

# CHASING JUSTICE



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press

## Chapter One

### *Pino Grande National Forest—June*

A black truck with an old camper shell whipped around a switchback in the distance. Driving too fast for the dirt road, the vehicle fishtailed on the washboards. A plume of dust swirled behind it.

Maya Thompson, a U.S. Forest Service Law Enforcement officer in training, sat in the passenger seat of the patrol Tahoe studying the truck speeding their way and debating if the driver might lose control. Her FTO, or field training officer, Doug Leyton, didn't seem bothered about the vehicle careening toward them.

As the truck flew by, it kicked up a rock that smacked the windshield and bounced off onto the dirt road. Maya startled, but Doug's hands sat steady on the steering wheel, completely unfazed while her heart pounded. Nothing about rocks hitting windshields or trucks passing on dirt roads had been the same since returning home from Afghanistan.

*Give it some time, everyone said.*

*Time healed everything.*

*Maybe.*

Maya took a deep breath and pulled her long red hair

back in a ponytail, securing it with a hair band. “How far out are we?”

Doug shrugged. “Maybe another five minutes.”

In the back of the SUV, Juniper lay on the seat specially designed for K-9s, with rubber mats and a vent for air-conditioning or heat depending on the time of year. With her eyes closed, the Malinois rode with the relaxation of an experienced veteran, despite being two years old and new to the job. A black fur mask crossed her face, mixed with a light brown coat over the rest of her body. A white spot splotched her chest.

Juniper opened one golden eye, then closed it again, the picture of contentment.

“Wish I could chill like that,” Maya said.

“Me too. Although she’s not always like that at home. When she’s not working, she can be difficult.” Doug glanced at Maya. “How’ve you been doing?”

“Fine.”

“No, I mean, how are you really doing? You can tell me. I’m your best friend, right?”

“Seriously, I’m fine. There’s no need to worry about me.”

Maya turned her head to watch the trees passing by in a blur—a mixture of green and brown from the pine beetle kill over the last few years. The pine beetle was about the size of a grain of rice and native to Colorado. The beetle infestation had impacted over 3.4 million acres of forest. The trees had been dying before Maya left to join the military, but at that time, the damage wasn’t as widespread. Now she was back and the beautiful, lush forests she loved so much were partially dead, with trees cut up into slash piles waiting for winter snow to burn. The forest looked like Maya felt inside.

“You know if you ever need to talk, I’m here for you.”

Doug reached over and took Maya’s hand, giving it a squeeze. Maya interlocked her fingers with his, appreciating his strong and reassuring grip. Doug was right—not only was he her FTO, but he was her best friend. They’d grown up together and she was grateful for his help.

“I know you’re here for me. Thank you.” Maya released Doug’s hand and undid her seat belt as they pulled into the trailhead parking lot. She wanted out of the vehicle to breathe the fresh air and stop her chest constricting from panic rising through her body. The feelings came so often now, but she had learned to control them, or maybe ignore them, and keep going. Or so she told herself every day. *No more war zone.*

She had thought about telling Doug more. Without him she wouldn’t have this job as a Forest Service officer. Maya would probably still be drinking herself to death at the cabin her grandmother left to her.

But despite how much she wanted to, Maya couldn’t fully open up to Doug. She didn’t want him to know how much of her had changed from the war. Most of all, she didn’t want him to know about the feelings she had stuffed deep down and shut off. When she was in Afghanistan, Maya heard other soldiers talking to their loved ones. She’d stopped calling home—it was too difficult to speak with those she loved, especially her grandmother. Nana had had a way of knowing when Maya wasn’t telling the truth and sensed she was struggling. Now that Nana was gone, Maya wished she could go back in time and talk to her.

Maya knew she was broken, but Doug had stayed

friends with her and for that, she was grateful. She feared she would never be the same again, but working with Doug helped her move forward. Someday she would talk to him more, but for now, she kept herself closed off.

