

Chapter 1

Gracie Parish had learned three valuable things in the last two excruciating hours driving around Mexico: The fetal position was only comfortable in the womb. Her deodorant wasn't trapped-inside-a-hidden-compartment strength. And blood circulation could be lost in your forehead.

There had to be an easier way to break into a sex-slaver's home than smooshed inside this malodorous secret compartment, while her brother and his frenemy, Victor, drove into the compound posing as mano-a-mano live "entertainers."

Sweat salted her eyes, slicked her skin. The good news? If she died, the House of Hades would feel like an oasis. A spacious oasis.

This was it. This was absolutely the last time she took part in her family's insane vigilante schemes. Ugh. Sometimes she wished she'd never been adopted into this mess. She needed a vacation on an island. A Canadian island. Someplace cold.

With a flick of her jaw, she clicked her mic. "How much longer, Justice? I'm roasting."

"Please, you've been in there for two hours. People smuggled out of Mexico stay in that compartment for days."

Days? Days pretending to be the back seat of a car, while your legs were tucked, foam padding stuck to your skin, your right arm went numb, your right hip screamed, and you could taste exhaust? "Yeah, well, not me. If my cyber skills weren't needed to rescue your boyfriend, nothing could get me into this Dante's *Inferno*. Nothing."

"Stop your whining. You're almost inside the compound."

Her sister scored zero on the empathy meter. Zero. "Easy for you. You're on a hilltop, stretched out, overlooking this whole scene through a scope."

"Just playing to my strength. I'm the best shot."

She *was* a good shot. *Hey. No.* "You know, this bull-poop has been going on since childhood. 'Gracie's the smallest, she can fit in that pipe.'" She mimicked a child's high-pitched voice. "'Gracie's the smallest, let her squeeze through the vent system. Gracie's the smallest—put her in the smuggling compartment so she can break out Trojan horse style inside the compound.'"

"Bull-poop? If you cursed, you'd realize bullshit is way more satisfying." She could hear the focus and humor in Justice's voice. "And it's not my fault you're a shrimp."

“Being petite isn’t a talent.”

“You also have great red hair and hot underwear.”

Oh. God. She’d never live that down. “Good thing. Otherwise, I’d have no excuse if they find me. Assuming they don’t shoot before I explain that Tony and Victor hid me here as a surprise bonus to their sex show.”

“Trust me, no red-blooded male is going to shoot you when he gets a look at that thong.” Humiliating. Circles of heat singed her already too-warm cheeks.

Should’ve just nodded when Justice had said, “Sure, Gracie, pretending to be a stowaway entertainer is better than nothing, but we don’t have a costume for you.” Or when her sister had looked around the desolate plane hangar, thrown up her hands, and teased, “We’re shit out of eight-hundred-dollar bras, and there’s no Agent Provocateur in sight.”

What happened after that was probably one of the top five most embarrassing moments of her life. She’d dropped her pants. She’d lifted off her shirt.

Justice had burst into laughter. Tony had sputtered. Victor had whistled. “Damn, Red, if I’d known you were hiding that, I would’ve been nicer to you.”

Yeah. Top five. Definitely. And this, being in this car, was definitely in the top ten most uncomfortable places she’d ever been.

Well, maybe top fifteen.

“Our boys are pulling up to the compound gate,”—Justice’s voice was low in her ear—“so stay quiet.”

The car turned. The crunch of gravel vibrated under the wheels and through her bones. “They wouldn’t hear me if I screamed.” Not a pleasant thought. “Seriously, I could die trapped in here.”

“There’s a release lever.”

Yes. But the arm by the lever was numb and heavy. The car jerked to a stop. Her forehead thumped against metal.

Her headset clicked. She heard Justice’s breathing and then, “There’s a big *American Ninja Warrior* security guard talking to Tony and Victor. He seems to be in charge of the five men at the gate. He’s gesturing our boys out of the car.”

Gracie caught the sound of a deep voice, a guy with an American Southern accent. *Southern?*

The car doors opened and shut as Tony and Victor got out.

Justice snorted through the headset. “Victor just pirouetted to show he had nothing to hide. Hysterical. Man has balls.”

And then some. She pictured that fine Latino pirouetting in his Magic Mike costume. Victor could fill out a G-string.

“They’re going to check the car.”

