

Chapter One

Washington DC, January 20th, Inauguration Day

“Anyone disappearing tonight?” Paige Sykes asked, pretending to tuck a curl behind her ear so she could engage her microscopic two-way radio.

A silver-haired gentleman in a Marine uniform turned and gave Paige a questioning look. She just smiled and batted her eyelashes. A grin spread across his face, and his gaze made a slow and thorough perusal of her body.

Idiot. If this was an example of her country’s “best and brightest,” they were in trouble. She could have been conspiring to take down the whole building, and a little flutter of lash had him drooling in his Scotch. She would never understand why men—mental *weaklings* who could be undermined with little more than a flash of inner thigh—held more top military ranks than women.

Paige and her Stilettos, Inc. girls might wear tight clothes and flash cleavage when necessary, but they always kept their wits about them.

Paige rolled her eyes and turned away from the crowd.

“Plus five points,” Chrissie said, speaking low. “I just touched a guy who cheated on his wife last night.”

Josie scoffed softly. “Twenty-five points. I just touched a guy who’s going to cheat on his wife tonight.”

“How’s that twenty-five points?” Chrissie asked.

“He’s sleeping with her sister,” Josie said with the cockiness of a card player throwing down the trump.

Paige's lips quirked. She couldn't help it. The game may have seemed immature once, but it helped the girls blow off steam when the things they saw may have otherwise driven them crazy.

"Ladies?" Paige said, pulling them back to task.

"I'm not getting anything," Josie said. "At least nothing more tragic than some serious hangovers and some regretful morning-afters."

Every guest at President Winston's inaugural ball was primed, smiling, and positively clueless. Someone else would go missing tonight—vanish to God-knew-where like the others. In one of her visions, Josie had seen the report come into their office, had seen that the inaugural ball was the last place the next disappearing Special would be seen.

Paige tucked her head down. "Maybe that's a good sign. Maybe the future has already changed." If luck was with them, it had changed for the better. "Chrissie?"

"Nothing," Chrissie said. "Maybe we had bad intel."

"Or maybe someone saw us here and changed his mind," Josie countered, sounding more than a little defensive.

"Don't get snippy," Chrissie said, copping her usual attitude. "You know your visions of the future change with the wind."

Paige looked out across the room. Chrissie was easy to spot, even through the crowd, and even with her usual spiky, punk hairdo halfway tamed into a less-spiky up-do. Paige sighed. She could hardly worry about her partner's conspicuous hot-pink sheath dress when the tattoos that covered the tops of Chrissie's arms and the back of her neck made her stick out like a Marilyn Manson groupie at a church revival.

Just as Paige had done for the last hour, Chrissie was mingling, shaking as many hands as she could, brushing as much exposed skin as she could. The fact that most men were in uniform or tuxes and had their arms covered was horribly inconvenient, but they'd worked in less ideal situations, and they could certainly make do now. Chrissie giggled with a tall-dark-and-handsome, then cocked her head, signaling for him to follow her to the dance floor.

"That's my girl," Paige whispered before tapping off her two-way radio.

In the opposite corner and just as easy to spot, Josie was following the same routine. Josie didn't need a hot-pink dress for Paige to find her. The swarm of men who gathered around her usually gave away her location, and tonight was no different. Josie's exaggerated hourglass figure was displayed in a deep red satin formal gown, and her long blond hair hung in fat banana curls past her shoulders. She laughed at something one of the men said, then pulled her hand from his grasp and touched the next one.

"Excuse me, ma'am. May I have this dance?" a familiar, deep voice asked from behind Paige.

Paige turned and stopped. He was here. Two feet away from her and as mouth-watering as ever. A month ago, she'd sneaked out of this man's hotel room while he was still sprawled nude across his sheets in a post-coital coma. At the time, she'd known she'd have to see him again—SIA guys never seemed to stay out of her business—but she wasn't quite ready. Not yet.

Careful not to give away anything with her expression—like the fact that she found this meeting completely humiliating—she gave a polite smile. "Darian Lorrington, what are you doing here?" Even as she asked, he drew her hand into his.

The intensity of his feelings hit her before she could even take in his face.

Touching him was like slipping heated skin between cool silk sheets: her flesh bare, the scent of sex still swirling in the candlelight around them. *He was hovering over her, that delicious male heat lighting her senses on fire, his hands making her burn for more.* Her thighs flexed—then and now. She saw writhing bodies. Sweat. A tongue darting out to wet a parched lip. She heard her name murmured in his thick, melodious timbre, heard her own responding groan of pleasure.

All of this came to her in a series of flashes and sensations within the span of mere seconds.

With anyone else, she'd know these weren't necessarily the same images that he had in his head. Her power didn't work like that. Her power helped her capture the essence of another's thoughts and feelings. Which gave her the upper hand she preferred...in every instance but this one.

What a clusterfuck!

“Stop it,” she muttered.

He raised one hand in mock innocence, his smile showing off a single dimple. “Stop what?”

Another flash. *His mouth on her neck, his hand on her breast, his thumb rubbing small circles against a pebbled nipple.*

Touching Darian created a complete mess of her ability. While her power allowed her to pick up on thoughts and feelings—physical and emotional—his power allowed him to project thoughts and feelings—physical and emotional. Additionally, Darian could project images and scenes so they'd play as vividly as recent memory in her mind.

When she touched him, she didn't know what was real. She was always left to wonder what he was consciously projecting and what his sincere emotions were, and she couldn't trust her own.

Another flash of skin sliding against skin had her pulse kicking up a notch. For a second she couldn't decipher the source of the arousal. Hers? His? His. Yes. She was pretty sure it was his alone.

Paige looked at him now, her eyes skimming over him shamelessly—because, hell, after the things he'd been thinking about her, why not?

“I hate it when you mess with my head,” she said.

