

## Chapter One

“I need your sperm,” Josie Bovard said, folding her hands in front of her on her desk.

Tanner Wiley narrowed his eyes. He couldn’t deny he’d had quite a few fantasies that involved Josie and his—er—bodily fluids, but somehow they’d never played out quite like this in his mind. “Excuse me?”

Josie shifted in her office chair. She pulled off black-framed reading glasses and tucked a leg under her. Today her hair was pulled into a knot at the back of her neck, and instead of being dressed as a blond bombshell, as she so often was in the field, she was in soft cotton pants and a pink tank top. This Josie was even more mouthwatering to Tanner than the one who flashed cleavage, wore tight clothes, and left her long, wavy hair framing her pixie face.

He cleared his throat and leaned forward on the desk that separated them. He’d heard her wrong. “I’m sorry. You need what?”

She leaned forward too, until her face was only inches from his. All he had to do was lift a couple of inches out of his chair and he could taste her.

She wrinkled her pert nose. “I. Need. Your. Sperm,” she said, enunciating each word as if he had only a loose handle on the English language. Which seemed to be the case when she was this close and his nose was filled with the fresh, flowery soap-and-water smell of her.

“Um, couldn’t we go to dinner first? I don’t know, get to know each other?”

She smiled, her blue eyes crinkling at the corners. “Cute,” she said. She passed a file across the desk. “I’d need your person too, of course, in addition to your little swimmers.”

He leaned back to flip through the file. “That’s...good to know,” he said. Now it all made perfect sense. “What is this?”

“It’s a list of all the fertility clinics within a fifty-mile radius of D.C.”

He narrowed his eyes, and she handed him another file.

“This is the list of Specials who have registered with the SIA in the last ten years,” she said, referring to Tanner’s employer.

Tanner was a field agent for the Specials Intelligence Agency, a secret group of government operatives with special powers. They worked to keep secret the existence of all Specials—humans with superhuman powers. Among “other duties as assigned” was keeping the government and non-Special humans everywhere safe from threats from radical Specials.

Tanner closed the file. “How did you get these? This is classified information.”

Josie waved a hand. “I had a hunch, pulled some strings, called in some favors.” She shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“It matters if you have classified intel.”

She steepled her fingers and studied him for a long moment.

He was no fool. He knew he was being scolded.

“You—and my SIA connection—know I can be trusted,” she said finally. “Or at least I thought you knew that, but you’re free to leave.”

He raised a brow and looked at his watch, more to make a point than to check the time. “Seems to me you need my help,” he said, doing his best to sound bored when the fact was he wanted to know what the hell she was up to. What did D.C. fertility clinics have to do with recently registered Specials?

She sighed. “I’d like your help, but I can manage without you.”

He shrugged. “I’ll need more information. What are you looking for?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, turning to her keyboard and pulling up a spreadsheet. “I’ve run

some numbers and found the Specials per capita have gone up significantly in the last ten years.”

Tanner flipped through the pages and nodded. “That’s to be expected as more and more Specials comply and register with the agency.”

Josie nodded and started typing at her keyboard, reminding him that as well as being a beauty, Josie was a brain. “Yes, but with that variable taken into account in addition to the increased awareness and compliance, there’s a dramatic increase far beyond my projected numbers—specifically in terms of births in the D.C. area.”

Tanner frowned. “You think fertility clinics are behind the rise?”

Josie rubbed her neck. “I don’t know yet. I just...” She stared at the file in his hands.

“You have a feeling,” he supplied.

“Yeah.” Her voice sounded distant. “I just want to check it out.”

“What exactly will you be looking for?”

“We will be looking for anything...suspicious. It’s not like we’ll be going in there blind. We have our abilities to help us see what we can about the doctors and nurses. Anyone who works at any of those clinics who is a Special or knows about us is a potential lead.”

“But these Specials who have registered in the last ten years would have been born, what? Sixteen? Twenty? Even thirty years ago.” There was a hell of a delay between when someone was born and when they became a Special. Sometimes even more before they realized their power. All in all, it made Josie’s hunch difficult to track and it would be nearly impossible to know whether or not it was happening today.