The front car doors opened with a squeak of hinges. Her heart rate jumped to please-God-don’t-let-them-find-me pace.

Sweat rolled down her face, perched on her lips. She held her breath.

They’d find her. They’d hear her hyper heartbeat like in Poe’s “The Telltale Heart,” *ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom*. And then they’d shoot her. *Boom*.

Someone climbed into the back seat. Blood *whoosh, whoosh, whooshed* in her ears. Her hearing tunneled and focused in tight. Did he have his knee on her left butt cheek? Not a featherweight.

Oh Lord, please. If she survived, she’d go back to running her bar. Maybe keep her cyber-warrior stuff going on the side, but she’d stay far away from the field. And danger. And death.

His weight shifted. The padding and the springs pressed tight against her hip. *Ouch*.

No big deal. No big deal.

If they caught her, well, she’d heard that Mexicans love redheads.

Is that racist?

Gracie, stop overthinking.

He didn’t register her beneath him. *Phew*. Then again, if this had been a shoddy place to hide, she never would’ve gotten into it. Petite body didn’t mean petite mind.

The door shut with a slam. She exhaled. Thank the universe, Allah, Dr. Phil, and baby Jesus.

Someone got into the front, started the car, backed it up, drove it a short distance, and parked. The car door creaked open and slammed closed.

Had they parked the car outside the compound?

“Justice—” she whispered.

“Fuck. Parked it outside the compound. You’re like twenty feet from the front gate.”

Fudge. She needed to be inside the gate to turn off the security. *Ok. Stay calm.* “Don’t worry, J. I’ve got this. I’ll find a way inside and turn off the electric fence for you.”

“You’re east of the guard tower.”

Honestly. The very last time I do this.

Chapter 2

Guarding the front gate of a ten-thousand-acre cattle ranch turned bad guy's hideout, Leif "Dusty" McAllister couldn't help but wonder if he had the luck of an '80s action-adventure star. John McClane's brand of bad luck.

That Die-Harder could be scarfing down burgers at a Shake-n-Steak and still run into a shit show.

Not that he was currently anywhere near that fabulous testament to his nation's culinary prowess. And if he went with the God's honest truth, he'd have to admit he'd been asking for it. Going undercover in Mexico to catch a family of American vigilantes wasn't exactly staying out of the line of fire.

Sure had raised a few eyebrows at the bureau. Uptight, shoe-polish divas. If you couldn't stomach a little cow patty on your boots, you shouldn't stomp around with the bulls. He'd spent months cultivating his relationship with Tony Parish, so when he'd offered Dusty a part in this operation, he'd gone all in. Tony was the reason he was in Mexico pretending to work for that psycho sex-trafficker Walid.

Dusty motioned the Latino guy with the sparkly G-string and Tony, who wore a similar getup and a belt weighted with BDSM tools to stand still while he frisked them.

As Dusty frisked him, Tony shifted from foot to foot. "Dusty."

Even though it was barely a whisper, Dusty froze. Guy was gonna call him by name? Here? Pretty stupid. Or desperate.

Dusty leaned down as he checked Tony's tools of the trade. Those and his steel-toed boots had set off the metal detector wand. Dusty got to a knee. "Take off your boots."

Tony bent down, took off his shoes, leaned next to Dusty's ear. "Gracie in back of car. Can you get her to security?"

Tony's sister was in the back of that car?

What was going on? This wasn't the original plan. How the hell was he going to get her inside without his men starting to suspect?

Dusty stood and nodded. "Put your boots back on."

He moved to frisk Tony's partner. The guy winked at him. "Take your time, big guy."

Was he serious? Walid was probably watching this whole exchange. Dusty pointed at his shoes. “Take ’em off.”

Dusty checked the guy’s shoes, ducked his head, hid his mouth, and murmured, “Justice?”

Inches from him, the guy retied his shoes. “Hillside. Scope.”

Definitely not the original plan. His heart started to pick up its pace. She had a scope on them?

This last-minute bullshit must’ve been sparked when Walid captured Sandesh, Justice’s boyfriend. *Damn*. Could’ve, would’ve, should’ve were lining up at the pasture gate in his mind.

He ran through the possibilities. Tony was going after Walid, so Gracie and Justice must be after Sandesh.

He motioned to the golf cart waiting nearby. “Good to go.”