Darian raised a brow. “Who says I was messing with anything?” he murmured, holding her gaze while he lifted her hand to his lips. He pressed them against her hand. Hot and soft. The heat traced up her arm and gathered in her stomach.

Tonight he was in a tux, and the body underneath could rival even the most conditioned Marine in the room. His milk chocolate eyes held hers. She wanted to lose herself there.

His arousal, not yours, she reminded her weak knees and pounding heart.

Before she could stop herself, she took in his face. His dark, sometimes curly hair had been tamed into submission tonight, and he'd shaved his usual dark stubble. Darian was one of those guys whose five o'clock shadow made an appearance around lunch. He usually didn't fight the stubble.

Her thighs flexed again, pressing together where he'd given her beard burn.

“You're not happy to see me?” he asked, and his dimple flashed, causing her girly parts do a little dance.

Damn. She was here on a case. Another Special was supposedly going missing tonight, and they needed to figure out who and stop it from happening, and preferably catch the perp in the process. The last thing she needed was to be distracted by eye candy. Even if the eye candy was of the really decadent, melt-in-your-mouth, and make-you-come variety. What had she been thinking about *men* being mental weaklings? All Darian had to do was flash that dimple and her mind and body were ready to wave a white flag.

Darian led her into a dance step that moved them toward the center of the dance floor.

She frowned. “What are you doing here? Don’t you have some paperwork to do? A desk to sit behind?”

He grinned, showing a flash of brilliantly white teeth before he pulled her in even closer. He lowered his head so his warm breath tickled down her neck. His lips brushed her ear as he spoke. “Contrary to what you seem to think, SIA agents do more than paperwork.”

She snorted. “Sure, as long as someone else is calling the shots.”

Darian studied her, then shrugged.

He worked for the Specials Intelligence Agency, the bastard redheaded stepchild of the DoD. No one acknowledged them. Most people didn’t even know they existed. And it worked better that way. They were the most powerful government agency and anonymity was an intrinsic part of that power.

When Darian had tried to recruit the Stiletto, Inc. girls to the SIA’s ranks, Paige had been elated. But, luckily, she’d found out before she signed on that they only wanted her for the “Intelligence” part of the agency. Desk work. Research. No more ass kicking.

No, thank you.

And she'd told him as much. And then he'd tracked her down on her vacation, and she'd slept with him. *Oops.*

“What are you doing here?” she asked again. He shouldn't be. The SIA wasn't on this job, specifically because the upper-ups didn't think it was wise to send a bunch of high-powered Specials after whoever it was targeting high-powered Specials. *Pussies.*

“Maybe,” he said, his breath against her ear like a teasing caress, “I knew you'd be here, and I wanted an excuse to hold you in my arms.”

If she were any other woman, she would have melted into him at that line. Even as herself—a woman who did not melt, not at all—she was tempted. She sighed. “You know, I don't have to be an empath to know when you're full of shit.”

He chuckled and pulled back enough to rake his eyes over her face again. They swept down, lingering on her exposed collarbone, making her feel like he'd just discovered a whole new erogenous zone.

She swallowed.

He'd kissed her there. Put his lips against the tender skin. Then his tongue. Then, when his fingers were inside her and she arched under him, he'd nipped that skin with his teeth—carrying her up and over yet another orgasm and down again before he'd tended to the bite with more whisper-soft kisses.

Darian pulled her close again, his body warm and solid. Delicious licks of pleasure spiraled through her, but he wasn't sending her images this time. He was behaving himself. It was her memory that needed a reprimand.

She craned her neck to look up at him. “You'd better back up a little. I'd hate to get makeup on your rental.”

“Rented tux?” he scoffed. “Only a Stiletto Girl would think that’s an insult.”

She narrowed her gaze and concentrated. She worked best with skin-to-skin contact, and the way he was holding her prevented that—not to mention most of what she read from Darian Lorrying couldn’t be trusted—but even without it, he had enough of his body pressed against hers that she could tap into him.

She opened herself, pushed her mind beyond herself for a moment and...

Why was he here? He had hid it well, but he was tense under his debonair, charming devil façade. Tense, alert, and ready to spring into action.

He was here for the same reason she was. He was on the lookout for trouble. Did the SIA decide to take on the case after all? It wouldn’t be the first time an SIA unit was in her territory. Even though Paige and her girls had a reputation for getting jobs done effectively, efficiently, and quietly, the government wouldn’t trust them until their paychecks said Uncle Sam on the signature line. Which would never happen.

“Doesn’t a guy like you have a date or something?” she asked.

His gaze flicked down to hers. “There is this girl I like,” he said, “but she won’t return my phone calls.”

Paige looked away. Why had she slept with him? When Collin left, hadn’t she decided she was through with Specials?

As if to answer her question, Darian’s hand stroked small, light circles on her back. His touch gave her all sorts of ideas she couldn’t even blame him for.

He lowered his head again and trailed light kisses up the side of her neck. He wasn’t playing fair. Images poured over her.

He lay her down on red satin, his body hovering over hers. His hands explored her bare flesh. He was so hard and all he wanted was to sink his cock deep inside her, feel the heat of her pussy squeeze him deeper. But first, he would explore her body. First, he would make her come with his hands. With his tongue.

This wasn't a product of his imagination. He was projecting memory. The night they were together in Eden. But now she was seeing it—feeling it—from his angle. She saw her body as he looked down on her, saw her ivory skin, watched her breasts rise and fall, her nipples hard and beaded under his teasing fingers. She felt his cock throb, knew how badly he wanted to be inside her.

On the dance floor, he bit lightly at her bare shoulder. In the memory, his hand slid into the curls between her legs and found her clit with his thumb.

Her breath quickened. Anyone watching them would have seen nothing more than a man trailing his mouth along a woman's neck, but she felt more than that. She was wet, aching. Her clit throbbed against the memory's touch.

