooked up to a generator. My family hadn't been huge into Christmas: my dad was Jewish and my mother preferred the solemnity of church to the consumerism of decoration, but we'd always put a string of Christmas lights over the windows in our living room during the holidays, the kind that blinked in different colors. Some of these were like that. Others were ice blue, or plain white. There were a lot of them, though, and the space they illuminated was covered with various cheap chairs and a few makeshift stands surrounding a deep pit that I was too far from to see into. I could hear the snarls, though. Something was in there.

I darted behind the corner of a gas station pump and stared out into the misty rain for a moment, away from the people. My heart wanted to catapult right out of my chest, and I thought I might be sick. Something was down there. What if it was Conrad? How could I get past a dozen people to haul him up?

A second look told me that, oh thank fuck, at least that something in the pit wasn't Conrad. He was on his knees, his hands tied behind his back. I couldn't tell if he was bleeding or not, but I had to guess that he was at least wounded. Otherwise he wouldn't have been in that position.

I could make out the sounds of arguing from where I was, but not exactly what was being said. One way or another, I needed to get closer. Thank god it was getting dark. As long as none of them had Conrad's freaky mutant hearing, I should be all right. I could get close, and then... then...

Then I'd be facing twelve armed people with a shotgun, a machete, and some noisemakers. That sounded like a bad place to be, but maybe I'd get lucky. Maybe they'd all get startled and just... I don't know... fall into the pit en masse.

No. That wasn't going to happen. I needed a better plan, and I was starting to get a headache, the smell of gasoline was so strong right here. I wrinkled my nose and started to move away, then stopped and stared at the pump I was standing beside. The smell of gasoline? It had been so long since I'd scented it I hadn't even recognized it at first. I gingerly tried the pump—nothing. But then where was the smell coming from?

I carefully crept into the gas station, and immediately I almost cried with joy. Stacked along the walls in jugs, kegs, any container that could be had, was gasoline. The pump had been drained, and apparently anarchy didn't reign quite supreme here because someone was in charge of this store of gassy goodness. This was a beautiful cache of flammable fantastitude, a prepper's wet dream. I could only imagine why they hadn't moved it somewhere more secure: maybe there was nothing to worry about, from their perspective? Maybe they were all family, a little inbred cabal like Gina's people? Maybe they had to keep it in a public space to keep everyone honest about its use?

Whatever, I didn't really care. With this I could go gas up one of those cars, then come in and ram some fuckers. I could make Molotov cocktails, throw some grenades that would do some *real* damage.

Or, I could go big. In the end, it wasn't a hard decision.

Gasoline, wow. Fun stuff. One of my cousins accidentally set me on fire with gasoline once, during a family barbecue gone wrong. It singed the hair off my right arm and left the skin red, but I got off lucky. When this stuff goes up, it goes *fast*. And when you open a jug of it, pour the contents all over the rest of the cache, then stand as far away as your pathetic ability to aim a grenade will let you and chuck it into the store...

Let's just say, I knew to run. And five seconds later, I was still running when the *BOOM-whoosh* of the explosion rocketed forth from the ruins of the gas station. Needless to say, the inhabitants of Page went running in the opposite direction: toward the explosion.

I doubled around a building across the street, then headed over to where Conrad had been left on his own, totally unattended and looking over his shoulder at the mess I'd made with a stupefied expression. He went even more dumbfounded when I dropped down next to him, pulled out the machete and sawed at the rope binding his hands. It fell away after a second, and I spared a moment to look him over in the warm glow of the firelight. "Are you okay?"

"What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

"Yeah, you're welcome, you asshole. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said automatically. "They only got me once, couldn't even bother to make it a head shot."

"You've been shot?" I reached out to inspect him for myself, but Conrad shook his head.

“It’s fine, it’ll keep. We have to get out of here.” He stood up, and I stood with him. I could see the silhouettes of the people who’d kidnapped him in the distance, yelling at each other and trying fruitlessly to stop the burn. Ha, that wouldn’t be going out any time soon. Then, naturally, I looked the other direction: down, to see what was in the pit.

I shouldn’t have looked. I shouldn’t have, oh god, I shouldn’t. The pit was deep, maybe twice my height, and about twice my body’s length across. There was one living person in it, and the remains of, oh, a dozen others? The person—mutant—glared up at us balefully, its clawed hands groping at the edge of the pit. I couldn’t tell if it was male or female or something else, it had changed so dramatically.

“Holy fuck,” I whispered.

“Yeah, not good. Now we need to—*down!*” He shoved me to the ground even as he smoothly brought the shotgun up to bear on the man charging at us and wildly firing the pistol in his hand. Thank god the guy was inaccurate when he was pissed because all the bullets missed. Conrad’s blast, however, struck home right in the center of the guy’s chest and turned it inside out.

I fell hard, and rolled into an aluminum chair that had presumably been set up for viewing whatever monstrosities happened in the pit. The chair was light, and it tumbled right over the edge. I managed to stop myself before I followed it.