Without another word, Tony and his pal walked toward the cart that would take them to the villa. Just as well. Couldn’t afford to keep talking with his men looking on. Sure they trusted him, hard not to after months here, but they weren’t total idiots. Poorly trained. Yes. Happy-go-lucky. Yes. Total idiots. No.

Now he had to get Gracie Parish inside the compound without raising suspicion, keep that hothead Justice from shooting anyone, and sacrifice one sadistic sex-slaver to the cause. Hopefully, then he’d gain an invite into the Parish family.

An invite he sorely needed to get the evidence to take down the Parish matriarch and vigilante extraordinaire, Mukta Parish.

He cast his eyes to the sky and whatever heavenly powerbroker might happen to own stock in this shit show. *Please. No more surprises.*

In answer, the alarm blared from the speakers perched on posts throughout the compound.

Thanks a lot.

The two-way radio on Dusty’s belt sparked to life, security telling him the alarm had started in the dungeon—the old mine where they held prisoners. Looked like Sandesh had gotten restless.

Dusty motioned his men back from Tony and his pal, who had climbed into the golf cart. He did not want to set Justice off. The alarm had to be playing as much havoc with her nerves as

his.

He absolutely had to do something though, because Walid—a raging loon since his brother’s murder——was surely watching.

Adrenaline brushed its chemical magic across his blood, and the entire scene slowed, snapped into bright, glaring focus.

He ordered Tony and Victor out of the golf cart and onto their knees. Best to make it look good.

One of his guards, a recent hire, misunderstood. Deciding the alarm and these two arriving weren’t coincidence, he got in Tony’s face.

Newbie.

With a calm voice, Dusty spoke to the guy in Spanish. But the newbie bent down, grabbed Tony, hoisted him to standing.

And then the idiot reached for his gun. Dusty put up a hand. “No. *Para—*”

Pop. Blood splattered from a bullet hole in newbie’s head. Tony wrestled out of his dead grasp and ran toward Walid’s villa, with his friend a hot step behind.

Bullets started flying. Dusty ducked and ran for cover in the other direction, toward the car and the woman hidden there.

Yep. John McClane’s luck. They were gonna die so friggin’ hard today. All of them.

Chapter 3

There was no way Gracie could stay trapped inside this sweaty can of a space for one more fudgin' minute.

Justice's voice came through her headset again. "Gracie. They're in. They're—"

An alarm sounded. Her heart sped up—way up. It outpaced a Ducati. She needed out of this hidey-hole *now*.

Her sweaty, numb fingers flip-flapped against the metal escape lever like a fish on the deck of a ship.

The *pop, pop, pop* of Justice's gun came through her headset before it clicked off. Why was Justice shooting? Did it have anything to do with the alarm?

Crud.

This never would've happened if she'd still been with John. She'd probably be a soccer mom, have a garden and soft moments.

Okay, stop, Gracie. Focus on squeezing that metal between your fingers. Not regret. Not the man you lost. Not the child you had to let go.

Easier said—thought and repeated again and again—than done. She thought of John all the time. And their son. Tyler. At work. At rest. At play. And now. Here in this sweaty, uncomfortable, uncertain place. Because she was afraid. And her biggest regret was losing them.

Stay calm. Hard enough to breathe squeezed inside the metal curve of this seat. Her fingers cramped, her wrist angled back, she grasped at the latch, pulled. The muscles in her wrist yelped. The spring gave with a dull click.

Breathing heavily, she pushed against the padding. The seat cracked open then stopped dead. *Fudge buckets.*

More shots. Close. Someone fired from behind the car. Someone used the car for cover. Someone fired at her sister. At Justice. Whoever was shooting at her sister was *so* dead.

She angled her knee to aid her pushing hand. The seat began to give way. Hopefully Justice would keep whoever was firing to busy to peer through the heavily tinted windows at the car's interior.

The car door opened. "Let me help you there, Gracie."

She flinched, banged her head. *Ouch.* Southern accent? Southern accent knew her name?

What the hell was going on?

The car shifted. Guy must be big. There was a creak, and the seat was yanked open. Air. She sucked it in, turned and pulled her shoulders loose. Freed. She sat up and blinked at fresh air and man.

Uhm. Oh. She stared straight into the startled face of way-too-handsome. Sunset-brown hair topped by a USA ball cap, a big, easy grin defined by the persistent crease of overused dimples, labor-tan skin, and the sexiest nose she'd ever seen. A roughly carved block, his nose added challenge and strength to a sun-rugged portrait.

