

*Chapter One*

She hadn't moved almost two thousand miles for *this*.

Ava Callan gritted her teeth as she climbed out of her modified patrol car and opened the door for her four-legged partner. Her gaze darted up, to the picturesque mountains in the distance, then back down, to the overgrown grass in front of her. Ahead was a line of concealing trees, and a little box house peeking through with its peeling paint and shuttered windows. The man who'd chosen to live on this big patch of land on the outskirts of Jasper, Idaho, wanted to be left alone by everyone. Especially the police.

Ava tapped her leg and Lacey, the two-year-old German shepherd she'd been paired with instead of a human partner, leaped to the ground.

Lacey's ears were perked, her nose in the air as she looked around, then up at Ava.

"Let's do this," Ava said, advancing slowly toward the house, her gaze on pivot as Lacey sniffed the ground.

Harold Bingsley, the man she'd been asked to do a wellness check on, had a history of methamphetamine use. Although Ava and Lacey had only recently finished training together, Lacey had already started her training as a drug detection K-9 before Ava even left Chicago for this thousand-times smaller town.

This police call was routine and low-risk, but five years of working patrol and then narcotics in Chicago had taught her that no call was without the potential for danger. Letting her guard down was never an option. Not even here.

She'd parked on the street, mostly out of sight from the house, in case Harold was high, in case the sight of a police car gave him anxiety. According to his younger sister, who'd called from Oregon, he hadn't picked up his phone in a week. Maybe he was just angry with her for trying to convince him to move near family. *An endless argument*, she'd called it. But he didn't have any friends, and since he'd gotten clean, he had no one to visit. So, she didn't want to take the chance that he was hurt or sick and alone.

The slow trek along the dirt road toward the driveway was a far cry from Ava's last call out in Chicago. That had been a multi-agency raid on an illegal drug processing warehouse. She'd rushed in after SWAT had cleared it, enjoyed the congratulatory handshakes from a slew of federal agents on the work she'd done for the task force. Five months of her life had been dedicated to that bust. It had been her ticket to bigger and better things inside the Chicago PD. Instead of claiming them, she'd returned to the precinct and handed over her gun and badge.

There was a sudden tightness in the vicinity of her heart as she remembered her chief's frown, and the question he'd asked one more time. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Shaking the memories loose, she focused on her surroundings. Beyond the couple of acres where Harold's house stood, the street was mostly commercial. Or at least, it had been at one time. Now, abandoned warehouses clogged the otherwise beautiful view, the exteriors slowly crumbling.

A beautiful May Saturday and Harold was presumably holed up inside instead of enjoying the cute little downtown. Not that there were a lot of entertainment options in Jasper, but he could have driven out to Salmon River, gone swimming or spread a picnic by the water now that it had finally started to warm up.

If she wasn't working, that's probably where Ava would have been. Pictures of the serene mountains and the river, so different from Chicago's constant hustle, had lured her here. That and the charming little downtown, framed by those towering mountains, had made her wire a security deposit for the house she'd rented, sight unseen.

She'd been determined to see the move as an adventure instead of a defeat. Three months later, that optimism was harder to come by, even if Jasper's natural beauty was better in person.

Skirting the rusted sedan and the motorcycle on its side on the long gravel driveway, Ava walked up to Harold's front door. She kept one hand near her holster as she watched Lacey.

The dog stopped beside her, staring up at her with intelligent brown eyes. But she didn't sit. Which meant that so far, she hadn't alerted on any drugs.

Nudging Lacey away from the door, Ava stood off to the side as she keyed her radio and announced, "I've arrived at the Bingsley residence."

"Good luck," the cheerful voice of Jenny Dix, Jasper PD's only dispatch, came back.

Ava rolled her eyes. *Luck* would have been being sent to a real situation. Wellness checks ranked up there with parade duty. *Luck* would have been landing in a town where they appreciated her years of experience, where she actually fit in. Instead, she'd been given a K-9 and rookie duty. On the occasions when she tried to join the other officers after-hours at the local brewery, she'd always given up on feeling like part of something and gone home early.

Really, *luck* would have been not needing to leave Chicago in the first place. Her hand twitched toward the locket she wore under her uniform, with the photos of the family who had never supported her career choice. Family who was all lost to her now, for one reason or another.

*Focus*, Ava reminded herself. She'd made her choice. This was her fresh start and if she wanted it to work for her, she needed to work for it.

If that meant starting back at the beginning with everything—her career, her friendships, her sense of belonging—so be it.

Squaring her shoulders, she knocked on the door and infused her voice with friendly authority. "Mr. Bingsley? This is Officer Callan, Jasper Police. Your sister called us to make sure you were okay."

She listened carefully, ready to go for a weapon—lethal or otherwise—if he came out armed. He wasn't licensed to own a gun, but he'd been arrested with one in the past.

