



Pushing Fate

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Blurb

Ainslie Croft is a dreamer. The problem is, her dreams aren't pleasant. Ghosts haunt her, asking for help. When she crashes into a dream where one man is running from her and another toward her, Ainslie knows her life is about to change forever. But can she overcome her emotional and physical scars to let anyone into her life?

Ramsay Balfour is a man on a mission. He has to find an evil necromancer and destroy his power. Ramsay also plans to seduce Ainslie back into the land of the living by teaching her how to love again.

Dedication

Dedicated to anyone who has pushed fate, their luck, and themselves in the pursuit of the best. And to Captain James T. Kirk and the evil beauty of the split infinitive. It's wrong and it's bad but I just have to boldly go there.

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Prologue

Ainslie Croft threw up her hands to fend off the man who charged toward her, slamming her into the ground. She swore as she felt the sting of gravel bite into her knees. When she looked up he was nowhere to be seen. *Who was he? Where am I?* She scanned her surroundings. Ainslie picked out old weathered gravestones, faded silk flowers, and neatly maintained lawns. *I'm at the cemetery. Why?* A wild shiver ran down her spine and Ainslie knew she was not alone. There was someone approaching her—another man. She sensed he was different from the first. She felt hot and uncomfortable, almost as though he knew more about her than he should. As he moved closer toward her, Ainslie's heart beat wildly. She knew instantly this was someone she would never be able to walk away from and the thought terrified her. *He is my destiny.*

Ainslie woke with a start, her arms lashing out as if she was trying to protect herself. Her heart was beating madly and she was breathing hard as though she had just run a race. She switched on the bedside light, narrowing her eyes at the brightness.

"Two o'clock in the frigging morning." Ainslie groaned tiredly as she pushed back the tangled sheets and looked down at her knees. They were scraped and bloody. "Of course they are." She expected nothing less. Her dreams were as realistic as they were painful. She dabbed at them with the sheet, which was already stained with the blood from her knees. "Why can't I be normal?" Even as she said the words, Ainslie knew normality for her would never be an option. She sighed as she pushed her hair back from her face and reached for the cordless telephone beside her bed. There was only one person she could call who would understand what had just happened. Ainslie punched in the number she knew off by heart. Even though it was two o'clock in the morning, Lucretia Bell, her contact within the Spooky Girls, listened to her intently.

"Who do you think he is?" There were no recriminations from Lucretia at having been woken so early.

"Which one?" Both men had meaning in the dream.

"The first man."

Ainslie blew out a frustrated breath as she pushed her tangled, shoulder-length hair back from her face again.

"I think he's a ghost and you know I hate dealing with them. They never bloody go to the light easily." Ainslie knew this only too well. Ghosts were constantly visiting her; boring and stilted as her life was, she was not looking to change it. Ainslie felt safe in her own little cocooned world. "I believe he is my fate." She just wasn't sure how, though. Fate was fickle. It had a way of smacking you in the face when you least expected it. Just glimpsing the small amount of what was destined to happen was enough to make Ainslie wary.

"Ah, well, you know what you have to do then." Lucretia's voice was calm and matter-of-fact.

"I have to go to the cemetery." It was not something Ainslie looked forward to doing, but she knew there was no other option. She had to answer the call in her dream, as she had answered similar calls before. "Maybe I can just forgo the search for meaning this time." Ainslie could almost see the cynical eye roll Lucretia would give her at those

words.

“It’s what you have been summoned to do, Ainslie.”

But I’m tired of being summoned. “I am just a little weary of constantly pushing fate like this.” She got up from the bed. The burning pain in her knees forced her to sit again. “Why do I have to look for it at all? Why can’t I just let fate come to me naturally?” *Why can’t it be someone else?*

“Ainslie, you know that’s not going to happen.” Lucretia’s voice was very patient as if she hadn’t been through this conversation many times before with her friend. “Some people would be thrilled to know what’s going to take place before it does.”

“Yeah, but the problem is I only see pieces of the puzzle in my dream and having to interpret it pisses me off.”

“I know, but you have to solve it regardless. You have no choice.”

“Yes, I’m screwed.”

Chapter One

Malcolm Durant ran and ran until he thought his lungs would burst. It wasn't that he wasn't fit, for he was. He had been exercising every single day of his life. It was more that he was spurred on by panic and confusion. Malcolm no longer felt any control over his life. Someone else pulled the strings and he did not know how to sever the ties and find the peace he so desperately craved.

"How did I let my life get to this?" he cursed, not caring if the strangers he charged past stared at him. If they did, it was not his problem or their concern. Malcolm had his reasons for running, reasons that these people could never understand. Their lives were so far removed from his. "Not that this is life." He was in a living death and he wanted out.

As Malcolm continued his headlong flight, his hand strayed down to recheck he had not lost the knife he secreted in his pocket. It was the only protection he possessed. He could easily kill someone with a single slash—not that he wanted to kill. It was not who he had been as a person. But now, belatedly, he knew he had to protect himself any way he could until he could find a way out of the mess he was in. There was one person in particular he wanted to destroy. "God grant me the chance, and I will gladly go to hell for that sin."

Malcolm gasped in relief as he saw the familiar sight of the gates of the North Brisbane Cemetery before him. It was the only place he felt safe at the moment. He redoubled his speed at the thought of this sanctuary. He was sure if he stayed by his gravesite then the answers he sought would come to him. Though it had been a week already and he had faced nothing but frustration. Yet he still knew the answer was somewhere in the cemetery. He just had to find it. As Malcolm ran through the cemetery gates, his heart felt a little lighter. He had no life, but he had hope.

When he cannoned into the woman, Malcolm knew he should stop to help her. Her angry shout as she fell hard to her knees on the gravel path stung his ears. How could anyone understand the panic that gripped him? His quick glimpse and her sweet, womanly smell made him only too aware it had been a long time since he had tasted a woman.

"And I will never do so again." That angered him and it was yet another reason to hate the man who had put him in this position. "Fucking Ascanius, I will kill you for what you have done to me." As much as Malcolm knew anger was not productive, it was hard to be anything else when he thought of Ascanius. He took a quick look back at the woman. She seemed upset but okay. He wished he had time to stop but he needed to get to his grave and think. "What is the answer to this living hell I am in?"

*

Ainslie Croft could swear like a trooper when the need called for it. Being slammed down to her knees on the sharp gravel of the cemetery path called for swearing and much of it. The crazy thing was, she had known this was going to occur. She had seen proof of it in her dream and yet it didn't make it any easier when it happened. Ainslie cursed again. It was unladylike and harsh but damn it, her knees hurt like hell and she wanted to throttle whoever it was who hit her and ran off. She dragged herself to her feet and looked at her bloody knees. The wounds on her knees from the previous night had been

reopened.

“I should have worn jeans.” But no, not her. Ainslie had militantly chosen to wear shorts instead, working on the theory that she, not fate, was going to be in control of what happened to her at the cemetery. “Yep, that worked out really well for you, didn’t it?” Once again Lucretia’s often used words about her being so stubborn rang in her ears. “Yeah, well, I am who I am,” Ainslie muttered to herself as she limped over to a nearby seat. “Nothing like gravel rash to piss a girl off.” Maybe the man who knocked her down wasn’t her ghost. “Oh great, now I’m thinking of them as ‘mine.’” Possibly he was just a fitness freak out running in his quest for bodily perfection. Ainslie had always thought too much exercise was dangerous and this had proved she was right. She pulled a handkerchief out of the pocket of her shorts and dabbed at her knees, trying to wipe away whatever gravel and blood she could. The end result was red, raw, lacerated knees with blood oozing through the torn skin. “How very attractive—*not*.”

Ainslie sighed as she looked around her. The man who knocked her down was nowhere in sight. All she remembered of him was a blur of a bright red shirt, jet-black hair, and that he was tall and stocky of build. “And clearly ill-mannered and a pig,” Ainslie grumbled to herself. She wondered whether she should go on home. “Maybe the dream was just to warn me not to follow all my dreams.” She shook her head in thought. No, her dreams always meant something. But what? That was the annoying thing about them. She had to find the answers. “Like it’s some sort of dumb quest.” And for some reason, this dream felt different from the others, but she could not determine why. In her sleepy vision last night, Ainslie knew the man who knocked her down had been a ghost for she felt no life force within him. But the man who had knocked her down just now had felt solid and very much alive. “Bloody hell, what’s going on?”

Ainslie Croft was twenty-six years old and she had been having weird dreams since she was six. Lucretia believed the trauma of a childhood fire had brought on the latent ability of being able to glimpse snatches of the future while she slept. Ainslie wasn’t so sure. The only thing the fire had brought her was heartache and guilt. She could still hear the sirens and her mother’s crying in her head. The silence of her sister Jacinta’s blanket-covered body as she was put in the ambulance still deafened her. Ainslie could clearly remember the sorrow in the firefighters’ eyes as they shook their heads in despair at not being able to save a life.

“One little girl dead at eight years old and the other badly burned.” After all these years, Ainslie heard the long-ago echo of their words in her ears. “A six-year-old playing with matches ... that little girl is lucky to survive.” They all said it was lucky the house had not burned down completely. Lucky they had insurance.

“Lucky” was not the word Ainslie would have used. Yes, she had survived. But the guilt weighed heavily on her. The physical scars she carried were nothing compared to that feeling of being responsible for her sister’s death. Ainslie had started the fire that killed her sister and broke her mother’s heart. There was nothing lucky in that. Why hadn’t her so-called ability given her a warning dream that she would do something so reckless as a six-year-old? As abilities went, it sucked.

“Because you weren’t ready to accept it then,” Lucretia had told her, trying to make Ainslie understand.

“And ninety-nine percent of the time now, I don’t want to bloody accept it,” Ainslie murmured to herself as she sat in the peaceful grounds of the cemetery as the past, once

again, came rushing back to haunt her. After the fire, Ainslie and her mother had survived after a fashion. Her mother had never blamed her for the childish mistake of playing with matches. Ainslie had only been six. And yes, the six-year-old Ainslie should have known better. But tragic things happened that could not be changed. The physical scarring to Ainslie's upper body had required intensive treatment. But life had to go on despite the loss and despite the pain. It had been the two of them against the world. Ainslie's errant and forgettable father had long since disappeared from the picture and there were no other family members to fall back on.

Much later, her mother had gotten sick. At nineteen, Ainslie had seen that illness in one of the dreams. It was more that she knew something bad was going to happen which she could not stop. But she had refused to believe it even though in her heart she knew it was true. The nighttime visions had started to come to her as a child but, as a child would, she hid from them. Ainslie, at six, had believed they were punishment for being so bad in causing the fire. But now, at twenty-six, she knew better.

Life had a way of dumping stuff on you when you least expected it. Despite her beliefs to the contrary, the doctor had said the dreaded word—cancer—and their lives had changed dramatically. Doctors' appointments, special diets, and treatments consumed their lives. The need to find a cure to save her mother had put everything else on hold. But in the end the cancer had taken her mother and Ainslie had been left alone with memories.

Life went on and so did she. Her interest in anything other than plodding through her days was limited. Ainslie knew other people suffered the same or worse than she did and that life was not exciting all the time. So what was the point of whining?

Ainslie tried very hard to ignore the dreams that came to her, as nothing good ever came from them. Snatched glimpses of things that sometimes happened the next day—what was that all about? What was she supposed to do? Who were these people who called out to her as she slept?

Please help me.

Where am I?

I'm scared.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" Ainslie would answer in frustration. The pain in their eyes tore at her soul. She woke up most nights shaking with dread and despair, knowing she could not help people who needed it. What was that Shakespeare quote? *To sleep: perchance to dream*? Her dreams were not the romantic ones most people wished for. They were messy and complicated. How could she help the people who called to her when she was muddling through her own life without any great success? Another layer of guilt slammed down on her as she was clueless about giving aid to people who seemed so lost. Were they even real people? In the logical workings of her mind she doubted they were, yet in her heart Ainslie knew they were real and needed help.

But why her?

Then, four years ago, Lucretia Bell had found her. Lucretia told Ainslie that she could read the aura that surrounded a person's physical body. Ainslie had just nodded and smiled at the time and tried to move on from the crazy woman with the long, dark blue hair.

"I'm serious," Lucretia had told her. "I detect those with strong paranormal ability and encourage them to use it to become part of Spooky Girls."

“Okay...” Ainslie had mumbled. Everyone had to have a hobby of some kind even if it was crazy. Who was she to say what was normal, anyway? She had people visiting her dreams and pissing her off.

“Spooky Girls work to benefit the community.”

“Of course they do?” *Why do I attract the nut jobs?* ““Spooky Girls”? Seriously?” It sounded like a Goth pop group.

“It’s a deliberately silly name to allay people’s fears. If we told the general public what we really did they would freak out.” Lucretia had tossed a hank of thick blue hair over her shoulder. “You think I’m insane.”

“Correct, but don’t take it personally as I don’t think anyone is completely sane.”

“Spooky Girls is a group that is dedicated to helping other women develop their abilities,” Lucretia had explained patiently. Lucretia Bell was one of the most enduringly patient people Ainslie had ever met and she would soon learn she was not someone who took “no” for an answer.

“Oh.” That sounded like a nice, albeit strange thing. She looked at the woman with the intense, yet kind, look in her eyes. But for the hair and the whole aura thing she had a weirdly soothing, but slightly freaky, presence that called to Ainslie. Or was it that Ainslie was like an open party line and anyone could tap into her mind? “I read somewhere everyone has some psychic ability.” At the time she had been looking for answers for her own little problem of dream crashers. Ainslie had read enough to know it was not normal and her greatest wish was to be exactly that. But she had no intention of talking about her problem to the blue-haired stranger.

“I know you don’t want to talk about your gift, Ainslie.”

Whoa! Gift? I think not. It’s more like a pain in the ass. Ainslie could not remember the last time she had been able to sleep more than three hours. “Do you read minds?”

“Only if they are open to me.”

How did one close a mind?

“I can just see by your aura that you are closed off to everyone and everything, Ainslie. I would not worry about anyone but the strongest will being able to infiltrate the fortress you have built around yourself.” Lucretia had smiled at her in gentle understanding. “And you’re right about paranormal ability, Ainslie; everyone does have it but some are stronger than others. Everything in life revolves around free will. People make choices to utilize what talents they have. You can close yourself off from me if you need to, but that does not diminish your natural gift.”

Spooky girl stuff indeed. “Is this like a cult you’re trying to suck me into?” Ainslie had looked at her suspiciously. The woman did look like she might be someone inclined to dress in hippie clothes and bang a tambourine in the name of love and profit for her guru. She was surprised when Lucretia laughed at her words.

“Healthy skepticism is good but you still have to deal with what is God-given.”

“I don’t want this in my life.” Ainslie wished it was a gift she could take back to a store. She wouldn’t even ask for a refund or a store credit. She just wanted it gone.

“You know there is no choice.” Lucretia went on to explain how she had found her. “It was simple, really. I was contacted by someone from one of your dreams and they told me of your struggle.”

“Seriously?” Ainslie was gobsmacked. Someone from her dreams had chatted with this woman? How did that happen? “I don’t know how to help those people.” And clearly

they needed help if they went searching for anyone who would listen. Over the years there had been hundreds of them in her dreams. Some had crossed Ainslie's physical path in daylight and she had been unable to react in the way they needed her to. Ignoring them had been the easiest but most cowardly option to take. She had not been proud of it but she knew she was no help to anyone.

"You cannot help those in need unless you are ready to do so." Lucretia had explained how she and the Spooky Girls could help Ainslie.

It sounded like a nice, supportive network of possibly crazy gals helping each other. They all had strengths and weaknesses and they used their gifts to aid those in trouble. It was probably the exact thing Ainslie needed but she was a loner by nature and not one for joining anything. "I'm not a team player." The whole "No 'I' in teamwork" thing had been written about people like Ainslie.

"We're here to help you. Be as active or not as you want." Lucretia looked knowingly into Ainslie's eyes. "The physical scars you carry do not define you as a person. The aid you give to others does."

"You get all that from a glance at my aura?" Ainslie wasn't even sure if she had believed in aura readings before she met Lucretia. But she did now.

"That and so much more that you're not ready to deal with yet." She handed Ainslie her card and left it up to her to make contact.

And from that moment on Lucretia had helped Ainslie any time she rang her. Her dreams were only ever pieces of a larger puzzle but she made an effort to understand them and to try to help those who called out to her. Lucretia had suggested Ainslie go to the place in the dream and await whatever she had to with what little information she was given. It was not something a rational person would do, but clearly her life was not going to be normal, so why fight it? Sometimes it was something simple like helping a lost child, preventing an attack, or dealing with a ghost.

The first ghost Ainslie had ever met had been a shock. At a casual glance the woman would have looked like a normal human; yet at the same time, she was distinctively ethereal. The physical body appeared to be there but an eerie lack of substance seemed to make her image shimmer in a mirage-like way. Even more of a shock was the fact that the ghost, and others later, had debated why they should go to the light. Ainslie had been amazed.

"Are you for real?" she had asked the woman, who wore a bathrobe and hair rollers, in the car park behind the bowling alley. It was in the middle of a thunderstorm and the rain was pelting down. Why couldn't her dream take place inside in the warmth?

"I'm not going." The ghost had folded her arms and stood like an immovable object.

This did not happen in the movies. Ghosts just went to the light and looked all happy about it. The ghosts she got stamped their feet and refused to go. "Why did you ruin my sleep?"

"You were the only one who seemed able to hear me."

Unbelievable. "Okay, so listen up—you're dead and you can't stay here." People stared at Ainslie—who appeared to be talking to herself—as they walked past but she did not care. She was tired and wet and wanted to go home.

"Why not?"

"Because no one other than me can see you." Was this what her life was going to be? Debating the toss with a ghost?

"I don't want to go." The ghost's lower lip pouted sullenly.

Ainslie pushed the wet hair out of her eyes. "I get that, but there will be someone waiting on the other side for you."

"How do you know?"

Oh for God's sake. "Because I am sure someone you loved and who loved you has passed and is waiting for you." Though if she was this annoying dead, how annoying was she alive?

"My husband, but he was a pig."

"Your mother, sister, brother?"

"Nah, I was an orphan."

Great ... excellent. "A pet?" Ainslie was clutching at straws now. Her next try would be a teenage heartthrob from the woman's youth.

"My cat Tibby."

"Okay, wouldn't you like to see him again?"

"Her, and yes." The woman looked at Ainslie warily. "What if I don't like it on the other side?"

Like it was a travel package she could complain about. "Speak to someone over there—now go." Ninety percent of her ghosts were like that. How did that *Ghost Whisperer* person make it look so easy?

"Why do I have to get the pissed-off ghosts?" Ainslie had complained to Lucretia.

"Because they need you."

"Huh?"

"Because you don't sugarcoat reality and even ghosts need a kick in the ass to get them moving."

Ainslie stood and winced at the pain in her knees. After the fall she had thought about going home and ignoring the whole dream, but she knew Lucretia would never let her hear the end of it. She sighed deeply and looked around. Old headstones, faded flowers, manicured lawns, and bloodied knees. It was exactly like her dream.

"So where is frigging Speedy Gonzales?" Ainslie did not enjoy looking for trouble but she was also not averse to confronting those who pissed her off. Suddenly a blur of red caught her attention. She saw the man who knocked her down. *Right. Time to explain to him what an ill-mannered idiot he is.*

Ainslie Croft never backed away from anything or anyone in her life. And she sure as hell never missed an opportunity to tell some jerk what she thought of him. She was a great believer in getting something off her chest, then moving on. She marched purposefully toward him, her knees stinging with every step. But almost as if sensing her, the man gave her one quick look and dashed off. Ainslie had been told she was scary before but grown men usually did not run from her—at least not until she opened her mouth and spoke.

"Fine, whatever," Ainslie muttered to herself as she turned around and changed direction. As she did, she saw the man again. He stood watching her no more than a hundred feet away. How had he gotten behind her so quickly? He was in front one minute, dashing in the opposite direction, and then he was behind her. Ghosts played games like that. Still, he still didn't seem like ghosts she had come across before. There was a solidity to him that differed from the usual etherealness of a specter.

"Weird..." she muttered as he disappeared again.

“What is?” a voice asked from behind her.

Ainslie yelped in sudden fright and spun around quickly to confront, or fight, or just hit whoever it was behind her.

Chapter Two

“What the hell do you want?” To her surprise, she wasn’t yelling at the man in the red shirt. This man was dressed completely in black. She looked into his green eyes and knew then and there this was the other man from her dream. Although Ainslie had not seen him clearly, the wild beating of her heart and the sudden heat suffusing her body confirmed it as fact. Lucretia always told her to trust her first instinct. This man whose eyes searched hers so intently was going to change her life somehow. The question was, would she allow him to? Lucretia always talked about free will. It may not be Ainslie’s will to give him that chance.

“Do you usually yell at everyone?” he asked, subtly looking her up and down.

Ainslie was dressed casually in dark red shorts and a faded blue, long sleeve T-shirt with the words “Marrakech Hippie Trail Survivor” emblazoned on the front. The intensity of the man’s gaze made her feel hot and cold. *I don’t like it.* Ainslie placed her hands on her hips defensively. Anyone who actually knew anything about her and saw this gesture would have realized her temper was on the edge of a wild flare-up.

“Golly gosh, I’m so sorry I yelled at you.” Her voice was sweetly cynical. “But the thing is, I don’t like it when people sneak up on me.” She pushed back a stray chunk of her shoulder-length brown hair back behind her ear as she looked at the man. Too tall, too good-looking, and most likely conceited as hell, Ainslie summed up in her mind. And was that auburn hair real? His hair had that rich, burnished look that women paid to get out of a bottle. There was no way she would let anyone like this be her fate. This whole dream was screwed up. Ghosts who weren’t ghosts and a man who could in no way be her fate.

“I never sneak. I simply approached you when your attention was elsewhere.”

“Oh, you snuck,” Ainslie retorted, knowing it made no difference now. The thing that mattered was why this man was looking at her so intently. It was unnerving and weird, especially considering they were standing in a cemetery. Ainslie did not think for one second that he was attracted to her. Besides, she wasn’t interested in men. *Been there, done that. Never again.* Humiliation was not good for your soul. She took a step back from him as casually as she could.

Her casual retreat was not lost on the man. “What were you looking at?”

“Why?” To Ainslie it sounded like he knew what it was but he needed her to confirm it. *I’m not that easy.*

“Because I’m interested.”

“How so?” What could possibly be so important that it had this man wandering around a cemetery in the middle of the day? He was clearly looking for something or someone. There was nothing casual about him.

“I’m looking for a man you may have seen.” The man smiled at her questions as if amused.

“Who?”

He shook his head and chuckled at her words. “Typical female, always having to know what is happening before you give any information.” His gaze traveled down her legs. “What happened to your knees?”

“Too much praying.” Ainslie didn’t recall the man in her dream having such a nice smile. Despite this, there was something about him that warned her to be careful. Maybe it was the crooked nose that looked like it had been broken one too many times, or the faint puckered scar beside his left ear. Whatever it was, she sensed he was not a man to be messed with. But then, she was not a woman who could be pushed around either. “What is it you want?” *And stop looking at my pale, pudgy legs like that.* A sudden vision of his hands on her thighs flashed into her mind. *Whoa.* Ainslie shook her head to try to dissolve the image.

“Have you seen a man in a red shirt? And don’t ask me ‘why’ again,” he added before she could open her mouth.

“Is he a friend of yours?” There was no “why” in that question. There was much more information she needed before she told this man anything. What was the connection between him and the other man? Why was she caught up in it? Was the red-shirted man running from him? And if so, why? Would she be getting Red Shirt in trouble with Tall and Auburn by admitting she had seen him? Sure, he had knocked her down and she was angry, but what if he had cause to flee and had not meant to hurt her?

“Have you seen him or not?”

“Does he owe you money?” Ainslie didn’t think the man before her looked like a thug, but she was sure not all of them were ugly and had tattoos to advertise they were trouble.

“All interrogators should be women.” The man sighed lightly. “Do you always ask so many questions?”

“Why? Is it annoying?” Ainslie knew it was but she did not particularly care. She had a feeling this man got his own way a lot. Perversely, it pleased her to thwart him in a small way. It gave her a measure of control in the situation she had been put into and she rarely got that when it came to following up on her dreams.

The man started to speak but halted as he focused on something behind her.

“Come here to me.” He held a hand out to her.

“What?” Ainslie didn’t care for his tone. It sounded very much like an order and she generally did not follow those, especially from people she didn’t know.

“Don’t argue; just do as I say,” he told her, his gaze trained on what was behind her.

Bad choice of words. Ainslie looked at the large, capable hand stretched out toward her.

“No, I’m fine where I am.”

Just as the auburn-haired man went to snatch her to him, a large hand grabbed her from behind. “What the—” Ainslie yelped as she was pulled against a hard, warm, red T-shirted male form. The most dazzling light blue eyes she had ever seen looked into hers as she twisted her neck to see who held her. She gasped at the beauty and the great sorrow within. Although stunned momentarily, Ainslie regained her senses and fought to get out of the man’s firm hold. Despite her struggles, the man held her effortlessly against him with one arm. In the other hand he held a knife. *Holy crap.* This had not been part of the dream.

“I cannot allow myself to be imprisoned, Ramsay.” Ainslie’s captor directed his words at the other man. “There is too much I have to do. I have to find my freedom and being locked up will not help me do that.”

“You know I don’t have any other choice, Malcolm. Until we assess the threat, we

have to keep an eye on your whereabouts.” Ramsay’s words were low and strangely full of regret.

Whatever was happening between these two men Ainslie felt there was no need for her to be a part of it, and yet she had been called to be witness to it. Why? Because of her stupid dreams? And she seemed to have gotten this one totally incorrect. The warmth from the man’s body alone made her realize her vision was haywire as ghosts were not warm. So what was this all about? Was she supposed to die today? Was she the one who was supposed to become a ghost? *How did I get this so wrong?*

“Just let me go and I’ll walk away and forget whatever this whole thing is.” Ainslie again tried to pull away from the man who held her but it was useless. His grip was viselike. The man called Ramsay seemed oblivious to her words. He looked like someone who was beyond caring about so many things.

“I will kill her if you don’t let me go.”

Ramsay shook his head and smiled in a sympathetic way. “No, you won’t.”

Ainslie glared at the man in black. He was taking this whole hostage thing mighty calmly, but then, it wasn’t his life. “In case you’ve missed it, Tall and Auburn, he has a knife at my throat. I tend to think he’s genuine.” She pulled at the arm that gripped her waist. He was chasing this man for some reason so surely they could sort out the problem between them and free the innocent bystander. “Make a deal or something.”

“I don’t make deals.” Ramsay ignored the look of sheer venom Ainslie shot at him.

“I need my freedom to pursue him, Ramsay. I cannot let it end like this.” The words were simply and succinctly said in such a way that all three of them knew how important liberty was to the man who spoke them.

“You know, I don’t think that’s an unusual thing for the man to ask. Free him, free me.” Was anyone actually listening to Ainslie? What the hell was this between these two men? She wished her so-called psychic abilities worked when she was awake, instead of just in her sleep.