“Get up!”

“Fuck, I’m up,” I said as I stood with a groan. More people were noticing us now, and behind us in the pit I heard the sudden creak of cheap aluminum. I turned to look behind me, and saw the very tips of those claws appear. “Oh shit, Conrad—” I turned to tell him to save the other shot, but he was already firing at our next pursuer. The woman—I was pretty sure it was a woman, hard to tell through the heavy jacket—went down as well, and then Conrad tossed the shotgun aside, grabbed my hand and started to run.

I followed.

Chapter Nine

Mother Nature Is A Bitch

I know, I know, I'm impossible to please. I don't like cities, and now—what, I don't like the great outdoors either? For god's sake, you might say to me, is there anything you do like, Javi?

Yeah, sure there is. I like roads, for starters. I like long, straight roads that give you good visibility in many, many directions while offering you the speediest route of passage across the enormity that is America. I like brief stretches of forest that offer cover from potential assailants, but don't go so far as to be wilderness. I like warm, safe places to sleep and companions I can trust. I like having a goal, and I like getting closer and closer to that goal every day. I like having a *plan*, and nothing fucks with a plan like Mother Nature.

You can't blame some people for thinking that the Purple Plague heralded the start of the Rapture. All sorts of crazies come out of the woodwork when faced with an epidemic of such proportions, and as we started to lose functionality as a nation, Mother Nature seemed to step up her attacks as well. Hurricanes hit the East Coast, pretty much obliterating everything from Miami to the Jersey Shore that hadn't already been taken out with bombing. Tornadoes ripped across the Midwest, and the massive impact of the missiles in L.A. prompted an earthquake that had as much as a quarter-mile of coastline sinking into the sea. It was shit.

It's not just the big things, though. The little things grind away at you after a while, things that you used to be able to find respite from. The heat of the sun, the dampness of the rain, the penetrating blast of the wind in your face. Without shelter, without a vehicle, without electricity... there's no escape from these things. They make you desperate, stupid, and afraid. They encourage you to do dumb things. I honestly don't know if Gina would have succumbed to grief and horror at her transformation if the weather hadn't been so fucking terrible the day we buried Phin. Survival tip number nine: nature will do it's best to screw with you at all times, so mind your p's and q's.

It was one of those hundred-plus degree days when all you want to do is lie around in an air-conditioned room and watch trashy television. There wasn't a breath of air moving, and even before dawn the air seemed crisp around the edges, casting mirages everywhere you looked. It was still, and quiet, and both

of us knew the moment Phin stopped breathing. The steady, hoarse whisper of breath creeping from his lungs halted, and the sudden silence was unnerving.

“No,” Gina said, leaning over Phin. He wasn’t flushed anymore, his face pale except for two bright spots of color highlighting his cheekbones, which were already fading. “No no, no...” She touched his face, his throat, laid her head across his chest. Her eyes were wide as she waited, just waited, for it to rise again, to lift her head and her spirits. “No,” she repeated. “No.”

There wasn’t much I could say at this point other than, “I’m sorry.” And I said it over and over, a helpless harmony to her noes. We sat there for an hour until the sun rose over the horizon. Finally I said, “Gina, we have to bury him.”

“Bury Phin...”

“Yes.” I wasn’t good at dealing with grief, and I had too much of my own to be as kind as I maybe should have been. “We have to bury Phin. Soon.”

“Right.” I was stupidly relieved by her sudden agreement. “Right, we have to bury him. We need to dig a hole.”

“Right.” We were well away from the town at this point, and I had a trowel for digging for... well... you know. Personal business. “We do.” We picked a spot near a little trickle of a stream a few hundred yards away. I got the trowel, and Gina picked up a rock, and we spent the rest of the day—from morning through the afternoon—digging a grave. It was slow going, the soil hard and scanty. I took a few breaks to rehydrate and tried to get Gina to do the same, but she wouldn’t stop.

By late afternoon, we had a decently deep hole. We laid Phin down in it together, and I looked at him for a long time. No more green eyes and bright smile, no more jokes and affectionate hugs. No more of what had made Phase One as bearable as it had been. Things would be rough with just me and Gina, but I thought we’d manage. I hoped we would.

“It’s better this way,” Gina said at last.

“Why?”

“Because he didn’t have to live to see me become a monster.”

I reached for her shoulder, but she jerked away. “You’re not going to be a monster.”

“I’m infected, Javi. I’m *changing*.”

“It’s going to be okay,” I told her earnestly. “It’s not a death sentence! So you’re changing, that’s okay. We’ll adapt. You’ll make it, Gina.”

She finally looked at me. Her irises were just starting to glimmer with the plague’s telltale yellow. “It’s sweet that you think that,” she said. “You’re a sweet guy.” I didn’t quite know how to handle that: Gina never complimented me. “Give me a little time alone?”