She thought she felt something change in him for the briefest moment, but whatever it was blipped away in another rush of lust.

She fought to focus. That night had been incredible, but she didn't intend on letting it happen again. Especially not tonight. "Jesus, Darian. What'd you do, eat a gallon of oysters for dinner?"

He threaded his fingers into her hair and pressed her head lightly against his chest. The warmth there vibrated with his chuckle.

The bud in her ear beeped softly. "We've got a party crasher," Chrissie said.

Paige held her breath. *Shit*. Okay, so she'd been thinking about letting him in her pants again when she should have been thinking about finding their soon-to-be victim or their perp. And now there was a bomber in the building. She'd always had hellacious-bad timing with men. That pretty much summed up why—with the exception of some regularly scheduled maintenance—she was planning to stay far, far away from them.

“Description?” Josie asked.

“Male, mid-thirties, blond and blue eyes—freaky blue eyes. The woman whose memory I first saw him in was weirded out by his eyes.”

Paige's breathing quickened. She remembered that guy. Hadn't she touched him? She hadn't felt anything but the same mild anxiety she'd sensed in every man and woman on security detail. She should have felt more if he were planning on blowing the place up. If not nerves, then the dark, clawing evil that filled every terrorist she'd ever touched. But there had been nothing there.

She had to get rid of Lorrying and confer with the girls.

“Where's the party?” Josie asked, using their code word for bomb.

Chrissie was silent for a moment, and Paige prayed that Darian hadn't noticed how still she'd gone.

“It has to be on him. I got this all from his buddy's memories. Hell of a friend. I could see his plan to have a party with Freaky Blue-Eyed Man. Best I can tell from what I'm getting, he's holding the keys to the door.”

Bomb on Freaky Blue Eyes, buddy holding the detonator. Okay.

“With friends like those...” Josie mumbled.

“Paige, if you copy, cough twice,” Chrissie said. They’d done this enough times to understand that they couldn’t all always speak freely.

Paige turned and pretended to tuck a strand of hair as she engaged the microphone in her ear. She coughed lightly, twice, into her hand.

“Are you okay?” Darian asked.

She nodded into his chest. “The champagne gives me a little throat tickle.”

“I’ll find Freaky Blue-Eyed Man,” Josie said in her ear. “Chrissie, you keep an eye on our party planner. Paige, let us know when you’re available.”

“We’ve got this,” Chrissie said. “Take your time, Paige.”

And miss out on all the fun? Not likely.

She looked up at Darian and admitted there was a significant possibility of fun right before her eyes. Couldn’t she just have him wait for her somewhere, and they could have a little hot, frantic sex after Freaky Blue Eyes was taken care of? No. No more sex with Specials. It was too complicated.

“Oh,” Josie said, pleasure in her voice. “I thought Darian might be making an appearance tonight.”

Paige bit her lip and scowled internally, thinking, *Thanks for the heads up, Jo!*

Chrissie hummed. “Darian? Seriously. Take your time. Just let me read your memory when you’re done with him.”

Paige sighed. She loved her job. It gave purpose to an ability that would have otherwise been...haunting. She loved her girls. They were as skilled as they were fun. But working with readers of past and future certainly left something to be desired in the privacy department.

It looked like hot, frantic sex wouldn't be on the agenda at all tonight. Which was for the best. Paige had already given Darian the wrong idea by sleeping with him the first time. She didn't need to make it any worse. Her priority now was to get rid of him so she could do her job.

"You're warm," she murmured. "Warm enough that part of me wouldn't mind dancing with you all night." Then, because she didn't want him becoming suspicious, she added, "Assuming, of course, that I could pretend you weren't a hemorrhoidal pain in my ass."

She was still tuned into him and could feel him soften, could feel his guard dropping and his alertness shift from the crowd to her.

He was thinking about their night together again. It was nice to never have to worry if the guy she was with had enjoyed himself. Fringe benefit of an often less-than-pleasant power. She snuggled her body closer, but looked up at him, letting her lips curve in a smile. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in a repeat performance of that night?"

"I could be persuaded," he whispered, his dark eyes searching hers. "But I'm looking for more than sex from you, Paige."

What a line. It probably even worked for most women. The fact that he was telling the truth certainly didn't hurt his case—except that the idea of more than sex scared the hell out of her. She didn't do "more than sex." Not anymore. And definitely not with Specials.

She reached up and traced the hard lines of his jaw. He really was beautiful, and it'd be a shame to see that pretty face get hurt if he did something stupid like try to play Rambo. "This is such a bad idea," she whispered.

"It doesn't have to be bad," he said, predictably.

Paige had known he'd argue if she said it was a bad idea, and that was her intent. Get him to think it was his idea. When in any kind of combat with the male species, she'd found it best to always be in control of their pride.

She chewed on her bottom lip for a minute, then let her eyes go wide. "I can feel how hot you are for me," she said. No lie. She could—mentally and physically.

"I don't think you have any idea."

But she did. It didn't take special powers to detect the raging hard-on pressed into her belly. "I don't know." She lifted onto her toes and whispered into his ear. "There's an office three doors down the hall on the right. I slipped in there earlier, so it's still unlocked. Meet me there?"

He swallowed. "What about—?"

"The party will still be here when we get back, and the president won't arrive for at least another thirty minutes." Her hand drifted down his back, then she let her nails drag back up. "Come on, Darian. I want you to touch me again. I want to feel your cock inside me."

His pupils dilated and his breathing quickened, but his gaze, locked on hers, was still questioning.

Hell, why was this taking so much persuasion? He'd been all hot to trot when he'd asked her to dance, and his arousal was even stronger now. If that was even possible.

His breathing was uneven. He wanted her. Normally, that wouldn't even faze her. She'd get rid of him and get to work. But the power of the sensations and images he was flashing through her head told her they'd have one hell of a time in that office. The hungry, one-hundred-percent greedy, female need part of her almost wished she could go meet him for a quickie.