“You know we can’t allow that, Malcolm.” Ramsay’s hands were in fists at his sides. He struck Ainslie as a potentially dangerous man was who would act only when the time was right. “I know you want revenge but we have to make sure we don’t lose out on catching him through excess emotion.”

Revenge? Excess emotion? Have I walked into a soap opera?

“Does the life of this woman mean nothing to you?” Malcolm countered.

“No, the cost is too high to allow an individual to stand in our way,” Ramsay responded quietly, showing no emotion whatsoever.

Ainslie glared at him. *Cavalier bastard.* His eyes were completely blank and expressionless. They could have been discussing the weather and not the danger she had been thrust into. “Well, thank you very much!” she spat at the man called Ramsay. “Boy, oh boy, if I manage to live through whatever this weird-assed thing is, you are in big trouble, mister.” Ainslie couldn’t believe Ramsay, even though a complete stranger, could be so offhand about her life.

“You know you don’t want to kill her.”

The man called Malcolm nodded his head slightly. “No, but how do I get you and the others to take me seriously?”

“Come back with me and we’ll talk.”

Even as Ramsay said the words, Ainslie knew they could talk all they liked but they

would change nothing. She understood enough about human nature to know that the man who held her was beyond rationality. People with knives often were.

Malcolm sighed. "No, you'll talk to them and they'll do nothing for me. We have been down that road before. I know how they work. I'll be imprisoned until they can work out what to do with me."

"Not happy with the way this is going," Ainslie whined in a singsong voice at the man before her. Was she the only one who sensed doom?

"Be quiet." Ramsay directed a look at her that would have silenced the most difficult person. His gaze went back to Malcolm's. "Please, Malcolm, let her go. She is innocent."

Ainslie nodded her head vigorously at this statement. Her life wasn't exciting but it was hers, and she was interested to see how the rest of it would pan out.

"I'm sorry, Ramsay," Malcolm apologized softly.

"I know." Ramsay appeared to be sorry as well.

Why were they both sorry? *What did that mean?* Ainslie saw the knife flash above her and she was pissed off that her life was going to end so quickly and without any meaning at all. Her eyes locked with those of the green-eyed man. She wanted to remember his face forever. "When we meet up in hell, I am going to give you the ass kicking of your life for making me die like this." It felt good to say those words. It was the one piece of control Ainslie had left to her. As the knife found its mark, Ainslie flinched momentarily in surprise. However, instead of feeling the blade tear into her flesh, she felt the man behind her stagger and gasp. As he loosened his hold on her, Ainslie turned and looked at the knife protruding from the man's neck. There was no blood. The knife was embedded to the hilt and yet he showed no pain. She shrieked and jumped away from the man as he fell heavily to the ground.

"Holy crap!" Ainslie instinctively dropped to her knees to try to help him. Before she hit the ground he had disappeared. She swung her head up and looked goggle-eyed at the man standing above her. He didn't seem surprised, but more resigned and annoyed as he made a call on his cell phone.

"What is this? And who are you people?" She had dealt with some strange things in the past but this was coming close to topping them.

Ramsay finished his conversation and snapped his phone shut. "You're going to have to come with me."

Ainslie jumped up and backed off from the man. "Oh no, I'm not going anywhere with you."

"You have no choice," Ramsay informed her as he lifted his shirt and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. He dangled them before her. "I don't want to cuff you but I will."

"Cuff me? Who the hell are you?" The glimpse of tanned, taut stomach muscles momentarily threw Ainslie but she managed to remember what was going on and why she had every right to be upset. Just because the man had great abs did not mean he had the right to be pushy. A sudden vision of her tongue on his flesh made her shiver. *Oh boy. What the hell is going on?* Her dreams were never specifically about her.

Ramsay moved in close to her, his arm closing around her firmly. "This is not the place to explain. I need to take you with me so you can be debriefed."

"Debrief me? Are you nuts?" Ainslie yelped angrily as she tried to pull away, even though she knew it was completely hopeless with the grip he had on her. "I swear I saw nothing, I know nothing, and I care even less. I just to want to go home." *Maybe eat some*

chocolate, call Lucretia, and never sleep again for fear of dreaming.

Ramsay snapped one cuff around her wrist. "I can't let you."

"You are serious, aren't you?"

"Deadly."

Ainslie fought him getting hold of her other wrist. She did try to inflict some damage on him with some well-aimed kicks to his shin but they were like gnat bites on an elephant.

"I do not believe this! Is this reality TV? And if so I don't want to play anymore!"

Ramsay managed to grab her flailing wrist and he snapped the cuff around it securely. "This is very real, I assure you. And don't struggle against the cuffs or you'll hurt yourself."

Ainslie stamped her feet angrily. "Don't cuff me and I won't struggle." Even as she said the words, she knew one day she would welcome being cuffed and bound by him.

Get thee gone, visions.

Ramsay smiled at her foot stamping. "You know, I've never seen a grown woman do that. It's most intriguing."

"Maybe the women you know are boring."

"Could be." Ramsay pulled her close to him until their bodies were almost touching. "What's your name?"

"What's yours?" Ainslie had no intention of giving this man any more information than was completely necessary. The handcuffs indicated he was either a cop or a sexual deviant. If he was the former he could look up her identity easily enough. If he was the latter, she did not need his type visiting her home—that is, if she managed to survive whatever this was.

"My name is Ramsay Balfour and I perceive that you could be very annoying."

Ramsay crooked his head on an angle and looked at her assessingly.

"You have no idea how much, sunshine." Most people gave Ainslie a wide berth when she was annoyed, premenstrual, or just felt she was not the happiest person in the room. She did not suffer fools gladly, if at all.

"What are you doing wandering around a cemetery anyway?"

"Why are you here?" Ainslie sensed his patience was thinning. That suited her. The sooner he got sick of her the sooner she could go. It worked with most people. "Got no friends to play with?" Her gaze went to his mouth that was mere inches from hers. Infinitely kissable was the only way to describe it. She licked her lips in anticipation. *Of what? Bloody hell, I'm losing the plot. This is about ghosts, not kissing.* Hell, he probably had lots of female friends eager to kiss him.

Ramsay grinned at her. "Attitude, excellent, I love that in women."

"Yeah, but do they love you?" Patronizing sod. Ainslie hadn't kissed anyone in ages and she certainly didn't kiss smart-ass men. She made up her mind that there was no way she was going to be part of his fate. Nope, she would be pushing fate in the opposite direction from her with a mighty big shove.

"Depends on the woman."

The sexy look he gave her made her legs shake. Oh yeah, he was the type many women would love. *But I cannot and will not. Love is not for me.* "Anyway, answer my question. Why are you lurking around here?"

If he was annoyed by her suggestion of lurking, he didn't show it. "I had to secure

Malcolm. He shouldn't have been out in public."

"Are you trying to scare me?" Ainslie didn't scare easily and she refused to be intimidated by this man even if he had a very nice smile. She was sure she'd read about a smiling killer somewhere, or was that a killer smile? Whatever. He was trouble.

Ramsay leaned in close to her. His eyes never left hers. "Is it working?"

"Nope." He was way too close to her. She could see the fine laugh lines around his green eyes and smell his spicy aftershave. This was too intense and personal for her. Ainslie made a point of not doing close. She pulled her head back from him. "Who is—was—Malcolm?" More to the point, where was he? Was he a ghost or what? *And why am I mixed up in this?*

"Malcolm is someone who needs to be contained."

Ainslie arched an eyebrow at him skeptically. She knew he was lying. Why? "So you're some kind of jailer who imprisons people?" She decided to play along with his story for now. Besides, it wasn't like she had any choice, being bound as she was.

"Malcolm is not who he looks like."

"What? He looked awfully like a person to me."

"Real people don't just stab themselves then disappear, do they?" He looked at her pointedly.

"Well, no." Okay, he had her there. "What the hell is going on here?"

Ramsay turned as he heard two cars approach them. They were black, sleek, and anonymous. He grabbed her arm and started moving her toward them. "I work for Summit."

"And this is supposed to mean something to me?" He walked her swiftly over to where the cars had stopped. Her knees were on fire from the fall but there was no way she would show weakness. "Who are they or do you have to kill me if you tell me?"

Ramsay stopped momentarily and looked into her eyes. "They are here to see if they can track Malcolm while I deal with you."

"Deal with me?"

"Yes, and if you play nice and do all we ask of you, no one will hurt you. Now come with me."

Fear ran down her spine. "What is this about?" Hell, was that her voice that sounded so scared?

"You have stumbled into something you should never have seen. You come with me now or suffer the consequences later." Ainslie opened her mouth to reply. He placed two fingers on her lips. "And before you ask, you don't want to know the consequences."

Chapter Three

Ainslie looked around her in wonder as she was escorted in handcuffs into the oversized warehouse. It was a large industrial building on the northern outskirts of Brisbane and, although it appeared like a warehouse on the outside, it looked like some sort of weird science experiment on the inside. The latest in technology lined the walls of the building and people wearing the white star Summit logo bustled back and forth, barely noticing that she was wearing restraints. Now, if she worked here, this was something Ainslie would have instantly wondered about. But then, she was a person who liked to question things. However, she also realized this did not seem like your average run-of-the-mill workplace, and she suspected if anyone was the odd one out in this Summit place, it was her. Whatever she had unwittingly stumbled into, it was not normal.

"Where are you taking me? Though it's not like I have a choice in the matter." She bumped into Ramsay to avoid an oncoming person. The press of his body against hers made her gulp. Ainslie, despite the fact that she was determined to hate him, felt a sudden flash of heat as his arm reached around her shoulders to steady her.

"You okay?" Ramsay asked, an amused smile on his face.

"No, I'm bloody not! I am dragged against my will into this geek factory of a place and I'm getting attitude from you. I am not okay." Did he normally treat people like this? What was this place? This organization had a weird, spylike feel to it. She had the feeling that many secrets were held between these walls.

"What's your name?" Ramsay did not appear to be the slightest bit perturbed by her attitude. "Scared to tell me, darlin'?"

Smart-ass, arrogant sod. Hate him now to avoid loving him later. Ainslie stiffened at the thought. *I can't love anyone. It's impossible. And him? No way.* Visions or not, this man was not for her.

"I am not now, nor will I ever be, your darlin'." Ainslie snorted at his words. "Nor am I scared of you, James Bond or whoever you are." She had been in plenty of weird situations before and she would handle this and him as she had them.

"Your name?" he asked as he led her to an office.

What would it hurt if he knew her name? Besides, she did not want him thinking she was intimidated by him and whatever this place was.

"Ainslie Croft."

"Pretty and unusual name—just like its owner." Ramsay indicated a chair for her to take as he shut the office door.

Ainslie felt uneasy as she watched him close the door before his gaze focused on her. She attempted to keep what control she could of the situation by sitting as gracefully as possible on the chair before his desk. She wanted him to feel as if she were a queen and he was there to do her bidding.

"Oh please, save the chat-up lines for some mealy-mouthed woman. I'm not about to get all giddy over your praise." Though she was grateful to give her sore knees a rest. Ainslie held up her hands toward him. "As lovely as these bracelets are, you know I am no physical threat to you, so please take them off now."

Ramsay Balfour looked down into the militant, yet tired-looking hazel eyes that glared into his and he knew of all the women who could have witnessed what had happened, this was the worst one imaginable. There was no way she was going to accept nicely what they told her and walk away quietly. There was a look of intelligence in her eyes that suggested she was not the sort who would believe just any story she was told. And as for not being a threat, she was so wrong about that. She threatened every good intention he had of not getting involved with another woman after the last debacle with Claire. He'd been attracted to Ainslie Croft the minute he'd seen her. But then, she was nothing like his ex. From the little he judged about her, he knew this was no shrinking violet who would use guilt to get her own way. He uncuffed her hands and watched as she rubbed at her wrists. Ramsay felt a pang of guilt for causing her pain.

"Are your wrists sore, Ainslie?" Ramsay liked her name. It seemed to suit her. Old-fashioned, strong, and reliable.

"I'll get by." She looked around the bland office. "What is this place? KAOS headquarters? Are Max and the Chief going to be here soon?"

Ramsay could tell by the look in her eyes that she was more frightened than angry, even though she was sitting here like attitude personified, waiting for whatever fate held for her. He had to give her credit for that. Ainslie Croft was handling this better than a lot of women would have. Normally, Ramsay liked feisty women. But this was not a normal situation. He had to pay more attention to assessing, given what she had seen, what threat she posed to Summit, as opposed to wondering if there was anyone in her life or not. That was not what Summit would consider productive or protocol. Ramsay moved around to his desk and sat before his computer. He started tapping her name into the Summit database.

"Summit is a covert intelligence agency set up by the Australian scientific community to investigate and analyze threats." Now, if she told others what he'd said, then Summit would deny everything and declare her mad, for it was just a simple computer manufacturer. At least, that's what Summit told the public. He awaited her response.

"Uh-huh," Ainslie murmured as if she couldn't care less.

"No reaction?" He liked the cool, pissed-off look she shot at him. *Very nice.*

"Did you need one to make you feel important? Should I gasp a bit or maybe burst into tears for being held at—what did you call it? A 'covert intelligence agency'? Ooh, how special is that?" Her voice was completely disinterested.

"Very special," Ramsay responded drolly. He was pleased when he saw her name jump up on computer screen. "Ainslie Croft, twenty-six, single, employed in the Promptel call centre, paying off a mortgage, no living family," Ramsay read out loud to the woman before him. She seemed neither impressed nor offended he had information on her. He had to admit he admired her. Whatever she was thinking or feeling, she was determined to keep it to herself. When he had escorted her inside the Summit building, her eyes had widened and her mouth had dropped open momentarily but she had recovered quickly. He had not been as quick to recover his wits, though. When her full breasts had squashed up against his arm, Ramsay had felt his cock jerk up with interest. Luckily Ainslie had been so pointedly disinterested in looking at him that she was unaware of the effect she had on him.

"Wow, do you know my star sign and shoe size as well?" Ainslie's voice was calm

yet flippant as if trying to recoup from the sudden blow to her composure.

Ramsay smiled at her attitude, knowing it covered her true feelings. He looked back on the screen and accessed her birth date. “Scorpio.” He looked down at her feet. He smiled at the bright blue toenail polish that he could see on the toes that were visible in the open-toed flat sandals. She was not only feisty but quirky. “And I’d say size eight.”

“Wrong. Size nine.” Ainslie wound her feet back around the legs of her wooden chair.

His boss had listened carefully to Ramsay’s opinion of Ainslie Croft when he had made a quick phone call to him before they’d driven back from the cemetery. He had made the phone at the minute Ainslie was safe in the car and he could talk in privacy. This was not a woman they could fob off easily. She had seen too much and was too smart to believe whatever lie they told her. So they were going to try her with the truth. Again, if she chose to tell others, they would discredit her. However, as a quick judge of character, Ramsay had an idea that Ainslie kept a lot to herself and would not speak about what she’d heard, regardless of whether she thought it the truth or not.

A strange notation caught Ramsay’s eye. He clicked on it and expanded it to glean more information. So this was why they had data on Ainslie Croft. Not every inhabitant in Brisbane was on the database. Only the unusual, the useful, and the suspicious were carefully collated in their files.

“Cat got your tongue, James Bond?”

He smiled at her words. “I see you are a part of the Spooky Girls.”

“So?” Ainslie stared him in the eyes as if daring him to make something out of it.

Ramsay dared a lot. It was part of his job. “So, what’s your particular ability?” He was aware that the women who were a part of this group were strong individuals who worked together to help others. Although they were no threat to Summit, their actions were checked from time to time. On more than one occasion Summit had sought their help on the more unusual cases they came across. And yes, admittedly some of the members were a little wild and crazy but sometimes that worked in Summit’s favor.

“I can do the Vulcan hand salute and roll my tongue at the same time.” Ainslie held up her hand and separated her fingers in *Star Trek* cult salute and poked out her tongue at him.

“Nice tongue.” It was pink and inviting. *And I want it on my skin.* Ramsay smiled as she blushed and shut her mouth quickly. Interesting; not many women blushed nowadays.

*

Ainslie was annoyed she was blushing like a schoolgirl. It was not the slightest bit cool. But then it was hard to be calm and in control when you had no idea what you suddenly found yourself mixed up in. That he could type her name into a computer and bring up all sorts of details on her was alarming. This was all very freaky and scary but there was no way she was going to let on how she felt. Ainslie liked to think she led a boring, quiet life but for the dreaming of crap events that screwed up her quiet life from time to time—like now.

“Did you notice Malcolm’s eyes, Ainslie?”

The way he said her name threw Ainslie momentarily. It sounded almost like a caress. She shook herself mentally. *Get a grip. The man cuffed you, for heaven’s sake.* That did not make for the start of a happy relationship.

“Yes, they were blue and yours are green.” A very nice sparkling green, if she cared

to notice those things. Which she didn't—Ainslie was just observant. *Yeah, right.*

Ramsay did not seem surprised she knew the color of his eyes or Malcolm's. "Women always notice much more than a man ever does."

"Flattery? Oh please, what's your point?" If he thought he could charm her, he had another think coming. She had made herself immune to the advances of men.

"What did you think when you looked into his eyes?"

"No more than when I looked into yours." Ainslie pushed a strand of hair from her face. Those green eyes were unnerving as they searched hers for clues.

"And what did my eyes tell you?"

"That you're pushy, arrogant, and most likely a pain in the ass." She smiled overly sweetly at him.

Ramsay threw back his head and laughed at her words as if not the slightest bit offended by them. "Excellent response—and Malcolm's eyes?"

Of all the discussions Ainslie thought she would have with this man after what had just happened, it wasn't about the color of someone's eyes. "Well, they were dazzling." One quick glimpse had told her that. "Though, I didn't really notice too much other than..." Ainslie stopped when she realized she had been about to say—*other than for a ghost, he seemed too warm and alive*. It was bad enough he knew about the Spooky Girls Club. She wasn't about to share any of her real thoughts with him. "I, er, was paying more attention to you than him." The pleased smile he gave her made her blow out a sigh in frustration. "Don't get all excited. You pissed me off; naturally I was paying more attention to you."

"Even though he had a knife at your throat you preferred to look at me instead?"

"What is your point about his eyes?" Of course she would look at Ramsay Balfour. He was the sort of man who instantly grabbed a woman's attention. Immunity did not mean she was incapable of appreciating male beauty when she saw it. He was hot. He made her hot. *This is very bad. Get a grip, girl.*

"Malcolm is not alive."

Ainslie knew she had to tread very carefully as this was getting into territory she shared with no one but Lucretia. The less freaky stuff people knew about her the better. "He seemed alive to me." And that was what had thrown her. She had gone to the cemetery today expecting a ghost and she'd found a knife-wielding man and Ramsay Balfour. What exactly did he know and how was it going to affect her? "Are you saying he's a ghost?" she asked idly.

"Did you think he looked like a ghost?" Ramsay parried back as he got up from the desk and moved toward Ainslie.

"How would I know what a ghost looks like?" *Great, we're game playing.*

Ramsay sat down on the edge of his desk, directly before her. "You know we can go around and around all day with this but it would be easier if we both spoke the truth."

"Okay, you first." Ainslie wanted to see if his truth suited her. She had experienced a few run-ins with people she had told the truth to and they had viewed her as mad and now kept a distance from her. Suffice to say, apart from Lucretia, she had few friends and there was no one else Ainslie trusted.

Ramsay looked at her for a moment as if judging what her acceptance level was. "Malcolm is what they call the undead."

Okay, that was not what Ainslie had expected but it did explain why she thought he

had been a ghost in her dream.

“He was a Summit agent investigating a necromancer. Do you know what that is, Ainslie?”

“I believe it’s someone who manipulates or summons the dead for their own purposes.” Of course she knew. The Spooky Girls sent out e-mail newsletters that Ainslie read with a mixture of amazement, amusement, and skepticism. The Spooky members were actively pursuing every weirdo known to man, it seemed. No one was too freaky for those gals. From what she’d read, some necromancers were just playing at necromancy while others were the real, evil deal. The necromancy of medieval times was about finding out knowledge and gaining wisdom through the deceased. Now, it was mixed up with satanic worship, deviant sites on the Internet, and the need for power.

Ramsay nodded as if pleased yet not surprised at her awareness. “Yes, that’s essentially correct. A necromancer makes use of the fine line between life and death. Most of them now seem to be caught up in satanic rituals. Malcolm was killed a week ago by an unknown person. I saw his body at the morgue.” Ramsay’s mouth tightened sadly at the thought. “His corpse was taken from his grave the night after his funeral. It is our belief that the man—the necromancer—who killed him took it.”

This was really not something Ainslie wanted to get into but she felt she was being driven that way by fate, and fate was not something you could halt. “So this necromancer guy brought your friend Malcolm back to life?” Okay, this unfortunately was now falling into the realm of what she normally dealt with.

“Yes.” Ramsay looked satisfied she understood without him having to explain it more deeply.

“How is that possible?” The ability to make the dead rise again was huge. There was indeed power in that on both a personal and a global level.

“It is believed there are gifted individuals who are psychically able to connect with the deceased.” He looked at her with interest.

Oh crap. Ainslie didn’t want to go down the path he seemed to want to lead her down. “And you think this necromancer is one of them?”

“Possibly,” Ramsay responded thoughtfully. “It is my understanding that most people have some extrasensory or psychic ability. We investigate it all the time at Summit. It’s something the Australian scientific community is interested in.”

Ainslie had the distinct feeling she was being put under the microscope.

“Some people are genuine in their talents and shy away from exposing them.” Ramsay’s eyes were intent on hers. “Others manipulate what little talent they have by calling on dark forces.”

Okay then. This was beginning to sound like the last Spooky Club meeting she went to. It had almost been like a weird-assed intervention to get Ainslie to embrace fully her powers or, as the club members called it, her gift. Then as now, she knew it was time for a change of direction. “So, your friend Malcolm was killed because he knew too much?” *And what am I supposed to do about it?* This was not the simple task of pointing a ghost to the light and giving him a push.

“We believe maybe as a warning to Summit to back off.” Frustrated, he ran a hand through his short, wavy auburn hair. “From what I know, Malcolm was close to crushing the necromancer.”

Ainslie felt a pang of sympathy for him. He had lost a friend and colleague and he

had to work out how to stop the killer and deal with what he was feeling. She really wanted to despise the man who had cuffed her and dragged her into wherever she was—but she couldn't. Had Ainslie been in Ramsay's situation, she would have done the same thing. But still, she knew she had to keep her wits about her, as this was no normal man. That she even noticed him as a man at all was a worry. Ainslie wasn't looking for any romantic flirtations.

"So we have necromancers in Brisbane." A normal person would be surprised, but Ainslie wasn't and she knew he was aware she wasn't. Many strange things lurked in big cities that the public was unaware of.

"The Spooky Girls are active in Brisbane," Ramsay pointed out. "Their members are just as powerful as the necromancer."

"But they're not killers." They were anything but. Sometimes Ainslie thought she had wandered into a hippie commune with all the peace, love and, she was sure, highly illegal smoke that was flowing in the main meeting room in Edward Street in the city.

"No," Ramsay conceded.

"So why ask me about his blue eyes?" There had to be a reason behind that. He struck her as a man who did not say things just for effect.

"It seems necromancers bring people back with heightened abilities—brighter eyes, and they are faster and smarter."

"He was awfully quick on his feet for someone supposedly, er, undead." Even as she said the words she realized it wasn't just someone who was quick. If it were, she wouldn't be sitting here being interrogated by James Bond. "When he knocked me to my knees, I—"

"How are your knees, by the way?" Ramsay interrupted as he looked down at the lacerations. "We need to get those looked at."

Ainslie didn't want to be discussing her knees or anything else of a personal nature with Ramsay Balfour. *Why am I seeing my ankles locked on his back and me crying against his shoulder in relief? And the heat—so hot as his cock plunges inside and—*She blew out a deep breath to regain control. "Are you telling me we have a plague of the undead running around the city?" Ainslie felt the sweat on her upper brow and knew this man would be her downfall.

"We're not sure how many. Possibly three that we are aware of, and that includes Malcolm."

Ainslie was gobsmacked. She expected he would say no, just the one. "Get out of here!"

"No, I work here." Ramsay smiled at her stunned expression. "Good to know you aren't as jaded as you make out."

"You have no idea." She never imagined any of this could come out of her dream.

"How broad-minded are you, Ainslie?"

"That's not a real subtle way to open a sentence, Ramsay."

"It's not meant to be subtle. It's meant to make you understand that what I am telling you is the truth. I need you to accept what I say."

"Why?" Was her opinion or understanding that important to this man and whatever this Summit organization was?

"Because we depend on your silence."

"I still don't know what this shadowy Summit mob does and why my silence is so

important to you. I am assuming if I ran around telling everyone what I knew you would just say I was a liar.”

Ramsay nodded. “Correct.”

Ainslie pinched her arm to make sure she was awake and this was no dream. But then, her dreams were never this vivid or involved. They provided only mere glimpses. This was full Technicolor with a script handed to her to act out.

“You are awake, Ainslie.” Ramsay looked at her thoughtfully.

Ainslie sat back in her chair and assessed the man before her. The way he looked at her made her want to believe what he was saying but it seemed too incredible. The undead? Necromancers? Sure, she dealt with ghosts, but that was the strangest her life got. This was the stuff of 1950s schlock Hollywood science fiction movies.

“You think you can trust me?” But then, who would she tell anyway? Lucretia and the Spooky Girls were the only ones who would believe it. No one else would.

“I know I can trust you, Ainslie. I have no question about your integrity.”

“Really?” Ainslie was honestly surprised. She never took anyone at face value, let alone trust them, but Ramsay Balfour clearly did.

“Shall I continue?”

“Oh hell yes, I can hardly wait to hear the next bit. When do the aliens land? And do they always say ‘Take me to your leader’? Or is that just Hollywood hearsay?” She had to treat the situation lightly as the reality of what was happening was scary and she wasn’t sure what part, if any, she had in all this.

Ramsay smiled as if he knew carefully hidden fear when he heard it. “Malcolm is dead, or should be. We need to locate the necromancer to somehow free him and I’m thinking you may be able to help us, Ainslie.”

“How?” *And why am I even asking? I want no part of this or him.* Yet Ainslie knew she had very little choice. He had been the man in her dream. She may not have seen his face, but she sensed him. Ramsay was the man. Fate had pushed her in his direction for a reason. *Fucking fate.*

“I don’t think you were just out for a stroll.” He braced his hand on either side of the desk he sat on and looked at her pointedly. “Who are you, Ainslie Croft?”

“You have it on your computer.” She tried to remain calm and aloof even though every fiber of her being wanted to run. This was more than just star signs and what your hobbies were.

“There’s more to you than that.”

“How do you know?” Ainslie looked into his astute green eyes and knew that he was not just any man who could be fobbed off.

Ramsay slid from the table and dropped down on one knee so his face was level with hers, giving her no option but to look at him.

“Because I can sense you’re hiding behind a facade.”

“Everyone does.” She pushed back into her seat, away from him.

“Not everyone,” Ramsay responded quietly. “So tell me.”

Tell him? A complete stranger? What would it be like to be able just to trust someone like that? To tell him every thought and worry you had? Ainslie could not imagine it.

“It’s complicated and I don’t know you.” Ainslie was surprised when he reached up and clasped her hand in his. The strong warmth of it seeped into her bones like a balm.