“Sure.” I could do that. She needed space, a little privacy to say good-bye. I walked back to the bikes and emptied my canteen in four long swallows, shaded my eyes against the glare and turned around just in time to watch Gina’s body slump forward into the hole. My ears caught up a moment later, the sound of the gunshot ringing loud. I ran toward her, but I already knew it was too late.

Back then I’d run for someone else’s life: now I was running for my own. Survival tip number six was coming in really handy right now: I was able to keep pace with Conrad despite being shorter and less ripped, but I wouldn’t be able to forever, and I had no idea what the game plan was.

“Where are we going?” I shouted as we raced along. I could hear people shouting in the distance but no more gunshots.

“The river!” he replied. “We’ll swim across, get a barrier between us and them!”

“Where’s the fucking river?”

“A mile away, so shut up and run!” And I did.

I heard the river before I saw it, roaring in the distance. Oh, naturally. The weather had been nothing but dry, dry, dry for weeks and now, today of all days, we’d had a fucking downpour. The water was high and fierce, and we were going to swim across it in the dark? Hell no.

“We can’t,” I gasped when we reached the embankment. I could see dark shapes go swirling past—branches, other sorts of detritus dislodged and sent downstream in the flood. “We won’t make it across. We can just go along the side for a while and find somewhere to hide!”

“Javi.” Conrad gripped my face in his hands and stared at me. “We have to do this now. We’re being followed.”

“We can hide from a group of—”

“We’re being followed by the mutant.”

“What?” That didn’t make sense. “Why would it come after us? If anything it should go after the assholes who kept it captive!”

“It’s been conditioned to fight and consume its own kind! Why do you think they bothered to leave me alive instead of killing me at the barricade? They wanted to turn me into a show. Fucking pricks couldn’t do *one* goddamn thing right,” he muttered, confusing me. Before I could ask, he continued. “We have to swim because it’s getting closer, and we’re out of guns. It’s just you and me and a machete, and I don’t like those odds.” He’d probably like them better if I wasn’t around to protect, the prick. “So we swim across.” He looked over my shoulder and grimaced. “We swim *right now*. I’ll help you, come on.” He tugged me after him into the water.

God, it was cold. Even compared to the pool of muck I’d been lying in an hour ago, this water was cold. I shivered so hard my teeth rattled in my skull, but I managed to coordinate my limbs enough that I could swim, after a fashion. The current was strong enough that we were swept downstream faster than we went across, but we were making progress. Conrad kept himself upstream of me, taking the initial impact from whatever was coming at us, and I wrapped one hand around his belt and used the other to paddle. We were getting there. We’d make it.

I didn’t expect to feel clawed fingers latch around my ankle, jerking me backward. My head went under, but I kept my hold on Conrad, kicking backward with my free foot in an effort to scrape the claws off. They dug in tighter, pricking holes in my skin, and I needed to scream, but that would be the end of me, and I wanted to live. I wanted so much to live.

Hands found my armpits and pulled my head forcibly out of the water. I coughed, the flood of water in my ears making me dizzy, and barely heard Conrad say, “—is it, Javi, what’s—*shit*.” Suddenly he was going in the other direction, the *wrong* direction, and I wanted to yell at him, but I didn’t have the breath for it because I went under again, the claws pulling me back. Only this time, I wasn’t fighting back alone.

The hand that held me clenched so tight for a moment I thought my ankle might break before the tension unexpectedly relaxed. I surfaced again and was shoved hard in the direction of shore as Conrad lifted the dark machete out of the water before scything it across the face of the mutant who was following us. It emerged from the water like a nightmare, sharp teeth gaping even wider as Conrad cut it through the mouth. It reached for him, but his second blow sliced

open its throat. Black blood gushed forth and melded with the frothing river water.

I needed not to see this. I needed to be on relatively dry land. I turned and began to swim again, feebly, so exhausted that I barely knew which way was up. I could see the shore, I could see it. I was going to... I had to...

A branch I didn't see coming clocked me in the side of the head. I felt one brief moment of crunching pain, and blacked out before I could do more than register the fact that I was about to drown.

Chapter Ten

Don't Break My Heart

At this point, I've laid out most of the tips I think you need to successfully navigate the apocalypse. Physical and mental health, advance preparation, choosing your companions wisely and knowing when to walk away, or when to *sprint* away from a bad situation. This last one is the most... well, ephemeral, I guess, and it's also the one where I've failed the most spectacularly.

Some people are naturally good at closing off certain parts of themselves while they open up others. Actors, politicians, and anyone used to dealing in the public sphere without going crazy are all examples. These are people who can compartmentalize, do one thing in one sphere while believing something completely different, or reshape themselves to new circumstances without the kind of soul-crushing angst that a lot of us go through. Getting a divorce? Getting fired? Losing everything you've ever known and being forced to adapt on the fly to a whole new world? You got it!

