

PROLOGUE

Front Range Rockies *A Few Years from Now*



The chubby gun trader shifts his weight and looks up at me, one eye squeezed shut. “What sort of firearm you lookin’ to purchase, ma’am?” He’s enthroned on a maroon chintz armchair in front of a burned-out Walmart.

“Handgun,” I say. “Something easy to aim and shoot.”

Behind me, a handful of men mill about a few meager stalls. I can feel their stares pecking against my back, an unarmed woman traveling alone. I force down a flood of disturbing memories and focus on the task at hand: protecting myself in a world gone all to hell.

“You come to the right place, little lady.” He glances down at my hiking boots and then drags his gaze up my torso, his top lip curling. “I got a Walther P-22 I might be willin’

to trade.”

I’ve never heard of Walther, and I have no idea what a P-22 is—for all I know, it could be a water pistol. I stand there staring at him, unable to get my brain to engage.

The King of Walmart takes off his sweat-stained baseball cap. “Well, lady?” His sunburned skin is covered with grime, and his matted hair is thinning. He leans over the torn fabric and spits into the dirt. “You here to buy somethin’ or just gawk at my goods?”

There are snickers from behind me, and my fingers curl around the pepper spray in my pocket.

C’mon, Isabel, you can do this.

I cross my arms and set my jaw, bringing up the image of Ripley facing down the Alien, and then sweep a razor-sharp gaze over the rubbernecks.

Heads turn away.

At least they have some humanity left.

I meet the gun trader’s bloodshot eyes. He replaces his cap, no longer making an effort to hide his amusement. “Whatcha got to trade?”

“Black pepper and cinnamon—and a bit of dry mustard, if you want it.”

He leans sideways to see how big my pack is, his boots teetering on one of a dozen milk crates snaking around him. “That all?”

I glance over at the stall next to us. A gaunt man and his two teenage sons are attempting to trade a laptop computer for a half-dozen eggs. I turn back to the chubby gun dealer. “You could swap them for meat.”

He kicks a basket full of what I belatedly realize is hand-made jerky.

“Or—” I can feel my face flush. “You could trade them for rice?”

He guffaws and eases back into the chair. "I'm not much for Chinese food."

I turn away, irritated with myself, but absurdly relieved by his rejection.

God, I hate guns.

On the other side of the parking lot, a bearded old man is selling walnut-sized potatoes from a double-wide stroller. Rip Van Winkle nods, and I return his greeting, wondering how long the world can survive on seed potatoes and discarded baby gear.

"Still..." The gun trader waits for me to look at him. "I s'pose I could use some fancy flavorings on my venison."

I regard the only overweight man in a sea of famine, disgusted with the whole human race and embarrassed by my own full stomach. "Let me see the gun, please." The nicety slips out before I can stop it.

Good grief, Isabel. Get a grip.

"Lemme see the pepper."

I unzip the main compartment of the pack and hold the flap open so he can see the plastic bottles inside. "All of them are sealed and within their expiration date."

God, I must sound like an idiot.

"Well ain't that just hunky-dory."

Despite the biting wind and overcast skies, my face feels impossibly hot.

He slides a plastic tray off a crate and pulls out a black and silver handgun. "This here Wally's semi-automatic and already broke in." He offers it to me butt-first.

I take a step closer, and the reek of wood smoke, sour sweat, and charred flesh accosts me. I force down the urge to vomit and reach out for the pistol.

"B series," he says. "Fires right or left handed. Loads and discharges smooth as Scotch whisky, and it's got a ten-round

magazine.”

I wrap my hand around the cold metal, and a shudder creeps up my spine. There are few things I find more repulsive than gun.

“I’ll trade you the Wally plus ten rounds of ammo for the whole backpack.”

I set the firearm down on the crate. “The pistol and a hundred rounds. And I keep the pack.”

He tips his head to the side. “Handguns are a dime a dozen, missy, but I got hollow-tip Stingers, and you can bet yer lace panties they ain’t gonna be making more anytime soon.” He takes a slow breath. “Fifteen.”

I hook my thumbs in my pockets and glance over my shoulder.

“Now see here, lady.” His voice has lost its obsequious tone. “One bullet’ll stop a mountain lion or a ten-point buck.” He aims at a child in mismatched pajamas. “A hundred are worth more pepper than a goddamn camel can carry.” He runs his gaze over my chest and onto my crotch. “Unless you got somethin’ else to trade.”

Bastard.

“See, I could sell you some cheap, unreliable shit—excuse me, ma’am—but you don’t want to be shootin’ some rapist and have the gun misfire, now do ya?” He pulls the trigger, and it makes a sharp click.

“Fifty,” I say. “No backpack.” I glance down at his ample belly. “And I’ll throw in a five-pound sack of sugar for your camel.”