He is the one. The thought chilled her to the core. *I cannot open myself to him. I'm not strong enough.*

"Ramsay Balfour, thirty-four, single, and no kids. I own my home and car and I'm planning to go to North Africa in a couple of months on a holiday."

"By yourself?" *Why do I care?*

"Do you want to come with me?"

Yes.

"No." She tried to pull her hand from his but his hold was gentle yet firm. Ainslie looked into his eyes and saw a measure of understanding she hadn't seen in anyone but Lucretia.

"I have all my own teeth." Ramsay grinned a cheesy smile at her. "I can cook and clean and I have been told I am a good listener." He looked down at their entwined hands and smiled as if bemused. "Your turn now. What drew you to the cemetery?"

Ainslie blew out a sigh and contemplated her options. She could tell him the truth and he would think she was nuts. That wasn't something that would surprise her. Or she could make up a story. *Oh, what the hell.* This was fate's call. "I—um, have dreams." She sat back and waited for his reaction.

Ramsay smiled whimsically. "Ainslie Croft—dreamer."

Chapter Four

“It’s more than that.” She struggled to pull her hand free from his as if she felt foolish for what she had just said. “You make it sound like I dream of a knight on a white horse.”

“Do you?” Ramsay rather hoped she did because the more time he spent with Ainslie, the more the different layers of the woman were exposed to him, and he liked what he saw. He was reluctant to let go of her hand because the simple contact energized him. His whole body felt alive with need.

“No, knights in shining armor don’t exist.”

The lady sounded most definite on that score and that saddened Ramsay. What had happened in her life to make her stop believing in simple pleasures and the possibility of romantic fantasies?

“Tell me about the dreams. I want to know.” Ramsay felt her stiffen at his words. “I promise I won’t make fun of you.” He felt her hand relax slightly in his. This was definitely one lady he wanted to know more about.

“I dream of dead people,” Ainslie answered matter-of-factly and then awaited his response.

Her words did not shock Ramsay. He had been working at Summit for too long for the unusual to surprise him. He then understood the tiredness he saw in her eyes. What would it be like to dream unpleasant things? “Do you always see ghosts?”

“No.” Ainslie sighed as if a sudden buildup of pressure had been released. She shook her head in response. “Sometimes it’s lost children or people in trouble. I push fate into reacting when I go to where I saw them in my dream and wait for them to appear.”

“‘Push fate’?” That was not a concept Ramsay had heard before.

“It’s just a name I use to, I guess, help me deal with what I find myself caught up in. It’s like I’m the catalyst for whatever is supposed to happen. Sometimes I can help, sometimes I can’t.” She bit her lip as if the failures were too hard to think about.

“That’s a heavy burden, Ainslie.” Did she do this all alone or did she have help?

“I get by.”

“Do you? But at what cost?” Ramsay allowed her to pull her hand from his and he felt the loss keenly as their flesh parted. “What happens if you don’t follow your dream?”

“I don’t want to know.”

“Why?” Ramsay was beginning to understand the stiffness in the woman before him. Ainslie was a coiled-up bundle of nerves. Her tough words were for her own protection. Ramsay pushed back the stray strands of hair that fell across her face. He felt her quiver at his touch and he knew he was not the only one who felt the attraction between them.

“I don’t want to be responsible for something horrible happening.”

The shudder that ran through her body alarmed him. How could one person be responsible for the fate of others? “Ainslie—”

“So why did Malcolm stab himself?” Ainslie changed the subject quickly.

That was okay with Ramsay. For the moment they would move on. Although it was not his job to get involved like this, he dearly wanted to know what caused the deep pain he saw reflected in her eyes.

"I believe he wants to die but the hold the necromancer has on him is powerful."

"But he *is* dead."

"Yes." It was nice to have someone who did not look at him as if he was talking in Swahili. Ainslie accepted his words for what they were.

"Okay, so he's going to keep running and trying to kill himself in the hope that he may really die?" Ainslie looked dismayed at the thought.

"Maybe." Ramsay rose and moved away to give her the space he sensed she needed.

"And there's no resting in peace for Malcolm because of this necromancer guy. That's not right."

"Yes, he was a good man who deserved better." Ramsay looked at Ainslie thoughtfully. He suspected she was not a woman who shied away from a battle and he guessed she had seen a lot of things she did not want to talk about. "So you understand why I think you can help us. I think you are somehow, albeit against your will, linked to Malcolm and myself." He saw her stiffen with shock as if he had hit a bull's-eye. Had she dreamed of him as well? If so, what had she seen? The thought intrigued him.

"I understand that I don't want to be a part of any of this."

At that moment Ramsay knew, by the tone of her voice, that Ainslie had resigned herself to being caught up in this. Ramsay was aware he should have reported her ability as soon as he became aware of it. Summit liked to know these things. However, Ramsay did not always play by the rules and he did not want a bunch of geeks in white coats coming in to probe and pester Ainslie. He planned to do this his way. He wanted to get to know her. "But you are a part of this."

"Not willingly," Ainslie told him, momentarily caught but not held unless she chose to be. "And nor is Malcolm from what I saw. He looked awfully sad to me."

"Yes, but I believe you will help him." No matter how annoyed she may have been at being dragged into Summit, Ainslie struck him as someone who always did the right thing.

"How do you know?"

"Because if you didn't care you would ignore the dreams." Ramsay knew he was right by the way her pupils contracted at his words. "I'm sure others choose not to help."

"I used to ignore them when I was younger. They confused me. But I can't ignore them now." Ainslie sighed resignedly as she rubbed her eyes as if it was all too tiring.

"I know you can't."

Ainslie looked at him suspiciously. "How do you know?"

"From my short acquaintance with you I can tell that despite the sarcasm, you care deeply about the people you see in your dreams. I also think you're lonely and you need to be needed."

"Trust me, I do not." She pushed back from him again. "You make me sound like some pathetic stray looking for attention."

"Who do you care for, Ainslie? Who cares for you?"

"That's none of your business." She stood up, forcing Ramsay to step back.

"No, maybe not, but I want you to help me and I will use whatever means I have at my disposal to make that happen." Yeah, this woman was an interesting package. Definitely one worth pursuing further and not just in the course of his job. He had the overwhelming urge to pull her into his arms and hold her because she needed it. Ramsay wanted to give her the security she seemed to be denying herself. *I also just want to feel*

those lush curves and the heat as our bodies meet. I want to touch and taste. I want her. The thought shook him. No woman had ever gotten to Ramsay this quickly. There was something about the sweet, cranky, yet intensely sexy woman that made him hard, hot, and hungry. It wasn't the slightest bit professional but Ramsay didn't care. If Ainslie wanted him, then he was hers in a heartbeat.

*

Ainslie's eyes narrowed suspiciously on Ramsay and she went back to hating him. It was like he was playing good cop, bad cop with her by making her feel all sorry for him, then switching to patronizing her. For one second she actually believed he cared about her. Was she so starved for attention that any man who looked at her kindly would do? What a dummy she was. "What is this 'whatever means I have at my disposal' crap? Do you think you can manipulate me somehow? With what?" Her hands went down to her hips as she faced off with him. "I have nothing and no one. There is no way you can threaten me to make me help you."

"No man in your life?" Ramsay looked at her with interest.

"That's none of your business." Ainslie wasn't about to discuss with this man the reasons behind her celibate life.

"How come?"

Ainslie was tired of being questioned. "Piss off," she snapped as she tried to move past him, but he was like a man mountain blocking her path. "Move!" Then she made a mistake. Ainslie touched Ramsay. She placed her hands on his chest to push him away, but the pushing thing didn't happen. Instead her hands flattened on the hard wall of muscle and her fingers stroked the cotton-covered flesh. "Uh-oh." *Stop it. This is bad. This is wrong. But oh, it feels so good.*

"Darlin'—" Ramsay's eyes locked with hers and his hands moved down to her hips.

Oh boy. The way he said "Darlin'" made Ainslie hot and cold all over. "I, er, um—" Logic dictated that she remove her hands from his body and step back. Sheer, mad need made her stay where she was. *I don't know this man, but I want him.* It was crazy. When Ramsay's body pressed forward into hers, Ainslie closed her eyes and sighed. "I have to go." Yet she didn't move.

"Do you, darlin'?" Ramsay's hands slid down to her ass, pulling her closer. "You smell delicious."

Ainslie gulped loudly. Their lips were a bare inch apart. She could feel his hot breath on her face and all she wanted to do was kiss him. That and the hard cock that was pushing against the thin fabric of her top made her mind chant over and over *I want it. I want him.* None of it was rational or reasonable but then, lust never was. *And I haven't been in lust for a long time.* "We can't do this."

"Why not?" Ramsay's mouth hovered teasingly over hers.

Ainslie closed her eyes and tried to gather her scattered wits. "I'm not here for this." *Or am I? Who am I supposed to be helping here? Malcolm? Ramsay? Myself? What do you want from me, fate?*

"I'm so glad you're here."

Before she could respond, his mouth was on hers and Ainslie knew that she was in deep trouble. With some people, a kiss was simple and sweet. With Ramsay, it was a wild rush of sensation as lips met and tongues touched. It was hot and a seductive prelude to all the things she knew this man could be and do for her. *I want that. I want him.*

Ramsay's hands seemed to be everywhere, and yet Ainslie wanted him to touch her more, to grab, to hold, to take. She ground her pelvis against him as she gave in to the pure, foreign pleasure of being overwhelmed with sensation. Ainslie gasped as Ramsay slowly sucked on her bottom lip, then let it slide from his mouth slowly. "I—" Ainslie licked her lips, reveling in the taste of him.

"Yes?" He moved his lips down her chin, kissing and licking as he went.

If he hadn't been holding her as firmly as he was, Ainslie knew she would have slithered to the floor. "I don't know you and you don't know me." There was no way she could let this go any further. It wasn't just the fact they were strangers. Only one man had seen her scars, and he had been repulsed. How would Ramsay react if he saw them? Sex was one thing, humiliation another.

"Get to know me." Ramsay caressed her back.

"Don't do that." Soon he would feel the scar tissue and she didn't want pity from him. Ainslie reached around and pulled his hands to the front.

"Why not?" His fingers moved down to toy with the zipper of her shorts. "I want you and I have a very strong feeling you want me."

"Yes, but—" The cock pushing against her stomach made her falter. The "but" part of her sentence was supposed to be the start of a rational argument against sex, yet that hard cock made Ainslie lose her train of thought.

"But what? It's too fast? Maybe. But I know what I want and it's you." The zipper was down and her shorts soon followed. "Do you want me?"

"Yes." There was no other answer.

"Excellent." Ramsay kissed her hard and passionately.

Ainslie pulled back from him. "But make it quick." Maybe it was wrong to use this man for sex. *But damn it, I want to feel something—anything.* Ainslie knew Ramsay was the man to make that happen. "I don't want anyone to see us." Of course that wasn't the real reason, although she would be mortified if anyone did. She just didn't want to be completely naked. Half-naked worked better for her. Ainslie didn't want him to see her old, lumpy burn marks on her back. If they indulged in quick, wild sex then the less likelihood she would need to drop all her clothes.

"Whatever you want." Ramsay fell to his knees, his hands dragging her knickers down. When his tongue touched her clit, Ainslie screamed and clutched at his shoulder. "Don't worry, the walls are soundproof."

"Thank God," she choked out as her fingers ran through the auburn hair of the man at her feet. His mouth was gentle yet insistent as, using his tongue, he traced a line from her clit to her anus and back again, only stopping at random to suck on the tender pink folds before sliding on. It was the most amazing feeling. Her heart was beating a crazy tattoo and her knees were wobbling. Ainslie wanted to fall down in his arms and screw him on the floor, but also remain standing and enjoy every second of what he was doing to her. "Oh, Ramsay."

He looked up at her, his fingers toying with her clit. "Do you want me as much as I want you?"

"Y-y-es-s." Ainslie pulled at his shoulders. She was wet with need and that need was for his cock.

Ramsay rose up before her as he moved his hands down to tug at her top.

Ainslie covered them with her own. "I want you now." As much as she would have

loved the tug of his mouth on her nipples, she didn't want her upper body exposed. There would be too many questions and she just wanted this man without drama or pity.

"Next time we'll go slow." Ramsay backed her up against the wall.

Next time? The idea both scared and thrilled her. In her heart, she knew there would be no next time. Ainslie could only give so much of herself. "Condom." Was that her voice so husky and full of need? She watched as Ramsay moved to his desk and pulled out his wallet.

"Yes ma'am." Condom in one hand, he unzipped his trousers with the other.

"Oh my..." Ainslie was lost for words. His cock with thick and smooth and exactly what she craved.

Ramsay was amused by her reaction. "You like?"

"Oh yes." The thought that all his turgid flesh was just for her made her whole body burn. For once, Ainslie was going to let go and throw caution to the wind. She walked into his arms as he came toward her, his covered cock grazing her exposed skin. Before she knew it, Ramsay was lifting her up into his arms and once more she felt the wall against her back. She'd had sex once. It had been boring and by the numbers. This was raw and passionate and real. *I will remember this forever.*

"Ready?"

"From the moment I saw you." The words were out of her mouth before she could think. It didn't matter. They were the truth. Ainslie's eyes locked with Ramsay's as he centered his cock at the wet core of her body and pushed inside. The sudden hot pressure made Ainslie close her eyes.

"You're so tight," he growled in a mixture of pleasure and surprise as he kept moving until he was fully inside.

She'd only ever had one other lover. Ainslie had wanted to give him everything for a chance to feel something. In return, that man had wounded her pride and made her shut down her feelings with his cruel words. But this was different. Only part of her was exposed to Ramsay. She could hide what she liked in order to take what she needed from him. Maybe that wasn't an honest response, but it was the only one she could give. Ainslie whimpered softly as Ramsay started thrusting in and out of her body. The slow, burning friction made her clutch at his shoulders. It was the most natural thing in the world for her to meet his mouth in a deep, hungry kiss. Every thrust of his cock shook Ainslie and sent a thrill of excitement down her spine. She held on, taking all that Ramsay offered. His mouth on hers swallowed her sighs and moans.

"Oh darlin'." Ramsay's thrusts became harder and faster, his hands under her ass holding her closer and tighter.

If someone had walked in at that moment, Ainslie could not have cared less. Only one thing mattered to her. Ramsay. Suddenly she jerked in shock. "Oh—"

"What is it?" Ramsay's eyes were full of concern.

How did she explain she had never had an orgasm before? At twenty-six, that was embarrassing. "Nothing."

"Have you ever had an orgasm?" She felt the heat rush to her face. Ainslie dropped her head against his shoulder. "Look at me."

She did. There was amusement and passion and great deal of gentle caring in his eyes. "No, I haven't."

"Some men are such fools. Hold on, darlin'."

Ainslie squealed with surprise as Ramsay turned them around and carried her over to the desk. Paper and pens went flying as he used one hand to hold her and the other to clear the desk surface. When he laid her down, Ramsay pulled out from inside her and looked down at her.

“What?”

“You’re beautiful.”

It took all the strength Ainslie had not to burst into tears. That he has said something so sweet made her actually want to believe it. “Please come back inside me. I need you.”

“My pleasure, darlin’.” Ramsay lifted her legs and placed an ankle on each shoulder.

Ainslie was completely exposed and vulnerable but for the first time in a long while, that didn’t matter. “Please.” When his cock plunged once more inside, she closed her eyes and savored the heat.

“Open your eyes. I want to see when you come.” Ramsay ramped up his pace as he reached down to caress her cotton-covered breasts, then he leaned in and kissed her.

Ainslie wasn’t sure whether it was the way his cock pumped in and out of her body, or the sweet, lingering kisses that started the fire racing through her veins. Whatever it was, the most amazing feeling started to spread up her spine. She panted and clutched at Ramsay. She needed to hold on to him and feel every move he made. Ainslie felt a part of him and didn’t want to break the connection. She knew it was her voice that begged for more and she was not ashamed of it. It was the first time in her life she had felt so alive. She came crying against his shoulder, her body shaking with passion and relief. “Oh my God.” That was better than she ever imagined it could be.

“Hang on to me,” Ramsay whispered in her ear before sliding his mouth down her neck, placing wet, sucking kisses on her skin.

To let go would have been impossible. She was bonded to Ramsay physically and emotionally. Every movement of his body corresponded with hers; as she shook and shuddered, he kept on moving. When he growled out low and his mouth found hers, Ainslie felt the wild shiver of his release within her.

They lay still for a while as their bodies calmed down after their coming together. It was peaceful and perfect. Ainslie stroked Ramsay’s shoulders. *I will never forget this moment.*

“That was damn good.” He kissed her hard.

“Yes,” Ainslie replied breathlessly.

“Next time we go somewhere quiet and we both are naked.”

Ainslie stiffened at that. Reality was a bitch. “There won’t be a next time. This was just a crazy one-off.” Ramsay was still inside her body. As good as that felt, it wasn’t something she could rely upon. *This is not my life.* There were so many reasons it couldn’t be.

“Was it?”

“Yes, now please get up.”

Ramsay moved as requested. “Can you deny what you felt?” He held a hand out to Ainslie to help her up.

She ignored it. It was time to get back to who she was. “Quite easily.” She rolled off the desk and looked for her shorts.

“You really blow hot and cold in a heartbeat, don’t you?” Ramsay picked up her shorts and handed them to her.

"I have to go." *Before I do something stupid like burst into tears and tell you every silly thing about my life. That would be truly embarrassing.* No one wants to be cried on.

"Ainslie, we have to talk about this."

"No, no we don't." She thrust her feet into her shorts and yanked them up. Ainslie had no idea where her underwear was. She looked at his exposed cock. It was semi-erect and the thought of teasing it back once more to prominence flashed through her mind. Ainslie shook her head. "This was a mistake." Need was not something she did well. "And no, I don't want to discuss it." She could see in his eyes that Ramsay did. However, all Ainslie wanted to do was leave.

"And what you want is the only thing that counts?" Ramsay pulled off the spent condom and threw it in the wastepaper bin.

How did you explain that to the cleaners? "Yes. Now step aside."

"Ainslie."

"Let me pass."

Ramsay sighed as he zipped up his trousers then held his hand out, indicating she was free to go.

Ainslie marched to the door. The sooner she left this lunatic asylum the better she would feel. She grabbed the doorknob and pulled. It was locked.

Ramsay stood and moved toward the door. "Are you embarrassed about what just happened between us?"

Ainslie continued to struggle with the locked door as if it would magically open by her persistence. "No, I'm not. I just want to leave." She kicked the door hard. *Holy crap.* Ainslie staggered backward as the pain shot through her big toe. Trying to karate kick a door in sandals was a dumb move. She bit her lip to control the urge to cry. It had been a shit of a day. The sex was great, but the rest just sucked.

"You okay?" Ramsay reached out to her in concern.

"Fine," Ainslie ground out, trying to gather herself together despite her pain and embarrassment.

"I was joking, you know."

Ainslie turned to face him. "What?" How was sex a joke? This was like her first time all over again. Ainslie wanted to shrink down into the floorboards and disappear.

Ramsay reached for her arm. "I'm not talking about making love with you. That could never be a mistake."

Ainslie looked into his eyes. She saw a gentleness she wasn't accustomed to seeing in anyone's eyes. She wasn't sure what to say.

"I would never manipulate you or anyone else. I just wanted to see how hot you were under that cool front of yours, and now I know."

What he said was a form of manipulation whether he realized it or not. He had used her to see what he could get from her. While she had enjoyed it, Ainslie felt like a fool. Hot sex was one thing, but the aftermath was always the telling time. "You know nothing, you arrogant sod." That was it for Ainslie. She had sore knees, been handcuffed, and now was being laughed at by this man. A girl could only take so much. She launched herself at her tormentor. Ramsay caught her against himself once more as she pummeled whatever part of him she could reach. She wanted to make him pay, to feel real bad, and to remember that she was not a woman to be trifled with. The problem was, he was too big, too powerful, and she knew throwing herself back into his arms was a bad move as

she could feel the strong, male warmth of him wreaking havoc on her starved hormones. "You are a pig!" His arms were wrapped around her waist, trapping her tight against him, making her blows all but useless on him.

"Darlin', I am more than happy to hold you because I think you need it." Ramsay smiled gently at her.

Her blows seemed to have no effect on him. She was furious yet confused. "Let me go." It would have been so natural to collapse against him and accept the warmth and protection his body offered. But where would that get her?

Ramsay looked down and grinned. "Come on, where's your sense of humor?" He released his hold on her.

Ainslie pushed against his chest, although his arms were already at his sides. "Get away from me!" She could tell by the pleased look in his eyes that he was only too aware that she had felt something at their close contact.

"You were the one who jumped me," Ramsay pointed out.

Ainslie turned back to the door and struggled again with the lock. She again kicked at the door in frustration. She wanted out *now*. Ramsay leaned around her and easily turned the handle on the unlocked door, making her feel even more foolish and angry at him than before. She pulled the door open, letting it slam back into the wall. Ainslie charged outside looking wildly around her, wondering which way to escape. She ignored the curious stares of the workers as she stormed past them. *Let them wonder.*

Ramsay followed in the wake of her haphazard progress, helpfully pointing out directions as Ainslie searched for an exit. "I'll drive you home."

"I would rather eat dirt than go with you!" Ainslie shouted. She wanted nothing to remind her of this nightmare day. She sighed with relief as she came to a green exit sign.

Ramsay, still behind her, leaned over her and slid a white card into her top breast pocket. "Here's my card."

Ainslie bolted forward. He was way too close to her. "Get away from me!"

Ramsay pushed open the door to the outside. "I know its pointless offering to drive you anywhere, but I will call you a taxi."

She looked around, trying to get her bearings. *I have to get out. I need to get out.*

"What we discussed has to remain a secret." Ramsay looked at her meaningfully.

"And what happens between you and I is no one's business but our own, Ainslie."

"We have no business together."

Ramsay shrugged. "So you say."

Lordy, he was handsome. "So I know." *Don't give in to that smile.*

"Ainslie—"

Whatever Ramsay was about to say, it was not something she wanted to hear.

"Good-bye." Ainslie stormed away from him before he could say another word. The world outside Summit still looked the same. *But I have changed.* Once more Ainslie knew fate had changed her life forever.

Chapter Five

The next day, Ainslie was still smarting over her scraped knees and her encounter with Ramsay Balfour. While the sex had been amazing and her body still ached pleasantly from it, it had been neither real nor true. Sex had been to prove his point. “Whatever,” Ainslie said, sighing, as she tried to push the thought of the man from her mind.

And then there was that fantastic story he had told her about a mad necromancer and the man called Malcolm. Yet she hadn’t yet come up with a plausible explanation for the man who died then disappeared, let alone the whole Summit experience. Maybe because she knew there wasn’t one and that was as annoying as he was—he had spoken the truth. This was beyond her normal experience. Her dreams were never usually this complicated.

“Why the hell am I being dragged into this?” Ainslie had not slept the previous night for fear of dreaming more of the same. She didn’t want to see any more than she had to. As a result, Ainslie was so tired she could barely form the sentences required to ring her workplace and tell them she would not be in.

The thing that had annoyed her most was she had allowed herself to lose control with Ramsay. *What a smart-ass he is. What an idiot I am.* Ainslie liked to be in control at all times, and it was as though he knew that and wanted to test her. In but a moment he had broken through a barrier and gotten to her. Maybe ten years from now she would look back on the whole thing and laugh. Maybe. She sighed as she dumped a bunch of celery into her shopping trolley. The mundane act of grocery shopping was the only thing Ainslie could handle at that moment. She was tired and beyond thinking.

Ainslie pushed her trolley around the fresh produce section of the supermarket. She tried to concentrate on her shopping list, but her mind was elsewhere. Until she met Ramsay, she’d never realized how totally boring her life was. That disconcerting realization kept playing round and round in her head. It had been such a long time since something had actually come into her life and shaken it up and made her think outside the circle she had relegated herself into. Oh sure, she had ghosts and other freaky things thrust upon her, but all that she was used to. The circle she lived in was safe and dull and did not allow anything to cross its strictly defined borders. It was unbreakable and sheltered and she did not want that to change. That circle hid heartbreak and tragedy and all those things she did not want to revisit. She did not want Ramsay Balfour trying to fit into it. He was the proverbial square peg.

Until now, she had plodded through her days without thought or interest, but then, Ainslie did not want to feel or want or need. Her earlier life had had more than enough emotional upheaval, and she did not want any more. Of course, she would never forget the past. Memories could be placed in neat boxes and stored away, but she would never forget her mother and sister and the guilt that still hung over her like a dark, brooding cloud. And of course the scars never faded. They were a constant reminder to her.

She had no man in her life. That was Ainslie’s choice. She didn’t want to have to explain or show the scars on her back to anyone, let alone another lover. She had tried once and that experience had scarred her even deeper than her burns. They were not pretty, but then, life lessons rarely were.

Her thoughts strayed back to the way Ramsay had looked at her, touched her. There was amusement and concern and something else that she chose not to consider. Attraction was not something she sought from a man. Although she knew her scars were but physical blemishes, they still held her back from forming attachments to anyone. She told herself she didn't care what anyone thought, but deep down, she did. Like everyone, Ainslie liked the concept of fitting in, but she knew she never would. In essence, she was a coward and so far that had worked out okay for her.

"Get carrots, Ainslie," she murmured to herself as she tried to drag her thoughts back to the mundane task she was doing. Self-pity got you nowhere. As Ainslie stretched over the display to pick up a three-pound bag of carrots, she gasped and dropped it back in place.

It wasn't that the bag was heavy; it was that she saw something she did not think she would ever see again. "Oh my God..." Dark hair, blue eyes, and a red shirt came into her line of vision. Ainslie grabbed the bag of carrots then dragged her trolley backward into a nearby aisle and watched the man. There had to be a logical, rational reason this man, who was supposedly dead, was wandering around a north Brisbane supermarket. And, when she came up with it, Ainslie was sure she would take great comfort from it. But for now, she was just plain confused. He seemed to be wandering around the supermarket looking for something and she had a horrible feeling it was her. Now her dream people were seeking her out instead of her coming to them. "Yeah, but this man isn't just anyone."

As Ainslie continued to watch the man, she debated what to do. Did she ignore the whole thing and write it off to coincidence? But then, she was not a great believer in coincidences. Everything happened for a reason and she knew from past experience she had to help him, but she really didn't know how. Necromancers and secret organizations? It was like stuff out of Hollywood. She sighed deeply. What to do? Or more importantly, she knew what she had to do, but did she want to do it? Ainslie sighed heavily again. She knew Lucretia would say, "You have no choice and you know it."

Against her better judgment, Ainslie scrabbled through her handbag for her cell phone and found the card Ramsay had given her. Yes, she had kept the card. Why, she wasn't sure, or if she was, she did not want to acknowledge the reason yet.

Ramsay Balfour answered on the second ring. He sounded pleased to hear her voice. "I knew you couldn't forget me, Ainslie."

"Just shut up and listen, James Bond." Ainslie wondered again if this was the right thing to do. Did she want to invite this insanity back into her life? And what about Ramsay? What was she to do with him? Because she was sure he was not someone who just quietly disappeared out of your life once the drama was over. They had enjoyed a great moment of sex. It was not something that could be easily forgotten, regardless how much she wanted to. Ramsay had a look about him that suggested he could be annoyingly persistent. "Malcolm is standing in the fresh produce section of my local supermarket." It was all very spy story, whispering into a cell phone while standing in the gourmet food aisle trying to look nonchalant.