“What’s done is done. If they’re not tampering with fate now, we won’t worry about it.” She forced a smile and something in her eyes told him she was lying. What was she really looking for?

“And I’m guessing this is where I come in?” Tanner squirmed. Hell, he was really considering this.

She smiled. “We’ll be the happy infertile couple.”

Yeah, because *that* was his fantasy. Was the universe mocking him now? His shit-ass excuse for a childhood hadn’t been punishment enough for his past life transgressions? “What’s the plan?”

The tensing of her jaw was at odds with her nonchalant shrug. “Best-case scenario, we feel out the doctors. If we happen to run into one who is a Special, we’ll find a way to mention we’d like our baby to...be like us. Then we see what happens. Worst case...worst case, we find nothing.”

She was looking for something else, but she wasn’t saying what.

He pretended he didn’t notice and raised a brow. “That’s a pretty hefty assumption. What have you seen?” In addition to being a bombshell beauty with the body of Angelina Jolie and the brains of Einstein, Josie Bovard was a precog. By simply touching another person, she could see pieces of that person’s future, which was precisely why the SIA wanted her on their payroll. Too bad she’d turned them down flat when she was told she wouldn’t be doing field work.

Josie and her Stilettos, Inc. comrades preferred to do their own ass kicking—not just gather intel.

“Nothing helpful,” she muttered, taking a sip of her tea. “Not that I would tell you if I had.”

He sighed and finally asked the question that had plagued him since she’d sent him the e-mail asking for his help. “Why me?” he asked. “Why not take Chrissie in? She can go around feeling up employees and figure out what’s been happening.” Chrissie Elliott’s power was the

opposite of Josie's. When she touched people, she saw pieces of their past through their memories.

Josie's face grew somber and long seconds ticked by as she stared at nothing in particular. "The other girls don't know about this project yet." She smiled, but tension still played across her forehead. "I'll tell them after Paige's wedding, but they have enough on their plates right now."

Resisting the urge to call *bullshit*, he asked, "Even Chrissie?"

"Yeah, bridesmaid stuff." She chewed on her lip and studied him for a beat before smiling. "And anyway, Chrissie can't disappear."

Tanner nodded. "So you're using me for my sperm and my ability."

Her smile turned to a smirk. "Among other things," she said. Her voice was low, husky, and had his balls tightening.

Shit. She might as well pull out the leash. She had him right where she wanted him and she knew it.

"And what's in it for me?" Might as well pretend she hadn't had him whipped since the first moment he'd set eyes on her. His friend Fernandez said women were turned off by men who would do anything for them. Of course, Fernandez was an idiot when it came to women, so Tanner wasn't sure his advice was really worth following. "Why should I help you with this case? You know you aren't planning on telling me the whole story."

Josie narrowed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "What, a non-Special child's right to life isn't enough for you?"

Great. He wasn't whipped. He was just an asshole. Even better. "You know what happens if we find evidence that some fertility clinic is manipulating DNA."

She nodded. “If there’s anything there, it becomes a federal case, and we turn our files over to the SIA. I know, I know,” she muttered.

She *knew*, but it never seemed to stop her or her Stiletto Girl partners in crime from carrying on as they pleased anyway. He sighed, resigned. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

She treated him to one of those signature *Josie* smiles that made him feel like a fucking god among men. “I’d hoped you would!”

Hell, she’d had him at *sperm*.

\* \* \* \*

Tanner had been summoned to his lieutenant’s office, which either meant he had a new mission or he was about to get his ass chewed.

Nicholas Fernandez was already seated across from their superior, and as Tanner lowered himself into his seat, he exchanged a look with his partner. Several seconds later, Darian Loring joined them, making their unit complete.

“I have another special case for you,” Lieutenant Armstrong said. “Something that’s becoming an area of expertise for you three.”

