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CANDICE FOX



THE CHASE

**600 prisoners escaping justice.
And one hunting it.**

About the Book

'Are you listening, Warden?'

'What do you want?'

'I want you to let them out.'

'Which inmates are we talking about?'

'All of them.'

When more than 600 of the world's most violent human beings pour out from Pronghorn Correctional Facility into the Nevada Desert, the biggest manhunt in US history begins.

But for John Kradle, this is his one chance to prove his innocence, five years after the murder of his wife and child.

He just needs to stay one step ahead of the teams of law enforcement officers he knows will be chasing down the escapees.

Death row supervisor turned fugitive-hunter Celine Osbourne is single-minded in her mission to catch Kradle. She has very personal reasons for hating him – and she knows exactly where he's heading . . .



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**CANDICE
FOX**

**THE
CHASE**



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For all the aspiring authors. Never give up.

CHAPTER 1

From where she sat at the back of the bus, the driver's death was a confusing spectacle to Emily Jackson.

She had a good view down the length of the vehicle from her position, leaning against a window smeared with the fingerprints of happy children. Her seat was elevated over the rear wheel axle, so as she rode she could see youngsters jumping and crashing about the interior, playing games and teasing each other across the aisle, occasionally throwing a ball or smacking a catcher's mitt into a rival's head. Half of the other parents on the bus were ignoring their children's activity, gazing out the windows at the Nevada desert, some with AirPods in their ears and wistful looks on their faces. Others were making valiant attempts to dampen the chaos and noise: confiscating water bottles, phones and toys being used as weapons, or dragging wandering toddlers back to their seats. Forty minutes of featureless sand and scrub beyond the garish structures and swirling colours of Vegas was a lot for kids to endure. When the bus bumped over a loose rock on the narrow road to the prison, Emily saw all the other passengers bump with it, the bus and its riders synchronised parts of a unified machine.

She didn't have to nudge her son, Tyler, as they approached the point at which Pronghorn Correctional would come into view. Tyler had been coming to the annual pre-Christmas softball game at the facility since he was a kindergartener, and had only missed one year, when his father strained his back fixing the garage door and couldn't play second pitcher against the minimum-security inmates as he usually did. Tyler's familiarity with the journey seemed to give him a sixth sense, and she watched as he flipped his paperback closed, shifting upwards in his seat. No landmark out there in the vastness told mother and son they were approaching the last gentle curve in the road. Hard, cracked land reached plainly towards the distant mountain range. Then the pair watched through the bus's huge windshield as the collection of wide, low concrete buildings rose seemingly out of the sand.

'Who's your money on this time?' Emily asked the teen. A five-year-old in the seat in front of them started pointing and squealing at the sight of the prison up ahead. Tyler considered his mother's question, watching the

boy in front of him with quiet distaste, as if he hadn't once been just the same, so excited to see Daddy at work.

'I'm betting inmates,' Tyler decided, giving his mother a wry smile. 'Dad says they've been practising during yard time for months.'

'Traitor.' Emily smirked.

'How 'bout you?'

'Officers,' she said. 'If you're going for the cons, I've got to go for the correctional officers or your father won't sp—'

A thump cut off Emily's words.

It was a heavy, sonic pulse, not unlike a firework exploding; a sound Emily both heard and felt in the centre of her chest. Her brain offered up a handful of ordinary explanations for the noise even as her eyes took in the visual information that accompanied it. *A blown tyre*, she thought. Or a rock crunching under the bus's wheels. Some kind of spontaneous combustion in the vehicle's old, rickety engine, a piston or cylinder giving out due to the rugged terrain and the desert's usually blinding heat.

But none of those explanations aligned with what Emily saw.

The driver slumped sideways out of his seat, caught and prevented from falling into the stairwell only by the seatbelt over his shoulder. A fine pink mist seemed to shimmer in the air before dissipating as quickly as it had appeared. Emily grabbed the seat in front of her and held on as the bus swung off the road and slowed to a stop in the shrubbery.

