



## Chapter One

Running for your life, scared out of your mind, sucked.

Natalie Blackwell choked back a sob. She could barely see in the dank, dark tunnel. The harsh rasp of her breathing competed with the hard thump of her heart.

Her bare foot hit something sharp and she winced. She pressed a palm to the stone wall and sucked in some air. She couldn't even remember losing her shoes, and her favorite gray skirt was now torn and stained.

She was *so* claiming them as work expenses when she got out of this nightmare. A hysterical laugh bubbled in her throat. She'd been running through these underground tunnels for hours, and she still hadn't found a way out.

Somewhere, deep in the labyrinth of tunnels, a monstrous roar echoed.

*No.* Her pulse spiked, and she took off running again.

She turned a corner, her feet slapping on the damp stone.

She'd been at an archeology conference in Athens. She'd been loving the fabulous talks, the chats with colleagues, and the socializing. Needless to say, her conference had gone *very* wrong.

Now she was alone, in the dark.

*You've always been alone.* Nat felt her chest lock. That's right. Growing up, her ambitious parents had mostly forgotten they'd had a daughter. They'd always been late home from work, or off on work trips. Natalie had spent more time with her nanny and housekeeper.

She lifted her chin. So what? It had taught her independence and to trust herself. It had made her strong.

And while she might be alone right now, her team would be searching for her.

Her belly clenched. God, she missed them.

As the archeologist for a covert black ops team, Nat spent most of her time locked in an underground base in Nevada, helping her team of military badasses save the world. She had to believe they'd come for her.

If they could find her.

As she paused at a junction, peering down the shadowed tunnels, she thought of sexy, brown eyes and a handsome, scruff-covered face.

Axel Diaz—former Delta Force, too handsome for his own good, a charmer.

Natalie choked back a small sob. Axel was her secret, middle-of-the-night fantasy. They were attracted to each other, but he'd never acted on it, and she'd seen him run through one-night stands like a...a... Forget it. She was too stressed out to think of a good metaphor. She didn't deny she wanted the guy, but she wasn't interested in being a notch on his already very notched bedpost.

She sniffled, rubbing her hand under her nose. Still, she was going to think of Axel's muscled arms and sexy smile to get her through this.

Whatever the hell *this* was.

Something inexplicable had happened at the conference. One of the archeologists had gone crazy and he'd changed into something...wild. He'd attacked the conference attendees, torn up the hotel, then abducted Nat and several other female archeologists.

After that, everything was a blur. He'd knocked them all out—she had the aching lump on the back of her head to prove it. She'd woken up locked in a dark space with the other sobbing women beside her. Wherever they'd been trapped had been rocking, so she'd guessed they'd been aboard a boat.

The next thing Nat knew, she'd come to in these dark tunnels.

She had no idea where the other women were, although she'd heard someone scream about an hour ago. Or thirty minutes ago, or hell, maybe two hours ago. She had no idea what the time was.

Squeezing her eyes closed, she tried to keep calm. All this had to be linked to her work. She had access to a lot of classified information. Unbeknownst to most historians, human civilization had once been far more advanced than the mainstream history books taught. Advanced cultures had risen and been destroyed during the last ice age. Through her work, Nat had the chance to study incredible pieces of technology that had survived to modern times.

Team 52 was tasked with retrieving powerful artifacts that occasionally turned up, and keeping them out of the wrong hands. At their secret base at Area 52, they had a warehouse filled with incredible but deadly artifacts.

Nat had no idea what had driven Dr. Mark Kitchener to lose his mind, but she *would* survive this.

"The team is coming," she whispered. "The team is coming." *Axel is coming.*

If she made it out—no, *when*—she was going to kiss him. She had no idea what made him avoid relationships, but fuck it, she wanted to know how well he kissed.

A scraping noise echoed behind her. She swiveled, squinting into the darkness, and her heart leaped into her throat.

She walked backward, trying to keep her steps quiet. Her fingers dragged against the wall, and caught on shallow grooves that might have been engravings. Damn, she wished she could see.

Another scraping sound.

Biting her lip, she turned and ran. She *had* to keep moving.

Suddenly, she collided with another body.

A woman screamed.