Doug opened the back door and Juniper bounded out of the vehicle. She shook and then stretched, her brown fur glistening in the sun. A part of Maya wanted so badly to reach down and run her hands through her beautiful coat. She could imagine the feel of the soft fur that would dance through her fingertips, but even worse, she could hear the ringing in her ears from a bomb exploding. The yelping of a dog in pain. Brown eyes begging for help. The memories from Afghanistan that haunted her dreams every night.

Maya stared off into the horizon to gather herself. She never wanted to feel the pain of losing a K-9 partner again.

Maya's love of dogs came from when she was a little girl. Her grandparents had adopted a Great Pyrenees German Shepherd mix puppy named Bear. Together, Maya and her grandmother trained Bear. Maya loved the loyalty and how Bear waited for her after school at the front door. They'd hiked together and Bear always slept with her, which helped with her childhood nightmares.

When Maya joined the military, she applied to be a K-9 handler, but while deployed in Afghanistan, she'd lost her military K-9, Zinger, and the pain cut deep.

Especially since she was at fault for Zinger's death.

After discharging from the military, Maya resisted working alongside a K-9 again, but knowing she was desperate for a job, Doug had convinced Maya she could

suck it up and work with him and Juniper. She would only have to ride with him for a short time and then she'd be out on patrol on her own, with no dog reminding her of the past. Maya had debated the choice. In the end having a job where she was supporting herself and acting like an adult who made money for essentials like food and clothing won out.

When she joined Doug and Juniper, Maya couldn't help but admit there was still a draw. Deep down she wanted to take the leash and feel the vibration, the dance, the power, and most of all the partnership, where a handler gave the dog the lead and they trusted each other. This animal was bred for their job and their instincts were superior, but Maya had killed a dog through handler error. She vowed to never put another dog in danger.

*I'll never take the leash again. Only a worthy K-9 handler like Doug should work a dog.*

Low-hanging clouds from a morning rainstorm rolled in off the mountain peaks, crawling down the valley, pushed by the wind. She caught Doug studying her and smiled at him. *Reassure everyone that you're okay.* That was the only way to survive. Maybe someday it would be true.

"We'll head out toward the old Baker homestead. The call to dispatch came from a hiker near that area," Doug said.

"All right. Let's go." Maya put on her green Forest Service jacket. The panic from the rock hitting the windshield was already leaving her body. The mountains had a way of calming and soothing her. Doug made sure Juniper's leash was secure on her collar along

with her Kevlar K-9 vest before the trio headed out toward their destination.

Maya traipsed over the rough trail, dodging fallen logs and stepping over rocks. Doug hiked ahead of her ducking under thick tree branches. His light brown uniform blended in with the surrounding forest.

Sudden movements to the north of the trail made all three of them stop abruptly. A mule deer leaped out from behind a tree, her large ears flipping back and forth. A fawn with white spots followed. Juniper sat by Doug and cocked her head to the side. Maya saw the curiosity cross the dog's face, but obedience overrode her predatory instinct.

"She's a good dog. Amazing to see a Mal that relaxed," Maya said.

"She's a *great* dog. I feel lucky to have her. Maybe one of these days you should try working her. Or even take a bite from her in training. Just get the feel again."

Maya shrugged in response. She hadn't told Doug much, just that she'd lost her K-9 partner, Zinger, due to an IED.

*It was my fault. I didn't trust my dog. I didn't listen to my dog.*

Watching Doug and Juniper's partnership ripped open painful wounds.

They waited for the deer to continue on their way, their hooves softly hitting the ground until the mother and baby disappeared into a grove of fir trees. The trio started hiking again and the sound of Juniper's sniffing cut through the quiet forest. The dog jogged back and forth in a zigzag pattern, working a scent.

"She enjoys the trails, doesn't she?" Maya said.

"Yeah, she's always up for getting out here and doing

her job. Loves tracking work the best, although bite work is a close second for her. Your grandfather offered to do some decoy work a while back,” Doug said, with a laugh.