"Where are you?" Ramsay was instantly alert.

"I'm at the supermarket on the corner of Rode and Gympie Roads at Chermside."

"Don't approach him." Ramsay's voice was hurried as if he was running for the door as he spoke.

Ainslie snapped the cell phone off. She looked at Malcolm and wondered how long it would take for the cavalry to arrive. As if on cue, Malcolm turned his head and looked straight at her.

"Okay then, let's get this over and done with." Lucretia always said face your fears. She had told Ainslie that last night when she had updated her friend on what had happened. Lucretia had sounded amused and had pointed out that she had to follow this through to the end, regardless of what she thought about Ramsay Balfour.

"Anyway, what's wrong with him?"

"He's pushy," Ainslie had responded over the phone. There was no way she was going to mention she'd had sex with a virtual stranger.

Lucretia had laughed at her words. "You need to be pushed. Is he good-looking?"

Hot and tasty as sin and I want to sin some more. *"I suppose." Okay, he was, but she wanted more in a man than just good looks and great usage of cock—not that she wanted a man at all, she hastily corrected herself. Ainslie barely knew Ramsay and he was screwing up her mind already.*

"I can tell by your voice he is attractive. Excellent."

"Nothing is excellent about this, Lucretia. I want to live in peace."

"You will one day."

Ainslie took a deep breath and pushed her trolley over to Malcolm. The sooner she ended whatever this was, the better.

"I need your help." There was no preamble or pleasantries. Malcolm was a man with one thing on his mind.

"Of course you do." Ainslie sighed tiredly. No one in her dreams ever wanted anything else. "I mean, how?" There was no point fighting whatever this was.

"You can help me end this." There was deep pain in Malcolm's eyes as he looked at her. "I need to destroy Ascanius."

"Who?" And am I going to want to hear about this guy?

"He's a necromancer."

Okay, Balfour had not been lying. "So, you were killed by him?" Malcolm nodded at her in a matter-of-fact way. "How come you look so alive?"

"Because it seems to amuse Ascanius to keep his victims in a never-ending state of being half-dead."

The frustration in his voice was not lost on Ainslie. She could not imagine what he was going through—living yet not living.

"And that's why you stabbed yourself yesterday."

Malcolm nodded as if pleased she understood him. "Yes, I want to die. I want to end this state I find myself in. I can never be alive again, but I will not accept this living death. I just get so frustrated. I try to destroy myself, but I can't because I'm not alive and I'm not dead." The frustration in his voice was only too evident. "I want to kill Ascanius first and that's why I have been following you, Ainslie."

"Great." This undead man knew her name and probably where she lived. "So what is it you think I can do? I work in a call centre. I have no superpowers." If she had, she would have sorted out her own life, kicked some politicians' asses, and ended the reign of emaciated, blonde bimbos who encouraged eating disorders, among other things.

"I feel that you have a great power within you. I believe I was somehow drawn to be in your dream. I'm just not sure how or why, but I feel I have to grab every opportunity

presented to me in order to end this living hell.”

His words were so desperate and sad that Ainslie wanted to help him but she had no idea how she could. Necromancers were beyond her limited abilities. “I just have freaky dreams that push me into things that I honestly don’t want to get involved in. I have no power.”

“Your dreams are more than that, but I suspect you choose not to acknowledge it.”

The undead sounded exactly like Lucretia Bell. What powers did they think they saw that she did not feel? And how many normal people stood and chatted about dreams and powers with a man who was dead yet not dead in a suburban supermarket? *This is your life, Ainslie Croft.* “So this Ascanius guy—what’s his story?”

Malcolm looked around slowly as if assessing who was listening. “He creates followers by killing them and tying them to him through death. Most people fear death so they latch onto him as they don’t want to leave all that is familiar to them.”

Eww. “So this is like an undead army?” Ainslie contemplated his explanation. Malcolm was right. A lot of people were scared of dying, of the unknown. They would cling to whatever small portion of life they had instead of facing their fears. It was cunning and extremely sick that this Ascanius used this fact. She blew out a sigh. *Why me?* “So how do we stop him?” There was no point thinking she was going to be left out of this, because the minute she had the dream she knew that was not possible.

“I’m not sure.” He spread his hands out, questioning, as he looked at her.

“Uh-huh, and you think I can do it?” Ainslie may have the same surname as the legendary Lara Croft, but that was where the similarities stopped.

“Yes, with Ramsay’s help,” Malcolm said, as if it was the obvious solution.

“I work alone.” Not that she had a clue how she was going to handle this situation. However she had no plans, despite the dream, of hooking up with James Bond again. There was something about him that scared her more than dealing with the undead. He was a challenge she did not want to rise up and meet. Added to that, there was the sex thing. Being with him would make her start thinking about hot cock and possibilities.

“I need you both.” Malcolm’s amazing blue eyes were earnest on hers. “Ramsay is inclined to act without thinking, for he fears nothing. Ascanius is to be feared.”

Ainslie thought again about the Summit agent. Ramsay Balfour struck her as a risk taker. “I rang him, you know, when I saw you.” She wished she hadn’t now, but she had not been thinking clearly and he was the first person she’d thought of. That in itself was odd, because usually the first person to spring to mind was Lucretia.

“I expected you would call him.” Malcolm smiled as if pleased. “Talk to Ramsay and tell him that Ascanius has been watching him and he is a target. The necromancer also knows about you.” His smile was gentle on Ainslie. “I see the unease in your eyes. You must know that anyone with power attracts him.”

Well, bugger. “Where is this Ascanius person?” The sooner she got this over and done with, the better. How did one go about shooing away a necromancer, anyway?

“I have to go.” Malcolm touched her arm gently. “I’ll come by your home later.”

“You know where I live?” That was a freaky thought.

“There is a connection between us that is strong, Ainslie.”

Yes, I feel that too. The warmth from his hand was strange considering he was technically dead. “Can you knock or something when you arrive?” She wasn’t a great fan of people appearing out of nowhere. Only two ghosts had ever come to her home and

each had nearly given her a heart attack.

Malcolm smiled. "Yes, Ainslie." He disappeared.

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Ramsay smiled when he saw her jump as he came up behind her. "You smell nice." The scent was flowery yet mysterious like the woman herself. He took in the snug jeans and pale pink, long-sleeved T-shirt that encased her curvaceous form. She was all hips, ass, and boobs, and he liked that. Although Ainslie was not a classic beauty, there was something about her that made a man look, appreciate, and wonder. Ramsay had been doing quite a bit of that since he'd met her. His cock tightened every time he thought about that moment in the office with her. Many women had captured his attention physically before, but none made him lie awake and speculate about them. Who was she? One minute she was hot, sexy, and giving, and the next she ran cranky, then cold, then seemed impossibly sweet. Who was the real Ainslie Croft? That's what he planned to find out. If she had not called him today, he had intended seeing her just to remind himself that he had not been mistaken in what he'd seen and felt.

"Okay, where's Malcolm?" He scanned the area around him. As much as Ramsay wanted to talk to the woman before him, he had to get to the business at hand.

Ainslie stepped away from him and collided with the grocery shelves behind her, sending packets of pasta falling to the floor. "Do you have no regard for personal space?"

That was cute considering how "personal" they had already been. "Oh, I haven't begun to get personal with you yet, darlin'." Ramsay wanted to threaten the hell out of her composure and make everything between them tight, hot, and very close. However, he also sensed this was not a woman to be rushed. He would take his time and utilize the chances that were presented to him. "You look tired." The dark circles under her eyes indicated she had not been sleeping. That concerned him. Her dreams must be bad if she chose to avoid sleep. Ramsay didn't like the idea that she was denying herself relaxation because she was scared. That was wrong and he was going to help her whether she liked it or not.

"I'm fine, and don't call me darlin'," Ainslie snapped as she tried to pull herself together. "And he's gone."

"Gone?" Ramsay looked at her in disbelief. "You knew I wanted to talk to him."

"Hey, my world doesn't revolve around what you want, James Bond. Besides, I spoke to him and—"

"You what?" Ramsay yelled at her. Yes, technically Malcolm was one of the good guys, but he was also sort of dead and he had a necromancer on his tail. Chatting with him was not a safe thing to do.

"Don't yell at me!" Ainslie yelled back at him.

"I cannot believe how reckless you are!" Ramsay ran an agitated hand through his hair. Of all the women to get involved with, he had to land one like Ainslie Croft. Stubborn, secretive, and perverse.

"Yeah, tell me about it. I had sex with you, after all."

"And you loved it."

"Whatever," she tossed back flippantly.

What a piece of work. "You were supposed to wait for me." He looked down into her militant hazel eyes and knew he had his work cut out for him.

"Do not think for one second you can tell me what to do. My world does not revolve

around following Balfour law.” Ainslie glared at him as she squared up to the challenge. “Besides, Malcolm was perfectly gentle with me.”

“He is, or was, a great man who has an evil asshole after him.” Was this woman contrary or was she just not listening to what he was saying? Ramsay wanted to take hold of her and shake her and then he wanted to kiss the stuffing out of this frustrating, beautiful woman. “You could get yourself hurt or even killed if we don’t handle this right.”

“Oh duh, like I don’t know that,” Ainslie snapped back angrily, seemingly indifferent as to whether anyone heard them. She leaned forward and poked him in the chest with her finger. “And there is no ‘we.’ You dragged me into this, James Bond. There is just you and me—separate and apart.”

“There is very much a ‘we,’ and you know it. You felt it. Your dreams brought you to where you are now, Ainslie—to me.” The finger that poked him once more in the chest did not hurt him; in fact, it turned him on. It was full of pissy female attitude and he loved women like that. Ramsay wanted to pull her into his arms and make her forget whatever she was angry about. He suspected he was not the prime target of her angst. Ramsay had a feeling that there were many things this lady hid under the surface. No woman had ever made him so angry, excited, and protective in one hit. But then, she wasn’t just any woman.

“Maybe all this is your fault as you were in my dream too.” She stopped suddenly as if she had given more information than she’d intended to.

Ramsay caught and held her hand against his chest. “Was I? How?” If her dreams were prophetic, then how was he supposed to fit into her life? For fit in he would. Every second he spent with Ainslie made Ramsay more certain of that.

“It’s not important.” She tried to pull her hand out from under his. “I rang you today merely as a courtesy. And I don’t have to report everything that happens in my life to you.”

“Yes, you do, especially when it has anything to do with Malcolm.” He lifted his hand so she could free hers. He watched as Ainslie nervously entwined her hands.

“Well, he didn’t hurt me, so get a grip.”

“He could have.” Ramsay looked at her in a mixture of exasperation and amusement. His grandmother had once warned him that he would not always have women falling at his feet, and the one who didn’t would be the only woman he would ever want. “I love Malcolm as a brother but even I can’t be sure what’s going on in his mind now. What did Malcolm say?” Ramsay listened as Ainslie filled him in. He raked his hand through his hair in frustration. The thing that concerned him most was why this Ascanius was interested in Ainslie. How did he even know about her? “See? You need my help.” He caught her arm and pulled her toward him.

“Oh, bugger off,” Ainslie swore as he pushed her gently back against the shelf.

“Ainslie Croft, you are the most annoying woman.” He focused on the soft pink lips before him. He longed for another taste to see if she was as hot as her temper or as sweet as when she shyly blushed. *Got to love a paradox.*

“Ramsay,” she murmured as her eyes grew wide in realization of what was about to happen. “Don’t do it.”

“What?” Ramsay asked as he watched her lick her lips. He cupped her face in one hand.

“This is a supermarket and—”

“An excellent place for kissing.”

“I don’t want you to kiss me,” she murmured and then gulped as if she had not meant to say that.

“Oh, but I must.” His mouth descended on hers. Ramsay felt an enormous rush of power charge through his body as he pulled Ainslie into his arms and gave himself up to the kiss.

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“Oh God,” Ainslie muttered in quiet desperation as his lips touched hers, and she knew this kiss would be her undoing. After that moment in his office, she had made a sacred vow to herself she would never touch him again. So much for vows, Ainslie thought as she found herself slumping against the man who cradled her close. The need to push him away competed with the urge to give him whatever he wanted. *What I want.* “Don’t...” She panted as his lips left hers momentarily. *Don’t what? Don’t do it? Don’t stop?*

“No?” Ramsay queried softly as he placed hungry, sucking kisses on her lips.

“Um ... I don’t know,” she murmured as his mouth returned to hers and once more she was swept up into something she knew she was helpless to resist. The warmth of his body and the feel of his arms were so nice to one who had been starved for affection for such a long time. It seemed natural to lift her hands up to his shoulders and to curl her fingers into the hair at his nape. The man was delicious. When the kiss ended, Ainslie kept her eyes closed for a moment, savoring the final taste on her lips. She opened her eyes when she heard Ramsay chuckle lightly. She looked at him in amazement. Ramsay looked pleased with himself, and she wasn’t sure whether to be annoyed at his reaction or happy she had provoked it. Ainslie licked her lips and tried to gather her scattered wits together. “You shouldn’t have done that.” Ainslie pushed back from him unsteadily. “I didn’t want you to.” *Liar, liar, pants on fire.*

“You could have stopped me with a simple ‘no,’ darlin’.” Ramsay’s hands were still locked around her waist. “You wanted me and I wanted and still want you.” He dropped one hand down and captured one of hers. He pressed it against his denim-covered cock. “It’s all for you. All you have to do is ask.”

Ainslie was instantly wet between her legs as she felt the bulge in his jeans. The thought of that hard flesh once more inside her made her tremble with need. There were so many reasons she needed to remove her hand from his cock. They were in a supermarket. Anyone could see. Yet that didn’t dissuade her. Tomorrow she would wonder at her actions and curse herself for acting so, but now, Ainslie wanted to exert some of her own power on the man who was rapidly taking over her life. She slid the zipper of his jeans down.

“Darlin’?” Ramsay looked intrigued and slightly alarmed.

Good. This was all about control and she wanted him to lose some. “I just want to see how cool you are under fire, James Bond.” She eased his cock out through the zip. Ainslie had to give him credit. Ramsay was standing still and quiet and watching her every move. Anyone wanting pasta was going to be in for a surprise. Ainslie wrapped her hand around the broad width of his cock and slowly moved her fingers back and forward in a firm, milking motion. She had never done this to any man and it excited her. She smiled when Ramsay groaned in appreciation.

“How much would it take for you to lose control?” Using the fingers on her other hand, Ainslie toyed with the head of his cock. A small amount of precum oozed out.

“Sex in a supermarket? Is that what you want, darlin’?”

“Are you game?” Ainslie trailed a finger down the long vein that bulged out from the side of the shaft. *What would that taste like?*

“Are you? Or are you trying to teach me a lesson? Don’t get me wrong, I love it, but I’m not that easy to tame.

He seemed awfully passive to Ainslie as she ran her hand up and down the long, stiff length. A sudden vision of her mouth on his cock jumped into her mind. She shivered in anticipation. That was exactly what Ainslie craved. “Neither am I.”

“We’re perfect together then.” Ramsay’s hands came to rest on her shoulders. “And if you keep doing that it’s going to get messy.”

Ainslie could feel the tension in his touch. *Excellent*. “Can’t handle mess, James Bond?”

Ramsay leaned down and whispered in her ear. “The next time we’re alone together, I’m going to make you beg me to take you.”

His hot breath on the side of her face made Ainslie shiver. “Ain’t gonna happen.”

“Oh, but it will. I’m going to fuck the stuffing out of you, darlin’.”

Ainslie jumped at the thought. Hot, pumping cock. *I want that. I need that*. She found she could make no intelligible reply. If she said “yes please,” he would be dragging her out of the supermarket to fuck her as promised. If she said “no,” then it wouldn’t be believable because she had her hand on his cock.

“Let me go.”

“I’m not the one holding on.” Ramsay pointed out the obvious to her.

Ainslie removed both hands from his cock. “I just wanted to teach you a lesson. You’re not the only one who can control a situation.” Ainslie said it as much for her benefit as his. “I need to sort out my part in whatever this thing is with Malcolm and this Ascanius guy and move on alone.” Ainslie wanted Ramsay out of her life. She was sure of it. He was the sort of man who wanted more and she wasn’t in a position to give it.

“Who are you trying to convince—me or yourself?” He looked at her shrewdly as he pushed his cock back inside his jeans and zipped up.

That had to be painful. Ainslie pushed back from him, feeling slightly guilty. She had to get a grip on herself, not on him. Playing with cock was like playing with fire. *Been there. Done that. Have the scars to prove it*. Ramsay was someone who could also mark her for life. *If I let him, and I can’t*. Ainslie had to focus on the fact that she was not someone who could ever have a man in her life. She had gotten over the need for one—or at least she thought she had. She wasn’t about to relive painful memories or take a chance because of one knee-wobbling moment.

“I know what I’m doing.” *Sort of*.

“Do you?” Ramsay dropped his hands from her waist and viewed her doubtfully.

“This Ascanius is dangerous.”

“So are you.” Ainslie moved sideways from him.

“But in a way that you’ll enjoy.”

Oh hell yes, but it’s not to be. “Arrogant men are a complete turnoff to me.”

“Liar,” Ramsay responded pleasantly. “How many men’s cocks have you toyed with?”

Ainslie knew she was turning bright red but she refused to be fazed. “I am so not interested in you.” She winced when she heard her words. They were so high school-like and they indicated a huge dose of denial.

“And yet you have to make a point of telling me that.” Ramsay smiled at her softly. “You cannot change what is meant to be, darlin’.”

“Whatever.” It was a lousy response but the best she could come up with. Ainslie wasn’t about to let Ramsay get under her skin. No doubt he was interested in her as a challenge. However, Ainslie didn’t need any more challenges in her life.

Ramsay looked down into her trolley. “That’s a lot of carrots,” Ramsay commented pleasantly to her. “Needing something hard and long?” He grinned as she rolled her eyes at him.

“You’re so funny—not.”

“So, how about having dinner with me tonight?”

Ainslie looked up at him and snorted in derision. “I’d rather dance on broken glass.” Because she knew having dinner with him would be a hell of a lot more dangerous than any old dream that wandered into her head. Dinner would lead to “the stuffing being fucked out” of her and while that was an interesting, hot thought, it was not a safe one.

Ramsay was not deterred. “I’ll carry your shopping home.”

“I have a car.”

“I’ll cook for you then.”

Now an offer to have someone cook for her was not something she would have normally passed up unless that someone was Ramsay Balfour. “What do you want, exactly?” *Damn, I wish my dreams were more specific.* What was he supposed to be to her? Someone who passed momentarily through her life? If so, she could handle that. A lover? That he had already proved himself to be. Did she want more of that from him? Not in the realm of possibility. She had too many hang-ups to let it happen. So what then?

“I want to get to know you.” Ramsay said it as if it was the most reasonable thing in the world to say. “And not just in the biblical sense.”

“Why?” Ainslie narrowed her eyes on him. What was the game he was playing, and how did it involve her?

Ramsay shook his head in mock despair. “You always ask so many questions. It’s simple, really, darlin’. I fancy you.”

“Yeah, you want sex. I get that. But I’m sure another woman would do just as well.” Even as Ainslie said the words a strange spurt of jealousy caught at her. *It’s none of my business who he makes love to. Whoa!* Ainslie’s head jerked back at her words. *Make love?* No, it was sex. Nothing more and nothing less. *And please try to remember that, Ainslie.*

“I want you but not just for sex. I want to know how your mind works. I want to hear you laugh and see you smile. I want to sit down and talk to you.”

This was not something she expected or wanted to encourage. A fast fuck in an office was one thing. Fancying was completely out of the question. Fancying indicated future intentions. *That is so not me.* “Does this work with other women?” Ainslie was trying to remain calm and unaffected by the man who had been affecting her since she had met him.

“You’re not other women.” Ramsay smiled charmingly at her. “See you at seven

o'clock."

"Dream on," Ainslie returned dismissively as she pushed her trolley quickly away from him.

"You're the dreamer, Ainslie," he responded softly.

Chapter Six

“Crap, crap, crap.” Ainslie swore when her doorbell rang at exactly seven p.m. that evening. She knew exactly who it was. It was bloody Ramsay Balfour to annoy her. Despite the fact that she had not told him her address, she knew the man had access to her records. Ainslie looked down at her bright pink flannelette pajamas and swore again. Maybe it had been an act of defiance to put them on, to believe he would not turn up, but underneath knowing all the time that he would. “I do not want to deal with this.” The doorbell pealed again.

“Damn it,” Ainslie muttered, and stamped her foot as she contemplated her options. To invite him in was to invite in certain trouble. To leave him out there was tempting but she had a feeling he would find his own way in anyway. She suspected a Summit operative knew how to break in somewhere if he wanted to. When the persistent knocking took over from the bell ringing, Ainslie knew she was screwed, or about to be. A quiet, uncomplicated evening in front of the television was not going to happen. “Keep your mind focused and your legs together and you’ll be fine.” Ainslie stomped to the front door and flung it open.

“Hi darlin’.”

“What are you doing here?” she demanded, glaring at him. The answer was obvious, of course. He was carrying a bag of groceries in one arm and a bottle of wine in the other.

“Nice pj’s, darlin’.” Ramsay smiled at her. “You know, I never thought flannelette in any form was sexy until this moment. There’s something about rumpled pajamas and tousled hair that makes me want to forgo dinner and take a woman straight to bed.”

Ainslie snorted cynically, even though her body instantly heated up at his words. “Well, good luck with finding one desperate enough to take you on.” She tried to shut the door on him.

Ramsay kept his foot in the door and gently pried it open until he was all the way inside. “You look tired.”

“I’m fine.” His sweet look of concern was the last thing she wanted. Her defenses were shot to hell around him already.

“You’re not fine. You look terrible.”

“Well, you can just piss off now.” She didn’t need to be reminded that she was no beauty queen by this man.

Ramsay handed her the bottle of wine. “Are you always this cranky, or is it just me?”

Yeah, it’s you and what I’m scared I will do with you. She blew out a deep breath. “I’m tired.” Ainslie was absolutely knackered. The urge to sleep was overwhelming, but she was worried about her incipient dreams. Other dreams had been easy to deal with. This latest one had dragged up all sorts of unexpected consequences, and the biggest one was standing in her doorway bearing gifts of food and hot sex. If she had been a normal woman, Ainslie knew she would have found the need to feed her respective appetites both sweet and sexy. *But no, I’m not frigging normal.* “I told you not to come.” Lord, that sounded whiny even to her. Ainslie did not want this man getting the wrong idea. She had lived alone too long to need someone to rely on.

“Are you scared to sleep?” Ramsay looked as if he already knew the answer.

“What do you want from me?” She wanted to dislike him, but she couldn’t. And that worried her. She didn’t want him thinking this could ever be anything more than just dinner. Ainslie was not looking for a man. Actually, she wasn’t sure what she was looking for, but she was sure adding a man to her life was not the answer. Besides, there were so many reasons having a man in her life would not work.

“The directions to the kitchen would be good.” He gently pushed his way farther into her home. “I’m going to cook dinner so get over it, darlin’.”

Ainslie blew out a frustrated sigh. She could see there was no point in fighting him. “The kitchen is to the left.” She left him to it and turned to go change. “And this better be a damn good bottle of red.”

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Ramsay Balfour was in two minds about Ainslie Croft. One part of him wanted to watch and observe and work out what was going on in that complex mind of hers, while the other part wanted to take her in his arms and fuck her until she could not walk straight nor think of one good reason why they should not be together. This afternoon in the supermarket still replayed over and over in his mind. That she had grabbed his cock and played with it where anyone could see them told Ramsay two things. One, Ainslie was not someone who backed away from a challenge. And two, she wanted him as much as he wanted her. No woman took hold of a man’s cock without understanding the ramifications of her actions. Ainslie just chose not to say what she wanted out loud. Who was the more stunned by the response was questionable. Ramsay had wanted to pull down her knickers and spin around and fuck her hard from behind. The need had been so primal, he was amazed he’d stood as still as he had. But he understood this afternoon had been about what Ainslie needed. But damn, it had been hard both in body and spirit not to take her once more. Even worse was placing his swollen cock back into his jeans without relieving the pressure. He still remembered how beautifully defiant she looked as she finished what she set out to do. To control him. That had been amusing. Ramsay was interested to see what her next move would be. As much as he wanted more from Ainslie, he also wanted her to openly want him without fear or reservation.

Ramsay considered himself a good judge of character. Ainslie was a woman who hid a lot, and he wanted to know everything about her. So over dinner he chatted and smiled and made her laugh. Ramsay was well aware of her less than happy feelings about the situation where she found herself. However, she had loosened up a bit under the food, the wine, and the general conversation. He looked thoughtfully at the woman sitting across from him on the adjacent sofa. She had changed into jeans and a long-sleeved shirt that buttoned up to her neck. Her hair was pulled back and she had made no effort at all to attract him in any way, yet perversely, he was more attracted. What exactly was it that made her so on edge? Outwardly she appeared to be a calm, confident woman. But inside? What was it that made her retreat from him? Why the buttoned-up persona? He knew that was only a disguise. Ramsay had tasted the real woman. What was she hiding? Only once had he seen Ainslie ever let her guard down. Was it just him who made her so edgy? Possibly, but he felt there was more to it than that—most likely the dreams she had. He could not imagine what it would be like to worry about falling asleep and dreaming. How bad did her dreams get?

“So is this necromancer thing only happening in Brisbane and if so, why?” Ainslie gripped the stem of her wineglass with both hands.

You have to relax, darlin'. "Haven't you heard Brisbane is Australia's most livable city?" Ramsay liked the sudden unexpected smile his words produced, almost as if it was against her will. He wished he could make Ainslie smile more often, as she lit up when she smiled. "To be honest, we have no idea." How did anyone know what threats to their world lurked without their full knowledge? "Summit is aware of the necromancer and we plan to stop him." *Until you appeared on the scene, Ainslie Croft, we had no idea how.* Ramsay still wasn't sure, but he felt she was the key. Malcolm obviously thought as much. When he was alive he'd been an astute judge of people. Although Ramsay didn't want to use anyone, he was stuck for choices. Ainslie could be the answer to solving this particular puzzle.

"So all this weird Summit stuff is all part of a normal day for you?" Ainslie looked at him as if she could not fathom it.

"Pretty much. Summit is basically an undercover security agency that is called in when things are not what they seem. We work alongside the police and other security agencies, but we handle the odd or the unexplainable." Despite her body language, Ramsay knew Ainslie was listening to him with interest. There was intelligence in her eyes that could never be hidden despite what else she chose to conceal. Ramsay also now instinctively knew that whatever he said to her, she would treat it seriously and not tell anyone else. Ainslie was a keeper of secrets. "Summit has been around since the 1960s. Unless, like you, someone gets mixed up in a situation, they would never know the organization existed."

"It sounds intriguing and complicated."

Just like you, my darlin'. Ramsay leaned back in the cushions and surveyed the woman in front of him. There was veiled intrigue within her whether she chose to acknowledge it or not. She was an enigma. And Ramsay enjoyed solving the complex. "But enough about Summit; tell me about Ainslie Croft." Ramsay wanted to know everything.