Her heartbeat skittered between the dread of tense alarm and the uncertainty of unexpected arousal. Her skin heated to a temperature rarely seen outside a volcano. Of course.

The sensitivity in her body painted every emotion upon her skin in hues of red. From pleased pink to rust-colored anger to chili-red lust. Didn't matter if it was an insult, compliment, or an unexpected sexual attraction that hit her like a bomb, the result was clear on her face.

Top most embarrassing moment, please take a step down.

His eyes bounced along her body. The red-velvet bra. The matching thong. The ruby piercing snuggled in her bellybutton. The tattoo along her right side—a woman's long, elegant hand curved with vicious scarlet nails, clutching an enchanted apple, holding it out, as if implicitly offering it to the person now consuming her body.

Consuming her body with eyes of thickest amber, eyes drunk on sun, sex, sand, and Southern Comfort.

The heat from his eyes reached out and licked her. Every inch of her grew hotter. Her face. Her hands. Between her breasts. Lower.

The man reached down blindly, groped and found his two-way. He lifted the two-way to his mouth but spoke to her before he spoke into it. "Darlin', don't be upset by this. I'm on your side. Trust me."

He clicked the radio on. In Spanish, he gave instructions for his men to go out and hunt Justice. He clicked off.

Don't be upset? Did the man realize that was her sister? Teeth clenched, she reached down and extracted her gun from the hidden compartment. She aimed at him.

A muscle along his thumb twitched, but he kept his Glock 19 down, smiled.

He smiled? Was he trying not to laugh? *Oh, buddy, let's see how quickly I can wipe that*

smile off your face.

“No. No,” he said, clearly reading her intent from her furious face. “Don’t shoot. I’m working with Tony. I had to send those men so Walid wouldn’t suspect us.”

Tony? “My brother never mentioned you. And you just sacrificed my sister, so Walid, a sex-trafficking supervillain won’t suspect you?”

Her finger tensed around the trigger.

He shook his head. Smile gone. His gun hand remained down. *Smart.* “I did that so Tony still has a chance. And your sister is good. Honest. Those guys can’t shoot. No fooling. One of them shot himself in the foot trying to take his gun out two months ago.”

“Gracie?” Justice’s strained voice came through her headset.

Gracie clicked her mic on with a flick of her jaw. “Go. I’ve got American Ninja Warrior.”

He did smile at that. “I’m Agent Leif McAllister. FBI.”

FBI? Nuts and bolts. The email. The email she’d sent via a secure site to the FBI. The one she’d sent when Tyler was sick and she was helpless to go to him and it all seemed Momma’s fault. The stupid email that proved her a traitor to the family and Momma’s secret society, the League of Warrior Women. She swallowed a wave of panic. “FBI? In Mexico?”

“Yeah, well, I’m sort of off duty right now. No need for the agent part, actually. Just thought that would make you more comfortable. My friends call me Dusty.”

“Dusty?”

“Been told I could talk a stone to dust.” He reached out with his free hand. “I’m going to help you out of here. Okay?”

“You touch me and I will shoot.”

His hand dropped. Good. Nothing like getting the boundaries set from the get-go.

Chapter 4

Dusty was pretty sure Tony would have an issue or two with what he intended to do with his sister. Give him the ruby. Give him the nails. Give him the apple. Yep. He wanted to lick his way down the whole damn tattoo and across that too-pink skin.

But first things first. Getting her not to shoot him. Which meant being honest with her.

Well, no. Not honest.

Telling her that that the FBI had gotten an anonymous tip about Parish vigilante activities and he was investigating her family and using her brother Tony as a means to an end would make this whole thing messy. Would cost him his job. And the person he wanted to bust most, Mukta Parish.

He'd give her his cover.

"Your brother recruited me to help take out the sex-slaver, Walid. I've been working here for months, replacing every decent shot with a lousy one, and learning this place and its quirks like the back of my hand."

She squinted, obviously weighing whether to shoot him. "Give me your gun."

"That's a no-go." And a hell no. She opened her mouth. Probably to argue. Because after only two minutes of knowing her, Dusty also knew this was Gracie's strong suit. "If my men or Walid see you with a gun on me, things are going to get real complicated."