His eyes were hot on hers as he pulled away. "Don't make me wait long."

Paige waited until he'd left the ballroom before pressing her ear bud. "Sorry, I had to lose some unwanted company."

"I hope you didn't lose him for good," Chrissie said.

"If only my life were that simple," Paige muttered, striding to an exit opposite Darian's. "Tell me what's going on."

"I just found the party," Josie said. "Northwest corner of the ballroom. He's a little shit. I can take him, no problem."

"I still have my sights on our party planner," Chrissie said, referring to the guy with the detonator.

"Chrissie, you distract him while we move the party out of here. The last thing we need to do is to panic the guy with his finger on the champagne cork. I'll call Rider and see if he has any intel on these guys."

"Got it," Chrissie said.

"And Josie?" Paige whispered.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I touched Freaky Blue Eyes earlier. There's a possibility he doesn't know about the party."

"How's that possible?" Josie asked. "We're not talking about a tiny little explo—celebration here."

Chrissie cursed. "I think Paige is right. Get him out of here."

Chapter Two

Darian slipped into the men's room before alerting his unit. He tapped his ear device. "Stiletto, Inc. is up to something. Paige Sykes couldn't get rid of me fast enough. Wiley, follow Josie Bovard. Fernandez, you follow Chrissie Elliott."

"Which is that?" Wiley asked at the same moment as Fernandez said, "Is that the blonde?"

Darian sighed. "Wiley, you're on Future; Fernandez is on Past."

Like all SIA operatives, the guys were familiar with Paige's firm, Stiletto, Inc. Their services ranged from low-profile private investigation gigs to high-profile government jobs where they were unofficially commissioned assassins—a fact he'd had more than a little trouble grasping when he'd first learned what the firm called themselves. Because they were Specials and because they could kick ass, SIA had been trying to recruit the Stiletto Girls.

In her ability to see memories, Chrissie Elliott could see the past when she touched someone; Paige Sykes was an empath, able to read emotions and sensations through skin contact; and Josie Bovard could see the future in the same way.

"Copy," Wiley said, followed by Fernandez's response of "10-4."

Individually, the women of Stiletto, Inc. were powerful, but together they were nearly unstoppable. Even Josie's power, with its glitches, made her pretty bad ass. She saw visions of the future, though as Darian understood it, nothing she saw was set in stone. The visions were more like a warning of what *might* happen.

The Stiletto Girls were truly powerful in the arena of gathering intelligence. But for the life of him, Darian didn't understand why they continued to risk their lives working in the field. If they joined the SIA, their intelligence abilities would be put to good use, and Specials whose

abilities gave them a combative edge could work the front lines. Specials like Darian and his unit.

“I haven’t seen any sign of Raines,” Fernandez said.

Wiley scoffed. “Collin Raines doesn’t do his own dirty work.”

“Don’t worry about Raines,” Darian said. “Our orders are to follow the girls.” Even if Raines was the main reason behind that order.

Darian ran a hand through his hair and let himself be pissed for a second. Had Paige really believed he was so easily manipulated? She’d sent him to some office to wait for her, brushing him off with nothing but lies. He hoped like hell it wasn’t because she was up to no good.

Onto her, he’d had no choice but to play her game. What else could he do? He’d had to focus on her naked and in his arms, focus on the way her pussy looked when she was hot and swollen and ready for him. And by doing so, she hadn’t guessed his purpose. She’d only known he was hot as hell for her. Which wasn’t too far from the truth. She’d looked stunning tonight. When he’d spotted her on the edge of the dance floor, he’d had to take a minute to catch his breath. Her dark hair had been curled and pinned off her neck. She’d worn a blue sheath dress that had hugged her subtle curves—that tight ass and those perfect breasts—and made her green cat eyes glow.

Her abilities were clouded by sex; now he could make sure she and her friends were still working for the good guys.

He frowned. He couldn’t imagine why the girls’ loyalty was being questioned, but it wasn’t his job to imagine. His job was to complete his mission. He could think about its implications later.

“Shit! Where’d they go?” The muffled curse came from Wiley. Darian could hear him moving, shuffling through the crowd, handing out a series of *Excuse me*’s and *I’m sorry*’s.

“Crap. They’re headed for the roof. The fucking *roof*. No one up to any good goes up to the roof in the middle of the inaugural ball. Could I have some backup before these ladies get us all killed?”

Darian was already heading for the stairs, thinking, *What are you up to, Paige?*

When he hit the stairs, he had to step over an unconscious Secret Service agent. The handy work of a Stiletto Girl, no doubt.

He was already up the first flight and working on the second when Fernandez said, “That’s all you, Loring. I’ll be keeping my eye on Punky Brewster here,” he said, referring to Chrissie, whose clothes, tattoos, and wild hair made her look more like a punk rocker than a secret agent. “She’s keeping a very careful eye on someone.”

“You didn’t watch much television as a child, did you, Fernandez?” Darian asked.

“What?”

“Punky Brewster wasn’t actually a punk—”

“Oh, shut it,” Fernandez muttered. “Get back to work.”

“I’m halfway there,” Darian responded, rounding the landing on the third floor and picking up speed.

Darian heard a door slam.

“What the hell?” Wiley muttered.

As Darian rounded onto the top floor, a hand shot out from the dark corner, in it was a gun. Pointed right at his head. “Stop,” she barked. She was holding Wiley against her chest, which was interesting since she was six inches shorter than Wiley.

Wiley made a move, and, just as quickly as she'd drawn it on Darian, she pointed the gun back to Wiley's head.

Fuck. What was she up to?

Darian stepped forward and brushed his fingertips over her arm. "Don't do this," he whispered, projecting relaxation. God, she was soft. And she smelled like fucking sunshine after a new rain. The thought didn't do much to change his feelings about her doing field work.

