

Chapter One

None of this would've happened if Fitz had held up his end.

Curtis Monroe knew there was nothing he could do about it now, so he concentrated on the one thing that mattered.

Running.

The night air felt stifling and thick on his face. The black greasepaint he wore didn't help. He breathed in deep enough to stretch his ribcage to the limit, pushed down the thought that he couldn't take another step, and broke into a sprint for the third time since he'd climbed out of the athletic director's office window. The sprint brought the chain link fence closer, but he knew he couldn't hold the pace. His thigh muscles cramped from lack of oxygen and streaks of light danced in his peripheral vision. He pulled back a touch, his heart thudding. His lungs burned. Each step bore the weight of wet concrete. But he grinned through the pain. That fence was getting closer. He tightened his grip on the black metal cash box under his left arm, hearing Sonny's footsteps behind him, matching him stride for stride.

He exhaled a ragged breath and glanced back at Sonny. Another black cash box was clamped and rattling with change under Sonny's right arm. He yelled.

"We're almost there. Just up this hill. Don't slow down."

Curtis locked his gaze on the silhouette of chain link and barbed wire stamped against the clear night sky. He clamped his jaw shut and bore down, running through this last stretch of athletic field that bordered the visitor side of the football stadium in a horseshoe of manicured grass. That backward glance gave him all he needed to know. Those two security guards would never catch them before they reached the fence. They looked to be at least twenty, maybe

twenty-five yards back. And the off-duty cop with the beer belly was totally out of the picture. He was a hundred yards away, the blazing arc lights of the football stadium illuminating him as he held binoculars, watching the chase from his post outside the ticket booths. Problem was, in that bare second of a backward glance, Curtis saw the empty dog leashes hanging from the cop's hand. He knew everything hinged on how many seconds ago the cop had released his rottweilers. That and how fast those black and tan monsters could run. Fear of being dragged down by the dogs squeezed a band of panic around his heart.

The night sky peeled open, turning bright as his pupils dilated from the adrenaline dumping into his system. He felt his sweat slicked, grease painted face dry in the wind as he pushed into high gear. Everything fell away, muting and becoming background noise. The sound of his footsteps cutting through the grass. The burning in his thighs and lungs. The muffled roar of the crowd cheering for their team in the football stadium. He tossed the cash box over the fence, scrambled up it, and vaulted the double strand of barbed wire at the top.

The barbed wire never touched him. He dropped clean on the other side of the fence, bending at the knees as his feet hit the sidewalk, and looked for the cash box. It lay safely in the grass skirting the curb. He grabbed a fistful of chain link in each hand and stared straight at Sonny. Only ten feet separated Sonny from the fence. The two security guards hadn't made up much distance. They were still maybe twenty yards back. It looked like everything was going to work out. And then he stiffened, tightening his grip on the fence. The two rotties came out of nowhere, running by the security guards with fantastic speed, tongues out and flopping. He watched them bear down on Sonny, closing the distance in great, muscled strides. The bigger of the two bolted out in front, his legs stretching in a last dash to get his teeth into Sonny before he made the fence. Shaking the fence with all he had, Curtis yelled.

“C’mon!”

Sonny winged his cash box over the fence. It clattered on the street behind Curtis, broke open and scattered change over the asphalt. The chain link rattled as Sonny slammed into it. Curtis felt Sonny’s hands grab his through the fence. Mouth open, Sonny gasped.

“I...can’t...climb...”

Curtis jerked the chain link against his face, pulling nose-to-nose with Sonny.

“The rotties are on your ass!”

Sonny scrambled up the fence, but Curtis could see it was too late. The lead dog was three strides away, ready to launch into Sonny. Curtis grabbed the fence and shook it, screaming at the dog.

The big rottweiler turned his head in full stride and bared his fangs, throwing himself at Curtis. The dog plowed into the chain link, inches separating his teeth from Curtis’s face. Slobber flung into Curtis’s eye as the rottie bit down on the fence and shook his head, jaws clamped wide on the diamond-shaped links of galvanized steel. Curtis stood, rubbing his eye with the back of his wrist. The hair on the back of his neck rose as the dog let out a bone-deep growl, twisting and pulling at a mouthful of chain link.

He looked up, blinking to clear his vision. A blurry image of Sonny perched on top of the barbed wire came into focus. Sonny leaped, the sound of ripping denim filling the air. Curtis held his breath, watching Sonny hit the ground headfirst. Frozen, Curtis looked at his buddy.

Sonny was limp, face down in the grass, the left leg of his jeans ripped from calf to heel. From what Curtis could see, Sonny’s leg was untouched by the barbed wire. But, blood or no blood, Sonny still wasn’t moving. Curtis’s mind circled tighter and tighter.

And then he relaxed, hearing Sonny moan and reach blindly for the fence.

The fence shook with a jackpot rattle as the second rottweiler and both security guards slammed into it. Curtis helped Sonny to his feet. He gripped Sonny's face and looked into his eyes, making sure they weren't fixed and dilated like someone who'd been cold-cocked. Sonny's pupils contracted. Satisfied that Sonny had his wits, Curtis turned toward the fence.