“What are the Stiletto Girls up to now?” Fernandez asked.

The lieutenant frowned. “It isn’t what they’re up to. It’s what trouble they’re in. Recent intelligence indicates the Ascendants are weeks, if not less, from hatching something big.”

“What?” Tanner asked. “What do they have planned this time?”

“I wish I knew,” the lieutenant said. “They’ve been careful this time and our intel is beyond inadequate. Our Readers haven’t been able to see how they plan to achieve it, but they’re getting visions of Ascendant rule and...worse.”

“What’s worse than those sick fucks taking over?” Fernandez asked.

“In these visions, non-Special humans are being used as cattle,” the lieutenant said.

“So it’s more of the same,” Fernandez said.

Tanner frowned. Six months ago, their SIA unit in conjunction with the Stiletto Girls and some unwelcome help from Rider and Collin Raines had taken down the Ascendants’ new leader. Winton had worked his way into the position of president of the United States, but he was an Ascendant who had grown more and more powerful by drinking other Specials’ blood—a technique to steal another Special’s power that only worked if you drained the Special. The moment the drained Special’s heart stopped beating, the power was transferred to the blood drinker.

Winston had planned to use his power as president and his many powers as a Special to use non-Special humans for their blood and labor. Though you had to drain a Special to get a new power, drinking the blood of a non-Special heightened powers better than any other recovery method the SIA or Ascendants had found.

“It’s not exactly more of the same,” the lieutenant said. “Winston’s plan was undeveloped, sloppy in comparison to this. Our Readers have seen how it will work this time.”

“How?” Tanner asked.

“The non-Special humans are more like animals than people. It’s as if they’ve lost their ability to reason. They eat, sleep, work, and give their blood. It’s almost as if they don’t care. They just do as they’re told. It’s as if they’ve lost something.”

“Their free will,” Tanner supplied.

“Yes.”

“So what do the Stiletto Girls have to do with this?” Tanner asked.

“Are they keeping intel from us again?” Fernandez asked.

“We have no reason to think that they even know they’re involved,” the Lieutenant said.

“But our Readers indicate that they will be.”

“Surprise, surprise,” Fernandez said.

The lieutenant leaned forward on his desk. “Our Readers indicate they’re in danger. I need you to get close. I need you to each stick yourself to a girl and protect her,” he said. “I’ll keep you apprised of any new intel.”

“And what exactly are we looking for?” Tanner asked.

The lieutenant pulled a hand through his hair. “Let me do the looking. You keep them safe.”

Fernandez shot Tanner a look and mumbled, “Sounds to me like we’re on babysitting duty again.”

\* \* \* \*

“To the last of Paige’s bachelorette days,” Josie said, raising her martini. Grey Goose and a double, the drink was desperately needed and equally deserved after the week she’d had. Which was a pretty pathetic way of thinking, considering it was Monday night.

Chrissie clinked her beer against Josie’s glass. “May the marriage be long, your love be strong, and your future be bright.”

Paige’s emerald eyes glimmered with tears as she covered her mouth. “Aw! Chrissie!”

Chrissie flashed her Cheshire grin. “And—in case your marriage is like all others—may your always have fresh batteries for your vibrator.”

Paige swatted Chrissie’s arm before raising her wine glass. “To the Stiletto Girls,” she said, “the ass-kickingest PIs, the most beautiful bridesmaids, and the very best friends.”

“Hear, hear,” Chrissie said.

Glasses clinked, and they all drank.

The jukebox played a song about tequila making a woman's clothes fall off, and pool balls clicked at the several tables spaced throughout the room.

The bar was a bit of a dive, but it was near their office, offered top-shelf booze—which the bartenders served liberally if you weren't opposed to letting them stare at your cleavage—and the clientele left them alone. All in all, for weeknight after-work drinks, it was damn near perfect.

Chrissie nearly drained her beer then turned in the booth and grinned at Josie. Josie loved that grin. Chrissie was a little...rough around the edges. She lived hard and played hard, but when she was hurt, the cut went deep. Her spiky black-and-platinum hair and punk rocker façade might fool some, but Josie knew there was a soft heart behind that charming grin, and lately that heart had been hurting.