"I don't know what you're trying to pull, but you move one little toe toward that roof, and I will shoot your friend here," Paige muttered even as her shoulders relaxed and her face was no longer drawn tight by tension.

Darian shot a glance to Wiley, who looked more amused than worried.

"This is how you're going to repay us for saving your ass last fall?" Wiley asked.

Darian winced. This wasn't the best time to bring that up.

Wiley looked at Darian. "Let me know when I can take her down. I'll be on that roof in three seconds flat."

Darian tensed his jaw and Wiley shrugged in response. They both understood they needed to avoid commotion of any kind at all costs—their orders had been clear. But they also needed to know—

"What the hell is going on up there?" Fernandez demanded in his ear.

Paige tightened the arm around Wiley's neck. "You never saved our ass. You got in the way. And you're doing the same thing now. We have the situation under control."

Wiley snorted and Darian kicked him in the shin. He didn't care that Wiley's machismo caused him to find her sentiment amusing. Sharing his feelings wasn't helping the situation in the slightest.

“You want to tell me what’s happening on that roof?” Darian asked, using all his willpower to maintain a reasonable, rational tone, and wondering how much hell she was going to give him when he flipped her around and snapped the gun from her hand.

“The situation is under control,” Paige repeated.

Wiley shook his head. “You don’t give me the go or she doesn’t give a better explanation, I’m going ahead without it. Screw you both.”

Suddenly, a horrifying screech came from the other side of the access door. “No!”

“Shit,” they all responded in unison.

“What’s she doing to him?” Wiley asked, not seeming too terribly concerned about the gun at his temple.

“Fuck!” Fernandez came over the ear piece. “I turned my back for one minute and Punky Brewster disappeared.”

“She’s doing her job,” Paige said to Wiley. “Now let her.”

The choppy hum of a helicopter grew closer.

Wiley spun away from her in a move that had her up against the wall and her gun in his hand before she could blink. Darian spun at the same time and grabbed her hands, pressing them against the wall behind her.

“It’s too late, Lorryng,” she murmured softly. “It’s taken care of.”

Wiley headed for the roof, and Darian didn’t move a muscle.

Their eyes met in the poor light trickling in from the now-open access door.

“Unknown suspect, Punky Brewster, and myself coming your way,” Fernandez said.

Paige didn't try to pull free of Darian's grip or even scream at him to release her. Her calm demeanor may have fooled him once, but Darian knew that face now. He knew the little twitch in her jaw. She was pissed.

"They're moving a guy out in a chopper," Wiley said in his earpiece from the roof. "Oh," he said. Through his earpiece, Darian could hear Josie's soft voice in the background, but he couldn't make out the words. "A bomber," Wiley filled in, barely missing a beat as he shared the new information. "The suicide bomber is gone, but the man with the detonator is still inside."

Relief pumped out of Darian like water from a broken dam. *Of course*, Darian thought. *Which would make us the shmoes who tried to stop them from saving a building full of innocent people.*

"You can't keep taking these missions when you're not equipped to deal with them," Darian told Paige softly. How convenient was it that his cover for watching her happened to be exactly what he felt about her doing this work?

She didn't respond. Not verbally. But her gaze darted to the access door.

Right, so the Stiletto Girls had gotten the bomber out of the building. Now he was the ass for not believing they could do it. Better than her knowing the truth: that the SIA wasn't worried about the competence of Stiletto, Inc. They were worried about their loyalty to the U.S. government.

"It's a risk," he explained. "You three are too valuable. It's too much of a risk."

Again, nothing but that wide-eyed look that said, *you don't know shit, you little dick-for-brains, must be hard to be you*. Of course, he wasn't a Reader, so he didn't know for sure those were her thoughts. Just a hunch.

"Bring him back!"

Darian released Paige to turn to the man who'd just stumbled onto the landing.

Oh, fuck. He knew this guy—or *had* known him, before he'd left the SIA.

Darian extended a hand. "Relax. We can work this out."

"I'll blow up the goddamned 'copter! Bring him back!"

He closed the space between them. On a single exhale, Darian touched the man and flipped a switch in his brain to send a signal.

The man crumbled, dropping to the floor and sobbing. Projecting emotion was so much easier when the subject was already emotionally primed, but that was just ridiculous.

Paige began patting him down before he could recover from his wave of grief. Her eyes widened as she touched him and a tremor of emotion passed through her. She pushed through it, and continued patting him down while Darian focused on incapacitating him with grief. Grief he knew that Paige was feeling every bit as powerfully as the man.

He knew part of what she was feeling—she'd be picking up the emotion Darian was projecting onto him. But it was worse than that. She'd also be feeling the darkness and ugliness inside of him, and *that* Darian simply couldn't imagine.

If flooding the man with emotion hadn't worked and he'd had to project pain, would she still put herself through this? He knew the answer.

"Where's the remote?"

The punk-looking Stiletto Girl—Chrissie—appeared at the top of the stairs, dragging Fernandez by his shirt collar. She didn't let go when she answered Paige's question. "There's no remote."

Paige pulled away, visibly grateful for an excuse to break the connection. "Then how?"

Darian answered, "He's a Special."

“I figured as much,” Paige muttered. “I’m afraid to ask what his ability is.”

Chrissie tightened her grip on Fernandez, who looked more amused than annoyed, and said, “He blows things up. I should have gotten that from his memories, but I thought he just had a lot of experience with explosives. I saw him blow crap up, but I didn’t realize—”

“He doesn’t need actual explosives to do it,” Paige finished for her. “Which explains why I didn’t get any sort of reading from Freaky Blue Eyes.”

“No explosives,” Darian said, “but he has to spend a lot of time around the object. The more time and energy he focuses into it, the bigger the explosion.”