A foot separated him from the two guards. Both were sweating and panting, on the edge of keeling over, but they obviously spent a lot of time in the weight room. One was goateed, bald and a couple inches shy of six feet. The other was well over six feet and probably had to turn sideways to fit through doors. Curtis thought the shorter, bald guy took the prize for crazed maniac. His neck was a pillar of muscle and his vein-wrapped arms stretched the short sleeves of his blue Armco Security golf shirt to the limit.

Eyes bulging, the bald guy grabbed the fence, shaking it as spittle flew from his mouth.

"You guys are dead!"

Curtis grabbed Sonny by the shoulder, pulling him away from the fence. Before he could stop him, Sonny raised his arm and pointed at the guard.

"Yeah? Come on over here and we'll see who's dead, you mother—"

Curtis backhanded Sonny and yanked him away from the fence. Sonny pulled away and touched his forehead where he'd been smacked. Curtis put his index finger in front of his lips and shook his head.

The shove from Sonny caught Curtis by surprise. He stumbled backward, touching a hand to the ground to keep from tripping over the curb. By the time he caught his balance, Sonny was already stalking into the street.

A red haze filled Curtis's head. He exhaled loud and hard. The sound of the screaming security guards and barking dogs collapsed into static as he bent down and picked up the cash

box from the grass. He brushed a clot of mud off the box. Yeah, there wasn't time now, but he'd definitely get in Sonny's face later. Get in his face and remind him for the hundredth time that talking was how they got a piece of you—how they put together the profile that eventually put you in prison. He slapped the cash box and shoved it under his arm. And there was gonna be a long conversation with that idiot Fitz. If Fitz had done his job, they would've been gone long before the security guards got a sniff of them.

He straightened and looked toward the street. Fives, tens and twenties blew against the curb, some skittering past Sonny's cash box lying sideways in the road with a busted lid. On his knees next to the broken box, Sonny worked to jam the lid shut, his white forehead showing through the grease paint where he'd caught the backhand. Curtis moved quickly, jumping here and there to pick up loose bills, stuffing them into his pockets. He scraped at a crisp bill with Ulysses S. Grant on it. It seemed to be glued to the concrete. A series of muffled grunts and rattles from the fence caught his attention.

He glanced back, picking at a wet corner of the fifty. The bald security guard was on the fence, climbing toward the barbed wire with his partner pushing from below. Curtis felt his pulse jump and then he relaxed, seeing the guard slip, workboots clawing for a toehold. The dogs could probably climb better than that muscled freakshow.

He scraped his fingernail under the fifty and cursed as the corner off the bill ripped off and blew down the street. He shoved the torn bill in his pocket and jogged next to Sonny, slapping his shoulder.

“Let's go.”

He watched the security guard on the fence snag his hand on the barbed wire and jump to the ground with blood running down his forearm. Sonny stood, cutting off his view.

“Damn thing’s broke,” Sonny said, gripping the cash box. He raised his eyebrows. “Oh, sorry. Am I allowed to talk now?”

“Get your ass in gear before the cops show,” Curtis said, backing across the street before turning and jogging downhill into a quiet neighborhood of split levels and colonials.

Four blocks deep into the neighborhood, Curtis cut into the side yard of a big, southern-style white house with four, two-story pillars bracing the front porch. He slowed to a walk, stopping in the shadows to catch his breath, leaning against the rough brick chimney. Sonny huffed next to him.

“Gorman’s one street over, that way,” Curtis said, pointing through the back yard.

Sonny bent over, hands on knees, and said, “Fitz better be there. Don’t know if those guards made it over the fence, but I’ll tell you, man, I can’t run no more.”

Curtis could see Sonny’s eyes widen, big white holes in the black of Sonny’s grease painted face, as he jabbed Sonny in the chest. “You’re running. We’re both running until we’re clear of this. Got it?”

Sonny’s eyes bobbed up and down. Curtis cleared his throat and spat on the ground before pushing away from the chimney. He jogged through the backyard and stopped at a shoulder-high, leafy hedge. Holding the cash box overhead, he edged through it sideways. On the other side of the hedge, he scanned the parking lot of Gorman Park. A Ford Bronco idled alongside the eight-foot tall, wooden Gorman Park sign. Sonny pushed through the hedge behind him. He elbowed Sonny, nodded at the Bronco and ran across the parking lot.

As he opened the Bronco’s front passenger door, the hinges groaned and creaked.

Fitz stared at him from the driver’s seat. “About time,” he said.

Curtis slid into the front passenger seat, hearing the back door's hinges groan even louder as Sonny got in. Cash box in his lap, Curtis pulled the seat belt over his shoulder. He took a deep breath and exhaled before turning to Fitz. "Didn't I tell you to put WD 40 on these doors?"

Fitz shrugged. "What do you care? They're my doors."

"Dude, the cops over in Bromfield probably heard us opening your rusty ass doors. But maybe that don't bother you, kinda like me and Sonny having security guards and dogs on our ass don't bother you, huh?"

Fitz smiled and swiveled in his seat to look at Sonny. "You bring any of your sister's tampons? I think Monroe needs one."

Curtis turned his attention to the cash box in his lap. He opened the lid and started counting, blocking out the sound of Fitz's laughter.

Ignoring the sound of gravel crunching as the Bronco rolled out of the parking lot.

Shutting out everything but the numbers adding up in his head.