I'm not trying to insinuate that these people don't have genuine emotions; I'm just saying that they know how to keep them in check in order to come out ahead in whatever situation they find themselves in. This is the kind of person I've always aspired to be. I used jokes to combat feelings of vulnerability as a kid in my family; I used distance to deal with the same as an adult. The world fell apart, but I still had Gina and Phin, and Phase One was going to work and everything was going to work out all right.

Phin dying, well... I'd had some time to prepare for that, as awful as it sounds. I knew it was coming and it was tragic, but I knew I could go on. At the very least I could go on for Gina's sake because she'd need my help. She'd give me purpose because she'd rely on me, and I could rely on her. When she killed herself, honestly, there were a few hours there where I seriously debated whether or not it wouldn't just be better to follow her.

She broke my heart. She broke it because I left it wide open, because I gave her too much space in it, and she didn't *want* it. In the end, Gina didn't want it. It wasn't enough. And sure, maybe my perspective is selfish, and she had a lot going on, but you remember my cautionary tale back in tip number one? This is the motherfucking consequence of that tip. It *ruins* you if you let it, *they* will ruin you if you let them, these arrogant assholes who don't care enough about

the wreck they're going to leave behind as long as they get their sweet oblivion. *Fuck* them. *Fuck* that. Survival tip number ten, and nobody's joking here: it's not just about *your* survival. You've got more power than you realize over the people around you. Think about that before you go irreparably damaging them.

I wasn't going to go through that pain again for anybody, but I wasn't capable of closing my heart off completely either. Conrad wormed his way in with his stupid smirks and his awful singing and the way he'd smile when I made a bad pun. He'd cemented his place when he'd listened to me read Shakespeare without complaining, or let me touch him with gentleness and desire, and touched me back the same way. Conrad was in my heart, and his death would have shattered it. That was why I couldn't leave him to die.

That was why I had to come back, too. I wanted to *live*, not just for myself but for him. I couldn't let a little thing like a concussion and swallowing down a gallon of rank river water be the end of me, not even for the promise of peace. It surprised me not at all when the darkness receded from my vision, my ears began to hear again, and my stomach convulsed as I brought back up all that water with the help of Conrad's huge hands slamming against my diaphragm.

"There you go," he said, rolling me over onto my side so I could throw the water up easier. "There, easy does it, Javi, Jesus... You've got it, you're okay." He kept his hands on me, one on my shoulder and the other on my back. I took a huge shuddering breath, making my whole ribcage ache. My head throbbed with brutal pain, and I was seeing double, but I was alive. I'd take all the pain in exchange for that.

"There you go," Conrad repeated, bending over and kissing the very edge of my ear, stupidly careful now considering he'd just been beating on my chest like a drum. "You're going to be okay, I promise. Fuck, Javi, you can't do that. You're not supposed to die." His voice was thick and bitter. "Why didn't you just ride away? Jesus Christ."

I wanted to point out the whole system of reciprocity we were supposed to have going on, but I was too busy coughing to do it. Also... little things were coming together in my fractured head, flashes of insight that I was usually too obtuse to let through. Conrad had told me to ride away, to leave him behind. He'd almost certainly be dead if I had, but that didn't seem to bother him. He'd been disappointed earlier, actually angry, over the fact that he *hadn't* been shot in the head. He wanted me to live, but he didn't seem to care if he did.

I thought his mission was to protect me, and to get me to where I was going. Apparently I was wrong, or at least I didn't have the full picture. That was

unacceptable, and I'd be dealing with it as soon as I figured out why I couldn't really move my ankle. I craned my neck down to look at my foot, and saw that there was a *hand* attached to it. A severed hand. Attached to my foot.

Horror flooded through me, and I forgot my pains as I started to thrash, desperate to get that fucking thing *off* of me.

"Javi, calm down."

"Don't—fucking—tell me," I gasped, "to calm—down! Get it off, get it—off, get it—"

"Get what—oh." He actually sounded surprised, like he'd somehow missed the enormous clawed purple appendage stuck on my ankle. Maybe he had; he'd been pretty intent on bringing me back. "Stop kicking, I'll get it, I'll get it." He leaned down and pried the fingers apart, and I got my first good look at Conrad since we'd gone into the river. The rain had stopped and the moon was out, and I could just make out the fresh cut that spanned his face from cheek to cheek, right across his nose. But where was the bullet wound? I struggled to sit up while he finished detaching the hand, then reached for him. I needed to verify that he was really as whole as he looked.

"I'm fine," he assured me. "Javi, I'm okay."

"Said you were—shot."

"It was just a graze," and there was that bitterness again. "Across my arm, here." He laid one of my seeking hands against his bicep. "Right above where your hand is. It was enough to make me lose my grip on the Beretta. I took a hit to the head, and it brought me down for long enough that they managed to tie me up and walk me to their murder pit. And my head is fine," he added before I could ask. "It's your head you should be worried about."

"It's nothing." Actually it was definitely something; I felt a little sick from the pain of the headache, but I had to get this out in the open. "Did you want them to kill you?"