Chrissie jabbed a finger at Fernandez. She had daggers for eyes and they were aimed right at Darian. “You want to tell me why this guy was getting in my way?”

Fernandez smiled and shrugged, as if to say he’d let her drag him around all she wanted as long as he was able to keep an eye on her.

“Threat averted,” Paige said softly. “Let him go.”

Chrissie scowled and dropped his shirt. “I need some fresh air,” she muttered.

“I’ll take care of him,” Fernandez said, brushing his hand over the perp’s forehead.

The guy looked up at him with puppy dog eyes and stood. Fernandez put an arm around his shoulders and led him downstairs.

“Hell of an ability,” Chrissie muttered. She turned to Darian. “What’s going on here?”

“I’ll explain later,” Darian lied. Fernandez would press the guy for information. With any luck, tonight will have served two purposes. They’d learned Stiletto, Inc. was still on the up and up, and if they were lucky, they’d learn if the large influx of threats picked up by SIA intelligence had something to do with Collin Raines and the election of President Winston.

“Whatever,” Chrissie said before stepping onto the roof.

Darian turned to Paige. “On a scale of one to ten, how pissed are you?”

Judging from the fury in her eyes, he was guessing she was an eleven. Maybe a twelve.

Darian didn’t care. Everyone was safe, and Stiletto, Inc. was still working for the good guys. At the end of the day, that was all that mattered.

She released a long exasperated sigh before finally speaking. “You were supposed to be waiting for me in the office. What happened?”

He let a slow smile curl his lips. “I don’t have to be an empath to know when you’re full of shit.”

* * * *

Paige’s anger was punctuated by the sharp click of her heels as they struck the dark sidewalk.

What was it about Darian that got under her skin? Sure, he was cocky, but the SIA was like the CIA meets Marines with superpowers thrown in. When she dealt with them, she *expected* cocky.

She clenched her jaw. *Why were you following us?* she’d asked him.

We have some intel that this case might be a little more than you can handle.

Stiletto, Inc. had been handling things just fine before they’d been assigned Darian’s crew to breathe down their necks. In fact, they’d been on the case for weeks now, while the SIA had been twiddling their thumbs trying to decide whether or not they should get involved. Then they’d undoubtedly had to cut through miles of red tape.

Stiletto, Inc. could take care of it *better* than SIA pigs.

Paige wanted to growl. If he had put it in any terms but those, she would have welcomed their help. Specials were vanishing—whether they were being kidnapped and held somewhere or

murdered, no one knew. The case was too important. But he *hadn't* put it in other terms. Instead of the importance of the case, it had been a question of their competence. *Too valuable*, he'd told her. Then he returned to his favorite topic of why they should join the SIA and work safe little intelligence jobs the rest of their lives.

It was natural that she'd be a little bent out of shape by the suggestion that she and her girls couldn't do their jobs without getting themselves killed.

But, if you're honest with yourself, you have to admit you're not nearly as irritated with the other two guys. If you're honest with yourself—

Paige grunted, cutting off her own thoughts. So what if Darian got under her skin for reasons she didn't want to analyze too closely just yet? That wasn't why she'd stomped off. That wasn't why she was walking alone through the frigid streets of DC when the only other people out were the homeless, who had no choice, and the drunks, who had no clue.

I don't want to see you hurt, Paige. Those words had been uttered softly amid the chaos and bitching. The other girls were no more keen on the guys interrupting their mission than Paige had been, and once the threat had been neutralized and they all met up on the roof, everyone wanted to say her piece. *All* the girls wanted to know how Darian's unit had even known where they'd be tonight. Chrissie had accused them of knowing about the bomber and holding out intel. Of course, the guys hadn't taken too kindly to that. But Darian—whom Paige was never quite sure she could trust—had whispered those words to her quietly, for her ears alone. *I don't want to see you hurt, Paige.*

Paige always had a different interpretation of the knight in shining armor coming to the rescue of the damsel in distress. As an empath, she knew perception was a powerful thing—more powerful than most people realized. Even though the knight thinks he's saving the damsel from a

terrible fate, Paige figured that most of those women in the classic fairy tales had the situation under control before some pompous ass rode up on his white stallion.

She exhaled heavily and watched her breath steam in the cold January air. Right now the mid-twenties temps were good. They cooled off her frustration, helped her think. She didn't want to admit it, but sex fogged her brain as much as it fogged the next guy's, and thanks to Darian Loring, she had sex on the brain. So, for now, she welcomed the cold air. She let it swirl around her bare toes and up her skirt. She did nothing to stop it from sinking into her skin and wrapping its chilly fingers around her bones.

Behind her, she heard the fireworks and breathed a sigh of relief that they'd been where they had tonight. It wasn't over. She knew that. There would always be threats, always be people who wanted to destroy what America stood for. But getting through this day was an accomplishment in itself, and she was going to let herself enjoy the feeling.

As soon as she allowed herself to feel relief, it was pushed aside by gnawing worry. They hadn't learned anything new about the vanishing Specials. They still hadn't a clue who was behind it or who would be next. Would someone still vanish tonight?

She slowed as another set of footsteps sounded behind her—it was a man's stride, muffled, solid and flat, next to the sharp clicking sound of her steps.

She stopped and closed her eyes. "What are you doing here, Collin?" she asked, her back still to him. It was the female in her, not the Special, who sensed her old lover on her heels. Collin Raines.

He stopped behind her, and she braced herself for his touch and the disconcerting lack of sight that came with it. She steeled herself and prayed she'd have enough self respect not to throw herself into his arms.

He turned her around. She felt nothing but the pressure of his hand against her back and the weakness of her own heart in her chest. The sight of him made her throat tighten. The light of the streetlamps cast shadows across his face, exaggerating the appearance of the long scar that cut over his forehead and across his left eye. He wore a long black trench coat and black leather gloves.

His eyes swept over her. “How have you been, my love?”