A smile spreads across his leathery face. “Make it forty plus a couple bags of jerky, and you got a deal.”

I set my pack down next to the pistol, willing my damn hands to stop shaking. “Let me see the bullets.” He spends a minute rummaging in a crate and then holds up a clear

plastic case. The label says fifty, and there are ten missing. “Okay, I’ll take the gun—assuming the bullets work.”

He laughs. “Yeah, them bullets *werk* just fine. I’d be happy to give you a little demonstration, if you like—using one of yers, a’course.”

I nod, anxious to see that I’m not being swindled.

He bumps an empty crate with his boot. “Put yer stuff in there, and I’ll show you what this little fella can do.” I set down the sugar and dump the spices in on top. He loads a round into the magazine, slides the cartridge back into place, and then taps the butt of the gun against his palm. “You ever shot a semi-automatic pistol?” He hands me the remaining bullets and two bags of jerky.

“No. But I’ve fired a rifle.”

A BB gun, actually. At summer camp. When I was ten.

“Then you know to expect a kick.” He stands and addresses a gaunt teenage boy leaning against the blackened door-frame of the store. “Hey, music man, come watch my stuff while I show this lucky lady my *pistol*.” He snorts at the crude humor. “I’ll buy you a potato for yer trouble.”

The kid emerges from the shadows, a beat-up guitar slung over his shoulder and plastic grocery bags wrapped around his feet.

The gun trader gives him a disgusted look. “And don’t you be gettin’ no dirt on my chair.”

The youth inclines his head but doesn’t meet the guy’s eyes.

I watch the paunchy man lumber off, trying to decide how stupid it would be to follow him.

“I don’t think he’ll try anything, miss.” The teenager plops down on a crate and stares up at me, his eyes a stunning blue. “Not with all these people around, anyway.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I hope you’re right.” I hurry after my

gun.

The side lot is littered with dirt-filled plastic bottles, old tires, and other trash. A stray dog is curled up amidst the detritus, and beyond the rubbish is a giant mass of tumbleweeds trapped like some desiccated monster in a barbed-wire fence. The charred frame of a four-story building looms in the distance, and behind it, the Rocky Mountains poke up into the sooty haze. I stop and glance over at the man, his neon orange jacket garish against the browns and grays. "This is as far as I go."

He nods. "Here, boy."

The dog lifts his head and looks at us.

"Come on, buddy." The man pats his leg and whistles. "I got a treat for ya."

The pet thumps his tail and struggles to his feet. He trots across the pitted pavement, his head down, but his tail still wagging. He's a golden retriever, scroungy and emaciated, but still bright-eyed—and still willing to trust the idiots who got him into this mess.

The gun seller waits until the dog is six feet away, then he steps sideways, clicks off the safety, and fires the pistol.

The animal collapses like a sack of potatoes, a pool of bright red blood spreading across the cracked asphalt.

The man lowers the gun, and I wipe a fleck of gore off my lower lip, my heart racing.

Faces peer around the corner of the building. They gape at the dead animal and then at us, and then they disappear.

"You paid for the bullet, ma'am, so I guess that makes the carcass yers. I'll clean and skin it if you give me half the meat." He hands me the pistol and then grins. "Hell, we could have ourselves a little dinner party. Hot dog and mustard." He snickers. "Afterwards you could earn yerself an extra bullet or two." He grabs his crotch and makes a vulgar noise.

I stand there staring at the dead animal, feeling sick to my stomach. “No, I don’t want it.”

“Now that’s mighty kind of you, ma’am. I told you this here firearm was in perfect working order, and as you can see, the ammo is live—even if the dog ain’t.” He snorts. “You sure you don’t want to join me for a little backyard barbecue?”

“No.” I take the warm gun and shove it into my pack, my hands shaking so hard it takes me three tries to get the zipper closed. Then I turn and trudge back around the monstrous cinderblock ruin, the loud retort of the gun still reverberating in my ears.

“I’m saving a handful of them Stingers for next time,” he calls after me.

The skinny kid is playing the guitar as I walk up. He nods at me but doesn’t stop singing:

♪ *When will they ever learn? When will they ev-er learn?* ♪

I take a chocolate bar out of my pack and offer it to him.
Supporting the arts.

He snatches it out of my hand, rips off the wrapper, and shoves the whole thing into his mouth, his eyes shifting back and forth like a wild animal.

I wait for him to finish. “That’s the only one I have, so don’t follow me.”

“Yes, miss. Thank you. God bless you.”

If there is a God, he’s got one messed-up sense of humor.

I trudge back across the decaying blacktop and up the old highway, periodically glancing back to make sure no one is following me. As soon as the Walmart is out of sight, I vomit all over my gore-spattered boots.

Oh my god, Diego, what have we done?