Conrad went very still. "Javi..."

"Do you want to die?"

"Now isn't the time," Conrad said briskly. "We need to get back to the bikes and see if there's anything left to salvage. Or rather, I do. You stay here and—"

"Fuck you!" I yelled, and instantly regretted it, the pain cranking up to an eleven out of ten for a second. I pressed my hands to my forehead and bent forward, retching as the nausea overwhelmed me.

Conrad moved in close and put his hands on my back again, encouraged me to get up as much of the water as I could, told me, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry,” I said at last, sounding terribly pathetic at the moment but not really caring. I let Conrad pull me back into his arms and turned to press my cheek against his bare chest, still so warm despite everything. I listened to his heartbeat, beautiful and regular, and felt a stab of panic at the thought of never hearing it again. “Tell me why you want to die.” Because I knew he did. And now he knew I knew.

Conrad was silent for a long time, and for once I was too tired to needle the truth out of him. I wasn’t going to give in, though, and he knew that too. Eventually he said, “After my father died, my mother turned the company over to my sister and me. Melissa took on the international side of things, and I worked the domestic front. I was... not overtly out of the closet, since I did a lot of business with the military, but there were people who knew. One of them was a former commander of mine, who went on to be the general in charge of operations at Fort Hood. He was also—very occasionally—my lover.”

Conrad sighed. “Freddie was an organized man; he did everything by the book. He was reliable and just creative enough to be a good commander, and when he asked me to redirect a couple of the weapons shipments Temple Armament had coming into Fort Hood a few weeks after the virus began to spread, I didn’t think very much of it. It wasn’t strictly legal, but with everything in a state of upheaval everywhere I figured he had a good reason for it.”

He snorted. “I was wrong. Naturally. Freddie had been one of the first wave of the infected, and he was about to be removed from his post. He’d become paranoid, and he thought all of his staff were working against him.

“I basically handed him twenty MGM-140 short range ballistic missiles, without any accountability. When the 13th Sustainment Command, supplemented by National Guard troops, went to secure the refineries in Houston, Freddie... I don’t know. Lost his mind? Thought they were going to cut off access to the oil? Nobody knows for sure, but we do know that he ordered a bombardment with the missiles he wasn’t supposed to have access to. The refineries were destroyed, and my niece was a casualty.”

Oh... shit. That was... shit. I didn’t know what to say, but I didn’t have to. Conrad kept going, doggedly, like if he didn’t get it all out now he wouldn’t be able to at all. “He wasn’t the only paranoid military commander to strike at his

own troops, but he was the first. My sister and I circled the wagons at our company headquarters in Arizona.”

“Near where you found me,” I said, remembering Conrad in his three-piece suit.

“Yeah. We were pretty well equipped, so I figured we could wait it out.” His arms tightened around me. “It took months, but finally one of Freddie’s attachés got a message to us, let us know what had happened to Evie, and how. It didn’t take much brainpower to figure out what had happened. I had to confess to Melissa what I did, how I had lied and given Freddie what he needed to kill her daughter. I thought she would kill me when she found out. I wanted her to.”

“What did she do instead?” I finally prompted him after it didn’t seem like he was going to continue.

“She made me leave,” he said quietly. “Told me to get out; that she hated me, and I couldn’t be trusted. She had her people drop me in the middle of a heavy infection zone, so I was sure to catch the virus if I could. She said...” his voice wavered a little now. “She said if there was any honor in me at all, then I would die taking out someone who was worse than me, or saving someone who was better. That it was the least I could do to try to make reparations for my mistakes.”

I was stunned. Stunned and livid, and the two battled it out in my brain as I tried to wrap my head around it all. Conrad, the idiotic mission-oriented person so wracked with guilt that he was, was *literally* trying to die for me. *Me*. When all I wanted him to do was live, all he wanted to do was die. No wonder he’d been pissed about the head shot.

Whereas I was pissed at his sister, and when livid won the fight, all I could say was, “What a *bitch*.”

“I got her daughter killed.”

“No, you didn’t. You made a mistake that fed into a whole string of other stupid decisions, but you didn’t fire fucking... whatever those are... missiles at an *oil refinery*.”

Conrad shook his head. “You don’t understand.”

“Fine.” I was exhausted, too tired to argue it out right now even though I wanted to. There weren’t enough words for how fucked up I thought what his sister had done was, actually, and how awful I considered her to be, but clearly

she and Conrad's responsibility compasses had a different true north than mine. I didn't have to win that fight right now, but I did have to make one very particular point. "I don't understand. But I know, I *know*, that I won't make it without you. I won't. I can't."

"You're smart; you can make it to the Cochetopa Hills if you're careful."

I stared at him in consternation. "How did you know that's where we're going?"

Conrad kissed the top of my head. "You sleep talk."

Jesus, who else would think that was adorable rather than intensely annoying? "You can't leave me. It'll break me. Your original mission is shit, you need to stick to the deal we made. Travel with me. *Stay* with me, Conrad. I'll never be better off without you, never, I won't. I can't be."