She took a breath, but it entered her lungs in jagged pieces, not the long, cool, refreshing stream she needed. “I’m not your love.” *Not since you left.*

He raised a brow. “Have things changed that you can read me now?”

She closed her eyes. “You know they haven’t.”

“Then you wouldn’t know.” His ran a gloved finger along her jawline, back and forth until she opened her eyes.

“What do you want from me, Collin?” she whispered.

“I miss you.”

The words tore through her center with the slow and merciless sawing of a dull blade. Tears filled her eyes, and she looked to the clear winter sky so she wouldn’t say the words that rested on her tongue. *Then why did you leave me?*

“Don’t cry, my love.” Slowly, he pulled off his glove and held his bare hand palm up.

“May I?”

She didn’t acknowledge the question. There was no point. He’d do as he pleased anyway. Always had.

The first contact of his cool fingertips against her cheek was deliciously painful. It was always like that. She couldn't feel anything, couldn't read him. But, worse, she knew he could read her. She set her jaw and let him suck her power.

"You do miss me too," he said softly. "But you still don't understand..." His lip twitched. "I see you had an exciting night."

"Thanks to you? Are you sending others to do your dirty work now?"

He frowned and dropped his hand. Her power came back in a rush. Not that she would be able to feel him. Collin wasn't only a Power Sucker, he was a Blocker. No Special Paige had ever known could use their power on Collin.

"Who is he?" Collin asked.

"Who?"

His eyes looked sad. The icy blue that went straight to her heart, the worry lines from a hard life softening around them somehow. "Under everything else, it's still there. Your arousal. It's fading, but I know your arousal like I know my own. I can still taste it."

"Collin—"

"You were with someone tonight? Or thinking about it?" He gave a self-deprecating chuckle, but there was no real humor behind it. "I guess I can't expect you to waste the years of your prime pining away for me."

How could she still love a man who'd abandoned her?

"You can't honestly think that I'm going to feel soft toward you after what your friends tried to pull tonight?"

His lips quirked. "You always feel soft toward me."

“Go home, Collin. Wherever that is.” She turned and had taken five steps before he stopped her with little more than a hand on her shoulder.

“I wasn’t a part of what happened tonight. Not intentionally at least.”

She nodded. She believed him. There hadn’t been enough planning or power behind the threat for it to come from Collin.

“Are you still on the missing Specials case?” he asked.

“You know I will be until we have answers.”

He turned her slowly. “Leave it alone, Paige. You’re putting yourself right into their clutches if you keep on this.”

She shook her head. What a night for chauvinistic men. “You’re wasting your breath, Collin, and unless you have some information that will help with the case, you might as well stop.”

Collin frowned. “Nothing you can find is going to bring your mom back, Paige.”

She winced.

“I need you to trust me.”

“I’ve fallen for that line before,” she said.

He studied her. “Please take yourself and the girls off this case. I’m worried for you.”

“Still using fear tactics to recruit, Collin?”

He tipped her chin so she was looking at him, and she saw it there: the sincerity in his eyes.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Ah, that might work on other people, but I know better. I feel it.”

She knew he did, and she hated being so exposed to him. Especially now.

“I know you’re not very happy with me, but I still care for you.”

She shook her head, but he held it between his gloved hands.

“Promise me you’ll think about it,” he said. “Promise you’ll consider that, after all our years together, you should trust me. You should move on to some other case.” He lowered his head and brushed his lips against hers, and again she felt the pain and pleasure tonic of him leeching her power.

He ran his tongue against the seam of her lips, and she instinctively opened to him. His kiss was sweet—soft and patient. She didn’t kiss him back, but she didn’t deny him either. Instead, she focused on her heartbreak, remembered how she felt the day he left her, and used his power-leaching ability against him.

He pulled away and rubbed his gloved thumb over her bottom lip. Pulling a card out of his coat, he said, “If you need me, this is where I am now.” He tucked it into her hand and she let him. “I wish I could explain. I wish you could believe that this is the way it has to be.”

She shook her head and turned away.

* * * *

Tanner Wiley flipped his cell phone closed and slipped into the shadows.

Darian was convinced their intel was wrong, was convinced that, even though the members of Stiletos, Inc. refused to join the SIA, the private firm worked toward the same goal as the government agency.

Surely, he’d take their mission a little more seriously now that he had photographic evidence that Paige was sleeping with the enemy.

Collin turned the corner, and Wiley followed him, allowing his power of invisibility to cloak him.

After half a block, Collin stopped and turned, looking straight into Wiley's face. "Don't bother, kid," he muttered. "I can see you."

* * * *

When Paige got back to Stiletto, Inc. Headquarters, where the girls had agreed to meet, the office shower was running and Chrissie was slipping into her jeans.

"What took you so long?" Chrissie asked. "Please tell me you had a repeat performance with Mr. SIA." She shook her head and gave Paige a look of mock seriousness. "I worry about your vibrator, you know. Even the trustiest vibrating pals need a break sometimes."

Paige forced a smile, the image of Collin standing under the streetlamp still buzzing around in her mind. "Hook up with Darian? After what they pulled tonight? Not likely."

Chrissie frowned and settled on the edge of the bed. "What was that about?"

"Apparently the SIA decided they want to work this case after all. They're worried we can't handle it."

Chrissie snorted and zipped a knee-high boot over her jeans. "Bunch of chauvinist assholes over there," she muttered.

"Yeah, I know," Paige said, reaching around to unzip her dress. She let the dress fall to the floor and began pulling pins from her hair.

"Did they have any intel regarding the bomber?"

Paige shook her head. "No, it was a surprise to them, too."