"What?" Josie asked. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I saw Wiley in your office today," Chrissie said in a singsongy voice.

Paige's eyes widened, making Josie wish she hadn't asked. "Tanner was there? Jose, that boy is so sweet on you."

Josie's cheeks burned. She knew damn well how sweet on her Tanner was, thanks to the ultrasonic steamy visions that bombarded her every time they touched. He wanted her. She wanted him.

But right now she needed him, and not because he made her girlie parts hum.

"You're pretty sweet on him, too," Chrissie said, propping her chin on her fists. "So why is it you haven't fucked his brains out?"

Paige reached across the table and squeezed Josie's arm. "It's because things are going to

be serious between you two, isn't it?"

*Well, yes and no...*

"I'm just not ready to get involved with him." Josie shrugged. "Those SIA guys are trouble, ya know?" She winked at Paige, who was engaged to be married to an SIA guy of her own.

Chrissie nodded. "I've been in Wiley's memories," she said. "Boy has some serious baggage."

Josie swirled the clear liquid in her martini glass. "We all have baggage," she said softly.

"Did you know he was a foster child?"

Josie looked up from her drink. "I didn't know that." But somehow it didn't surprise her. Somehow she knew Tanner was an orphan like her.

Chrissie shuddered. "If most foster parents are like his, it makes you want to sign on to take in a couple of brats, ya know?"

"That bad?" Josie asked.

Chrissie shook her head. "The memories are buried pretty deep, but what I've seen...yeah."

"So what was he doing in your office?" Paige asked, moving the conversation away from the circumstances of Tanner's childhood. Though it rarely happened, using their abilities to gossip always made Paige uncomfortable.

"Secret groomsman stuff," Josie said. "I can't tell you, or it would ruin the surprise." Why was her capacity for telling the simplest lies diminished when she was near her girls?

Inclining her chin slightly, Chrissie narrowed her eyes. She knew Josie was lying. She must have seen a piece of Josie's memory. Already.

Damn it.

Josie ignored the look. She could figure out something to tell Chrissie later. At least if Paige picked up on the lie—which she likely would, given her empathic abilities—she'd not know the reason.

Josie didn't want either of her partners knowing. First and foremost, she was looking for answers to some very private questions about her past—questions about memories she'd kept secret from both of her friends, even the postcog Chrissie. Involving the girls would mean sharing a part of herself she'd locked away a long time ago.

But second, and more importantly, if Josie found the answers she expected at the fertility clinics, the girls would never let her go through with her plan.

Chrissie stopped her narrow glare and looked at her beer.

Oblivious to the silent exchange, Paige leaned across the table with a grin. "Thanks so much for taking care of all the wedding details for me, Josie."

*And thank you for changing the subject.* "It's not a problem. You know I love to plan." It was true. And if her ability made planning a wedding a little easier for her than it was for most, so be it.

Josie hadn't even realized Chrissie'd turned toward the door when she heard her mumble, "If it isn't the Three Stooges."

*Tanner.* Josie's glance darted to the door a little too quickly.

Chrissie chuckled and patted Josie's arm. "Well, look who's suddenly interested in a few SIA boys," she said.

Turning, Josie's heart kicked up a beat at the sight of Tanner Wiley. Even in jeans and a soft cotton oxford that matched his green eyes, he looked like he'd stepped off the cover of *Every*

*Woman's Fantasy Weekly*. His light brown hair was tucked behind his ears and was a little ragged where it brushed his collar. His grin was wicked as ever, and his sleeves were rolled to his elbows, exposing strong, bronzed forearms.

The three men strode across the room to stand at the end of the girls' booth.

"You ladies must be on a budget to be in such a seedy place," Tanner said, looking around at the scarred floors and undoubtedly taking in the stale beer smell Josie had learned to ignore.

"We like it here," Josie explained.