“Pops? Decoy? Does he even know how?”

“Yeah, I think he does, but I wasn’t able to connect with him. How’s he doing? You talk to him lately?” Doug asked.

“I think he’s good. Haven’t you caught up with him? Don’t you boys get together for poker night and beer?”

“You need to call him, Maya.”

“Why? Is he okay?” Maya stopped.

“He’s fine. He misses you. With your grandmother gone now, he’s lonely. You should at least stop in and say hi.”

“I’ll think about it.” Guilt washed over Maya. She and her grandfather had kept things cordial, but Maya knew he had every right to be mad at her. The thing was, she was mad at him too. Her grandfather was the Western River County sheriff, and with Maya’s job, she had to work with him and at least pretend to get along. To add to her frustration and anger, Maya had wanted a job as a deputy, but her grandfather ripped up her application. He’d told her to find a different job—one with less danger. He didn’t want Maya following in his footsteps. She would have been an asset to the department and her grandfather knew that. He also knew she desperately needed a job. *Not to mention, if he’d hired me, I wouldn’t be stuck working with a K-9 and reliving my nightmare.*

Juniper sprang to attention, cutting off Doug from continuing the conversation. The Malinois stretched

her nose in the air and scented off the slight breeze that came through the trees.

“Let’s keep going,” Doug said. “She’s air scenting in the right direction. Maybe she’s smelling a good marijuana grow.”

“Did the reporting party give you information about a possible grow?” Maya asked.

“No. They just said suspicious activity at the Baker cabin. Saw a person lurking.”

Juniper put her nose to the ground and picked up the pace. Her body became tense and her tail was straight up in the air. Doug and Maya increased their pace to keep up. Every now and then Juniper would pause and change direction.

Maya started to feel the burn in her legs from going uphill, dodging rocks and hopping over fallen logs. Pine needles cushioned the ground, but made it slick too.

Juniper took a sharp right and pulled on her leather leash, dragging Doug into a clearing, where they finally stopped. Doug grabbed a map out of his pocket and checked their location.

“I thought the Baker cabin was abandoned?” Maya asked.

“It was. But a few years ago, the Forest Service came in and restored it enough that someone could stay the night if need be. Gave us a place to get out of the cold when we had to be out in the winter, or get out of a storm in the summer.”

“Wouldn’t it be locked?” Maya asked.

“Since when do locks keep people out?”

Juniper tilted her head back and forth, listening to Doug and Maya. The dog seemed to grasp what they were saying. She nudged Doug and gave a sharp bark.

“Okay, girl,” Doug said, rubbing Juniper’s pointy ears. “Let’s keep going. We’ll get to the area by going up the trail and coming around the backside.”

“But I thought...”

“I know the cabin is that way, but look up at those trees. Beetle kill is bad around here and these pines have lost branches. There’s a bunch of widowmakers through that area.”

“The forest has changed a lot since I left,” Maya said, staring up toward branches that lay across other trees at odd angles. If the wind picked up or the ground was soft from rain, a tree might shift and at any time one of those branches could come crashing down and kill a person. Widowmakers had become much more prevalent in Colorado due to the pine beetle kill.

The trio wound their way around heading back to the northwest. They rounded a grove of aspen trees. The brown wood of the cabin contrasted against the white of the aspen bark.

Maya took in the scene little by little. The door to the cabin was jimmied open, but they didn’t have a clear view inside. Juniper put her nose up in the air, taking in the scent, when her body language changed. She crouched down and a low growl rumbled in her throat. Maya saw the dog step in front of Doug, positioning herself to protect her handler.

Maya didn’t see anyone in the cabin, but the phrase *trust your dog* went through her head. You always trusted the dog.

From around the corner of the cabin, a person popped out and strutted toward Maya. Chin up and their chest puffed out, the person had one hand closed and the other hand open with their fingers splayed out. Were

they clutching a knife? Trying to distract her with the open hand?

Maya wasn't going to take any chances. She unholstered her Glock.