Her eyes wandered over the scene at the front of the bus. The passengers in the first two rows were examining their hands or touching their faces as though they were damp. Hundreds of tiny cubes of glass lay over the driver, the dash and the aisle, the side window having neatly collapsed and sprayed everywhere, exactly as it was designed to do. Emily recognised Sarah Gravelle up there rising unsteadily from her seat and walking to the driver's side. Emily could see, even from her distant position, that half of the driver's head was gone. Sarah looked at the driver, and everybody watched her do it, as if they were waiting for her to confirm what they already knew.

Sarah stumbled back to her seat and sat down. Emily's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, her body suddenly covered in a thin film of sweat.

Sarah Gravelle started screaming.

And then everyone was screaming.

Grace Slanter put down her pen and pressed the speakerphone button to answer the phone that was ringing on her wide desk. Few calls came to the warden's office without first being channelled through her assistant's office in the room down the hall, so she was expecting someone familiar on the line: her husband, Joe, or the director of Nevada corrections, Sally Wakefield, a woman she spoke to almost daily. When the line connected, there was a second click she'd never heard before, and her own voice gave a ringing echo, as if it was being played back somewhere. *Robocaller*, she thought. But that was impossible. This was an unlisted line, not the kind that could appear on a database in some sweaty underground scam-mill.

'Hello, Grace Slanter.

'Pay attention,' a voice commanded.

Grace felt a chill enter her spine, high between her shoulders, as though she'd been touched by an icy finger. She looked down at the phone on the desk as though it held a malevolent presence, something she could see glowing evilly between the seams in the plastic.

'Excuse me?'

'There's a bus stopped in the desert half a mile from the prison walls,' the voice said. It was a male voice. Soft, clipped. Confident. 'If you go to the window behind you and look out, you'll see it sitting on the road.'

Grace stood. She did not go to the window. The warden had been trained to respond to calls like this one, and though she'd never before had to put that training into action, the first thing she remembered was not to start following the directions of the caller until she had a grasp on the situation. She went to the door of her office instead, the furthest point from the window, and looked down the hall. There was not a soul to be seen.

'Are you looking at it?' the voice asked.

Grace stepped up onto the couch against the wall, to the left of the desk. She could see the bus out there, a distant white brick in the expanse of land beyond the concrete walls and razor wire of the prison. It had one wheel off the road, the vehicle tilted slightly, leaning, as though drunk.

'Okay,' Grace said. 'I see it. What's your name? I want to know who I'm talking to.'

'On that bus are twelve women, eight men and fourteen children,' the voice said, ignoring her questions. 'They're the families of guards inside the prison. Your employees. Your people.'

‘Jesus Christ,’ Grace said. The annual softball game. Inmates versus officers. The families always came to watch. It was an event designed to appease the prison staff stuck minding vicious criminals during the holiday season while their families gathered at home. The peacemaking gesture usually lifted the dismay after the rosters for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and New Year’s were drawn up, so that officers went into those shifts with at least half a smile on their faces. After the game there were lunch and drinks for the unlucky families in the conference building outside the prison walls.

Grace staggered down from the couch and gripped the edge of the desk. Her training was forgotten, her senses blurred. She went to her chair and fell into it, relieved by the familiar feeling of her own warmth on the seat, something comforting in the chilling seconds that passed.

‘The driver of the bus is dead,’ the voice on the phone said.

Grace tried to remember the location of the panic button on her desk, the one that would send an alarm to her colleagues inside the building, and an automatic ‘assistance needed’ call to the nearest law enforcement agencies. All she had to do was remember where that single button was. But her mind was spinning, reeling, and for a long moment it was a struggle just to breathe.

‘Are you listening, Grace?’

‘I’m . . . I’m listening,’ she said. Grace drew in a deep breath and then let it out. She found the button under the desk by her knee and pushed it. A red light came on above the door to her office, but no sound issued. In seconds, her assistant, Derek, was there, huffing from the run up the hall, two guards right behind him. It only took one look from Grace to send them sprinting away again.

‘What do you want?’ she asked.

‘I want you to let them out.’