“Shh!” Nat whispered. “It’s okay. I’m not the monster.”

The woman whimpered, moving closer. “Natalie?”

Nat recognized the French accent. “Cosette?” The woman was from the University of Bordeaux.

“*Oui*.” The woman gripped Nat’s arms, her nails biting into Nat’s skin. “It’s hunting us.”

“It’s Dr. Kitchener. Something happened to him.”

“Whatever happened, he is changed. A monster.” Cosette lowered her voice. “He has *horns*. Like the devil.”

*Crap*. Nat had seen the horns, but she’d thought that she’d hallucinated them.

Then they both heard a soft snorting sound and footsteps. Heavy footsteps.

“He comes,” Cosette whimpered.

“Let’s go.”

But the woman was terrified and frozen to the spot. Nat grabbed Cosette’s hand and tugged.

“You’re not alone, Cosette. My team is coming for us.”

“The monster will devour us...or worse.”

What was worse than being devoured? “Not today,” Nat clipped out. “I’m not up for *any* devouring. Now, let’s move.”

They took off running down the tunnel.

Nat tried to stay strong, repeating the words over and over again in her head. *Hurry, Team 52.*  
*Hurry, Axel.*

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Before the SUV had even stopped, Axel Diaz threw open the door.

His boots hit the ground and he strode toward the front entrance of the Athens Marriott Hotel. It was a square box of a structure that looked more like an office building than a hotel. Ahead, a yellow line of police tape was strung across the front doors, and several police cars sat lined up in the front of the building.

He moved to duck under the tape, when a police officer dressed in a dark-blue uniform turned and fired off some angry words in Greek at him.

Axel swiveled and stared at the man.

The policeman's eyes widened, and he took a step back.

*Wise choice, amigo.* Axel had had a *very* bad night, and he was more than ready to take it out on anyone who got in his way.

"Axel, hold up," a deep voice said.

Axel paused as Lachlan Hunter, leader of Team 52, stepped up beside him.

"I'm Lachlan Hunter," the tall former Marine told the officer. "We need to talk with Captain Andreas Nikou."

The officer eyed them suspiciously. Axel ground his teeth together, watching as the frowning officer headed over to a cluster of other police officers. Axel *hated* waiting. He'd been trapped on the team jet for fucking hours. He'd spent every minute imagining what the hell could be happening to Nat.

*Don't lose it.* He flexed his hands. Nat needed him.

The police captain appeared, striding toward them. He was an imposing man with thick, dark hair. Lachlan nodded, and the men had a low, heated conversation. From what Axel could overhear, the Athens Police had nothing.

Then Lachlan said the magic words. "I think you need to talk with Director Grayson."

The next second, the captain's phone rang. Scowling, he held it to his ear. "Director Grayson. Yes, I'm Captain Nikou."

The man turned away, talking with the Team 52 director. Axel glanced at the rest of his team.

They were all spread out under the hotel's entry portico. Blair Mason was bouncing on the balls of her feet, ready for action. Her blonde hair was in a neat braid, and her athletic body dressed in brown cargo pants and black T-shirt. She caught Axel's gaze and rolled her eyes. She was no less happy about the delay, and wasn't a big fan of bureaucracy.

Beside her stood Seth Lynch, looking calm and composed. The former CIA spy usually looked cool, but he was jingling something in the pocket of his black cargo pants. Behind them, Smith Creed rose a head taller than everyone else, his brawny arms crossed over his wide chest. Callie Kimura, the team medic, stood beside him, looking impatient. Her black hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail. River, their newest team member, had her hands in the pockets of her jeans, her gaze narrowed on the police. Her curly dark hair was pulled back ruthlessly from her face. A former MI6 agent, the woman had skills and would be an asset to the team.

And also with the team was Dr. Ty Sampson. He was the team's scientist and River's man. The pair had fallen in love on a dangerous mission. Ty usually didn't come into the field with them, but with Nat missing, they needed him on the ground. The big, dark-skinned man was scowling at the hotel doors like he could see through them and stroking his goatee.

They were all impatient to find Nat. Axel pictured her laughing—she was Australian with some Chinese heritage—and she had the best laugh he'd ever heard. She was fucking gorgeous, wore tight skirts over her mouthwatering figure, and had long, black hair. Her beautiful face went perfectly with that quick, clever brain of hers.