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Ainslie had no intention of discussing her life with him. Sure, he had told her things this evening that would try the belief system of the most cynical, but that didn't mean she had to share any information herself. Besides, Ainslie had a feeling any knowledge he gained would backfire on her. Ramsay Balfour was a good-looking man. Most women would want to share everything with him to have him in their life. But she was not most women, and he was not for her. No man was. She had accepted that a long time ago. "You know all about me. You read my file." Weird to think there was a file on your life, no matter how boring it was.

"Your file is not the woman. There's much more to you than pages of neatly printed type to discover." Ramsay reached forward and gently removed the wineglass from her hands. "Why no man in your life?"

"I don't like men," Ainslie told him coolly, crossing her legs tightly. He knew more about her than she felt comfortable with. There was no way she was going to invite him to travel a more intimate path.

Ramsay grinned at her words. "We both know that's not true." He sat back and assessed her carefully. "Maybe you're scared of losing control."

It was an accurate observation but she chose not to acknowledge it. "Isn't there some other woman you can annoy?"

“No. If you are wondering, I’m single.”

“I wasn’t wondering.” Ainslie remembered from their talk in his office that he said he was unmarried. So why was someone as confident and attractive as Ramsay not paired up with his equal? What was he looking for in a woman? And why was he spending time with a woman who wasn’t interested in being pursued? How more obvious did she have to make it? Most men backed off. He kept on coming. And yes, admittedly, having had sex with him was a bad move as it had given the man ideas, but that was in the past and she planned to move on from it.

“Ask me any question you like. I am an open book to you,” Ramsay invited as if sensing her thoughts.

“You’re not a book I want to read.” She did, but why get hooked when she wouldn’t allow herself to get to the ending?

“Come on, what are you scared of? Scared you may like me, darlin’?”

Yes, that was exactly what she was scared of but she had no intention of telling him so. She sighed and looked at him thoughtfully. What to ask of him that she would ask any acquaintance so he would let up on her? “Fine, how did you break your nose?” That was something obvious and not overly personal. Besides, that crooked nose had to have a story.

Ramsay smiled at her words. “Good question, Ms. Croft. It’s personal but carefully not so personal as to indicate any deepening interest from you.” He held up his hand before she could protest. “It’s okay, I get it. We’ll play it your way for the moment. When I was ten, my brother Robert dared me to ride my bike blindfolded off the roof of my dad’s car, down the hood like some daredevil and land in one piece at the end. But I didn’t. I fell and broke my nose and it’s always remained crooked. And this scar beside my ear.” He pointed to the puckered white slash. “I got this when I fell from a tree saving my sister’s cat.”

“Clearly you were a clumsy yet adventurous child.” Ainslie could see in her mind’s eye a ten-year-old Ramsay racing off to some childish adventure without thought of the consequences.

“I have two brothers and two sisters and we were always up to some mischief.” He sat back and assessed her. “So tell me, was Ainslie Croft rambunctious as a child, or were you as quiet and watchful as an adult? I would love to know what goes on in that mind of yours.”

“My life is boring.” She had been very quiet as a child. Healing burns and guilt did that.

“What about your family?”

“I have no family,” Ainslie responded, deciding to end this before it became any more deep and meaningful. The evening had been okay, but it was time for Ramsay to go. He needed to leave before he started asking questions she didn’t want to answer. Ainslie uncrossed her legs and moved to stand. But before she could, Ramsay was beside her on the sofa, hand on her thigh stopping any movement.

“Talk to me.”

Ainslie licked her upper lip nervously, her gaze dropping down to his mouth so close to hers. “You know enough.”

Ramsay’s hand moved up her leg and onto her stomach. “I want to know more.”

“Why?” Her breath came out in a rush.

“Why do you think, darlin’?” His fingers started to pluck away at the buttons on her shirt.

She slapped them away. As much as Ainslie wanted to feel his hands and body once more on hers, she knew none of this could be anything more than a fantasy. *Was that a bad thing? Wanting and having while knowing you could never have more?* “Stop the cryptic crap.”

“You want the truth?” Ramsay’s eyes locked with hers. “I want you. I want to be on you and in you. I want to make you scream and tremble.” Once more he toyed with the buttons of her blouse. “I want to suck and lick every luscious curve of your body. I can’t forget those moments in the office or the supermarket.”

Ainslie gulped. *Nor can I.* “Um, you should go.” *Before I do something really stupid.*

“Why? Am I getting to you? Are you remembering how good it felt for me to be inside you?” Ramsay pushed her back against the cushions with one hand and with the other ripped open her blouse.

“Hey!” Before Ainslie could move, Ramsay lowered his head and he licked at her cleavage. “Oh God...” His tongue was stroking the compressed flesh. She wanted to take her bra off and beg him to suck on her nipples. Ainslie ached for that. She just wanted to be taken without worrying about scars or consequences. *I just want to be normal.* As if he had read her mind, Ramsay pulled at the bra cups, her breasts falling into his willing hands. Ainslie stiffened as he toyed with her nipples. She looked at him. “Please.” *Take me. Don’t take me. Suck me. Fuck me. Leave.*

Ramsay hesitated no further. His mouth latched on to one of her nipples and he sucked hard. Ainslie threaded her fingers through his hair, pulling him closer. The need she felt to just be with Ramsay was so great that she started to cry.

His mouth left her breast. “Are you crying?”

“No.” He wouldn’t understand. She barely understood herself. All she knew was she wanted to be a part of this man, if only for one more time. Ainslie gasped as his mouth met hers and he kissed her with a hunger that made her hips arch forward in invitation.

“You’re so beautiful I can barely breathe.” Ramsay’s hands strayed down to the snap of her jeans. “May I?”

The tender yet hot look in his eyes made her swallow hard. There were so many reasons this was a bad idea. “Um, I—” Sex to make her feel better? Was that really so wrong?

“Do you want me?” Ramsay popped the snap. His eyes met hers. “I can see you do. I’m hard for you.” He pulled the zipper down, then his fingers pushed inside to her pussy. “And you’re wet for me.” A finger found her clit. Say ‘please fuck me, Ramsay.’”

Ainslie jumped as he stroked back and forth. All the reasons she should tell him to leave failed to come to her lips. She wanted him. It was against all rhyme or reason.

“Please fuck me, Ramsay.” She kicked her shoes off.

“Thank you.” He smiled and started tugging off her jeans. “Is it only me who makes you feel this way?” He flung her jeans and knickers across the room.

“Yes.” There was no point in lying.

Ramsay slipped a finger inside the wet core of her body. “I couldn’t sleep last night thinking about how hot and tight you are and how good you made me feel.” He pushed his fingers in and out. When his free hand went to pull her shirt off, she caught and held his hand.

Ainslie squirmed under him. “Ramsay—” There were so many things she wanted to admit and deny but none came to her lips when she looked in his eyes.

“One day we have to be naked together, darlin’.”

In her mind’s eye she could see that day. But not now. *It was too soon. I don’t want to ruin this.* “I really need you now.” Joining with him made her feel like anything was possible.

“You’re going to drive me mad.” He leaned over and tongued her nipples once more as his fingers still toyed with her clit.

“If you keep doing that, I’ll come without you.” Ainslie was so close to the edge that it would take so very little to push her over.

Ramsay instantly released her. “You will not.” He stood and slid a hand into his jeans pocket. He winked at her as he retrieved a condom. “I was praying you’d say yes. I brought a couple on spec.”

Ainslie couldn’t help but giggle at his mischievous little-boy look. She lay back and watched as he unzipped his jeans and his cock sprang out. “May I?” Ainslie licked her lips in anticipation.

“If you touch me now I will explode.”

“I just want to lick the tip. I’ve never done that before but if you don’t want me to...” She sat up and faced him. “If you don’t have enough control—”

“Oh darlin’.” Ramsay came and stood before her, cock jumping in eagerness. “Do you know what you’re doing?” His tone was teasing and sweet.

Ainslie reached a hand out and circled his cock. She smiled at his groan of pleasure. “I’m going to make it up as I go along.” Ainslie leaned in and licked the tip several times. It was not what she expected, but it was interesting. She allowed his cockhead to drag backward and forward over her lower lip. His throaty growl of approval made her bolder. Ainslie sucked the engorged tip inside. Ramsay’s hips bucked forward with excitement. A sudden feeling of power and control washed over her. This man was at her mercy. She could do what she wanted and he was helpless to stop her. Ainslie liked that idea a lot, and eagerly sucked more of his shaft inside her mouth.

“Stop.” Ramsay pushed Ainslie back by her shoulders.

Ainslie drew back. “You don’t like?”

“I love it but I want inside you now.” He stepped back and ripped the condom wrapper open. “Darlin’, you make me feel so good, so strong, so lucky.”

Ainslie looked at him in wonder. “Really?” This was not something she ever imagined anyone would feel about her.

“Oh yes.” His fingers fumbled over the latex in his rush.

“Get that condom on.” Whatever worries Ainslie had, she ignored. This was all about feeling and need. *I’ll worry later.*

“Yes ma’am.” Ramsay rolled the last part of the rubber into place. He remained where he was and assessed her.

“What?” Why wasn’t he on and in her?

“Beg me.”

“What?” She knew very well what he wanted. Ramsay had declared in the supermarket that he would make her beg for sex.

“Beg me, darlin’.”

Ainslie was wet and hungry for cock but she wasn’t about to beg. She wasn’t the

only one in need. "I can live without your cock, James Bond." Her fingers slid down to her clit and gently began to massage the slippery flesh. "I may be horny but I'm able to satisfy myself without any help from you."

"If you come without me—"

She smiled at the strained expression on his face. "There's nothing you can do about it." Ainslie was trying very hard not to come as it was. Touching herself like this was torture. "You could always beg me to stop and ask for permission to enter."

Ramsay swallowed hard. "You're a bloody annoying woman."

Ainslie panted so Ramsay could hear. She wanted him to grab her and fuck the stuffing out of her as he promised he would. She widened her legs and arched her back, moaning softly as she did. If he did not take her now she was going to come.

Ramsay dropped to his knees and grabbed her legs, pulling her to the edge of the sofa. "Next time you'll beg."

"Maybe." She wanted to deny there would be a next time, but she already knew in her heart there would be many more moments like this. She gripped the fabric of the cushions as his cock plunged inside her. She whimpered as the heat of him charged through her body. The driving force of his cock made her jump as he filled her to the hilt. "Oh, Ramsay—"

"You are so perverse." He started moving in the manner of a man possessed. Sharp, hard bursts of energy as he pushed in and out of her body.

His cock pounded and his balls slapped against her ass and Ainslie wanted everything and more he could give her. She wanted to be used solely for his pleasure, and yet she wanted Ramsay to need her as desperately as she did him. Whatever this was between them was more than just sex.

"What are you thinking?"

That I could love you. But she bit back those words. Love was not for her. Love required total openness. *I can't give that.* "I need to come. Go faster ... harder."

"Yes ma'am." He leaned down and kissed her until she was breathless.

The rapid change of pace made Ainslie clutch at Ramsay's hips. She knew her fingernails had to be digging into his flesh but the need to hold on and take whatever was on offer was the most important thing. Ainslie choked as sharp spasms of delight started to ping throughout her body. She closed her eyes and panted hard.

"Look at me, darlin'." Ramsay's cock thrusts did not let up. "I need to see your eyes when you come for me."

Ainslie opened her eyes once more. A lean, strong body was over hers; the owner's sexy eyes were intense and focused on hers. "You're beautiful." *How is it possible this man wants me?*

"You're the only woman I'll ever want, Ainslie." He grinned at her. "Are you going to cry again?"

She had been but the scream of wild release that tore from her body took precedence over tears. Ainslie drowned in sensation as the orgasm took over. She pulled at Ramsay, wanting him as close as possible; the need for his skin to be on hers was overwhelming. Ainslie shook and shuddered under him. She held on as she felt Ramsay jerk several times and cry out in a primal, throaty growl as he came, cock pumping in release.

"Bloody hell." Ramsay collapsed on top of Ainslie.

"I think that sums it up." She stroked his back and wondered about the future. *If fate*

decrees, am I strong enough to be with him?

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Ramsay cradled Ainslie in his arms, brushing the hair back from her face to place a soft kiss on her cheek. He hadn't been lying. Ainslie did make him feel strong and real and protective of what they had found. Although he wasn't fully sure what was going on in her mind, he was prepared to wait for her to fully open up to him. Opening her body was one thing; her heart and her mind were another. There was something hidden and elusive about the woman in his arms. The dreams she experienced had to be hard on her. How would anyone be able to handle dead beings seeking help? That they sought her told him one thing. Despite the walls she had, she was someone who was giving and wouldn't see another suffer. A deep need to do whatever he could to help her gripped Ramsay. No woman had ever affected him this strongly. The woman in his arms was fast becoming the most important person in his world. Ramsay hadn't been looking for love when he stumbled upon Ainslie. *Love*. He smiled. *Yeah, that's what this is*. The time line was irrelevant. That he found her was all that mattered. *I love her*. He smiled and kissed her again. *That would freak her out if I told her that. But one day soon*.

Ramsay grinned at the way she snuggled up against him. She was a lady of extremes. Cold and standoffish one moment, then hot and giving the next. He started to speak but stopped. He cocked his head to the side and listened. "Did you hear that noise?" It sounded like someone was outside. His thoughts went immediately to Malcolm and, more importantly, Ascanius. He was the real threat. Ramsay reluctantly let go of Ainslie. There would be plenty of time later for them when all this was over.

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Ainslie had heard it but she had chosen to ignore it. Sometimes what you didn't acknowledge you didn't fear. Ainslie only confronted fears when they were in her face and there was no other option. "Probably the next-door neighbor's feral cat."

"I'll check it out anyway."

"It's not necessary, James Bond." She was surprised at how alone she suddenly felt when he withdrew from her. A rush of cold air and feeling of being alone grabbed at her. While she had been lonely all her life, this was a different feeling. It was like being given a gift and wondering if it was yours for life or just the moment. The mad thing was, it had never occurred to Ainslie to want someone for life. Her actual life was too crazy to expect another person to share it with her. Why would anyone else want to chase ghosts and do fate's bidding? She sat up and watched as he removed the condom and dressed quickly.

"Your safety means everything to me."

"Do you practice saying that?" Ainslie made her voice sound deliberately cynical, as his words made her want to go, "Aw, you're so sweet." She had never had anyone who wanted to slay dragons, or in this case, chase cats, for her.

"It's my pleasure, darlin'." Ramsay crossed the room, then opened the door that led from the kitchen into the backyard. The darkness swallowed him up before Ainslie was able to speak.

* * * *

"Playing the hero for the lady, Balfour?" Ascanius watched in amusement as the Summit agent walked around slowly, assessing his surroundings.

Ascanius knew all about Balfour. Ascanius had made it his business to when the other Summit agent, Malcolm Durant, had tried to take him on. Durant had failed and Balfour would fail. Ascanius was not alarmed that he might be seen. He had hidden well. Added to that, he had the absolute belief that there was no way he could be found unless he chose to be. Some may call that arrogance, but Ascanius believed that, as he had the power over life and death, so was his will to be found—or not. His control was beyond compare. He had sold his soul to the devil a long time ago, and he believed nothing could touch him. No one had come close to taking him on yet. “And no one will, even long after you are dead, hero.” Ascanius planned to live forever. Heroes like Balfour died but one death. “And I can prolong that.”

Ascanius’s thoughts went to the woman. He had only ever glimpsed her before in his mind. The real flesh and blood woman was quite different. Watching them on the sofa had made his cock hard. “Most fuckable.” The idea to use her as more than a pawn in his plans had merit. It had been so long since he’d tasted a woman. It was just a shame she had an interest in Balfour. “Some women have no taste at all in men.”

Ascanius wondered what Balfour would do. That the operative surely planned to try to capture him was a given. Ascanius would not tolerate Balfour trying to disrupt his plans to create chaos among the humans. Humans were like toys to him and he enjoyed playing with them. It was disappointing but not surprising that Durant had not followed the same path as his other undead minions. The others had gratefully latched onto him in their pathetic need to be alive. But they weren’t. They were just dead puppet shells who did his bidding. Durant was different. He was stubborn and, until this moment, a nuisance. That was, until he’d led them to the woman.

“What a fortunate break.” Ascanius turned his attention back to the woman called Ainslie, who was standing on the doorstep staring into the darkness. “Fascinating,” he muttered to himself as he surveyed her. He licked his lips in appreciation. “I do like a full-bodied woman.” Ascanius knew of her scars, as there was no information he would not seek to achieve his goals. That Ainslie was vulnerable because of them made her perfect to use and abuse. Finding her had been a stroke of good luck. He had followed Durant’s wild path as he’d charged through the night and crashed into her dreams. Ascanius had heard of dreamers such as Ainslie, but he had never had the good fortune to come across one as untrained and resistant to her gift as this one. He knew she was inexperienced in the possibilities of the psychic realm because he felt her ambivalence when he looked at her. She looked like someone out of place in her own skin. He felt there was much torment within her and he planned to manipulate that for his own means. Innocence and power were an unbeatable combination. He would use her ability to crash into the dreams of the most powerful people and manipulate them for his own means.

When Ascanius had first started to dabble in the realms of darkness, his goals had been simple. He wanted a treasure back in his life. Ascanius still wanted that, only now he saw he could have that and many other things as well. He himself had some psychic capacity. It was slightly more than what most humans had. Ascanius had spent many hours strengthening what skill he had and he had used whoever offered him assistance regardless of what they expected in payback. He knew when he had what he wanted, no one would be game to ask for payment.

Ascanius felt this Ainslie woman had more power in her than she was aware of. He would kill for that. “What a shame to waste such ability on one like her.” There was also

the connection he felt to this woman. Was it what those dreamers felt when they called to her to sort out their mundane problems? Whatever it was, he would use that opening to achieve what he wanted. Ascanius had been concentrating solely on her for the last couple of days. Tonight was the night he would see how strong she really was.

*

Ainslie was not a scared person by nature. She had lived alone for years. She had dealt with ghosts and weirdos appearing at random in her dreams and in her reality. On the whole, Ainslie considered herself pretty damn tough. She did not jump at sounds that creaked or groaned in the wind. Yet somehow, this felt different. Was it because of the whole necromancer thing? Or was it because of the man who had taken her body in such passion and tenderness that she was in danger of something she thought she would never do? Fall in love. “Why him? And why the hell does he want me?” Ainslie knew she was anything but approachable to men. She made herself that way. But Ramsay was different. He was not put off by her deliberate indifference and cool tone.

Ainslie shivered and rubbed her arms. She was not cold. It was more the feeling of something to come that she knew would change all their lives.

Whatever it was, it just felt eerie and beyond her control and she didn’t like that. Control was one of the few things Ainslie insisted on and in the last couple of days that had been thrown out the window.

She stood and waited patiently, listening for some sign of Ramsay’s return. While she was a modern, competent woman, she was not averse to having a man be strong in this situation. She was realistic enough to know that sometimes muscle beat out brains in the competency stakes. A sudden banging on the side of her house made Ainslie jump. “Ramsay?” she called as she peered out into the darkness. She walked down a couple of steps and saw only darkness. “Oh crap, where is he? Is he hurt?” she muttered to herself. The thought that he could be alarmed her. “Because I would be alarmed at anyone getting hurt, not just him.” Even as she said the words, she knew they were a lie. Ainslie jumped again as she heard the banging sound once more. “What the hell is going on?” This was no cat. It was all becoming too scary and not something she wanted to get involved with. Ainslie assessed her options. Go back inside and get the broom to defend herself, call the police, or wait nervously like a ninny on the steps. Option three seemed best to her indecisive mind. “Ramsay?”

“Worried about me?” The man in question appeared suddenly, making Ainslie shriek.

“Bloody hell, don’t just appear like that!” Ainslie slapped him on the arm. He had truly frightened her. And yes, she had been worried about him, but she had no intention of telling him that as he would misconstrue the meaning of it. She would be as worried for anyone going out into the darkness to check out a problem. *Yeah, right.*

“Admit it, you were worried about me.” He ushered her inside the house and shut the door behind him.

“I was not.” She looked him up and down. He looked to be in one piece. Her eyes locked with his and she felt a wild flash of heat as she thought of his hot cock and questing tongue on her and in her. “Anyway, you’re big enough and ugly enough to look after yourself,” Ainslie told him dismissively. “So what was the sound?” Focus on the problem and not the man. *But what if the man is the problem?*

“You know, it sure sounded like concern to me the way you called out my name.”

Ramsay looked at her knowingly as if he'd guessed what her thoughts were. "As you say, it was probably just a cat." He didn't sound like he believed it had been a feline. "You look tired; why don't you go to bed?"

The soft concern in his eyes touched her deeply. So this was what it would feel like to have someone care for you. It was nice, but not something she could allow herself to depend upon. "I can't." Maybe she was a wimp, but that last dream with Malcolm and everything that had happened to her in its aftermath was too real. Added to that, she was scared she would dream that Ramsay had a permanent place in her life and she wasn't sure how she would handle that. Unlike some people, Ainslie's dreams were invaded by restless spirits. Her dreams came unbidden at the whim of others.

"There's nothing to be scared of, Ainslie." He touched her arm reassuringly.

"You don't know what it's like." Some people had bad, complicated dreams occasionally. She had them every night. Most nights she did not want to close her eyes. If she slept more than a couple of hours a night she was lucky. "It may seem crazy to you, but—" She stopped suddenly as Ramsay's hand curled into hers. It felt amazingly natural.

"No, it's not at all crazy. If I dreamed what you did, I doubt I would want to sleep. Who helps you with this?"

Ainslie could tell by the look in his eyes he was genuinely interested. What would it hurt to give Ramsay that snippet of information? She told him about Lucretia as they stood with their hands linked.

"She sounds like a smart lady."

"I would not have been able to cope without her." Ainslie pulled her hand from his. It had been nice, but she could not rely on hand-holding to get her through life. A nice idea but not practical.

"I have a feeling you've coped alone with a lot of things, darlin', and you're stronger than you give yourself credit for."

I really want to hate you but how can I when you say things like that? "Yeah, I'm so strong that I'm scared to sleep."

"I'll sleep with you."

"You'll what?" Ainslie jumped back from him, annoyed with herself for her response—it was so not cool—but that had been the last thing Ainslie expected him to say. And in retrospect it was a dumb thing to worry about when she had just fucked the man. Strangely, the idea of being curled up only sleeping in Ramsay's arms seemed way more intimate than sex.

Ramsay laughed at her reaction. "I'm not talking about sex, but—"

"Good, because that's not going to happen again." The smile he gave her indicated "never" was not in his lexicon.

"We'll see. So can I stay and help you sleep?"

Hmmm. What to do? While it was true Ramsay made her feel safe, Ainslie knew that he was not a man she could be relaxed around. "You'll just keep me awake, James Bond." *And thinking and wanting and needing until I am doing you again.*

"Maybe not. Falling asleep in someone's arms can be quite relaxing, darlin'."

He struck her as a man who would know that. Ramsay probably had women falling at his feet. Ainslie eyed him suspiciously. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

“Because.” Ainslie hated having to explain herself to anyone. Most people gave up asking her things due to a lack of productive responses.

“Come on, it costs nothing to try, and you may even like it.”

Already Ainslie knew that was a no-brainer. Sex with him had been excellent. Anything else was bound to be just as good. She blew out a deep breath. She was desperately tired.

“I don’t know...” *I do, but do I take the risk of getting all silly over a man I cannot have?*

Ramsay drew an imaginary cross over his heart. “I swear I’ll be good.”

Hmm ... It was worth a try. “Okay, but no funny business.”

“All of this is funny, darlin’, but I will not do anything unless you want me to.”

Ramsay’s eyes were soft on hers. “Let go for a moment and relax.”

* * * *

“So, which side of the bed do you sleep on?”

“I sleep in the middle.” Ramsay had insisted Ainslie change into sleepwear as she would be more comfortable. Of course that made sense, but the man himself made her edgy. Ainslie was pretty sure if she told Ramsay no, he would respect that. The problem was, he was hard to say no to. He was pure, raw, masculine-what-do-you-need-darlin’-sex-on-a-stick.

“What?” Ramsay looked at her with interest.

“Nothing.” *I’m worried I’m going to lick you like a giant lollipop and love every second of it.* “I’m fine.” It was strange contemplating literally sleeping with someone. Sex was a bodily function. Sleeping meant being calm and relaxed. Ainslie looked the tall man up and down. *You are so not relaxing.* Her hormones were pinging back and forward throughout her body like in a pinball machine. *Tilt me. Flip me. Score.* “I’m a restless sleeper.” Normally she rolled from one side of the bed to the other. Ainslie watched as Ramsay kicked off his shoes. “You’re not going to undress, are you?”

Ramsay chuckled at her words. “Well, I usually do sleep naked, but you can relax. I’ll leave my clothes on this time.”

“Good—fine—I’m not a prude, you know, it’s just...” *Why do I feel the need to explain myself?* There was no one else’s opinion she worried about.

“I know, Ainslie. Just get into bed and relax.”

Like that was going to happen with him lying beside her. “Right.” *I can do this. He’s just a person.* She pulled back the covers and climbed in. When Ramsay lay down beside her, she felt her whole body stiffen in some sort of crazy anticipation as her hands fought to relax. The overwhelming urge to touch him was bizarre. She was not a tactile person by nature.

“Stop fidgeting.” He moved in close to her and held her hands against her stomach.

“I feel kind of weird.”

“You feel pretty good to me,” Ramsay murmured softly as his side connected with hers.

As the heat from his body started to seep into hers, a strange feeling of relaxation came over her. It was nice. It was peaceful. How could a virtual stranger do that to her? *Because he’s not a stranger, you big dummy. His cock and your pussy are good friends.* “Ramsay—”

“Yes, darlin’.” He shifted onto his side so he could look at her.

“If anything happens—I don’t mean like sex—” *Oh hell, how naive did that sound?*
“I mean—”

Ramsay kissed her cheek gently. “You’re so sweet. What normally happens when you have these dreams, darlin’?”

I could so fall for you. He was so nice sometimes. “I usually wake up trying to fight something off. I’ll probably end up blackening your eye by mistake.”

“Okay, I can deal with that or anything else that happens.” His eyes were earnest on hers. “You can trust me to look after you.”

That sounded so good. *No wonder I’ve fallen for you. Oh crap—focus, woman.*
“What if—”

“You jump on top of me and rub your body on mine and I roll you over and—”

“I wasn’t thinking about that.” *Though, now that I think about it ...* She pushed her butt back against his thighs, seeking his cock.

Ramsay chuckled. “Are we sleeping or having sex?”

“I wasn’t even thinking about sex.” *Liar, liar, oh God my knickers are on fire for him.*

“Sure you weren’t.” Ramsay pulled her into his arms and kissed her lips softly.

“Sleep now and we’ll fuck like bunnies later.”

Ainslie fought the inane urge to giggle. “Fuck like bunnies” was so crude and yet it was exactly what she wanted to do with Ramsay. *I want to fuck him until I cannot walk.*

“What are you thinking, darlin’?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re so sexy when you lie.” Ramsay kissed the side of her face.

“Why me?” She turned her head and looked at him.