"What's your excuse?" Chrissie asked.

Tanner shook his head and looked to Josie. "Is it just us or is she mean to everyone?"

"Pretty much everyone," Josie said with a smile. "But seriously, if you're here to ride our coattails on the Pentagon job," she said, referring to a sensitive case they'd wrapped that afternoon, "it's already taken care of."

He nodded and lowered his voice so only she could hear. "I don't suppose you'd believe me if I told you we were here because we wanted to hang out with you?"

Josie threw her head back and laughed. "No. I wouldn't believe that." More likely was they'd come keep an eye on them. But then, Darian was already pulling Paige from the booth to the dance floor, apparently intent on taking advantage of every opportunity to touch his wife-to-be.

Damn if the way Darian looked at Paige didn't make Josie turn all gushy inside.

Tanner touched her arm and his expression turned sheepish. "Then can I buy you a beer and make it up to you?"

At his smile, hundreds of butterflies burst from their cocoons in her belly. "Another

martini would be okay,” she said. Another martini would be more foolish than okay, but she didn’t have the willpower to turn down his company.

He signaled the waitress and ordered the drinks, and Chrissie said, “What about me?”

“Fernandez can buy your drink,” Tanner said, nudging his partner.

Chrissie rolled her eyes.

Fernandez watched Chrissie with his usual combination of skepticism and fascination.

“Fine,” Chrissie said, “but don’t get any ideas. This isn’t a double date.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Fernandez said, lifting her hand by her fingertips and gazing at her through his thick, dark lashes. “Do you wanna go make out in the corner?”

Chrissie punched him in the arm, but then slid over to make room for him.

Josie did the same for Tanner, knowing it was a bad idea. After what she’d found in her mother’s old journal this weekend, she needed to unwind like she needed air.

He slid into the booth and his body heat warmed the space around him. He smelled a little like leather and gunpowder—two smells Josie wasn’t entirely sure she’d find so damn appealing on anyone else.

The waitress returned with their drinks, he held one out to Josie. “For the lady.”

She took it and her fingers brushed his. The touch sent a jolt of electricity straight to the sweet spot between her legs and a vision to her mind.

*He slid his hand into her hair and lowered his lips to hers. The sound of crashing waves filled her ears and soft Caribbean sand grazed her bare back. He slipped his tongue into her mouth. She arched into him and her nipples grazed his chest hair...*

She withdrew from his touch slowly, her cheeks warming. The beach this time. Every time she had a vision of the two of them together, the locale was different, but the temperature

was always the same—*scorching*.

She'd begun having intimate visions of Tanner Wiley six months ago when Stiletto, Inc. had worked with him and his two Specials Intelligence Agency partners, Darian and Fernandez. After six months of prophetic foreplay, she ached for him so much it was embarrassing. In her dreams, her fantasies, her visions of his future and her own—he was always there. Always touching her. As a result, she walked around a state of perpetual arousal when he was around, which seemed to be more and more these days.

“You okay?” Tanner asked. He turned in toward her and brushed a lock of hair from her face.

*He slid his hand between their bodies and explored her breasts, her torso, the sensitive skin at each hip bone, before returning to her breasts. His thumb toyed with each nipple as he dipped his tongue into her mouth. Instinctively, her thighs spread, welcoming the strength and weight of his narrow hips as he settled onto her.*

*Between their bodies, he explored. His fingertips lightly grazed her stomach and circled her navel. Her hips rose off the sand, desperate to have his fingers slip inside her.*

Josie licked her lips and concentrated on keeping her breathing steady. Every time she touched Tanner, she saw this. Heat. Passion. Sex.

The fact that she'd chosen not to act on her attraction hadn't changed the visions—a fact that puzzled her. As someone who regularly saw snippets of the future, she understood how easily it could change, and how the smallest decision could make a person headed to point A alter course to point X.

So why, when six months after her first vision she hadn't so much as kissed the man, was she still seeing herself going at it hot and heavy with Tanner?