"What about when I turn into that?" He gestured toward the severed hand. "You think you'll be better off once I'm a raving monster who doesn't even look human anymore?"

"You're so fucking dramatic," I huffed. "That person was tortured. I'm not gonna torture you. Except with the occasional sonnet, maybe." I looked up at him. "We don't know how far the mutation is going to go with you. Neither of us know, but there's every chance you'll stay just like you are now. The changes *Porphuraviridae* makes vary from person to person, so don't you dare pretend like you're going to become *that*. You could stay exactly as you are, or you could grow a fucking tail, I don't know, and I would *still* want you around."

Conrad went quiet again, processing. At least this time I was fairly sure he wasn't going to come back with an argument about killing himself for my sake because that was as close to a declaration of intent that I could come without frightening him, probably. I knew what I felt, a sweet, warm feeling wrapped up in everything that Conrad was to me and tucked into the very center of my heart. I didn't have to say it to know it was true.

And then, of course, he had to go and one-up me.

"Doubt thou the stars are fire," he murmured against my forehead. "Doubt that the sun doth move. Doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love."

"Oh my god." I stared at him for a second, then weakly punched his arm. "You've been reading *Hamlet* without me!"

"Just one more thing to do on the mornings you sleep late."

“When? After your morning jerk-off session?”

“Sometimes at the same time.”

“You’re so disgusting,” I informed him. “Debasing the Bard like that. And yet, I *still* want you around. What does that tell you, you idiot?”

“That I guess I should stay with you.”

“Damn straight.”

It wasn’t the last word, of course. Not by a longshot because Conrad was an emotionally constipated idiot, and we both might die tomorrow when we went to retrieve the bikes, not to mention all the bacteria I’d ingested. I’d very likely get sick, maybe really sick, but I’d fight to survive whatever happened to me next. Because I wanted to live, damn it.

I wanted both of us to live, and keep on living, for as long as we possibly could.

Epilogue

Home Base

For me, surviving the apocalypse has been all about movement. It's been setting goals and going places and doing things and getting by, sometimes by the skin of my teeth, but making it. I survived Phin's death and Gina's suicide. I survived marauding beasts and inaccurate snipers and near drownings. I survived the infection that followed, even though it laid me on my back for a week and drove Conrad slightly crazy with worry. Actually making it to the Cochetopa Hills of Colorado, near the little town of Saguache where my grandfather had kept his post-office box, was almost frightening.

It shouldn't have been, right? That was the ultimate goal, the destination at hand, the end game: make it to the cabin. Reunite with my family. Live to see another day, another week, another year. It was funny, how my priorities had changed since Phase One. Because now I had Conrad, and as important as the concept of "home" had been to my mental and emotional health over the past year and a half, Conrad had somehow superseded the cabin in terms of importance. There was home, and for me it was objectively a place but *subjectively* a person. If things went badly, if we got there and what happened with Gina's family happened with mine... well, no. I wasn't going to let that happen to us. We'd walk away, find a new place together.

Not that I was telling Conrad that. He didn't need my uncertainty on top of the heaping pile that was his own.

"It's going to be fine," I said, scratching my fingers through his hair as we looked down on my grandfather's cabin from the hills just south of it. Conrad's hair grew incredibly fast, already down past his shoulders in the three months since it replaced the blond. His face had mostly healed from its slash mark, and a few weeks spent fishing and stuffing himself with protein had gone a long way toward taking him from wiry up to comfortably muscular. His claws might be a little sharper, his skin might be a more royal shade of purple, but the changes had pretty much leveled out a month ago. "They're gonna be happy to see us."

"You're not even sure they're going to be happy to see *you*," Conrad pointed out, but he didn't sound angry, just resigned. He pressed his head a little harder into my hand, and I pulled him in close and kissed the back of his neck.

“I mean, yeah, it’s a little iffy, but that’s my Aunt Rommie’s car, and if she’s here she’ll be on our side. She’s always liked me.” Rommie was the black sheep of my mother’s family, insofar as a girl who got a law degree and became a district attorney for the city of Atlanta could be a black sheep. We really had always gotten along well, and I’d kept her girls in Black Widow and Miss Marvel gear every birthday until right before the start of the viral outbreak.

The other bright spot—or maybe not, but I didn’t really know what to think about it—was that Rommie’s was the *only* car there. Which meant that maybe she was the only one who’d made it here with her family. I didn’t want my parents to be dead, but I didn’t want to fight with them either, and if they were here I inevitably would. But I didn’t want to think about that.

“They’ll be happy,” I insisted quietly, keeping my lips close to Conrad’s neck. I knew my breath tickled him, but he let me stay there anyway as I spun out a fairytale ending for us. “Happy to see me and happy to meet you, and they’ll have plenty of food and a room for us, with an actual bed. Can you imagine fucking on an actual bed? The only thing that could make that better is some real goddamn lube, which I’m pretty sure my grandpa didn’t stock, but there might be a shit-ton of Vaseline.” I felt him quiver with a faint laugh, the kind that resonated through his chest without ever quite making it out his mouth. I smiled to myself.