“Because no matter how much you fight, some things are meant to be, darlin’.”

Ainslie knew they were no longer talking about the dreams that overwhelmed her sleep. This man knew too much. Her needs and feelings were an open book to him. She closed her eyes to avoid further discussion.

A little while later, as she started to drift off to sleep, Ainslie heard a voice.

“Ainslie dear, come out to play with me...”

Chapter Seven

Ainslie wandered aimlessly in darkness until she came face-to-face with a tall blond man. He was dressed from head to toe in black and his entire presence had taken over her dream almost as if her own will was nothing compared to his.

“Who are you?” *And why am I in my dream instead of looking in at it?* She was never physically in a dream. Ainslie was only ever an observer. A wave of intimidation swept through her, the like of which she had never experienced before.

“I control this dream and I brought you into it. You will do only what I want you to.”

The dark eyes that burned into hers made Ainslie realize that she was in danger of becoming completely under his control. There was a power within him that she had never encountered before. It was frightening because it was dark and unchecked as if he didn’t care what he did. “What do you want?”

“Why, you, my dear. Isn’t that obvious? You need me.” The man reached out to her.

Ainslie instantly pulled back, sensing that his touch would contaminate her in some way. “Ramsay,” she called, momentarily alarmed when she could no longer feel him at her side.

“He cannot help you.” The blond appeared neither annoyed nor surprised that she had backed off from him. “Besides, Balfour is not the man for you.”

Ainslie knew she had to get out of this dream now. Whoever or whatever he was, he had the power to sap her energy. She could feel herself weakening just by being in his presence and that was unusual. Was it just the element of surprise that had done it, or was it the feeling of evil surrounding him that repulsed her? Regardless, she knew she would have to work hard to pull herself out of the dream.

“You can’t leave here yet, my dear.” He chuckled at her predicament. “You’re here until I let you go.”

Ainslie knew she was trapped momentarily. However, like all traps, there was a way to spring herself. As long as she kept calm and thought smart she would be okay. She knew in her heart this had to be the necromancer. There was no one else it could be. No other person she had dreamed had this type of pull on her. Normally she just glimpsed enough information to do whatever she had to do. This man was making her patently aware of her powerless state. He was the one who was trying to push her fate his way. “You are Ascanius.” She thought of Malcolm. *You use people but you will not use me. I refuse to play whatever game you have in mind.*

He smiled and bowed. “You’re smart. That always helps make things between me and those I control easier.”

“You will never control me.” Ainslie was glad her words sounded strong. She knew she needed every ounce of strength she had to beat this man.

“I already have power over many who have said the same thing, my dear.” Ascanius sounded unperturbed by his words.

“Like Malcolm.” In her mind she was trapped in the dream, although she knew physically she was still lying on the bed. She needed to connect her mind and body but she felt like she was mired in molasses and it was slowing her normally quick reactions down. What was this hold he had over her? More importantly, why was she allowing it?

Because you're scared and you can't fight that fear.

"Ah yes, Malcolm is mine."

"But not for long." What Ainslie had expected of him, she did not know. She believed him to be human—or at least he had been at some point—but there was an evil that seemed to encase him that indicated any trace of humanity was long gone. From what little she had heard Lucretia speak of the modern day necromancers, they dealt heavily in the black arts and nothing was beyond them in their quest for power.

"Never mind about Malcolm, dear. What's more important is I am going to change your life forever."

"What?" This was about her? How? Why? Her dreams were always about others.

"You have great power. You just need to know how to use it." Ascanius smiled charmingly as he held out his hand to her. "I can help you, Ainslie Croft."

"I don't need your help." *I need Ramsay. How do I make him hear me when I have no control over this?* "I will go back now."

Ascanius ignored her words as if they were meaningless. "I know your fears and the things you hide. I have seen you naked and open. I have watched how you've tasted cock and come in a wild rush under your lover. You are the most interesting woman, Ainslie. The thought of fucking that luscious body of yours makes my cock hard right now."

Ewww. A cold shiver ran down her back. Ainslie knew he was trying to push all her buttons to make her react against him, thereby weakening her. She knew she had to fight. "Ramsay," she called out as she retreated from Ascanius. "Ramsay!" She had to break free and gather herself before Ascanius took her over in her panic. Ainslie closed her eyes and pictured Ramsay's face. "Please hear me..." She felt a shiver of response run through her body. Was she imagining it or did she hear Ramsay calling out to her in reply?

"He's not strong enough to break through, my dear. That means you are mine forever. You may as well give in and come to me now as it's inevitable."

*

Ainslie had been sleeping quietly in his arms for forty minutes. Ramsay had not been surprised she had fallen asleep so quickly, as she had looked exhausted. When she had naturally rolled into his embrace, he'd smiled in contentment. It was nice and peaceful and he could see himself with Ainslie like this when he was eighty. Despite the quiet, Ramsay had not closed his eyes for a moment. He wanted to see what happened when Ainslie dreamed. Also, he liked to look at her. She was so beautiful and relaxed with her eyes closed and all the worries she carried lifted from her shoulders until she picked them up once more in the light of day.

"What is your story, pretty lady?" As he finished speaking, Ramsay felt a violent shaking course through her body, and a low distressed moan sprang from her lips. He was startled as the woman in his arms seemed to be totally unconscious despite the turmoil making her body tremble. "Ainslie, wake up." Ramsay shook her. She appeared to be deeply asleep—but on closer look, that wasn't all that was happening with her. Something wasn't right. He slapped her face lightly but there was no response and he expected Ainslie was the sort of woman who slapped back. But she didn't, and her low, keening wail grew stronger. "What the hell is going on?" He shook her again and called out to her once more. This was something more than just a bad dream. This crossed into a field he had no knowledge of. Sure, he worked for Summit, and while they dealt with unusual phenomena, this was something else. "I'm here, darlin'," he told her, trying to

keep his voice calm.

Ramsay had seen many things in his time but nothing like this. For one long moment he wasn't sure what to do. The restless woman in his arms alarmed him. "Think, man." That she was caught up in something intense was evident. "And I have to break her out of it, but how?" He had a university degree and could speak four languages, yet all that was useless right now. He held onto Ainslie, reluctant to let her go as his mind raced with possible plans of action. A sudden, simple, and childlike solution came to mind. *Would it work?* "It worked for Sleeping Beauty." Ramsay sat up with Ainslie in his arms and kissed her. Ainslie struggled against him as if she was trying to break free from something, but Ramsay kept kissing her.

*

Ainslie felt an amazing sense of peace start to come over her. She knew she could get out of the dream if she gave in to the feeling that was suffusing her body. It was a feeling of warmth and safety like she had never felt before. It gave her hope and courage. "Whatever your game is, Ascanius, you will not win."

The necromancer looked angry as if he sensed he was losing control and he did not like it one bit. "Balfour may will you sexually to him but he will never understand how powerful you are nor how it can benefit him."

Ainslie knew whatever it was or could be with Ramsay, it was strong enough to give her the belief in herself to get out of the dream she had been forced into. She would use his strength to pull her out.

"I refuse to play games with you, Ascanius." She felt herself slowly being freed from the morass she had been trapped in. "I will never be yours."

"You have no choice. I will control you as I control Durant and others." Ascanius smiled tightly at her. "So, my dear, neither you nor he will ever truly escape me. For now I'll let your lover win—oh, that's right—you allow no one to love you." He laughed maliciously. "See how easy it will be for me to win? I know everything about you, Ainslie. You will be mine. I'll fuck you until you have no will of your own."

*

Ascanius knew that she was slipping from his grasp. He had not expected the sudden bond between Balfour and the woman to be so strong. Sex was a bond that was damn near impossible to break. It was annoying for he knew, though powerful, the woman on her own would be easy to break. There was a depth of self-loathing within her that he felt, and he knew he could manipulate her to his own purposes. As she disappeared, Ascanius knew he would have to kill Balfour to have the woman.

"What is one more body in the scheme of things?"

*

Ainslie gave in to the surge of power she felt and drifted out of the dream. It had been amazingly easy when she allowed herself to give in. She woke up to find herself passionately kissing Ramsay. She gasped as she broke off the kiss breathlessly.

"What happened?" Ainslie licked her lips and looked at him in wonder. Had he given her the power to free herself? How was that possible? Was it just some weird fluke?

"I'm not sure." Ramsay still held her cradled in his arms. "You wouldn't wake up."

"So you kissed me?" It was the last thing she would have considered as a remedy, but seemingly it worked. She was damn grateful but also slightly embarrassed. It was hard to remain cool and distant with someone when his kisses had the ability not only to

empower you, but to turn you on. She was wet and needy just from a kiss.

"I thought it would get your attention." Ramsay grinned at her. "What do you remember?"

Ainslie clutched at his shoulders, reluctant just yet to break the peace she felt in his arms. *What is happening to me? I don't want to get involved with him but I can't let Ramsay go.* "Um, it was Ascanius, the necromancer." She shivered as she remembered his words—*See how easy it will be for me to win? You will be mine.*

Ramsay stroked her back comfortingly. "He came to you in your dream?"

"He pulled me into the dream." The fact that he could do that so easily scared her. "That's never happened before." Ainslie never got more involved in her dreams than she had to. To be thrown into the middle of one was terrifying. "He believes he can manipulate me for his own purposes and I'm scared stiff he's right."

"Darlin', I will protect you." Ramsay's words had the sound of a promise.

As much as Ainslie wanted to believe him, she knew it was not an option she could pin her hopes on. However, leaning on Ramsay at that moment felt good. "I was frightened." She was not ashamed to admit that. Ascanius had come close to literally scaring the life out of her. "I've never been in anything like that. I don't know what I would've done without you."

"I'd do anything for you." Ramsay kissed her cheek softly.

He actually sounded like he meant it too. "You barely know me. Okay, yes, we've had sex, but that doesn't mean—"

"It means everything and we both know it."

Ainslie wondered what he really wanted from her. Experience had taught her that people rarely did anything nice without a reason, and sex alone did not make a relationship.

"It's not about the length of time you know someone that counts, is it?"

"Well, no," Ainslie agreed reluctantly. Time was fluid and ongoing; it didn't matter in the scheme of most things. But whatever this was between her and Ramsay was not something she would consider "most things." She stiffened suddenly in shock as she felt his hand still on the small of her back. "Let go." She knew he had to have felt the scars through the fabric of her top. Why had she allowed herself to be lulled into forgetting those?

"Darlin'?" Ramsay looked at her in concern as he moved his hand up her back.

Ainslie tried to wriggle free from his hold. "Don't look," she pleaded as he twisted around and lifted up the edge of her top.

*

The pink, mottled skin Ramsay saw surprised him for only a moment. So that was what he felt under the flannelette. At first he thought it was the lacy swirls of some filmy piece of lingerie and he had been anticipating what Ainslie looked like in it. While naked was excellent, imagining Ainslie in frilly lingerie was a huge turn-on. But this was no lace fantasy. This was reality and he wanted to know more. Ramsay pulled the fabric up farther and saw the damage that only flames could do. A sudden understanding came over him as all the pieces he could not reconcile about the woman in his arms started to fall into place. He held firm to the fabric, despite her attempts to cover up. He had no intention of letting her hide anymore.

"Is this why you're so reluctant to have me see you naked?" He traced the ridge of

scar tissue that extended up her back.

“Well, I was offered a pity fuck once and it was so awful—” Ainslie choked out the last word and stopped. She tried to draw her top down. “He said it wasn’t fun screwing a monster.”

I want to kill him. “Do you remember his name?” The surge of anger that shot through Ramsay was chilling.

Ainslie looked at him in surprise at his tone. “Why?”

“Because I want to hunt him down and beat him up.” He would not allow the fabric to fall. Ainslie needed to learn that he was not about to back out of her life now. “Why him?” Why would such a lovely woman pick such an asshole as a lover?

“I was lonely and needy and stupid.” Ainslie pulled from his arms and moved away from him.

Ramsay instantly felt bereft of her warmth. “No, loneliness is never stupid.” The unshed tears in her eyes made him want to do anything to take some of the pain away. He doubted very much that she ever talked about her scars and he believed she needed to, since the mental wounds would never heal properly until she did. “How did you get the scars, darlin’?”

*

Ainslie was horrified at the sudden tears that stung her eyes. She had to pull away from Ramsay. She could not handle his gentle touch or the understanding way he looked at her. She was falling apart under his gaze. “I ... killed my sister...” And all the words that had been bottled up so long came tumbling out in one long, painful stream. It was like a pressure valve had been released. When she’d finished speaking, Ainslie felt like she had been talking for hours, yet only minutes had passed.

“It was an accident, Ainslie.” Ramsay sounded appalled and saddened.

“It was still my fault.” That would never change. The words could be spoken and some fears faced, but the guilt remained.

“You were six years old.”

“I want no pity.” From him, that would kill her. Although she barely knew Ramsay, his opinion of her mattered. Yet why, she wasn’t sure. He had gone from being a pain in the ass to a sweet, sensitive man. *Holy crap, I’m so confused.*

“No, I can see that. You prefer to maintain the fortress walls around you.” Ramsay reached over and tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “You’re not your scars you know, darlin’.”

How could she ever be this man’s darlin’? “You haven’t seen them in their full ugliness.”

“Then show me,” Ramsay responded simply, his eyes locked on hers in challenge.

Ainslie’s eyes widened at the thought. Could she do that? Did he really want to see them? No one but her doctor had ever seen them fully. The tight, scarred surface of skin was puckered and ugly. She made sure no one else ever saw it for it only evoked pity or horror. Ainslie did not want trite words of sympathy and she did not want to be considered a freak. Years of operations had gotten them as good as they were ever going to look. The scarring started at her left shoulder, ran down her left arm to her elbow, and covered most of her back. The scars were a permanent reminder of the night Jacinta died and her mother’s heart broke. Both Jacinta and her mother were gone and Ainslie was left with her scars. Physical and emotional scars that kept everyone at a distance and

reminded her of what she had lost.

“No.” It would be too hard to see Ramsay recoil in horror.

“I want to see them.” His words and gaze were firm and direct. “I’ve already seen you naked.”

“That was different.”

“No, no it wasn’t. You opened out and gave of yourself when we made love. You need to drop the barriers and let me fully in.”

“I can’t.” It was like exposing a part of herself she needed to keep hidden forever.

Ramsay moved closer toward her. “Yes you can, Ainslie, and you need to.”

“But what if...”

“What? You think I’m so shallow that scars would turn me off? Do you believe I’m only interested in your body? Hell, woman, I want you, but the whole you and not just the parts you choose to give me,” Ramsay told her in no uncertain terms.

“Really?”

“Yes, really,” he said reassuringly. “Can I unbutton your top?”

Maybe Ramsay was right. Maybe it was better to get it over and done with so they both knew where they stood and they could move on and sort out whatever this thing was with Malcolm and the necromancer. Ainslie bit her lip. “I’ll do it.”

Ramsay sat quietly as she fumbled to unbutton her pajama top, keeping the edges together until she took a deep breath and turned her back to him. She slid the fabric from her shoulders, exposing her breasts and the extent of the scarring. The whole mess was on show for him to see. The doctors had been good at repairing the damage, but expensive plastic surgery had never been something they had been able to afford.

“Oh, Ainslie...” Ramsay gasped hoarsely as he looked at her back.

Okay, there it was, as expected, the gasp of horror. Fine, whatever, it was hard for some people to handle. She started to pull up her top to cover her back. “I know it’s ugly and—”

Ramsay stilled her hands, leaving her mottled skin exposed. “No, only in your mind it is.”

Ainslie was surprised at his words. Really? He didn’t find her ugly? How could that be? Was he just being nice?

“May I touch you?”

“Um...” No one had ever wanted to before. She nodded in confusion at this strange turn of events. As his hands moved over her disfigured skin she sighed softly at the thrill of pleasure that coursed through her. “Ramsay, I—”

“Your skin is so warm and smooth. How far does the scarring go?”

“Down to the small of my back. That’s why I never undressed fully with you.” It was better he knew the full extent of the damage. When she felt his mouth on her shoulder, she flinched. “Don’t...” It was exactly what she needed and dreamed of, but Ainslie was scared to accept it for fear of it eventually being pulled away from her.

“I want to,” Ramsay murmured between the soft, wet kisses he placed on her wounded back. “I need to.”

Ainslie shook and choked back a sob. How did this sweet man stumble into her path so suddenly?

“Am I making you cry again?” he murmured against her skin.

“No.” She was about to howl like a baby in a moment.

He turned her around toward him. Ramsay cupped her face in his hands. "Why are you crying, darlin'?"

"I don't know." She hadn't cried in the longest time, not since her mother had died. "You're so..."

"What?"

Sweet and loving and sexy. I want to eat you up. "Who are you?" She looked at him in wonder. *Where have you been all my life?*

"I am the man for you." Ramsay's mouth descended on hers and he kissed her hungrily as he gently stroked her back. He broke the kiss to gaze into her eyes. "You're beautiful, Ainslie."

"I'm not." She wasn't blind. She looked in her mirror every day. Ainslie knew she was at best average.

"You're so bloody stubborn." His mouth sought hers again and he pushed her back on the bed. "If I say you're beautiful, then you are. I never lie about things that are important to me."

Ainslie looked at him in amazement. "Really?" She wanted to believe him. This was like a dream she never wanted to wake up from. Excellent sex and a man who understood her. *May every woman be so lucky.*

"Oh hell, yes." Ramsay growled as his hands worked at removing her pajamas until she was bared to his gaze.

"Wait." She caught his hands just before they descended on her breasts.

"Why?"

"Um, well—"

"What? Do you think this is a pity fuck?" Ramsay looked on in disbelief when she half nodded. He rolled Ainslie over and slapped her ass.

"Hey!" Three stinging blows landed one after the other. "Stop it!"

He spanked her once more. "When you accept what we have."

"What is that?" *Slap.*

"That we're damn good together." *Slap.*

"Are we, James Bond?" Ainslie was no longer arguing the fact. She just liked the feel of his hand on her ass.

"Yes." Once more Ramsay spanked her. Ainslie moaned. He smiled. "You like this?"

"Maybe." *Domination could be interesting.* Ramsay slapped her twice more but each time his fingers lingered on her butt. She sighed. "Okay, yes."

"Your butt is pretty pink." Ramsay leaned in to kiss each cheek before moving up her body so his chest was against her back. "Do you need me, darlin'?"

Yes. "Do you need me?" Ainslie wanted to believe the sweet man who made her feel so good. *Please don't let this be a dream.*

"Yes." Ramsay's mouth nuzzled at her shoulder.

"If you don't have me?"

"I'll cry."

Ainslie giggled. "A big strong man like you?"

"You make me weak."

"Good to know." She was rewarded with one last slap to her rear.

"Darlin'—"

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

Those two simple words caught at her heart. For the first time in forever the urge to belong with someone gripped her. “Take your clothes off, James Bond. I need you inside me now.” She sat back and howled with laughter as Ramsay all but fell off the bed in his haste to get naked.

“Let’s just forgo clothes when we’re together.” Ramsay’s clothes went flying off in all directions as he stripped.

“Constant sex all the time?” *Please God, have another condom.*

“It’s doable.” Ramsay pulled out another rubber from his discarded jeans pocket. “I’m up to the challenge.”

Ainslie licked her lips in appreciation of the sight before her. “You are full of yourself.”

“You’ll be full of me soon.”

Yes please. Ainslie wanted every hot inch of his cock inside her. “Promises, promises.”

Ramsay was once more on the bed, positioning her onto her hands and knees. “I always fulfill my promises.”

Before she could answer, his cock was inside her and all she could think of was Ramsay. Dead people, necromancers, and crazy ghosts were pushed way into the distance as his cock slammed to the hilt inside her. Ainslie closed her eyes and gave in to the driving sensation invading her body and the lips that kissed her scarred flesh with a tenderness that competed with the thrusting cock. “Oh, Ramsay, I—” Ainslie opened her eyes and tilted her head to one side. “Did you hear that?”

“Yes, damn it, I did.” Ramsay ramped up his pace. “Whoever the fuck is out there, you’d better have a damn good reason to be in my woman’s house.”

My woman? She was all that. The man had total command over her body.

“It’s me, Malcolm,” a voice called. “When you’re—er, ready.”

“Oh hell, Malcolm, of all the times to show up.”

“Sorry, mate.”

Ainslie tried to pull away from Ramsay. Having sex while someone was outside the door was weird. Hot, but weird. “Well, this is embarrassing. What if I scream or moan?”

“No ‘what if’ about it. You will.” Ramsay stopped momentarily and spanked her butt several times.

Ainslie squealed in excitement. “He’ll hear that.”

“Malcolm’s had sex.” Once more Ramsay’s balls slapped against her butt.

“Hurry up.” One of Ramsay’s hands went around and toyed with her clit. Oh yeah. *That was going to hurry things along nicely.* Ainslie bore down on his hand, grinding her pussy against his fingers.

“You’re so wet.”

“You’re so hard.”

“We’re a perfect match,” Ramsay murmured against her ear.

“O-o-oh,” Ainslie choked out, trying to contain the feeling that was coming over her. She was positive there was some sort of etiquette for having an orgasm while someone was in the next room. She bit her lip as a wild thrill of pleasure shot up her spine and back down to her toes. Ainslie pushed her butt back against Ramsay, wanting to milk

every drop from her lover.

“This is so annoying. I want to make love to you until you can’t walk straight but there’s someone in the other room.”

If Ramsay hadn’t circled his arm under her waist she would have fallen flat to the bed in a slumberous heap of contented womanhood. “I’m close to that point now.” Her whole body felt like liquid.

Ramsay groaned out loud as he came against her hard, his body jerking and his hands clutching her breasts. “I want to do that all again.”

So did Ainslie, but she knew that first and foremost, she had to deal with Malcolm. Ghosts, or in this case, the undead, did not go away until they could be at rest. “We have to help him.” *If I can get off the bed.* The warm body covering hers was better than the most expensive mink.

“I know—it’s just—”

“Yeah, I know.” Ainslie did. Nothing in her life had ever been straightforward, so why this?

“Promise me you won’t back away, darlin’.”

As much as Ainslie wanted to promise that, she was too unsure of herself to do so.

“Ramsay, I—”

“Don’t panic.” Ramsay turned her in his arms and kissed her gently. “This will work out.”

Chapter Eight

“Was that you outside before as well?” Ainslie thought back to the noise they’d heard. Sure, having the undead lurking around wasn’t something to encourage, but at least she knew who Malcolm was. She ran her hand surreptitiously down the front of her pajama top to make sure she had buttoned it up correctly. She caught the look of conspiratorial amusement Ramsay shot her.

“No, I’ve only just arrived and seemingly at a bad time.” He looked at both of them whimsically.

“Hell yes, mate, but I’ll live with it,” Ramsay told his friend. “Why are you here now, Malcolm, when you have been avoiding me like the plague?”

“Because it’s safer to come here and I have not been avoiding you. I couldn’t risk being taken to Summit. There is a leak there. Someone is working with Ascanius.”

Ramsay stiffened at the news. “I’ve been thinking that might be the case, with what happened to you. Who is it?”

“Richard Varlian.”

“Wait a minute.” Ainslie looked at them, amazed. “You are dealing with the undead, a necromancer, and a spy?”

“It’s been a busy month,” Ramsay replied, with a soft smile in her direction.

Ainslie felt her heart flip-flop at his look and she couldn’t think what to say. She broke off eye contact first. The man saw too much and she felt she had so little to give. It was hard to give when you have never offered anything of yourself before.

“How do you know it’s Richard?” Ramsay asked, his gaze reluctantly leaving Ainslie’s face.

“I saw him with Ascanius. Richard doesn’t have smarts to go undercover and he’s greedy. I believe the necromancer promised him the earth and Richard is dumb enough to believe him.”

Ramsay sighed. “Yes, he’s not a smart man. I’ll have him arrested.”

“No, it will spook him. I think it’s better to leave him alone and just watch what he does.” Malcolm’s bright blue gaze focused on Ainslie. “I need your help, Ainslie. I think you’re the key to what is happening here. Everything occurring now is linked and I believe you are the catalyst.”

“Me? How?” *I don’t want to be a catalyst.* Besides, Ainslie couldn’t think how either of these two men could possibly need her assistance. They were dealing with life and death issues that were beyond her experience.

“Do you know what synchronicity is?”

“It’s when everything comes together at the right time. Sometimes that’s good and other times it sucks.” Of course, it was the sucky times people remembered.

Malcolm nodded. “That’s right—nothing is coincidental and everything happens for a reason.”

“I believe in that, but how can I help?” There were times she could barely help herself.

“I’m not sure how but I believe you have the power to defeat the necromancer.”

Whoa! That was a big statement. Ainslie looked at Malcolm in amazement. “Me? I

just dream weird dreams.” She told him about the dream that Ascanius had dragged her into. Ainslie looked at Ramsay to see what his thoughts were. He just looked at her in concern, almost as if he knew she was their best chance but he wasn’t happy about it. “I’ll be honest, Ascanius scares the bejesus out of me.”

“This is why I think there is more to your abilities than just dreams.” Malcolm looked definite on that score.

“I believe Malcolm’s right. From what little we know about the necromancer, he targets victims with extrasensory perception, those who can see and feel what others can’t.”

“Yeah, but that’s not me. I have no special talents like that.” All Ainslie did was experience sleepless nights where weird people dropped into her mind wanting her to do something. “I know me. There’s nothing but insomnia induced by nightmares going on with me.”

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“Do you really believe that’s all it is?” Ramsay wondered if Ainslie really understood how special a person she was. It wasn’t just whatever extra abilities she may or may not have. It was the whole Ainslie Croft package that made her special. It was sad that no one had ever made her feel cherished before. However, Ramsay planned to dedicate himself to making her feel important and loved. He had never met a woman he wanted to safeguard before, but this one brought out all his instincts to love and protect. When exactly he had fallen in love with Ainslie, he wasn’t quite sure. Maybe when he handcuffed her and she spat back such attitude. It didn’t matter when. That he loved her was all that counted. “I believe maybe you have possible hidden talents along with the other things you choose to hide.” The look of panicked realization in her eyes that he understood her made him smile. The woman was cornered and she knew it. Ramsay knew she would probably fight like the devil to ignore the attraction between them. The fact that he frightened her so made Ramsay only too aware of the turmoil of her feelings. Ainslie needed him. He knew it and she knew it. But he also knew she would never admit it as he was beginning to understand that Ainslie did not discuss her feelings for fear of giving in to them.

“No, I don’t have anything more than anyone else does when it comes to the whole psychic shebang.”

“Don’t you?” Ramsay was looking forward to finding out everything there was to know about her. He stood beside her, looking into hazel eyes that refused to believe or give in, for to do so would risk possible hurt.

“Lucretia believes that the people crashing into my dreams happened after the fire, sort of like some weird floodgate of energy had opened and I just happened to be standing there when it did.”

“No, it’s more than being in the right place at the right time,” Malcolm answered, unconvinced at her words.

“Or the wrong bloody time,” Ainslie muttered. “Besides I don’t see or feel anything unusual when I’m awake.”

“Yet ghosts approach you in the daylight when you’re awake. That’s not normal.” Ramsay knew that would frighten the average person and yet Ainslie took it in stride, almost as if it was a job she had to do so there was no point getting all upset over it.