Maybe what happened tonight was more complicated than they thought. She'd touched the explosion-master Special, and she felt more than she'd expected. The darkness inside terrorists was always overwhelming. It was a hatred that surged up from their very soul and devoured anything good left inside them. And when Paige touched them, it threatened to devour

her. She'd felt that darkness in him, and around the darkness, covering but not smothering it, she'd felt the grief and despair Darian had projected, but she'd also felt pride, and hope. Hope for more to come. A belief that, if he didn't succeed, his mission would be completed by someone else.

She heard the squeak of the office shower stopping. Josie must be finishing.

"Chrissie, did you get any reading off the terrorist at the party?" Paige asked.

"Sure did," Chrissie said with a wicked grin.

"Was he working alone?" Paige asked.

Josie stepped out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her body and another around her head.

"Alone tonight, as far as I can tell, but he wasn't the mastermind behind the plan. I saw a memory of him talking to a man. He called him Scott in the memory. They were here in DC. I'm sure because I could see the Lincoln Memorial in his memory, and Scott was giving him his fake ID and tickets for the inaugural ball." She yanked on the other boot.

"I think we should check it out," Josie said, stepping in front of the mirror and grabbing her facial moisturizer. "The whole thing was a little too close for comfort."

Paige nodded. "I agree."

"You don't think Collin had anything to do with what happened tonight, do you?" Josie asked tentatively. "I mean, I know you probably don't want to talk about him, but he was so upset when Winston was elected and..." The rest of the sentence hung unspoken in the air: *and he left you to do something about it, didn't he?*

Paige shook her head. "No, it's okay. It's a valid question." She remembered Collin's face as she'd talked to him tonight. Maybe she couldn't read him, but she *knew* that face, knew

that man. “I think that if Collin were behind what happened tonight, it wouldn’t have been so easy to stop.”

Josie nodded and turned to Chrissie. “Anything else on this Scott guy?”

A slow smile curved Chrissie’s lips. “Only the name of a strip club from another memory. The way he was talking to the employees, I think he might be the owner.”

Paige’s smile was sincere this time. “You kick ass. You know that?”

Chrissie bounded off the bed ready to party. “Sure do.”

Josie turned to them. “So, do we go after him tonight or tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Chrissie said. “I’m near useless until I recharge anyway. Rider’s coming home tonight, so I’ll be ready to go in the morning.”

“Where’s he been, anyway?” Josie asked.

Chrissie frowned, then shrugged. “Probably looking into a potential case for the firm.”

“Good,” Paige said, but she hadn’t missed the discomfort on her friend’s face.

“What about you two?” Chrissie asked. “How are you feeling after tonight?”

“Totally sucked dry,” Josie said.

Paige winced, having literally had her powers leached from her during her encounter with Collin.

Josie combed her fingers through her wet hair. “But I’m hooking up with an old friend tonight.” She wriggled her eyebrows. “Don’t expect me back until morning.”

“Paige, are you game for tomorrow?”

Paige nodded. After tonight’s case, her powers would have been a little weak anyway, but when Collin used his powers on her, it left her damn near useless. Damn near...normal. If normal included a mild case of the flu. “Tomorrow would be better for me, too.”

She looked up at her friends. Josie was bent at the waist, hair flipped over her head, combing some styling product into her hair. Paige frowned. Maybe she should pay as much attention to her appearance as her two best friends did. Maybe...*shit*. Maybe then Collin wouldn't have left her? How absurd was that? And what was she, sixteen?

"There was a message on the voice mail from Aaron," Chrissie said, referring to the Stiletto, Inc. administrative assistant.

"What's up?" Paige asked.

"He wanted to let us know another Special was reported missing tonight."

Paige's stomach dropped.

Josie's hand went to her mouth and she chewed on her thumbnail for a moment.

"That's—what?—twelve this month?"

"Twelve that we know of," Paige corrected. Who knew how many Specials lived on the streets after being rejected as "crazy" by their families? No one noticed when street rats went missing.

"There's no clear pattern, though," Chrissie said. "They're disappearing from all over the country."

"What was this one's power?" Paige asked.

"Another Blocker," Chrissie answered.

Blockers were Specials who kept other Specials' powers from working. Some had to touch the Special to stop his power, some could stop powers of anyone in the same room, and some—like Collin—had other powers as well. "There's your pattern," Paige muttered. Even though the girls knew two—Collin and Rider—Blockers were rare among Specials. Yet, more than half of the Specials who had vanished this month were Blockers.

Chrissie slipped into a leather bomber jacket. “Paige, you look like hell.”

Paige gave a humorless laugh. “Thanks.”

Chrissie frowned and wrinkled her nose. “Are you all right?” She stepped forward and reached out to touch Paige, who drew back away from her touch instinctively.

“Sorry,” Paige muttered when hurt flashed across her face. The girls didn’t abuse their powers with each other, but they used them to stay connected. To understand what the others were going through. “I’m fine.”

I saw Collin tonight. She should have said it, but the words stuck on her tongue. Why should she implicate Collin if he was innocent? She’d believed him when he’d said he wasn’t a part of what happened at the Smithsonian tonight. So, instead of telling them, she said, “I’m just tired. I’ll be better after a shower.”

“It’s a plan, then. Tomorrow we’ll record everything we got tonight, and we’ll visit the strip club and Scott.”

Chrissie snatched her purse from the end table. “I’ll meet you ladies at the club. I have a couple of errands I need to take care of before I can party.”

The girls said their goodbyes, and Paige slipped into the shower.

Paige turned the water as hot as she could stand it to ward off the ache inside her, the ache that spread across her skin after Collin leached her powers. The ache in her heart from seeing him. The ache in her stomach from her broken dreams of their future.

She had been nineteen when she’d met Collin. Nineteen and living on the streets with her mom and little sister, Tara. The night had been worse than many. The hard, icy, not-quite-sleet rain felt like pinpricks against her face as it seemed to taunt her homelessness.

As the shower beat down on her now, she thought, *I saw Collin tonight*. She should have told them. But it felt like a betrayal.