“And there’ll be food, and we can hunt and fish and make life easier for them in return, and it’ll be a family for us. More of a family, I mean.” Because I already had the most important member of my family right here, and Conrad might as well not have any but me. “It’ll work out.”

“Maybe it will.” He still didn’t sound convinced, and I couldn’t blame him. I was going to say more, but then the door to the cabin opened, and my cousin Jamila came running out, holding a stick in one hand and what looked like a baseball in the other. I smiled so hard my cheeks hurt. “Oh god, she’s okay.” Jamila was the older one, eight to her little sister’s seven. I still couldn’t quite relax though, because even though Jamie had survived that was no assurance that her sister had. Except—

“Come on, Maria!” Jamie called back into the house. A moment later another little girl joined her, one with skin a few shades lighter than Conrad’s, and curling silvery white hair. My heart stuttered in my chest for a moment as I realized it was Maria, only changed. Mutated. Alive, despite that.

“Gimme the bat, you throw for me first,” Maria instructed her sister. They began to play, and for a long time all Conrad and I could do was watch.

“Well.” I cleared my throat. “I think our odds just got a little better.”

“Yeah.” Conrad sounded dazed. “They maybe did, Javi.”

I turned his face to mine and kissed his open mouth, and he responded beautifully, more fierce and eager than he’d been for days, ever since we crossed the Colorado border. “Let’s go find out,” I said at last, pulling back and staring into his bright-yellow eyes. He smiled, and it just made him more beautiful, sharp teeth and all.

“Let’s.”

The End

Test Your Readiness with the Apocalypse Survival Assessment Quiz!

(This is not to be taken too seriously.)

Scenario #1:

You're riding down the burned-out road on your pink Huffy bicycle when ahead of you, you see a man in the middle of the pavement surrounded by bodies. He's holding a gun in one hand and a machete in the other. What do you do?

- a) Ride on by with your eyes on the ground and hope he doesn't shoot you in the back and rape your corpse.
- b) Take him out from a distance with your mad sniper skills because this guy is obviously crazy and can't be trusted.
- c) Strike up a conversation with the intent of kicking his ass *mano a mano* and snagging his sunglasses, 'cause you could sure use a pair.
- d) Strike up a conversation and end up accepting his offer to join you on your terrible, horrible, no good, very bad adventure because fuck it, it's better than being alone.

Scenario #2:

You've been feeling a little poorly for the past few days. It might just be a cold, but it also might be the Purple Plague getting its claws into you. Nobody else in your group has noticed yet. What's your move?

- a) Ignore it and hope it goes away on its own. Ignorance is bliss, after all.
- b) Don't flaunt anything, but don't hide it either. Someone wants to confront you about this? They can tell you straight to your damn face.
- c) Tell a friend and get them to help cover for you. If it gets better, everybody's happy! If not, hey, at least no one jumped to any conclusions and tried to shank you in your sleep.
- d) Fess up to everyone, throw yourself upon their mercy, and hope that they're all patient and understanding with you.

Scenario #3:

You have some unexpected downtime and want to spend it doing something fun! What tickles your fancy?

- a) Read quietly to yourself, or play a game of solitaire or something. You're an expert at amusing yourself by this point, why bother anyone else?
- b) See if anyone wants to play poker—you promise not to beat the pants off them with your brilliant ability to bluff!
- c) Challenge the nominal leader to an arm wrestling match. If you're the leader, challenge your second in command. You've got to keep these people on their toes, after all.
- d) Go with the flow. Yeah, sure, maybe they're playing soccer, and you can't run for shit, but perhaps they need a goalie? After all, there's no I in TEAM.

Scenario #4:

You notice that there's a bit of a body funk in the air—not to point any fingers, but someone and maybe several someones hasn't cleaned up in a while. You:

- a) Ensure that it isn't you making that smell. You can only really be responsible for yourself.
- b) Play a covert game of telephone: “Hey, you fucking stink, pass it on,” and consider your civic duty done.
- c) Find the worst offender and call them out on it. People need to lead by example, after all.
- d) Organize a mass washing. Because, quite frankly, you could all stand to be more cleanly and now isn't the time to be a shrinking violet.

Scenario #5:

People are so fucking annoying sometimes. How do you deal with the aggravation that comes from surviving the apocalypse with this motley crew?

- a) It's called meditation, and you're the master of it. You've even worked out the perfect mantra: “Oooooommmmy god, don't die. Oooooommmmy god, don't die.”
- b) Target practice. Guns, throwing knives, slingshots, whatever. You get something out of it, and everybody else gets the idea that they should *not* fuck with you.

c) Make a list of all the things that piss you off. Get everybody in your party to read it. Quiz them on it occasionally because it's constantly evolving, and you wouldn't want someone to fall behind.

d) You know what relaxes you better than anything? Orgasms. By yourself, with someone else, anything works. It's a twenty-four hour quick fix, baby.

