

The Chase

By Mundocaso

The Chase

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Authors note

I can't believe this is already my third novel.

I started writing *The Chase* right after finishing *MDMD*.

The inspiration came from something close to my heart: my older niece's rabbit, Nijntje.

The first time I took care of Nijntje, he was a healthy, curious bunny, shy at first, but eventually so attached to me that he would follow me everywhere I went.

The second time I looked after him, Nijntje had grown older and was basically a senior in rabbit years. His health had rapidly declined.

I knew then that I wanted to write a story that would honour him in some way. A story that would keep a little bit of his spirit alive.

At the same time, I had been wanting to write a detective story, ever since falling in love with the character Detective Luqman from *The Crown of Hawa* and becoming fascinated by noir-style visuals and storytelling.

This novel is also the one most shaped by real-world events, as I found myself constantly inspired (and sometimes haunted) by global news and pop culture.

All of these threads wove together to create *The Chase*.

A story of loss, survival, and hope.

Thank you truly for giving my novel a chance, for reading it, and for letting these characters live in your imagination for a little while.

I hope you walk away with a new perspective, a small sense of clarity, or simply the feeling that you're not alone in trying to make sense of a complicated world.

Love you all.

— *Mundocaso*

Chapter 1

"**M**ommy, Mommy, look what I found!" Ana runs into the living room, eyes sparkling.

Her hands are cupped gently, holding something tiny and shaking.

With a proud smile, she opens her palms. Inside, a small bunny blinks up at the world, its fur the colour of warm red wood.

"Not now, Ana. Mommy's busy," says Gloria, her fingers flying quickly on her laptop. The screen glows soft and blue, lighting her serious face.

"You're always busy, Mommy," Ana says. She twirls in a circle, her joy dancing in the air.

"Come play with our new friend." She holds the bunny like treasure, her small hands soft and careful.

Gloria doesn't look away from the screen. "Ana, this is important. I have to finish my work. The bad guys don't take breaks, you know. And how many times have I told you not to bring animals inside?"

"Please, Mommy," Ana whispers, her voice so sweet and full of hope it could melt gold.

"I promise I'll take care of him."

Gloria sighs. It's the kind of sigh that carries long days and tired nights. She shuts the laptop and turns.

The bunny looks up with big, shiny brown eyes. Still shy, but full of life. Those eyes slip past her shield.

"You'll feed it? Clean up after it? Train it?" Gloria asks, raising an eyebrow.

"I promise!" Ana beams, bright as sunrise. "Marshmallow won't bother you at all."

"Marshmallow?" Gloria repeats, surprised.

Ana giggles like wind chimes on a breezy day. "That's his name now."

A soft smile tugs at Gloria's lips. She ruffles Ana's hair. "Alright. Let's go to the pet store. If Marshmallow's living here, it'll need the works."

She grins. "I bet your dad will be just as excited. He's been missing our old dog ever since he passed."

Ana holds Marshmallow close, like she's won a treasure beyond gold.

The next morning, Ana rides to school with her dad, Lucas, while Gloria has already left for work. Ana sits in the backseat, her bunny in a tiny travel cage on her lap.

"Are you sure you want to bring Marshmallow to school?" Lucas asks, raising an eyebrow as they park.

"Uh-huh," Ana nods. "We'll keep each other company. That way, we won't be lonely."

Lucas smiles gently, though worry touches his eyes. "Okay, sweetheart. Just make sure the other kids wash their hands before petting him. And don't overfeed him. I love you." He leans in and kisses her cheek before she steps out the car.

"Love you too, Dad!" Ana chirps. She waves, bouncing toward the school, holding Marshmallow's cage like a precious gem.

As soon as she walks into class, kids crowd around. "Oh my gosh, a bunny!" "He's so cute!" "Can I pet him?" the kids are shouting one by one.

Then, a louder voice cuts through. The popular kids push forward. "Look, everyone! Ana Banana brought her service bunny!" one boy sneers.