Grace had known the words were coming long before they were spoken. She drew in another deep breath. Across the two decades she had been in senior management at Pronghorn, she’d run over this scenario in her mind a hundred times. She knew what to do now. She was regaining control. There was a procedure for this. She grabbed her pen and started jotting down notes about the voice and the time of the call, keeping an eye on the window as she sat twisted sideways in her chair.

‘Which inmates are we talking about?’ Grace asked. ‘Who do you want me to release?’

‘All of them,’ the voice said.

CHAPTER 2

Celine Osbourne smelled smoke. On Pronghorn's death row, tobacco was a controlled substance. Level-two contraband. Any inmate found in possession of it was punished with the same severity as if they were caught with cocaine, heroin, marijuana or ice. She stopped in her tracks halfway down the row, outside serial killer Lionel Forber's cell, and sniffed. Forber was curled in his bed, asleep beneath a blanket, the 77-year-old predator as motionless as a snake under a rock. Celine followed the smell forwards, past a serial rapist crocheting a blanket, a child killer reading a romance novel and a cop killer watching television. The smell was not tobacco burning, she realised; it was wood. And when she found the source, a dark, worn smile crept over her lips.

'How come I knew it was you?' she asked.

John Kradle was bent over the small steel shelf bolted to the wall of his cell that acted as a desk. On the floor, at his feet, a battered silver toaster sat plugged into an extension cord that ran out of his cell and down the length of the row, where it turned a corner and disappeared from view. Kradle had a piece of smooth pine stretched across the desk, and he was using a wire that ran out of the top of the toaster as a makeshift soldering iron to burn ornate lettering into the wood's surface.

'How come you what?' Kradle grunted without looking up.

'How come I knew it was you?' Celine repeated. 'I smelled smoke and I knew somebody around here was up to no good, and I immediately thought of you.'

Celine examined the device in his hand. Kradle had fashioned a handle and a burning prong out of what looked like scraps of wire and wood and duct tape, elastic bands and folded cardboard. He was just rounding the second 'e' in the word '*feet*', having already spelled out '*Please wipe your*' in skilful, near-perfect cursive.

'I don't know, but if I had to guess I'd say it's because you're obsessed with me,' Kradle said, flicking the iron upwards gently to finish the letter with a fine line and a coil of grey smoke. 'I'm never far from your mind. You smell smoke, you think: John Kradle. You smell breakfast, you think: John Kradle. You smell your boyfriend's cologne, you think: John Kradle.'

The toaster at his feet popped and the piece of wire in his iron, which was glowing red, dimmed to black. He shunted the toaster handle down with the toe of his shoe and it began glowing again.

‘Is that the kind of delusion that gets you through the cold, lonely nights here?’ Celine asked. ‘Most guys turn to Catholicism, Kradle. It’s more realistic.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Who the hell rigged this up for you?’

Kradle looked at her through the bars, a weary glance that said prisoners didn’t snitch, even against guards, and that was a fact she should have learned within the five minutes of arriving on her first day on the job. She sighed.

‘Give me that.’ She beckoned for the wood.

‘Nope.’ Kradle swiped back his grey-streaked blond hair and started on the ‘t’ in ‘feet’.

‘What? “Nope”? You don’t say “nope” to me, inmate. Ever. Give me that piece of wood. That’s an order.’

‘I’ve been given an order already today. It was to create this sign here.’ He nodded to the wood in front of him. ‘I’ve got a few conflicting orders during my time in prison. You people holding the keys have a lot of trouble deciding what you want, sometimes. So, when that happens, I go with the one I like best. And right now, that’s working on this sign.’

Celine bit her tongue, turned away and smiled. The smile held no warmth and was an automatic reaction, something burned into her from years as a correctional officer. *Never let them see your anger. If you get angry, smile. Make them think you’re in control. That you expected this. That it’s all going to plan and you couldn’t possibly be happier about it.* But even her false smile was too good for John Kradle.

‘I bet you think standing there smiling like an idiot is going to make me think you’re not angry,’ Kradle said, behind her, as though he could read her thoughts. She turned back. He was still bent over his work, his big hands moving skilfully. ‘You’re wrong. I know you’re mad.’