Axel shoved a hand through his hair. She *had* to be okay. He couldn't imagine a world without Natalie Blackwell in it.

He'd wanted her for forever. And he'd fought that attraction just as long.

He was nowhere good enough for her. She deserved so much better than a broken ex-soldier who specialized in random hookups, and who woke every night screaming from his nightmares.

*Shit, this isn't about you, Diaz.* He needed to focus on Nat.

The police captain ended the call and headed back to them.

“Please go in, Mr. Hunter. Anything you need, let my officers know, and they will assist you.”

*Director Jonah Grayson greases the wheels again.* Axel ducked under the tape, smacked a hand against the glass door, and strode into the hotel.

With the team at his back, he crossed the lobby, following the signs to the conference room.

When he stepped through the open double doors and into the large room, he sucked in a breath. *Fuck.*

The place had been destroyed. There were holes in the walls, tables and chairs had been overturned, and the ceiling had partially collapsed.

Axel remembered Nat's frantic video call. *I need help.* She'd been terrified.

Then his gaze fell to the ugly carpeted floor. Several bodies lay under white sheets.

The blood drained out of his face. No. *No.* He strode straight toward them.



“Axel—” Lachlan lunged for him.

Dodging his friend, he gripped the sheet over the first body and flipped it back. A middle-aged man stared up at him with sightless eyes.

He moved to the next body. It was a woman in her late thirties, dressed in an ugly, brown suit.

He flicked back the last sheet. This woman was younger, with blood-stained blonde hair.

Axel stood and jammed his hands on his hips. He released a long breath. None of them were Nat.

“What the fuck happened here?” Ty said.

Lachlan scanned the room, his golden gaze like a tiger’s, searching for prey. “The police reports say a monster attacked the conference.”

Axel’s eyebrows rose. “A monster?”

“Yep. Humanoid, red eyes, dark-gray skin, with horns on its head.”

“Fuck,” Smith muttered.

“Split up and search the room,” Lachlan ordered.

Axel spun and circled the large space. He determined where Nat had been standing when she’d called them. Nearby, a long table was tipped on its side, several smashed artifacts littered across the carpet.

Nat would be pissed to see them broken and ruined.

He moved closer and crouched down. He’d learned enough working with Team 52 to pull a pen out of his pocket to avoid using his fingers. He gently touched the broken shards of clay. It looked like it had been some sort of vessel or jar. While the clay was a smooth red color on the outside, it was stained black on the inside.

Nearby, a round, clay tablet was resting beside a broken stand. He used the pen to tip it onto its back. It was circular, with some sort of pictograms on it, written in a spiral. If it helped find Nat, he was taking it with them.

Still standing upright was a figurine of a woman. Her arms were outstretched, and she was holding snakes in each hand. There were also several pots—some broken, some intact—made of black clay and decorated in vibrant, red designs.

“What have you got?” Ty appeared.

“Artifacts.”

The scientist crouched. “Definitely Ancient Greek. Some look Minoan.”

“This broken jar tell us anything?”

Ty shrugged a shoulder. “I’ll take samples and test it.” He snapped on some gloves and pulled out some bags.

“Here.” Axel nudged the round clay tablet.

“Shit,” Ty grunted. “I think I’ve seen this before.” He carefully slid it into a bag. Next, he started collecting up shards of the broken pot.

Once they were done, they met the others in the center of the room.

“There are reports from the hotel staff that the attacker took several women with him,” Lachlan said.

“How?” Blair demanded.

“Carried them out. Witnesses say they all looked unconscious.”

Axel ground his teeth together. If this thing had hurt Nat...

“After the monster left the grounds, it disappeared,” Lachlan finished.

“So we have no idea where Nat is?” Axel bit out.

“Not yet.” Lachlan’s gold eyes flashed. “But we won’t stop until we do.”

“Fucking hell.” Blair spun, her blonde braid swinging behind her.

“Keep it together.” Lachlan’s gaze bored into Axel. “Captain Nikou gave me the names of some of the archeologists recovering in the hospital.”

Axel’s pulse spiked. Finally, something concrete. “I’m driving.”