“I never said I was normal,” she responded coolly.

Malcolm looked at her thoughtfully. "I think Ascanius sees something in you that you do not."

"He did mention I was untrained. But I think that was his whole mumbo jumbo mystical shtick to draw me in. Anyway, Lucretia reads auras. She would have told me if she saw more within me."

"Would she if she thought you were scared to hear the truth?" Ramsay doubted it. To him, Ainslie was not a coward, but more someone who chose to work within defined boundaries because anything else was too uncomfortable to deal with. "I think you're blocking some sort of natural gift that is more than just dreams. I think Ascanius is astute enough to tap into that."

Malcolm nodded. "From what I know of him, his psychic abilities are slightly above average. He uses others he senses power in. Ascanius also draws from the various satanic worshippers that infest the city."

"Yeah, well, that's all very well and good but I would have felt something if there was something to feel." Ainslie hesitated. "And If I am 'blocking' it, then it's through survival instincts," she conceded, almost as if she had an each way bet on herself and her reactions.

Survival meant many things to different people. Ramsay could not fault Ainslie on her reason to close off from those things that could harm her. He turned to Malcolm. "How do you think we can destroy him?"

"He is mortal; therefore he can die. To keep him alive only keeps evil alive. The problem is, he practices the dark arts. He calls upon spirits that normal people would not. I'm not sure how he has me in this state of living death. All I know is I want to die."

"I can't help you die, Malcolm." The distress was evident on Ainslie's face.

"No, but I think you can if you destroy Ascanius. If he dies I will be free to rest in peace. If Ascanius is interested enough in you to pull you into a dream, then you have something he wants and we need to find out what it is and use it against him."

That made sense to Ramsay. "You have to speak to Lucretia."

"And I must go and leave you two alone," Malcolm added as he turned away from them.

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Ainslie caught at his arm to halt him. "You don't have to go." She felt desperately sorry for the man. What torment he must be in.

"Thank you, Ainslie. I don't belong here and I believe I have interrupted something between you two." Malcolm disappeared before she could speak another word.

Tiredly, Ainslie raked a hand through her hair and looked at the clock. It was almost three a.m. "Hell of a night." She had a lot to think about and she could only do that if she was alone. If Ramsay stayed any longer, her thoughts would only be locked on him and she wasn't sure if that was the safest place for them to be. The taste of his lips on hers still remained. "I'll be fine now, Ramsay. I'm not going to sleep." She was too wired for that. "Go home."

Ramsay reached for her but she stepped back. "Don't shut yourself off to me; not after what we shared."

That was exactly the reason she was doing it. Ainslie wasn't sure what she felt. Getting caught up in anyone wasn't in her plans. Ramsay Balfour was a man she knew bespoke commitment and complications. "I need time to think and I also need to talk to

Lucretia.”

“Okay, fair enough. I’ll give you that time.” Ramsay moved in close before she had time to react and pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Ainslie felt herself sag against Ramsay’s body as the soft, warm kiss answered a call within her she wasn’t even aware existed. The arms that held her were not unbreakable, but they were safe and strong and for one moment she gave in completely to the sweetness of his mouth on hers. It was a kiss that promised the moon and the stars and anything else she cared to wish for from him. It was a kiss she would never forget, by a man who was everything she did and didn’t want in a man. For one moment, life was a fairy tale and she gave in to the feeling that flooded through her.

Ramsay broke off the kiss and looked into her eyes. “I am falling in love with you, Ainslie Croft.”

Oh crap. She snorted out loud in disbelief. “Don’t be ridiculous! You don’t even know me and you cannot possibly be falling in love after a moment of being in my life! And sex is not love.” The hysterical edge to her voice did not go unnoticed by either of them.

“To my understanding, darlin’, love does not have time restrictions,” Ramsay responded in a matter-of-fact manner. “I am besotted with you whether you allow yourself to believe it or not. And yeah, I’m a big boy. I understand all about sex and feelings. I have both a deep love and lust for you. It is possible to have both.”

This was the last thing Ainslie needed. Okay, yes, sure, they had enjoyed some hot moments together and maybe she had gotten caught up in them, but the thing was, Malcolm interrupting them as he had was timely. She needed to get back on track. There was a job to do. Ramsay was in her life because of it and he could quite easily leave afterward. That he had been so sweet and caring about her scars was something Ainslie would never forget. But he was there for a reason. *And I will not pin my hopes on him.* She pushed at his chest to free herself from his arms.

Ramsay reluctantly released her. “I know you were hoping I’d be so horrified at your wounds that I would run from you.”

“Don’t be absurd.” Yeah, she had been. It was easier to be alone and self-sufficient than need someone, especially if that someone was only passing through her life. It made her tremble that this man knew so much about her thoughts in such a short time.

“Tell me, Ainslie, if you loved someone who was flawed or disfigured in some way, would you love them less?”

“No.” Where was he going with this? Couldn’t he understand that she wanted to be alone right now to think? After living a life of solitude it was weird to have someone barge into her world and disrupt it. Ainslie had gotten by very well without someone in her life and needing someone now was not part of her plans.

“But you think I would turn away from you.”

“I don’t know what to think, Ramsay.” Or, more to the point, what she was game enough to think. Usually she tried to avoid any deep thoughts. Shallow was the way to go.

“Yeah, you do if you allowed yourself to believe in what you consider the impossible.”

“I don’t have time for this.” Trying to be cool and unemotional when your heart was beating ninety to the dozen was impossible. The fact that Ramsay said he loved her with

such conviction scared her more than she ever could have imagined. She did not need delusional declarations of love. He would be out of her life as quickly as he'd come into it, and she did not want to get caught up in him.

"Make time, Ainslie. You can't just push all you feel back inside you."

"Watch me." She marched to the front door and flung it open. Ainslie hated being confronted like this. This was why she deliberately kept to herself. The truth was too painful and not something she wanted to analyze. Okay, he saw her scars, he made correct judgments, and now it was time for him to leave before she started wanting to depend on him.

Ramsay followed her. "You aren't alone, Ainslie."

"Yeah, I am." Ainslie had spent a lifetime building up psychological defenses. She wasn't prepared to drop her shields just because for one moment in her life someone made her feel something.

"You're not and I'll prove it." Ramsay slammed the door shut and pushed her back against it, kissing her hard and passionately.

Ainslie pushed at his shoulder but his hold would not break. "Ramsay—" She gasped between kisses.

He dropped to his knees, trapping her against the door with his body as his hands wrenched down her pajama bottoms.

Ainslie whimpered and clutched at Ramsay's shoulders as his mouth covered her clit and he sucked hard. He caressed her ass as he relentlessly lapped and sucked at the pink folds of her pussy. To Ainslie, it felt like he was devouring her. "Stop it." Even to her own ears the words sounded weak and unconvincing. Her knees wobbled under the passionate onslaught of her lover.

Ramsay paused only long enough to say, "Never. Not until you believe in us." He didn't take his mouth from her body until she started shaking and moaning, and even then he pressed on until her knees collapsed and she fell into his arms. "Just something to remember me by when you get scared."

Chapter Nine

“You read auras, Lucretia. You must know more about me than you’re saying.” Ainslie pushed back her coffee cup and looked at her friend pointedly. The local café was probably the last place they should be discussing topics like this, but at least they had chosen a secluded corner table.

“Yes I do, but you barely acknowledge the abilities you have now, Ainslie; if I had pointed out the other abilities I know you have, would you have accepted them?” The other woman looked at her knowingly.

Damn, Ainslie hated it when Lucretia was calmly right. The answer was of course, no, she did not want to accept what she had now, let alone something else that was not normal. “You should have told me.” *I sound like a petulant child.*

Lucretia sighed at her words. “It’s not up to me to tell you about yourself. You have to learn eventually to be honest and face those things you fear.” She took a sip of her coffee and looked over the rim of her cup at her. “Tell me about yourself.”

Ainslie snorted cynically at the blue-haired woman. “You know me.”

“But do *you* know you? Do you wonder why people are drawn to you—dead or alive? Why do ghosts look to you for help? Why do the lost call out to you while you sleep? Why not someone else? These are not just dreams, Ainslie. These people don’t stumble into just anyone’s life. You have a gift that makes you someone who can be trusted. Even though you go out of your way to repel people, they still feel safe around you.” Lucretia quietly observed the expression on Ainslie’s face. “I have seen complete strangers come up to you and tell you their thoughts. Have you ever wondered why?”

“I just thought I had one of those tell-me-all faces.” Ainslie just assumed she looked like an easy mark for people to talk to and tell their woes to.

“There is a power that emanates from you, Ainslie. You radiate with it. When I first met you I was so drawn to you that I warned myself to be careful.”

This surprised Ainslie. Lucretia always came across as so strong and confident. “Why?”

“Because you could be dangerous.”

“Only when I have PMS.” Then Ainslie was positively feral.

Lucretia shook her head in wonder. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

“What?” Whatever it was, Ainslie desperately wanted to understand. It was not just the scarring that had made her feel different from everyone else. Even without that, she knew she wouldn’t have slotted into life neatly.

“This is why this Ascanius is after you.” Lucretia set her cup down. “You are totally unaware of the magnitude of extrasensory perception within you.”

“Oh, you mean like the bending the spoon thing?” Ainslie already knew she wasn’t normal. She didn’t want to take her act on the road for the masses to see. *Though I could use the money...*

“You really have to make more of an effort to come to the Spooky Girls meetings, woman,” Lucretia responded in frustration. “Everyone on the planet has some degree of extrasensory ability. Most people never know it or develop it and others, like you, deny it.”

"I can't deny something I'm not aware I have." *Or was I aware I had it?* Ainslie knew she could be the queen of denial when she chose to be. She could shove unwanted thoughts and people aside easily. She focused on Ramsay for a moment. Nah, he was wanted. That was another problem.

"Subconsciously you have always known it." Lucretia said it like it was a fact. "There is such an intense energy field that burns around you even though you deliberately dull it with negative thoughts."

"Hell, this has been a weird couple of days what with the strange powers, the undead, a necromancer, and Ramsay declaring he loves me." What was next?

"He did?" Lucretia looked pleased.

Ainslie waved her hand dismissively. "He's insane. No one can fall in love that quickly." Well, she couldn't, or wouldn't. What was the point of throwing yourself into something that would never last?

"They can if they recognize their soul mate."

"Jeez, you're not about to go all mystical on me, are you?" Ainslie believed the concept of soul mates was used to sell greeting cards and self-help books.

Lucretia chuckled at her in exasperation. "Ramsay knows about your scars, doesn't he? Yes, I thought so. How many people have you told but me?"

"Only him," Ainslie admitted, but she didn't want to go into why because she wasn't really sure why herself.

"So why Ramsay? Did you have sex?"

Ainslie looked appalled. "I'm not telling you."

"Was it good?"

"Literally fucking amazing." Ainslie crossed her legs in memory of his mouth buried in her pussy. *Just something to remember me by when you get scared.* Yeah, that wasn't something a woman would forget.

"So?"

"I don't now. Sex is all very well and good but there's so much other stuff going on."

"Chicken."

"Am not."

Lucretia had a look of understanding clear in her eyes. "You recognize something in Ramsay that calls to you and he reciprocates. And don't think you can give me some smart-ass response. You know it's true. You are drawn together. You're just scared."

Ainslie wasn't about to get into the conversation as it required a depth of feeling she didn't want to admit to. *Damn Lucretia for being so astute.* A change of subject was required. "What about this Ascanius person?" She had filled Lucretia in on him as soon as they met up.

"Ah, a typical change of subject tactic from Ms. Croft." Lucretia shook her head indulgently. "Okay—on to the bad guy for the moment. From what little I have heard about him, he worries me."

Lucretia was never worried. That she was now chilled Ainslie. "Why?"

"In medieval times necromancers practiced their art to channel dead spirits in order to foretell the future. They did it for reasons of wisdom and to maintain faith. Now, necromancy is used as some perverse game to keep the dead in a living state of death as the necromancer seeks ways to manipulate them for reasons of power." Lucretia's mouth was a thin line of distaste. "Ascanius seems to be heavily into satanic rituals. His power

base is darkness. I believe he must be channeling some fairly serious forces for a human to have the power to suspend death as he does.”

Great—not. “So where do I fit in?” Ainslie could hope like hell that she didn’t have a place in this mess she had stumbled into but she had a feeling that hope would be in vain.

“You have innocence and vulnerability about you that I believe can attract evil. You are untried in the powers of your mind and you also carry wounds that you have allowed to define you as a person.”

“What? I do not,” Ainslie snapped in irritation. Her scars did not define her; they ... Well, they were just there and something she chose not to think about. That was not definition. That was denial and Ainslie had been okay with that—until now.

“Ainslie, you carry your scars like a cloak you hide behind. Couple that with your reluctance to commit to anything or anyone and that is your weakness. It is also something those who deal in the occult can manipulate.”

Lucretia was right. That was almost word for word what Ascanius had said to her. “What can I do?” She wasn’t about to let some demonic wannabe rule her life through fear. She did a good job of that by herself.

“You have to start using the power you have.” Lucretia made it sound like it was obvious.

“How?” *Is there a quick-fix magic spell or something?*

“Open your mind. Go to a quiet place and turn off the light and light some candles,” Lucretia suggested. “You need to close your eyes, channel your inner being, and think about who you are.”

Lord, that sounded so cosmically new age. “I know who I am.” *Sort of.*

“Stop being so perverse,” Lucretia scolded. “Do you want my help?”

“Yes,” Ainslie responded meekly. She had never heard Lucretia so fired up before. She listened quietly to what Lucretia wanted her to do.

* * * *

“The woman is Lucretia Bell,” Richard Varlian told Ascanius as they watched the two women from a distance. “She reads auras or some other weird thing. She also belongs to that women’s club that has a scary name.”

Ascanius shook his head in amazement. Could Richard Varlian be any dumber? But then, that’s why he used the man. Varlian was an idiot, but a necessary idiot. “They aren’t just a women’s club. The Spooky Girls have been around for years. Possibly centuries, under another name. No one really knows. They have some incredibly powerful women there.” Some more so than the Croft woman. But Croft was the one who was easiest to exploit, as she didn’t have a clue how to use the power she had.

“So why not use them instead of this woman? She’s not much to look at.” Varlian looked distinctly unimpressed with Ainslie.

Typical Neanderthal—he thinks with his balls and not his brain. Ainslie Croft may not be the most beautiful woman on the planet, but she had an innocence that intrigued Ascanius. If he had time to pursue her sexually he would. But that was not his plan, and there was another he needed more than her. “Because they know how to protect themselves and she does not.” There was no point taking on a crocodile when a frog could do the same trick.

“So what are we supposed to do with her?”

“You do nothing other than watch her.” Ascanius doubted whether he could even do that right without messing it up. Taking in a Summit agent had been meant to aid him, not annoy him. Other than the odd piece of information regarding the depth of knowledge Summit had on him, and that Malcolm Durant had been aiming to bring him down, Varlian was not proving his worth.

“Are you going to kill her like Durant and the others?”

What a dummy. “No, if she dies her power dies and that’s no use to me.” Croft had a natural power he could only dream of. While Ascanius had some psychic ability, his control came more from pledging allegiances to forces that were outside the mortal realm.

“What about Balfour?”

“Ah, yes.” Lover boy. When it came to Ainslie, Balfour was the only one who could stand in their way. “He needs to die, preferably in front of her eyes so I can slip in under her defenses and take her when she is at her most vulnerable.” Grieving women never thought rationally.

Varlian’s greedy little eyes lit up with glee. “Then I get what you promised me? Money and safe passage?”

“Oh, you’ll get all that and more.” *And I shall enjoy watching you die.*

* * * *

The candles were lit, the room dim and, despite Lucretia’s insistence she play some soothing music, the only music Ainslie favored was Matchbox Twenty and Tim McGraw. Should she rock with the spirits or get on down to the country on her quest to find herself? Neither CD was exactly peaceful. So she forgot about the music and sat down cross-legged on the carpet in the living room and closed her eyes to concentrate on her inner being, as Lucretia called it. However, Ainslie’s inner being could not compete with her outer being and mundane thoughts came to her mind thick and fast—*Did I turn off the stove? I should have washed my white blouse. Where is Ramsay? What is he doing? Cripes, why am I thinking of him? I should have got chocolate on the way home. Jeez, I have to wash the car again—and the dripping tap is going to drive me crazy.*

“Bloody hell, this is hard,” Ainslie muttered as she shifted around trying to find a comfortable spot. She mentally slapped herself, blinking her eyes and licking her dry lips. “You have to focus in order to save your cellulite ass—now concentrate.” She closed her eyes once more and blew out a deep breath as she tried to push all the everyday thoughts from her mind. After a concentrated twenty minutes, she felt her body relax and what could only be described as blobs of light start to appear in the darkness of her mind. They were indistinct but slowly they melded together like a kaleidoscope to form a light. It was mesmerizing and any boring thoughts that still lurked disappeared as she focused on the light. It was almost as if something was beckoning her forward to partake in the soft glow of luminosity. In her mind she stepped into it and instantly felt a wild surge of power shoot through her body from her toes to fingertips. It was like an energy bolt was charging through her. It was scary, but exhilarating. The doorbell rang but she told herself to ignore it. What she was feeling, she was supposed to feel. *Duh.* This was what Lucretia was talking about. The bell pealed again and was then followed by knocking and her name being called by a concerned male voice. Ramsay. The light she had been encased in fell away as her mind shifted to the man in question. “Bummer,” Ainslie

sighed to herself. Despite the disappearance of the light, she felt strangely invigorated. The knocking became a pounding and she knew it would be only a matter of minutes before Ramsay sought entrance by alternative means.

“What are you trying to do?” she snapped as she admitted him inside her home. “Beat the door down?” *Lord, he looked good. How is it possible this man mountain wants me?*

Ramsay looked at her in concern. “Are you okay?” He reached out to touch her arms as if to assure himself all was well. “Why didn’t you answer?”

“I was meditating.”

“Seriously?” Ramsay looked at her with a mixture of amusement and surprise.

Ainslie was slightly ticked at his response. “Why is that funny?” Okay, so she wasn’t an obvious choice as the contemplative type, but damn it, she could be.

“Because, darlin’, you don’t strike me as someone who has the patience for meditation.”

“Like you know me.” She pulled away from him in irritation. Sure, he may have been correct, but it was the fact that he found her amusing that annoyed her. Ainslie sidestepped him as he tried to take her into his arms. *Arrogant sod.*

“I’m sorry.”

He looked a little too amused to be sorry. “No, you’re frigging not.”

“I am—really. Please tell me why you were meditating, Ainslie.”

She looked at him, considering whether the expression he had on his face was genuine or patronizing. In her heart she felt it was genuine, but being suspicious by nature, she questioned every little thing. She blew out a sigh and decided to trust him once more. “Apparently I have these spooky powers.” Ainslie went on to explain to him as Lucretia had advised her to do. “Anyway, why are you here?”

“I wanted to see you, touch you, and taste you.”

“Back away, James Bond.” She could tell by the look in his eyes that Ramsay planned on sex. That thought made her instantly wet.

“Why?” Ramsay kept on coming.

“I need time to think and you mess me up.” He had the power to rattle her cage like no other.

“How so?”

Ainslie sidestepped Ramsay. “I can’t concentrate on stuff when you’re around.”

Ramsay matched her move. “What stuff, darlin’?”

“Ramsay—”

He smiled at her. “One kiss. How can that hurt?” Before she could answer, Ramsay pulled Ainslie into his arms and kissed her.

It was the longest, most thorough “one kiss” Ainslie had ever had. “You should go,” she murmured when his mouth left hers. She could feel his hands creeping up under her blouse. “I mean it.”

“I know you do, but I want to play some.” Ramsay’s eyes locked with hers. “Take it off or I’ll tear it.”

Ainslie licked her lips. Decisions, decisions. *I should order him out. I don’t need this added pressure. He is a distraction.* “Tear it.”

Ramsay did as bid and the sound of ripping fabric rent the air. “I knew you liked me.”

"I barely tolerate you, James Bond."

"Pull your shorts down."

"Why?" Duh, it was a no-brainer, yet some part of her needed to keep fighting the inevitable.

Ramsay unzipped his jeans, his cock jumping out eagerly. He sat down on the sofa. "Because I want you to ride me." He pulled out a condom from his pocket. "I've been thinking about it all day."

This was madness. Sweet, wonderful madness. "What if I had said no?"

Ramsay tapped his bare thighs. "I didn't factor that option in."

Ainslie put her hands on her hips in defiance. "I'm not easy, you know."

This made him laugh out loud. "Oh hell, I know that. You're the most damn difficult woman I have ever met. Now drop 'em and come make us both happy." Ramsay worked the rubber over his cock.

The thought of all the hard heat surging up inside her once more made Ainslie giddy.

"Come on darlin', you know you want to."

Ainslie pulled her shorts and knickers down. "One last time and that's it." *Maybe this will help with my meditation. Or maybe not, but a girl has to try.*

"Sure, sure." Ramsay reached out and pulled her toward him, his hands going between her legs. "You're beautifully wet."

"You do that to me."

"I know." He looked pleased by the fact.

"Smart-ass."

"I know that too. Now hop on."

Ainslie straddled his thighs and sank down over his cock. She reached around and unhooked her bra. "Suck me." She wasn't going to allow him to be the only one in charge.

"Yes ma'am."

Ainslie rocked back and forward on his cock as Ramsay sucked and lapped at her nipples. "So why are you really here?" Yes, he wanted sex. That was obvious. But there had to be more to it than that. Everything that had happened in the last couple of days had been more complicated than it seemed.

Ramsay's mouth left her nipple wet and pink. "You don't believe I had a burning urge to see the woman I love?"

"Ah, gee, no." The love thing was still a question in Ainslie's mind. Who fell in love that quickly?

Ramsay grinned. "You're a cynic. I like that. It's going to be fun proving you wrong." He grasped her hips and moved her faster.

"It will never happen." Cynics were born and bred and refused to be proved wrong. "Get to the point." That she had strong feelings for this man was one thing. That she needed an answer as to why she had been dragged into this whole mess was another, and it took precedence over the man.

"Yes ma'am," Ramsay responded again, not offended by her tone. "Malcolm and I have been talking and we plan to set a trap for Ascanius."

"Great." The sooner this was over and done with the better as far as Ainslie was concerned. *Then he will walk out of your life. How do you feel about that? Next question...*

“Not so great.” He smiled at her. “Don’t you find this an odd topic of conversation at this particular moment?”

“Everything in my life is weird—including you.” The friction from his pelvic bone against her clit was delicious. It sent off a small burst of sensation in her loins. “So I take it you have a plan and you need me.” Why was she suddenly the girl of the moment?

“Yes.”

“How?” Not that it mattered. Ainslie doubted she had any choice. Fate was a fickle bastard like that. It chose people at random and then drove those individuals insane until they complied with its wishes.

“We need to go to the cemetery where we first met.”

“Yes, what a romantic setting that is.” At least it would be something she could tell their kids about. *What? Kids? Me? Ramsay?* She shook her head as if to rearrange her errant thoughts back into the right slots. Dumb, never-could-happen thoughts to the left, and reality to the right. Besides, where could this go with Ramsay? They were complete opposites who had stumbled onto the same path.

She could almost hear Lucretia’s voice telling her from random beginnings great lives were made.

Ramsay looked at her in amusement. “What?” He caressed her ass.

“You fall in love awfully quickly.” As much as Ainslie wanted to believe in the unbelievable, love was hard to fathom. Sex, she understood. Cock met vagina and the most amazing feelings ensued.

“Some things, like the love of your life, you just know.”

Oh crap. Contemplating the ramifications of whether she was or wasn’t the love of his life was not something Ainslie, a loner by nature, wanted to do. It almost put her off her orgasm. Almost. “So I’m to act as bait in this trap?” That seemed obvious.

“I’m not happy about it, but the sooner we get rid of Ascanius, the sooner Malcolm can rest in peace and the sooner we can be together.” Ramsay looked at her indulgently. “What?”

“Let’s just take one step at time, James Bond.” She had enough racing off into dangerous and confusing situations in her normal life without adding to them.

“What happened to Malcolm has convinced me that we have to take the moments we have and make the most of them.” He kissed her once more. “But yeah, let’s come first and plan second.” Ramsay half stood up and twisted them so Ainslie was beneath him.

“Hey, no fair.”

Ramsay pulled out of her and lifted her legs so they were over his shoulders. “All’s fair in love and war, darlin’.” He slammed back into her body.

Ainslie moaned and clutched at him. “Remind me never to go to war with you.” The pummeling he was giving her body made her body bounce back and forward between him and the sofa. It was a hard, take-me-I’m-yours-fuck, and she was enjoying every second of it. She panted as spiral after spiral of excitement flooded her body when the orgasm hit. *This beats meditation any day.*

“Okay, darlin’?” His cock kept pumping inside her.

“Oh yeah.” Her knees were weak from both the force of his thrusts and relaxation taking over her body.

“I love the look in your eyes when you come. It’s almost like you don’t believe what happened.”

“Maybe I don’t.”

“Maybe you do but you’re scared to admit it.” Ramsay jerked hard several times within her and fell into her arms.

His earnest green eyes were so compelling on hers. As much as Ainslie wanted to believe everything Ramsay said, she was scared. Ghosts she could deal with, but love was a different kind of threat to her control and her independence. She had a feeling Ramsay could quite easily take over her life if she let him. Strong men needed to be in control. Problem was, strong women required the same thing. Ainslie just needed to decide if she was up to the challenge. “I want to be more than a moment.” When he smiled at her as he was now, she wanted to believe she could do anything.

“You know you are, Ainslie.”

Sudden knocking at the door saved her from having to delve further into the am-I-in-love-or-not-in-love-with-him thing. Ghosts in comparison were so much easier. They argued but eventually they got the hint and went to the light and left her in peace. Did she want Ramsay to do that? Did she treat him as one of her ghostly charges? *I don’t bloody know*. “Crap, who can this be?” Once more she was naked and spent and someone wanted to talk to her.

Ramsay pulled her up and they pulled on their clothes. “I’ll get it.” He moved toward the door, his hand still clasping hers. “It may be dangerous.”

Ramsay was awfully sweet in that insufferable male way. “It’s five o’clock in the afternoon. It’s probably the paper boy wanting his delivery money.” She pulled her hand from his. “I can handle Scotty. Stay.” She did not want shy Scotty being overwhelmed by the super spy.

“I am your loyal servant.” Ramsay grinned at her.

Ainslie went to the door, knowing full well he was following her. She opened it to find a weak-chinned man with pale, mousy hair. Her first reaction was one of mistrust. Maybe it was the overly ingratiating smile or the immaculate suit he wore that indicated he was all smarmy charm and no substance. Whatever it was, something didn’t feel right about him. Ainslie was a great believer in going by first instinct—and instinct told her this man was not what he seemed to be.

“Hello Ainslie. I need to speak with Ramsay.”

“Who are you?” How did this man know her name and how did he know Ramsay was at her home? Trust no one was her motto.

“I’m Richard Varlian.” The man introduced himself, holding his hand out.