Scenario #6:

Survival is all about mobility. Staying fit, staying ready, staying on top with the tools you need to get around. How do you keep yourself on the cutting edge of preparedness?

a) You bike. You do it every day. You don't need special exercises—you spend all damn day on your goddamn bike. That is fitness incarnate.

b) Push-ups, sit-ups, wind sprints... you take care of you. If you're faster than the person next to you, then you're going to be smiling tomorrow while they're something else's dinner.

c) Here's what happens when your bike falls to pieces and you need to move things along: you break out the litter, and get your peons to carry you down the road. Good for them, good for you.

d) The soccer ball fell over a cliff, but how about partner yoga? Especially now that you're so clean?

Scenario #7:

You're not particularly superstitious, but you've got your little rituals here and there, things that you think just might keep you lucky. What's your lucky habit?

a) You count all your fingers and toes every night, and give quiet thanks that you still have the same number you started with.

b) You've taught yourself to wake up at the drop of a hat. Nobody's gonna catch you with your pants down.

c) You know what's lucky? Getting other people to take the risks on your behalf. That's called delegation, bitches.

d) It's share and share alike here, so your luck *is* my luck. Cooperation means that we all benefit from Fortune's smile.

Scenario #8:

How do you feel about large groups of people? How much do you *trust* large groups of people? Could you make a place for yourself in the postapocalyptic commune?

- a) You're quiet as a mouse. You wouldn't mind being part of a bigger group, as long as it didn't make anyone think that they could take advantage of you.
- b) Abso-fucking-lutely not. Having companions for travel is one thing, but you settling down and learning to deal with a bunch of assholes on a forever timescale is about as likely as another nuclear war—wait, on second thought, don't take that bet.
- c) You love large groups of people. Why? It's called charisma, and you've got it in spades. You think you'd like to be called god-king of all you survey.
- d) Sure, why not? We've got to restart civilization somehow, that means finding ways to get along and work the kinks out.

Scenario #9:

There's an awful lot of wilderness in America, and it's just getting wilder. How are you at handling the wild part of the west?

- a) You prefer to avoid conflict whenever possible, whether it's with people or with Mother Nature. You are a leaf on the motherfucking wind, okay?
- b) Look, if you've gotta go in there then you'll go in, but you're not sticking your neck out for anybody else. Some wolf drags you off into the underbrush? Here's hoping you die fast.
- c) You're a wilderness survival expert. You don't fear the hunt, you *live* for it.
- d) Safety in numbers, right? You'd rather not face that kind of thing by yourself.

Scenario #10:

When it comes right down to it, what's the one thing you need more than anything to be happy, whole and secure in this brave new world?

- a) You need to be alive. Alive, and with all of your limbs and your sanity intact, that's even better. That would be a good start.
- b) You need to be the master of your own fate. You are confident, capable, and you don't need anybody else to survive.

c) It's not about what *you* need. It's about how much everybody else needs *you*. And they do. Oh yes, they do.

d) You need a sense of community. One person, many people—you just need to belong.

If you answered mostly a's:

Wait, what? Who? Are you standing over there? I can barely even see you! That's either a really good thing—I mean, you can't hit what you can't see—or a really bad thing. Invisible people tend to get passed over during the apocalypse, but if you're too hard to see you won't just get passed by, you'll be left behind.

If you answered mostly b's:

Howdy, lone ranger! You don't need other people to survive, you want to rely solely on number one, and you've got the skills to make that a reality. However, you'd better hope that you stay healthy because your insistence on trusting no one but yourself isn't going to do you any favors if you don't stay up to snuff.

If you answered mostly c's:

All hail the king! You've got the leadership skills to convince other people to follow you and the confidence to see your big ideas through. You've got to be careful to keep that ego in check, though: one man's president is another man's dictator, and you know what happens to deposed dictators. They get their own islands, and then they die. And then their penises are stolen.

If you answered mostly d's:

You're a beautiful cinnamon roll that's too good for this world, too pure. You are the ultimate cooperator, ready to lend a hand, play well with others and generally preserve a sense of common human decency for all. Your fate, however, largely rests in the hands of those around you. You'll either end up a community treasure or a very popular slave.

Author Bio

Cari Z was a bookworm as a child and remains one to this day. In an effort to combat her antisocial reading behavior, she did all sorts of crazy things, from competitive gymnastics to alligator wrestling (who even knew that was legal!) to finally joining the Peace Corps, which promptly sent her and her husband to the wilds of West Africa, stuck them in a hut, and said, “See ya!” She also started writing then because what else are you going to do for entertainment with no electricity? She writes award-winning LGBTQ fiction featuring aliens, supervillains, soothsayers and even normal people sometimes.

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