‘You do, huh?’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Because you know who rigged this set-up for me. You know what the sign is for. It’s for the warden’s office. It’s a peace offering from a certain lieutenant who took the warden’s directive in last month’s staff notices about trudging sand into her office to heart.’

The toaster popped. Kradle shoved the handle down again.

‘And you’re also mad because you know it’s a good sign. It’s pretty,’ he continued, gently blowing the tendrils of smoke away from his face as they rose from the wood. ‘It makes you mad to know that even though the warden is going to figure out an inmate made this sign, she’s going to hang it outside her office anyway because it’s so attractive. And for years to come, maybe decades, every time the warden calls you up for something – a promotion or a sector review or a captains’ meeting or whatever the hell – you’re going to have to look at this sign and know that your most loathed inmate made it and you couldn’t do a damn thing to stop him.’

‘That’s a fairly advanced narrative for a brain the size of a peanut to handle,’ Celine said. ‘You better give me that piece of wood and go lie down.’

‘Make me.’

Celine grabbed the cord running from the toaster out through the bars and yanked it free of the extension cord. She stormed towards the control room.

She slowed as she neared Burke David Schmitz’s cell. The neo-Nazi terrorist, an unrepentant mass shooter, had the highest number of confirmed victims of all the men on Celine’s row. There was a kind of thickness in the air around him. A coldness. The feeling touched the cells on either side of his, which for now were empty. She peered sideways as she walked by and saw him sitting on his cot, straight-backed, looking at nothing, as he often did. The young blond man gave Celine the sense that he could see her even beyond the reach of his line of sight as she passed by.

Lieutenant James Jackson was there, as she expected him to be, slouched sideways in his swivel chair, his feet up on the control panel, clicking between the cameras on the screens before him. The coldness Schmitz had left her with was gone, and she was hot with anger again.

‘Did you give John Kradle a soldering iron?’ she asked. Jackson’s round face was lit by the glow of the camera screens, highlighting the bags beneath his eyes.

‘I didn’t give it to him. He built it himself.’

‘But you gave him the parts. You gave him the toaster,’ Celine said. ‘That’s the toaster out of the break room. The old one. The broken one.’

‘Well, he didn’t have a visitor smuggle it in up their asshole, that’s all I can tell you, Captain,’ Jackson said. His assistant, Liz Savva, choked on her

coffee.

‘Help me understand.’ Celine leaned in the doorway, her arms folded. ‘I’m trying to get into your frame of mind. You let a man who shot his family to death in their home before setting the place on fire take possession of a toaster and misappropriate its mechanical parts so he could use it to burn things. Is that what you’re saying?’

‘Look, Captain.’ Jackson leaned back in his chair and stared at her. ‘These guys on the row? I don’t sit around thinking about their crimes. If I did, I couldn’t work with them. I just think of them as miserable sons of bitches who spend twenty-three hours a day locked in a cage.’ He pointed upwards, in the direction of the warden’s office. ‘Warden Slanter’s been looking at me funny since I messed up the new carpet in her office. I was telling Kradle about it and he came up with the idea of the sign. And I think he’s doing a good job. So why don’t you just lay off the guy? He’s helping me out.’

Celine sighed.

‘It’ll look good for the next inspection,’ Jackson continued. ‘The inmates doing arts and crafts.’

‘Kradle should be bumped down to finger-painting level,’ Celine said. ‘That way, he’s less likely to hurt someone.’

‘What’s your problem with Kradle?’ Savva mused, peering into her coffee mug as if the answer might lie in there. ‘He’s one of the least confrontational inmates we have. It’s like you hate him even more than the guy in six who ate all those old ladies’ faces.’

‘I’ll tell you what I hate.’ Celine put her hands up, ready to paint a mental picture, but a dull ringing interrupted her. At first she thought it was the phone on her hip. Then she followed the sound to the speaker hanging from the ceiling in the corner of the room. She’d never heard a phone ringing through the PA system before. There was a click, and a noise like a desk chair creaking.

‘Hello, Grace Slanter.

‘Pay attention.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘What the hell is that?’ Celine asked.