Tanner smiled, cocking his head. “What? Did you see something?”

She sighed, wishing he didn’t know about her ability and that he weren’t a Special too. Dealing with men who were too attractive for their own good was hard enough. Throw in the complications of a secret society of people with special powers and add the mess of tension between the SIA and Stiletto, Inc. and suddenly entering into the relationship became foolish.

For six months, she had kept her distance from Wiley because among the many things she considered herself, foolish wasn’t one of them. But after what she’d found in her mother’s journal, *foolish* didn’t begin to describe what a mistake it would be.

She shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

His grin was crooked. And wicked. “Only a precog would call seeing something from the future ‘nothing.’ It’s fascinating, and I’m curious. Give me a hint?”

Chrissie snorted. “Don’t waste your breath. Josie doesn’t share her visions of the future. She thinks it manipulates free will to put that information out there.” She waved her hand. “Or something like that.”

Tanner turned back to Josie. Was it just her or had he moved a little closer? “Is that true? You never share your visions?”

Josie shrugged. “Not *never*, but rarely.”

He took her left hand in both of his. “But you can’t blame me for being curious. You’re seeing something?”

“Nothing I haven’t been seeing for months now,” she said, studying him, and consciously blocking the visions pressing at the back of her mind. She’d only have to open the slightest bit and they’d be there. He’d be there.

The visions and her knowledge of what he could do to her—and how well he could do

it—would make her want him. On her, over her...inside her. A girl could only have so much willpower.

His eyes locked with hers and the air sizzled between them. Even without precognitive images of tangled limbs and moans of pleasure, her pulsed kicked up.

Did he know his smooth shave was threatening to turn to stubble? She wanted to run her fingers over it, feel it against her neck as he nuzzled her, wanted to feel it leave its mark on her as he explored her breasts. Then his lips would make a path over her belly and to her thighs until she trembled.

Would he open her legs, placing his fingers on her inner thighs and opening her with gentle pressure? Or would he slip his fingers between thighs and over her clit until she spread them for him?

Her visions made two things clear: first, she and Tanner had more than a simple love affair waiting for them. Paige had been right on that account.

Second, what was bound to be complicated would also be a damn good time.

“See, you’re smiling.” His thumbs drew circles on the tender inside of her palms. “It can’t be that bad. Can you give me even a hint?”

Didn’t she deserve a good time? Maybe it was the martinis or maybe it was the thrill of knowing they’d just successfully brought another case to a close, but she was ready to indulge. Knowing she shouldn’t only heightened the temptation.

Josie relaxed the wall she’d erected. There was a vision there. Waiting. Pressing against it. What would she see this time? His hands on her or his mouth? And where would they be? Outside this very bar?

She dropped the wall but the vision she saw of his future wasn’t the one she expected.

*Tanner walked across Josie's apartment, heading straight to the rolltop desk in the corner of her living area.*

*"What do you know that you're not telling me?" he muttered, flipping through the papers there.*

*He picked up the leather-bound journal and flipped through the pages.*

*An engine cut off outside and a door slammed.*

*"Crap." He faded until he was invisible, then Josie opened the door, stepping into her apartment and peeling off her clothes as she headed toward the bedroom.*

Josie dropped her hand and backed away as much as the booth would allow.

"What do you see?" Tanner asked.

END EXCERPT

She sighed. She'd brought this on herself for getting him involved in her private investigation, but when would these SIA guys learn to mind their own business? "Nothing I haven't seen before," she muttered, suddenly feeling a lot less uninhibited than she had moments before.

She should never have brought him in on this. He would press her for the truth until she gave it or he found it on his own.

"Any time you want to tell me about it," he said, "you know where to find me."

Yes, she did. He'd be helping her with a case closer to her heart than any. She'd chosen him because he couldn't get into her head but he could get into secure areas of high tech laboratories.

Had it been a mistake?

Tanner thought he could go behind her back and find out what she wasn't telling him.

Copyright © 2009 by Lexi Ryan

She'd just see about that.