Laughter explodes.

"Ana Banana" the nickname from when she slipped on a banana at recess is back again.

The teasing grows, loud as thunder as some kids start shaking Marshmallow's cage.

Ana tries shielding it's cage as she wraps her arms around it. "Stop it!" she cries, but her voice is small, like a breadcrumb on the floor.

Click. Click.

Heels echo on the floor. The teacher walks in, her gaze sharp as ice.

Silence falls like a dropped curtain as the teacher's eyes sweep across the class and land on the bunny. "I hope your pet won't be a distraction, Ana," she says in a cool voice.

Ana nods quickly, her face burning red. "No, Ma'am. Marshmallow is a chill bunny."

A snort from the back. "Pfff, Marshmallow. What a stupid name," says the same boy from before.

Laughter flares again, until the teacher cuts it down like a branch from a tree. "Unless you want detention, keep your mouth shut," she warns.

The room stills.

Ana quietly places Marshmallow's cage beside her seat. The lesson begins, but her heart beats loud in her chest.

Break time.

Outside, Ana opens the cage and lets Marshmallow hop in the grass. He sniffs and explores, soft as a whisper, curious as a dream.

A few classmates approach slowly, petting him gently and speaking softly to both Ana and Marshmallow.

For a moment, Ana feels like she fits. Like maybe, just maybe there's room for her here. She has been teased so much. Bullied, whispered about, laughed at. Because she's different. Because she's kind. Because she doesn't blend in. But Marshmallow? He makes her brave.

Still, not all hearts are soft. The popular kids pass by, throwing muddy words like stones, casting cold looks that sting like hail.

When the school day ends, Ana waits alone in the parking lot. She hugs Marshmallow close, her tears falling like quiet raindrops. The mean voices replay again and again in her mind.

Her father's car pulls up. She wipes her face quick like nothing happened.

"How was school, sweetheart?" he asks, opening the door with a smile.

Ana nods and smiles back. A big, too-bright smile. "It was good! Me and Marshmallow can't wait for tomorrow!" But inside her heart, a quiet storm brews. And she's holding it all in.

A couple days later, Ana walks through the city centre, her hand tucked in her pocket, fingers curled around a small bundle of saved lunch money. She plans to treat herself with something sweet to make the heavy thoughts in her mind feel lighter.

School hasn't been easy. The teasing, the whispering, and the cruel words about her and

Marshmallow linger, clinging to her like stubborn pollen.

She doesn't want to worry her parents, especially not Mom, who always looks so tired. So Ana keeps it all inside. Instead, she turns up the music in her headphones and lets her playlist carry her forward.

Soon after, she spots the candy store and quickly steps inside. The brightly coloured wrappers gleam like hidden treasure.

She picks her favourites, grabs a cold iced tea, and heads out with a flicker of joy in her chest. But just as she pushes the door open, that small happiness fades. An icy hand lands on her shoulder. She stops. Her heart jumps.

Slowly, she turns.

Behind her stands a girl about her age with wide, curious eyes. Her clothes are torn and patched, her sneakers worn thin. On one foot, her big toe peeks through a hole.

"Excuse me, ma'am," the girl says softly. Her voice is quiet, a little shaky. "I don't mean to bother you, but... do you have any spare change?"

Ana blinks. Ma'am? No one's ever called her that before. She looks from the girl's face to her shoes. Her heart sinks. "I'm sorry," Ana says, her voice heavy. "I just spent everything in the candy store."

The girl's hopeful eyes dim. "That's okay. Thank you anyway, and sorry if I scared you" she whispers, already turning to go.

"Wait!" Ana calls.

The girl stops. She turns back, eyes wide.

"My mom told me to watch out around here. Someone got shot last week," Ana says, her voice dropping for a moment. Then she brightens again, as if shaking it off. "I don't have money," she says, smiling now, "but I've got candy and iced tea. Want to share?"