She heard nothing from inside, so she knocked again, a little louder this time. "Mr. Bingsley? I need to confirm you're okay or I'm going to come in to check on you."

Still nothing.

Holding in a sigh, and hoping she wasn't about to find forty-five-year-old Harold Bingsley dead, she positioned herself to kick in the door. A jolt of adrenaline hit, this simple forced entry the closest she'd come to the anticipation and anxiety of a drug raid since leaving Chicago.

The laugh stalled in her throat as the door ripped open and Harold lurched through it, his pale skin tinged gray and the pistol in his hand shaking violently.

Ava's gun was bracketed in her hands before she'd even consciously thought to reach for it. She slid in front of Lacey, who was trained to detect, not to attack and apprehend. Her heartbeat crescendoed, but she kept her voice steady and calm. "I'm here to help you. Put the gun down."

The gun in Harold's hand bounced rapidly up and down as he swiveled it toward her.

Her arms tensed, her finger tight against the trigger she didn't want to pull. "Harold, your sister thought you might be sick. That's it. You're not in trouble. Okay? Put the gun down."

His gaze darted around, not sticking on anything. His free hand reached up and started scratching at his face, leaving behind deep red gouges. The gun continued to bounce in his other hand, his finger inching closer to the trigger.

Ava held in a curse. He was definitely high. Which probably meant paranoid. It definitely meant dangerous.

She kept her voice calm and even, kept her feet planted solidly in front of Lacey, shielding her. "Harold, I need you to drop that gun before you hurt yourself, okay?"

His gaze skipped to the gun and he frowned, like he hadn't been aware he was holding it. He stared at it a long moment, his trigger finger jerking back and forth, almost nudging the trigger, then pulling away.

Ava locked her shoulders, kept her own trigger finger poised, ready to depress, wishing she was wearing a vest.

Harold yanked the gun up and Ava warned, "No!" as her finger started to tighten.

Then, he flung the gun aside into the long grass and darted away from the house, his gait uneven and clumsy.

Tucking her weapon into its holster, Ava ran after him. He was a good four inches taller than her 5'7", a solid fifty pounds heavier than her hundred and fortyish. But he was also seventeen years older and in much worse shape. Plus, she had training and momentum on her side as she pushed off and tackled him, landing hard on his back.

Before he could recover, she yanked his hands behind his back and cuffed him, then patted him down for additional weapons as he muttered nonsense into the grass.

Keying her radio, Ava said, "I'm bringing Bingsley in. He pulled a weapon on me."

Jenny's response was lost under Ava's curse as Lacey went bounding past them, toward the abandoned warehouses.

"Lacey!"

The dog glanced back, barked once and kept going.

Yanking Harold to his feet, Ava pulled him along with her, following her K-9. Had Lacey scented on something? She hadn't at the house, but obviously Harold had had drugs to consume. Maybe he was keeping them in one of the abandoned buildings.

Ava picked up her pace to a slow jog as Harold stumbled along beside her and Lacey's lead increased.

At the entrance to the first warehouse—a massive building with cracked windows and some graffiti that reached a third of the way up the wall—Lacey sat. An alert that she'd found something.

Ava's heartbeat picked up again, anticipation at the slim possibility of getting a real case. Probably Lacey had just found Harold's extra stash. But maybe it was something bigger, a hiding spot for a distributor. "Good girl," she told the dog as she finally caught up.

Lacey glanced back at her, tail wagging, and Ava paused to pat her head.

This was the first time Lacey had alerted on something with Ava outside of practice, but unlike some K-9s who wanted treats or toys, Lacey's favored reward was a good ear scratch.

Checking her surroundings for any sign of people, any sign that this place wasn't actually abandoned, Ava keyed her radio again. Softly, she said, "Lacey alerted at the warehouse beside Bingsley's house. I'm going to check it out."

"Let me know if you need backup," Jenny's voice came back immediately.

"I'm good for now," Ava said, testing the door handle. It opened easily with a loud, high-pitched creak that made Ava cringe.

She spared a glance at Harold, who was using his shoulder to rub at his face where he'd scratched it earlier. "Is anyone in there?"

He just shrugged, but she wasn't sure if it was an answer or more scratching.

"Stay," she told Lacey as she peeked carefully inside.

Light streamed in through the damaged windows, illuminating layers of dust and abandoned machinery whose purpose Ava couldn't guess at. There were tracks in the dust in places, and a few abandoned beer bottles and other trash scattered on the floor, but the otherwise wide-open space looked clear and empty.

Easing the door open farther, Ava pushed Harold against the exterior wall and warned, "Don't move." Then she stepped slightly inside—not far enough that she couldn't chase after Harold if he took off, but enough to get a better look.

What she saw made her freeze, goose bumps rising across all of her exposed skin.

She backed out slowly, her hand already keying the radio, her breathing coming too fast.

Lacey hadn't alerted on drugs. She'd found a bomb.

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