‘It’s the warden,’ Savva said. The gentle ex-teacher and death row rookie was slowly rising from her chair. ‘Sounds like her phone’s being picked up by the PA.’

‘Oh, shit.’ Jackson laughed. ‘She’s left her mic on and taken a call.’

‘There’s a bus stopped in the desert half a mile from the prison walls. If you go to the window behind you and look out, you’ll see it sitting on the road.’

‘Are you looking at it?’

‘Somebody better get up there and tell her the whole prison can hear her,’ Liz said. ‘Before she starts—’

‘Shut up,’ Celine said. ‘Listen.’

There was a strange silence on the line. A silence that had flooded through the speakers and infected the entire prison. Celine stepped back through the doorway and glanced down the row. It wasn’t this quiet in E Block even in the dead of night. She heard Grace Slanter huff into the phone.

‘Okay. I see it. What’s your name? I want to know who I’m talking to.’

‘On that bus are twelve women, eight men and fourteen children,’ the voice said. *‘They’re the families of guards inside the prison. Your employees. Your people. The driver is dead.’*

‘Oh my god,’ Celine whispered.

‘Hey!’ an old man in the cell nearest the control room called out. Celine looked. He was holding a shaving mirror through the bars to see her. One grey eye was scrutinising her, its brow hanging low. Roger Hannoy, the face-eater. ‘What’s going on out there?’

‘Jesus Christ.’

‘Are you listening, Grace?’

‘I’m . . . I’m listening.’

Celine dashed down the corridor to the row of windows along the east side of the block. Beyond the furthest concrete wall of the prison, she could see the bus out there in the desert, stopped just off the lonely road that led to the facility. The voices on the speakers above them carried on. Jackson and Savva arrived beside her. Jackson gripped the bars.

‘My family’s on that bus,’ Jackson breathed. Celine saw all the blood rush from his face into his neck and then it was gone, leaving him grey as stone. ‘Tyler. Oh my god. Tyler. Tyler. Tyler.’

‘Who do you want me to release?’

‘All of them.’

‘This is . . .’ Liz began, but her words fell away and her mouth simply gaped.

‘Don’t panic. Let’s not panic,’ Celine said. ‘It’s, uh . . . It’s a drill.’ It seemed important to simply interrupt what was happening, to throw something, anything, under the wheels of the train as it came hurtling down the mountain, even though she knew it was impossible to stop it completely. The interruption didn’t last long. Jackson met her eyes, and they both knew that captains were briefed on all drills. The fear on Celine’s face crushed her lie the second it was out of her mouth.

‘I can’t. I mean, I can’t do that. That’s not doable.’ Slanter’s voice was bouncing off the thick walls. *‘You can’t just . . . What do you—’*

‘You’ve got four minutes to empty the prison. We’re watching, and we’re looking for a particular inmate. When he appears outside the prison walls, I’ll call my shooter off.’

‘Who’s the inmate?’

‘We’re not going to tell you that. You’ll have to release everyone.’

Jackson’s radio crackled on his belt. Celine watched him try to grip it, work it awkwardly from its holster, but he failed, his hands numb. Celine pulled it free.

‘Are you guys up in E Block hearing this?’ a voice on the radio asked. It sounded like Bensley from H Block.

‘Is this real?’ came another voice. All call signals were abandoned. All procedures thrown into the trash. Celine knew that was one of the first signs of mass panic. People forgot their training, became scared animals working only on instinct, fighting to return to reason.

A gaggle of voices and blips came out of the device in her fingers. Calls from all over the prison, fighting for airtime.

‘My husband is on that bus!’

‘Can anyone tell me what the hell is going on? Is this a drill? Is this a drill?’

‘This is Issei in Watchtower Eight. Somebody tell me this is a drill. Has anybody got a captain on deck?’

‘Is this for real, Celine?’ Jackson asked. He’d grabbed her bicep so hard his nails were biting through the fabric of her shirt. Celine tore her arm away.

‘I . . . I . . . I don’t know.’ She couldn’t force the words through her lips fast enough. ‘Just, uh . . . just get back into the control room. Send up a code red, and—’