The girl's face glows, like a cloudy sky parting for the sun. "Are you sure?" she asks, almost not believing it.

"Of course I'm sure," Ana smiles. "I'm Ana. What's your name?"

The girl hesitates, then says, "I'm Dwi, ma'am."

Ana giggles. "Nice to meet you, Dwi. But no need to call me ma'am!" She points to a bench under a big, shady tree. "Come on, let's sit there."

Dwi nods, and together they walk over.

Ana pulls out her sweets and tea.

They sit close and start to share, bite by bite, sip by sip. Laughter bubbles between them soft, sweet, and light. Like sunshine after rain.

Ana feels warmth grow in her chest. This moment is golden. And now, she wants to know more. "So, Dwi," she says gently, "why are you out on the streets by yourself?"

Dwi doesn't answer right away. She stares at the ground where tiny ants are carrying away bits of candy.

Ana's heart skips. "I'm sorry! That was too personal. I shouldn't have asked," she says quickly, her fingers twisting the hem of her shirt.

Dwi shakes her head. "It's okay. I don't mind." Her voice is soft, but strong too. "My mom and dad... they passed away when I was little. My aunt took me in, but she had... adult problems."

She places a small candy piece near the ants and watches them work. "She couldn't take care of me anymore. So... I've been on my own, back and forth."

Ana's heart aches. "That's so sad," she says, her voice cracking. Without thinking, she wraps her arms around Dwi.

Dwi pauses for just a heartbeat, then leans in and lets herself be held.

Ana pulls back with a smile. "We should totally hang out again! I want you to meet Marshmallow!"

"Marshmallow?" Dwi tilts her head.

Ana giggles. "He's my pet bunny, and my best friend." She pulls out her phone and shows a picture: a reddish-brown rabbit with curious eyes. "He'd love you. And I bet you'd love him too." She pauses. "Do you have a phone?"

Dwi grins, a little shy. "Yeah. My aunt gave me one a while ago." She takes out a slightly banged-up phone.

They swap numbers and smile at each other. A new friendship forming, real and warm.

As Ana walks home, she realises something:

She didn't eat much candy. But that's okay. Her heart feels full. Full of kindness, full of hope, and sweeter than anything in that candy store.

Two weeks pass and Ana and Dwi meet again. They reunite at the same cozy candy store where their friendship first started after having met up several times the past two weeks. With the scent of sugar and caramel in the air, their hearts light with anticipation.

"I saved up all week to buy my own candy this time!" Dwi announces proudly, holding out a handful of crumpled but carefully folded bills.

Ana beams, stepping inside with her.

The scent of caramel, chocolate, and a whisper of cinnamon wraps around them like a warm hug. "That's awesome, Dwi! What are you gonna get?" she asks, already scooping neon-coloured sour candies into a plastic bag, the colours bright against her fingers.

Dwi pauses in front of a shelf, her brow furrowed in playful agony. "I can't decide between these Caramel Clouds or the Gummy Giggles," she says, eyeing the soft pastel treats that gleam like polished gems under the shop's gentle lighting.

Ana leans in, thoughtful, then lights up with a grin. "Okay, how about this? I get the Gummy Giggles, you get the Caramel Clouds. That way, we have both. Best of both worlds!"

"Are you sure?" Dwi asks, hopeful, hesitant.

"Totally," Ana says, nodding. "I'm not picky. I love pretty much anything sweet!"

They walk together to the register, arms full of sugar and joy.

Behind the counter, the old man adjusts his glasses and smiles, the kind that comes from years of watching small stories bloom in quiet corners. "Well, well," he says warmly, his voice smooth as melted chocolate. "Weren't you here last week?"

Ana nods, a little shy.

His grin widens. "Wonderful!" he exclaims. Then, after a small, gentle pause "Would you girls like some ChocoChunks? On the house."

Both girls gasp, then speak in unison, "Really? Won't the owner be mad?" Their voices bubble with both delight and caution.