## Chapter Two

Josie watched her own spitting image squeeze through the crowd and thought, *That's what my sister would look like.*

Her second thought was that she was a nutcase who needed to see her shrink again.

Under the table, she nudged Chrissie with her foot. "Do you see her?" The question didn't make her sound any saner than she felt, but she had to know.

They'd stayed hours longer than they'd intended. The bar had begun its Monday night half-price margarita special, and the crowd had thickened. At nearly ten, the bar was more packed than they'd ever seen it. This was their after-work drinks destination. If they were making a night of it, they chose a very different kind of scene. The kind with more dance floor than bar and lots of bodies writhing to a sensual beat.

"Holy Christ," Chrissie said, pointing to the space between the pool tables where Paige and Darian were dancing. "Why don't they just get a room?"

Josie tore her gaze away from her could-be twin at the bar to look for Paige, the bachelorette who, in two weeks, would marry her perfect match. "They're in love," Josie explained, and Chrissie cocked a brow as if to say Josie's explanation didn't follow.

"Sorry," Chrissie said, "see who?"

"The girl at the—" Josie returned her attention to the question of her sanity. She searched the crowd for her face. "The one who—" She scanned the bar. The woman was gone. Frantically, Josie searched the growing throngs of people milling around the pool table and karaoke areas. She took in face after face, but the bar was too busy, and even if she had seen what she thought, she'd never find her again in this crowd.

She dropped her gaze to study her drink. *Let it go*. But it wasn't easy. She hadn't thought about that particular childhood delusion in years.

Josie excused herself, and Chrissie followed her. Once they were in the bathroom, Chrissie threw the bolt to lock the door. "When were you going to tell me about the fertility clinics?"

So much for keeping this from people who could get in her head. Josie ran the water, watching it hit the porcelain as she waited for it to warm. "What about them?"

"Why are you investigating them with Tanner? What do you know? And why are you keeping us in the dark?" Chrissie's tone made it clear she didn't have time to play games.

Josie closed her eyes, willing this conversation to end.

Chrissie put her hand on her shoulder. "Listen, it worries me when you keep shit from us. What's going on?"

She slid her hands under the water. It was too hot, and she scrubbed at her skin, watching it redden, scrubbing all the way up to the S-shaped scar on the inside of her wrist.

"You're going to burn yourself." Chrissie shut off the water. "What did you read in that old book? What is it, a journal? What does it have to do with fertility clinics?"

"Dear Santa," Josie muttered, "all I want for Christmas is some friends who won't poke into my private thoughts."

Chrissie folded her arms and set her jaw. Okay, so no apology coming anytime soon.

Josie exhaled slowly. "I have a friend, a Special, who works at a mental health center. She noticed a growing number of visits from Specials who have recently discovered their powers." Specials got their powers after losing their virginity. Depending on the power, sometimes it manifested right away, and other times the Special wouldn't know she was different

until months down the road. Either way, if you didn't know it was coming, it was disconcerting, and her friend met a lot of young people who thought they were crazy.

“Go on,” Chrissie prompted, arms folded.

Josie shook her head. “My friend is suspicious about the growing numbers and suspicious about why there seem to be so many more in this area than in others.” Josie would have looked into the case regardless, but as it turned out, it was the perfect cover to get Tanner to help with her personal mission.

Chrissie narrowed her eyes. “You think fertility clinics are making Specials?”

Josie lifted her palms. “I don't know where else to start.” She'd distorted some data to have an excuse to get Tanner to go into the clinics with her, but in truth she wasn't too worried about growing numbers of Specials. Like Tanner, she thought the numbers could be chalked up to increased awareness, outreach through the internet and any number of other plausible factors. She just needed some answers about her past and an explanation of what she'd found in her mother's diary.

Chrissie still looked pissed. “So?”

“So, what?”

“Jesus, Josie, if that's all there is to it, why the hell didn't you ask me and Paige? Why involve the fucking SIA?” Somehow, when Chrissie said it, *SIA* sounded like a dirty word.