Her brows drew together. "Give me your gun. I'll give it back when I'm safely out of the car."

"Look"—he glanced around to make sure no one had started to pay attention—"if I wanted you dead, I'd have shot you by now. There's no time. The longer we argue, the more suspicious this looks. You need me, so risk trusting me."

She tilted her head as if to ask, *so-why-don't-you-trust-me-and-give-me-the-gun?*

Damn. She was going to get them both killed.

He swallowed a big helping of yes-ma'am that nearly choked him, and placed his gun on the seat.

Straightening, she stepped back from the car. The SUV full of men he'd sent after Justice had pulled to a stop high on the ridge, and the men had gotten out.

At the other end of the compound, past the barn, main house, and entrance to the old

mine shaft, another vehicle tore out the back gate. Road grit flew into the air as the car screamed away.

Some of his men were already abandoning ship. Just how he liked it. He took out his two-way and yelled that he had it under control and for them to stop. They went faster.

Perfect.

His Glock in one of her hands, her small-framed Beretta Tomcat in the other, red-velvet bra, colorful tattoo, belly piercing...Gracie was as hot as bourbon whiskey. With a stone-serious expression, she motioned him to the rear of the car. He took two steps back. "We don't have—"

She turned to survey the area, revealing a thong splitting an ass as round and juicy as the apple tattooed across her abs.

"Tiiii..." His voice went up like a hay bale doused with gasoline torched by a flamethrower. His blood turned to liquid lava, steamed his body, and ironed out the wrinkles in the front of his cargo pants.

He should look away.

She turned, caught him looking. He grinned. Like a fool.

A bullet thunked into the steel of the car. He dropped a hair's breadth slower than her.

Crouched by the car, adrenaline slapping him upside the head for his stupidity, he raised his two-way and told his men not to shoot.

He returned his attention to her, crouched beside him, and tried to get things under control. "You need to give me my gun. I can get them..."

Gracie ignored him, raised her Tomcat, and shot over his head. Someone cried out. He leaned in. "Don't shoot. Honestly, these guys..."

She jumped to her feet and ran up the dirt road and through the now-unmanned gate. What the hell? He was tempted to let the idiot get herself killed.

Aw, hell. Anxiety putting spurs to his legs, he sprinted after her. A woman with a gun in each hand. *He* must be the idiot.

Lady had speed. But he had longer legs and apparently more fear. "Stop. You're making this harder than it has to be. And you're going the wrong way."

She pulled up behind the guard tower, sucking in air. "Which way is faster?"

He stepped to the side, blocked their conversation from any cameras. The noise from the alarm pulsed against his eardrums. "Give me my gun. I'll convince my men I'm taking you

prisoner. We can walk through here without killing anyone or getting killed.”

She squinted at him. “And my gun?”

Seriously? “You’ll have to give me that to convince my men you’re my prisoner.”

She shook her head. “If I keep my hands low like they’re cuffed in front of me, they won’t see that I’m holding a gun. It’s dark. And it’s a small gun.”

He seriously could not believe her.

She handed him his gun. “I need to get to the security station to turn off the electric fence for my sister.”

Great, just what this situation needed, another Parish running around.

Taking his gun, he nodded toward a building by the coal mine. “Roundish building, left of the mine—it’s a yurt. That’s security.”

Lowering her hands, she did a fair job of keeping the Tomcat hidden. Not that it would fool anyone who looked closely enough, but dressed as she was—hot woman wearing combat boots and a thong—no one would be looking at her hands.

“A yurt. Not very secure.”

No kidding. Even less secure today than it had been a few months ago. Dusty used his gun to indicate which way she should go. “Make it look good.”

She lowered her shoulders, lowered her head like she’d been defeated and started walking. His two-way squawked again, more shit going on in the mine. Damn Sandesh. Couldn’t that guy just sit tight?

“My Spanish isn’t great. Did they say the mine?”

He lowered the sound. They had. But he wasn’t about to tell her that. She might start running again. He needed her to stay calm and in his immediate vicinity. “No.”

She looked over her shoulder at him. Her eyebrows crashed together, forming a wrinkle above her nose. He felt it then. He felt it for what it was.

The moment lengthened, drew out as clear as crystal. As clear as a blue sky on a bright, cloudless Easter morning. The decision made. The box checked. He saw it in her face. You’re lying. And I will never trust you.