The old man laughs, walking over to a large jar filled with tiny chocolate nuggets. He scoops a generous portion into a small paper bag, handing it to them with a wink. "I like to spoil the regulars," he says. "And since you brought a friend, this is my thank-you. Besides..." He leans in conspiratorially. "I wouldn't worry about the owner. I know him

pretty well." Adding a playful wink.

The girls giggle, thank him, and step outside into the golden hush of afternoon. "Free candy. This is officially the best day ever!"

Ana beams, tearing into her sweets with radiant, reckless joy as sugar crackles between her fingers and laughter spills into the late afternoon light.

Dwi giggles, savouring a Gummy Giggle as it melts on her tongue. "What about your rabbit, though? When do I finally meet him?"

"How about right now?" Ana says, grinning like the sun caught in a smile. "Before we head back to mine, let's grab some apples. Marshmallow loves them and hey, we're spoiling ourselves today, so he deserves a treat too."

"Sounds like a plan," Dwi replies, tucking the rest of her candy into its crinkling bag as they move toward the corner, still mid-laugh, still unaware.

Then—

Bang!

A loud, single shot tears through the quiet, sharp and distant and yet far too close.

Ana flinches, candy spilling like glass across the pavement as her breath catches. "What was that?" she gasps, eyes wide as she drops to her knees, hands scrambling for the fallen sweets with trembling fingers.

"I don't know," Dwi whispers, her voice barely a thread. "It sounded like... a gunshot."

And then they see him.

A man rounds the corner at full speed, face hidden behind a black ski mask, a crossbody bag slamming against his side, breath ragged, steps chaotic, as if he's running from something bigger than fear.

Ana freezes as her gaze snags on the glint in his hand. A gun.

He skids to a stop right in front of them and everything slows.

The masked man spins, panic etched in every movement. "Don't come any closer! I mean it!" The gun jerks upward and a warning shot cracks the air.

Bang!

Ana and Dwi drop instantly, curling in on themselves, small and breakable, as a jolt of terror sears through their bodies like lightning.

Through her fingers, Ana sees he's not aiming at them, he's shouting at two men closing in fast. They're dressed in hooded sweatshirts, faces buried behind dark sunglasses, movements clean and predatory.

"Give us the bag!" one of them barks. His voice is sharp, like the torn rim of a rusted can: thin, jagged, and aching to cut. He draws a gun, all cold steel and a quiet threat.

The masked man laughs, not from humour, but from something burning deeper. "You think we'll just watch while you erase us from the map? Not today."

The men in shades don't flinch. "What you call erasure, we call progress," one of them replies, his words sharp like a surgeon's scalpel.

And then—

Gloria arrives. She steps into view from across the street, weapon drawn, badge flashing under the fading sun. "Drop your weapons! All of you!"

The air tenses, wound tight as wire. Three sides. Three guns. One second from collapse.

The robber spins again, eyes wide with disbelief, not expecting a cop, especially not one who looks like she knows exactly what's unraveling here.

The men in hoods freeze, hesitation flickering like static.

Ana and Dwi are still on the ground, still trembling, still small and soft in a world gone sharp, and Gloria sees them. She sees Ana. "Ana!" But it's already too late.

Bang!

A gunshot. Then another. Sparks skitter along the pavement. Bullets scream.

Dwi drops first, collapsing without a sound. Ana stumbles, a red bloom spreading across her shirt like a flower opening in slow, terrible motion.

Gloria moves without thinking, just acting. Her steps are sharp, gun raised, heart pounding in her throat.

The two hooded men are already gone, swallowed by smoke and shadow and the whine of a distant engine.

The robber runs, wounded, dragging his arm as blood streaks down his sleeve. He falls.

Gloria is on him in a breath, knee pressed to his back, gun to his head, breath burning in her chest. "Stay down," she says, neither screaming nor shaking, just there. And then she looks up. The world narrows.