She couldn't answer that. Not without telling Chrissie about memories of the sister she didn't have, memories she'd kept to herself since her shrink explained that her brain had invented a surviving sister as a coping mechanism for the tragedy she'd faced as a child. Not without telling Chrissie about what she'd found in the journal.

“I just need you to let me do this on my own,” she said. “I promise I'll tell you more

when I can.”

Chrissie wasn't satisfied, but she said, “And the journal you've been studying?”

Josie's heart clenched. If Chrissie knew how private this was, she wouldn't be doing this. “I've had my mother's journal ever since...” she trailed off unable to say the words.

“Since your family was murdered,” Chrissie supplied softly.

“Yeah, and I read it this weekend.” A distortion of the truth. This weekend, she'd read the journal for what had to be the twentieth time, but it was the first time she'd recognized the pattern in the nonstandard capitalization. This weekend was the first time she'd found a secret message from the mother she'd lost ten years ago.

“I saw you crying,” Chrissie said, her tone softening.

Josie grabbed a paper towel and dried her hands. “I'm pretty screwed up when it comes to this stuff. I don't want you and Paige looking at me like I'm a kicked puppy dog all the time.”

“What are you looking for? How does it connect to the fertility clinics? We can help.”

Josie shook her head. “It doesn't.”

Chrissie frowned. “Okay, but don't expect me to be happy about some SIA guy getting to help you when I'm not allowed.”

“Fair enough,” Josie said.

“Let's blow this joint.”

\* \* \* \*

Josie stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror and frowned. At twenty-six, she could see age creeping into her face. Not in an obvious way. Not yet. But the last ten years had taken its toll on her—first the stress of her parents' mysterious deaths, then a job she poured herself into, heart and soul. She could see evidence of this around her mouth and eyes when the

makeup was gone.

Josie and Chrissie had gone back to Stiletto, Inc. headquarters to hang out, and Josie's friend, Chad, had called. He was in town and wanted to hook up. She'd turned him down. Again. She wouldn't be surprised if he stopped calling when he came into town. She hadn't accepted his invitation in months.

Though she didn't want to admit it, it had been because of Tanner. Her visions of them together were so powerful and so *real*. Even now that she'd decided she couldn't be with him, being with another man felt wrong.

She frowned. All the more reason to do it.

But she didn't feel like playing the part of the giggly, airheaded girl tonight, and she'd known that was what Chad would expect. Better to turn him down than wear herself out mentally before throwing herself into this investigation. Wasn't that why God made vibrators?

Something caught her attention in the edge of the mirror, but it was gone as soon as it appeared. She stilled. She wasn't alone. She knew it as surely as she knew she wasn't the same bombshell beauty with her hair pulled into a ponytail and her makeup washed away.

She closed her eyes. How could she have forgotten? She'd seen this when she touched Tanner earlier tonight. She'd seen him in her apartment. She hadn't known it would be tonight...or had she? As pissed as she was that he was going to look through her things without her permission, hadn't she later gone wet at the image of him lingering while she went about her nightly routine? Hadn't she liked the idea of him watching as she stripped out of her clothes? Hadn't it slipped into her thoughts all evening?

She had told herself she was turning down Chad because she wasn't up for company, but there was more to it. She wasn't up for *his* company. She'd been more interested in the company

of a certain green-eyed special agent.

She pulled the tie from her hair to let it tumble around her shoulders before sauntering into the bedroom. He wanted to spy on her? She'd give him something to spy on.

Aware of every move, she pulled her T-shirt over her head and wandered to her bookshelf in nothing but her bra and underwear. How lucky that she had fantastic taste in lingerie. Tonight she wore a lace demi-cup and matching thong in blush pink.

From the shelf, she selected Anais Nin's *Delta of Venus*—not that she needed it. With an invisible Wiley looking on, she could come with nothing but forbidden lust to arouse her. She slid onto her bed with the book, leaving the overhead light on to give him the best show, to allow herself to imagine him watching her.