Ah, the traitor. “Uh-huh,” Ainslie responded, shaking the weak hand. That brief contact with his skin sent a sharp zing of warning through her body. That had never happened before. Bizarro world. Maybe Lucretia was right. If she opened herself up to what was within her, then maybe more of what she had held back for so long would naturally come out. She turned to Ramsay. He didn’t look the slightest bit happy to see his colleague there. She went back inside and left the two men alone. Ainslie was not worried about Varlian. She knew he was no match for Ramsay. It was only moments later when Ramsay returned to her.

“I’m not happy he came to your home.” The muscle in his jaw jumped as if his anger was barely contained. “I have to go with him, but we still need to talk about the plan.”

“What is there to talk about?” She arched her eyebrow up at him. “I go to the cemetery and stand waiting like a sacrifice for the crazy necromancer to turn up and you

nab him, James Bond.”

“Well, there is a little more to it than that,” Ramsay murmured as he moved in close to her. “I really need to kiss you.”

Yes, please. “Ramsay, I think we shouldn’t—”

“Shut up, darlin’.”

When his mouth descended on hers, all the shoulds or shouldn’ts were obliterated under the intensity of the kiss. Ainslie clutched at his shoulders and held on as her knees threatened to give under her. She trembled as the kiss ended. *Yep, that was a definite should.*

Ramsay smiled in satisfaction at her reaction. “What are you going to do when I go?”

Think about you. “I may try the meditation thing again.” Though focusing was going to be hard after that delicious fuck on the sofa.

“Lock the door behind me.”

* * * *

Ascanius was not happy when he felt the change in the woman. He stood outside her house, probing her mind. He had deliberately made sure Varlian drew Balfour away so he could infiltrate the woman’s mind but something blocked him. It was a pure white light unlike any he had felt before.

“I will not allow it to deny me access,” Ascanius hissed angrily.

“You have no choice,” Ainslie responded suddenly.

He was surprised when she answered. She was stronger than he gave her credit for. That could be a problem. “Well done, my dear,” he replied through the power of his own mind. He was not happy at this turn of events. What had changed to make her so much stronger?

“What is it you think you can gain from me? I give nothing to you willingly.”

“You will give me everything I need.” She had to. Ascanius needed her power for a cause most dear to his heart.

“And you must know that the more powerful I get, the less likely you are to get a weak-kneed response from me like the one you had the first time.” Ainslie’s words were hard and to the point.

“You will falter.”

“No I won’t, and you know it.”

Ascanius sensed part of her was bravado and yet part was true. “You can never compete with me, Ainslie.” He would not allow that. There was only one winner, and it was him.

“I don’t have to,” she answered. “You will destroy yourself and any competition between us will cease.”

Ascanius laughed. This was an annoying development, but he also enjoyed a challenge. “You may be in control now, but tonight when you sleep, I will take you.” He felt the power from her falter. She was not as strong as she made herself out to be. “Balfour will not be able to save you.” Her confidence slipped a little more. “And do you know why? Varlian is going to kill him now. I was hoping to do it in front of your eyes but I believe just knowing your precious love is about to die will weaken you forever.”

“You will not win.”

“Prepare to be mine, Ainslie Croft.”

Chapter Ten

“Malcolm!” Ainslie shouted wildly. She knew she should be calm and call for him in a controlled manner, but the thought of Ramsay dying screwed up any control she had.

“Malcolm! Where the bloody hell are you? I need you now!”

“Ainslie—what is it?” he asked as he appeared beside her.

“Ascanius told me Varlian is going to kill Ramsay.” Ainslie wrung her hands anxiously. *When did I become a hand wringer? When you have something to lose.* “What do we do?” She looked to Malcolm for the answers.

“You underestimate your man.”

“He’s not my man.” *Oh yes he is. No, he’s not. Oh bloody hell, I don’t know.*

“Of course he is. You have a power over Ramsay that I have never seen before. He loves you.”

Ainslie arched her eyebrows at his words. “You’re mistaken, Malcolm. I barely know Ramsay Balfour and I have no power over him.” It was quite the reverse. He made her weak with need and she had to wonder if that was lust mixed with loneliness, making her think it was more than it was. Ainslie Croft—seer of the cup half-empty.

“I am not mistaken. I can see his heart in his eyes when he looks at you.”

Ainslie did not believe for a second Ramsay looked at her with anything other than amusement tinged with challenge. “Once this job is over he’ll leave me.” Part of her did not believe it and part of her wanted it to be true. He thrilled her, he scared her, and yet, to get too attached to him and for him to walk away would kill her. What was a woman to do?

“Ramsay does not crave perfection in a woman. He wants a woman who is true and loving. Scars do not scare him.”

The dazzling blue eyes that locked with hers and his statement completely freaked her out. How did he know how she felt? As for her scars, they were covered. She surreptitiously pulled the edge of her shirt down. Was Malcolm a mind reader? “I ... um, well...” Ainslie stammered, trying to find the words to cover her confusion at his perceptive remarks. “Whatever it is or isn’t, we have to save him.”

“He will save himself.” Malcolm sounded confident on that score. “You, however, have to work out if you are strong enough for the battle to come.”

There was a battle? Hadn’t she dealt with enough skirmishes in the past couple of days? “What sort of battle?” What fresh hell awaited her now?

“We know, now more than ever, that Ascanius wants you, and he can control you by the mere mention of a threat to someone you love.” Malcolm held up his hands as if to still the words of denial she was going to speak. “You know it’s true. You were screaming my name in a panic. You have to toughen up and not react to his words, Ainslie.”

“Well, unfortunately we human beings have the problem of reacting badly to stuff like that—I mean, oh crap ... sorry, Malcolm.” She felt instantly bad when she realized what she had said. This man was trapped in a limbo land—neither human nor spirit. “Do you see any light at all?” She knew from dealing with others in the past that the light they saw was wondrous and soothing and she wanted that for him.

“No.” Malcolm shook his head stoically. “But I desperately want to.”

The only way he could do that was to get her to follow their plan and stop acting like an emotional nutcase. *I can do that.* “Ramsay mentioned a plan.” It was time to gird loins and channel whatever these powers were she had inside her.

“Ascanius knows anything we do from now on will be a trap. What we need to do is use his suspicions against him.”

That made sense to Ainslie. “Okay, so how?” She was utterly devoid of ideas and was relying on brilliance from Malcolm.

He assessed her carefully. “You need to believe you can beat him.”

“I can.” Ainslie was 92 percent sure she could. Maybe. Possibly. *Okay, maybe 88 percent certain.*

“I’m not talking bravado. I’m talking real, deep belief in yourself.” He looked at the half burnt down candles. “You’ve been meditating?” He seemed impressed.

Ainslie wasn’t really surprised that Malcolm took meditation in his stride. She had a feeling he had been a very special man. “Yes, I saw a white light that energized me.”

“Good, that’s a start. You need to close your eyes again and search for it now, remembering that the stronger you are, the easier you can defeat Ascanius.”

That was all well and good, but she had a problem. “I’m absolutely knackered. I’m scared of falling asleep, Malcolm.” She knew she was so close to snoring her head off as soon as she shut her eyes. “I’m not protected when it comes to my dreams.” Her mind was not focused when she slept. Her mind had a habit of independently wandering off and doing other stuff with weird things like ghosts and now necromancers.

“I will stay to make sure you do not sleep.”

Ainslie touched his arm in gratitude. “You’re a nice man.” She knew she could do this if he was there. Ainslie the loner had turned into someone who was not scared to accept help. *Who knew?*

“I was.”

“You still are.” She leaned in and kissed his cheek. A strange feeling of sunshine and warmth mixed with loneliness struck her. She had never felt that before. It made her all the more determined to help him and to stop whining about her own problems. “We’ll get you home.” She sat down on the carpet and closed her eyes, determined to do whatever she had to in order to help him. Ainslie heard his soft words, “Just drift off—find the light again.” After ten minutes or so of concentration, she found the light, or it found her. Did she call it or had it always been in her? Who knew? *Stop analyzing and start connecting.* As she linked with it once more, the same surge of power raced through her like it was aware of what she needed and was filling up every part of her body with the strength required. Visions of the past, the happy times with her mother and Jacinta mixed with those that appeared to be in the future. She saw herself and Ramsay together in a foreign land happy and in love. Bizarre—but yet not so. Could that really be her destiny? It seemed like only seconds later that Malcolm was shaking her.

“Ainslie—wake up.”

“I was asleep?” Despite what had to have been a short nap, she felt strangely refreshed.

“Yes. Did you dream?”

“No.” She didn’t want to share the dream about Ramsay. It was one to hold onto and savor. Could it be? Or was she projecting what she wished?

As if on cue, Ramsay arrived. Malcolm let him in and Ainslie raced to him, throwing herself in his arms.

*

Ramsay caught Ainslie as she flung herself against him. His heart swelled with love. The woman he loved also loved him—whether she admitted it or not, and he could wait for the words. This was a declaration in itself. “Don’t get me wrong. I love the attention, but what happened?” He caressed her face gently.

“Ainslie thought you were in danger.”

“Richard?” Ramsay chuckled at the thought. “He’s not smart. I saw the knife way before he tried to use it. I disarmed him easily.” He looked at Malcolm. “He was too obvious.”

Malcolm nodded in agreement. “He always did that in training.”

“Yep, too eager to kill.”

“It’s a failing that will eventually kill him,” Malcolm added.

Ainslie pulled back and slapped Ramsay’s chest to get his attention. “Hello? He tried to kill you, James Bond, and you’re taking it all very casually.”

“We’re Summit agents, darlin’; we don’t panic.” Ramsay had to admit part of him liked the fact that Ainslie was so concerned about him. That she cared meant everything to him. But he didn’t want her worrying needlessly about him. Ainslie worried too much as it was. He held her close even though he knew she was embarrassed at her reaction to his arrival. Throwing herself at him like this was a big statement of intent. She squirmed deliciously in his arms as she tried to escape him, every luscious curve meeting and rubbing against his flesh. He wanted to kick Malcolm out the door and make love to her once more.

“Well, I’m a call centre operator and we have the sense to know when there’s danger,” she answered back.

“So Richard is out of the loop—if he was ever in it. I don’t believe that Ascanius would have taken him seriously for a second.” Malcolm seemed certain of that.

Ramsay had to agree. Varlian was a small-time player with big ideas and no balls of his own to carry them out. “He was just in it long enough to find out about what you were doing.” That a prick like Varlian could be the means to have someone like Malcolm killed angered him.

“Yes, but there’s nothing I can do about that, is there, old friend?”

Ainslie succeeded in freeing herself. “You’re both taking this all so calmly.”

Passionate. That’s what Ainslie Croft was. Passionate and sweet and he could hardly wait until all this was over to start his life with her. The solitary trip he had planned to North Africa now excited him, knowing Ainslie would be with him. Yes, maybe he was counting his chickens before they hatched, but he knew this was his woman. He just had to make her believe it.

“What do you want us to do?” He teased her by tweaking her nose.

Ainslie swatted his hand away. “I don’t know—form a posse—hunt him down. What do you spies normally do?”

Ramsay laughed at her words. What a woman. “He’s too cunning.”

“I believe we need to re-create the way we all met,” Malcolm added. “If we go back to the beginning then I think we can find a way to solve most problems.”

“Only problem with that is I never met him at the cemetery. He came to me in my

dream.”

“Yeah, but I’m betting Ascanius is willing to go to you if he thinks you are vulnerable.” That seemed logical to Ramsay. Besides, he had no intention of Ainslie actually being defenseless. He would be there to make sure. “We want to watch him and assess how he deals with you.”

“So you may not even capture him?” Ainslie sounded disappointed.

“Sometimes it’s better to analyze an opponent to allow a successful capture,” Malcolm explained. “Ascanius has proved elusive. We need to know what he’s thinking to get the best chance of destroying him.”

“I’m not doing the skinned knees thing again. Twice was enough.”

“My darlin’, nothing and no one will ever hurt you again.” It was a promise set in stone as far as Ramsay was concerned. “Malcolm?”

The man nodded his head. “Ah yes, I guess I’ll be going then. Let me know when you’re ready to go to the cemetery.”

“Let’s do it now and get it over and done with.” Ainslie looked ready for a fight.

Ramsay admired her determination and courage. But he had another plan in mind. The more the lady relaxed, the better able she would be able to cope with whatever came their way. “Give us an hour, Malcolm.”

Ainslie turned to Ramsay in surprise. “Why? I’m ready now.”

Malcolm chuckled and disappeared.

“You threw yourself into my arms.” Ramsay would never forget that moment. “What was that about?”

“I was sort of worried.”

“Sort of?”

“Well, who am I going to have sex with if you get yourself killed?”

Such bravado. Just call it what it is, darlin’. Love. “I see, so all of this is about sex?”

Ainslie nodded, seemingly happy to go with that explanation. “Yes. You’re awfully good at it.”

“Nothing to do with love maybe?” Ramsay smiled at the audible gulp from Ainslie. *Oh yeah, she loves me.* The thought made him feel more powerful than ever.

“I’m, um, well, I like you a lot and…”

“And?”

Her hands went to her hips in defense. “What d’you want from me?”

“Everything.” He reached over and secured her hand in his. “Come with me.”

“Where?” Ainslie wasn’t about to move.

Ramsay tugged her hand until she stumbled against him. “You need to relax.” His arm slipped around her waist to hold her close.

“Oh.”

“You sound disappointed.” That she needed him as much as he needed her was more exciting than winning the lottery. Money came and went but love was a constant.

“Well, I thought—”

“That we’d have sex?” He moved them along toward the bathroom. “Oh yeah, that’s the plan. Ever had sex in a bath?” The thought of all the soft, shiny wet flesh bouncing up and down against his body made Ramsay’s cock jerk in anticipation of that first sweet thrust. “It’s very relaxing.”

* * * *

“There’s water all over the floor, James Bond.” Ainslie was astride Ramsay’s thighs, her hands wrapped around his cock in the warm, foamy water.

“So?” Ramsay massaged her soapy breasts.

Damn, that feels good. “Well, I’ll have to clean it up. I hate cleaning. It’s not relaxing.” Ainslie gave his cock a gentle pull to get his attention.

“Darlin,’ I will clean and cook and do whatever I have to do to make you happy.”

That sounded like every woman’s dream. A man who was not only sexy but able to understand the way to a woman’s heart was through doing the domestic chores. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Is this a dream?” The cock in her hands felt real, but in her experience anything this good was often not real.

Ramsay leaned in and kissed her. “Climb on board and you tell me.”

As much as Ainslie wanted to, she couldn’t. “Small—er, big problem. No condom.” One day, maybe it wouldn’t be an issue, but right now it was. “I don’t suppose you have one in your jeans outside?” She pushed back from him, letting go of his shaft.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Can you summon it forth by magic?” Leaving the warm relaxation of the bathtub was not something Ainslie was keen to do.

“Nope.”

“So we get out of the bath.”

“Yep.”

“I really, really want to have sex in a bath.”

“Seriously?”

Ainslie gave an over-the-top dramatic sigh. “Never mind.”

“Oh man.” Ramsay scrambled up. Water went everywhere. His foam-covered cock bobbed frantically. “Stay here.”

Ainslie smiled. This was fun. She had a man who was so hot for her that he would do anything she bid. *I could get used to this.* She lay back and looked at Ramsay. Ainslie made sure her breasts were exposed. She liked the way Ramsay swallowed hard when he looked at them. *Nice to see I’m not the only one out of control.* “Hurry back.” She watched as he ran carefully over the tiles. His bare ass made her lick her lips. *What would that be like to bite?*

The sound of Ramsay running through the house over the polished bare floorboards was only halted for a moment by frantic swearing. Ainslie could just see Ramsay trying to find the condom and keeping what was left of his control in check. She heard him running back to her.

“I stubbed my toe.” He hurriedly worked the rubber over his shaft.

“Poor baby.”

“I expect you to kiss it better.”

Ainslie moved to the side of the bath. “Come here.” She leaned over and kissed the condom-covered tip.

“That’s not my toe.”

“Thank goodness, as you’d have a hell of a hard time finding shoes.”

Ramsay stepped back into the bath. Water sloshed everywhere. “You are going to drive me mad.” He sat down and tapped his thighs. “Come here, darlin’.”

Ainslie was more than ready to suck hot cock inside her body. She lifted up over

him, then pushed down, sighing as the heat penetrated up and into her. “Oh...”

Ramsay caressed her back, pulling her closer. “See how good we are together?”

“This doesn’t get you out of cleaning up the water.” She moved up and down in a leisurely plunging motion. Ainslie wanted him slow and deep.

He had other ideas. Ramsay grabbed her hips and started to move her faster. “I can’t hold on much longer.”

“The real James Bond would have more control.” Secretly she was thrilled he was out of control for her.

“I promise after the cemetery I will lick you from nose to toes real slowly.”

That sounded good. “I’ll hold you to that.” Ainslie increased her pace in line with his demands.

Ramsay cupped her breasts. “It will be my pleasure. But right now I need to come.” His mouth met hers and he kissed her slow and deep, tongues twisting and tasting.

Ainslie gave in to his kiss. The sheer thrill of it made her hotter than she thought possible. She rode him faster and harder, wanting to push them both over the edge. She was so close to coming.

“Fuck,” Ramsay growled as his hips started to jerk on release. He held on to Ainslie as he kept thrusting.

She was more spurred on by the look of intense passion in his eyes than anything else. Ainslie gripped his shoulders and slammed her body up and down on his. On each downward stroke a wild rush of excitement made her pant harder and harder until the last one made her scream.

Ramsay laughed at her reaction. “You liked that?”

Ainslie could barely speak. There were so many competing sensations tearing through her body. She was so hot, yet she shivered. She wanted more but her legs were spent and she couldn’t get close enough to Ramsay even though she was plastered against his chest and impaled on his cock. “Bath time is fun,” she managed to croak out.

Chapter Eleven

Ainslie sat on a bench at the cemetery and wondered what she was supposed to do. Ramsay and Malcolm were somewhere nearby. They expected the necromancer to approach her. That made sense, in a strange way. Basically she was sitting out in the open inviting trouble. Good plan—not. Lucretia knew of their plan and she wasn't happy about it.

"I am against this but I understand it has to be done. Remain focused and remember he is only a mortal man."

"Who kills people and then brings them back to half life," Ainslie added, half-serious, half joking.

"Nah, he won't kill you; he wants you." Lucretia smiled and wished her luck.

"So comforting—not," Ainslie muttered to herself as she looked around the cemetery. When would Ascanius turn up? Even without the threat of him, it was not the smartest thing to do, sitting in a deserted graveyard. God knows what her workplace thought with all the time she was taking off. She had no idea what she would put on a sick leave certificate to cover this. *Ridding the world of a bad guy? The undead made me do it?* "Oh wait, I think that one's probably been done before." Ainslie hated her job anyway, so what did it really matter? There were more important things in life than listening to people whine about their phone service through a headset.

She looked around the cemetery. It was quite peaceful, though she was sitting here waiting for a madman. Her mother and Jacinta were not buried here; they had been interred elsewhere. Guilt nagged at Ainslie, reminding her she had not visited their gravesite for a month. She tried to go regularly as it made her feel closer to them.

She thought about Malcolm. How horrible it would be to have a grave waiting for him but he could not rest in it. Not that Ainslie believed your bones disintegrating back into the earth was the end of you. She believed that the physical body died, but not the spirit. She knew that somewhere her mother and Jacinta were waiting for her when her time came. It was not a scary thought.

"Woolgathering, Ainslie?"

She stiffened as Ascanius sat beside her. *Crap*. She was supposed to be paying attention and working at being focused—not daydreaming. As much as she would have liked to move away from him, to do so would suggest fear and there was no way she would award him with that. "What is it you want?"

"Why you, my dear." Ascanius looked at her as if that was only too obvious.

"You know that's not going to happen." Ainslie hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. Knowing that Ramsay and Malcolm were nearby helped.

Ascanius assessed her with interest. "You are stronger now than before. I find that intriguing and quite a turn-on."

Oh puke. "And I find you more annoying." Ainslie knew she had to keep calm because only by being so could she keep herself safe. "You must know that your time is limited."

"Maybe, maybe not." He crossed his legs at the ankles and relaxed as if he did not have a care in the world. "You can make things easier on everyone if you come with me."

“Um, gee, I don’t think so,” she responded, overly sweet. Was he mad? Did he think she was just going to say, “Okay, sure”?

“If you do, I will free Malcolm and those like him. Added to that, I will not kill your lover, Balfour.”

“He’s not my—” *He’s yanking your chain. Do not bite back.* The man was very good at pushing her buttons to get her to react. She could almost hear Lucretia’s voice telling her to collect herself. “Forgive me for saying so, but I have trust issues when it comes to you, Ascanius.”

“I only want you now.” Ascanius leered at her.

Did any woman find that sort of lecherous, wolflike smile sexy? On this guy it was downright vile. “For what reason do you want me?” And if it was for sex he could think again. Maybe in the past she had been scared of what others thought of her scars. The idea of sex with him was more repulsive than any scarring could ever be.

“Power.”

That he, or anyone else, thought she had power fascinated Ainslie. She honestly felt at times she was the most powerless person on the planet. “I have no great power.” If she had, she would have used it before this point to sort her own life out. It had taken the undead and a sexy agent to make her scars seem like the least of her concerns. “Besides, do you honestly think you’re not going to get caught?”

He chuckled confidently at her words. “I believe that I have influential sources to stop that from happening.”

“Some black magic voodoo weirdo playing satanic games in his basement?” Her words were dismissive, though she knew he was most likely talking about a scarier force. Demons. But then, did they exist? Probably; other evil, rapacious creatures did. Look at politicians.

“Some call them that.”

It was true; the greedy were not smart. “Haven’t you worked out that your ‘influential sources’ are only using you to get what they want?” No one, in Ainslie’s experience, ever did anything for nothing, and bad guys were the best at screwing you around.

“Maybe, but that’s how life is, Ainslie. Use or be used.” Ascanius scanned the grounds. “So where are they?”

“Who?” She could feign nonchalance as much as she liked but they both knew she had not come alone.

“The menfolk—or are they waiting for me to do something evil?” He sighed dramatically. “I’m going to have to disappoint them. The only thing I want is you. Ainslie Croft, you can free or save many people if you agree to come to me.”

“That’s blackmail, and I don’t make deals with terrorists.” For that was what he was. Anyone who dealt in fear was to be loathed, not dreaded. Only weak people terrorized.

“Call it what you like. The thing is, you are useful to me. The innocent such as you are always so deliciously corruptible.” Ascanius stood up and brushed down his clothes in a fussy manner.

Ainslie arched her eyebrow at him. “Black is so hard to keep neat sometimes, isn’t it?” Her tone was cynical and flippant.

“Quite.” Ascanius murmured in response, as if he was not happy that she wasn’t as scared as he wanted her to be. “You have the fate of many in your hands, my dear. Think

about it. What would you do if your precious Ramsay died? You know how to find me when you make your decision.” He turned and walked away.

*

Ramsay moved over to her quickly. It had killed him watching Ainslie deal with Ascanius alone. Malcolm had to hold him back several times from rushing over there and punching the man out for even daring to sit beside her. “What did he say?” He was relieved she looked no worse for what had happened. Slightly stressed, yes, but not hysterical. Ramsay admired the woman more and more each day.

“Ascanius wants me,” Ainslie replied matter-of-factly.

“I want you.” Ramsay smiled at the instant blush that rose to her cheeks. Despite what they were involved in, she made him feel good just being near her. Maybe it was his masculine instinct to protect her. Maybe he enjoyed her reaction to the mere thought of making love. That one moment in her bedroom had been unforgettable. *Get a grip, man.* Work first and pleasure later, when they had time to savor it properly.

“It’s a different type of wanting.” Ainslie looked into his eyes despite her shyness.

Indeed. It was a wanting to be wary of. Ascanius would not mess around. He had proved that in the past with Malcolm and who knew how many others. “We should have grabbed him when we had the chance.” Had they missed their opportunity? Sometimes watching and assessing was good; sometimes it annoyed the hell out of Ramsay when he just wanted to act.

Malcolm sighed as if he had been over this path with his friend before. “No, we need to get him when he is weak. We need to find out everything we can about Ascanius and break him so that I and others can be freed. What we know about him is limited. If he is too strong and cocky he will never crumble and we will never rid ourselves of him.” He turned to Ramsay. “I know you want action, but—”

“I know; I have to hurry up and wait.” It was a saying the two of them had used a lot in the past. But Ainslie had not been endangered in his past, and waiting was not an agreeable option. He looked at the woman in question. What was going on in her mind? That she trusted him partway with her thoughts made him happy, but he wanted to know as much as he could about her. Ramsay knew a loner like Ainslie did not give up all her thoughts and secrets easily. That was okay. He had a lifetime to work them out. *Be patient.* “Are you okay?”

“Sure,” she responded evenly, her eyes thoughtful.

Ramsay knew Ainslie was planning something. He just hoped she would let him in on it before it was too late. “I need you to be safe.” It would kill him to lose her now after finding her.

“I’m not going to do anything dumb.”

* * * *

That night the plan had been to sit and watch schlock 1950s horror films to keep herself awake. That was what she had told Ramsay when she had declined his offer to stay. Part of her wanted him to while another part of her knew she had to keep some independence. While sex with him was fantastic, she needed space to think without it clouding her judgment. Would she end up with Ramsay? Maybe, maybe not. If she did, she planned on keeping her individuality. She had seen too many couples where the partners became clones of each other. “I want more than that. I want the man and my

independence.” So with that thought she had slumped on the sofa and watched flying saucers connected by string terrorize a community.

When exactly she had fallen asleep she did not know until the most vivid dream gripped her and made her wake up screaming.

Ainslie had been in a chapel. There had been wooden pews, flowers, and Bibles neatly stacked in a row on a shelf. Ascanius had also been in the chapel. He had smiled and drawn out a gun. The shot he fired had hit Ramsay in the chest. It had been sickening to see him clutch the wound and fall to the ground in agony. In her dream Ainslie had rushed to him, dropping to her knees as she tried to stem the flow of blood. She was crying because there was so much blood and Ascanius was laughing at her. “You could have saved him if you’d just come with me.” Blood spilled on her clothes as she pulled Ramsay into her arms and begged him not to die. Ainslie had then woken up with a jerk and a sob. She looked down at her clothes. There was no blood. As much as that relieved her, she knew that in itself meant nothing.

“This cannot be. I will not allow it.” She stood up and snapped off the television set. “I will not allow frigging fate to force my hand this time and let this happen,” Ainslie declared to herself as she reached over and grabbed her cordless phone, punching in a familiar number. “I have to stop this madness now any way I can.”

Lucretia answered on the second ring. “Another dream?”

“Ramsay is going to die in my arms.” Just saying it tore at her heart and made Ainslie sick.

“You saw it?”

“I felt it, I know it.” Ainslie described to her friend what happened in the chapel. “I know it’s in a chapel somewhere. I want to find it but I don’t know where to start looking.” Tired, she ran a hand through her hair. “And I fear finding it because I have the horrible fear the dream will come true. I have to locate Ascanius’s weakness and destroy him first and I have to do it quickly, Lucretia.”

“Okay, so how do you want to go about this?”

“I don’t know.” Ainslie hated being so indecisive. “All I know is Ramsay’s life is at stake and I have to do everything I can to save him.”

“You love him. I’m pleased.”

“I don’t want to name what I feel yet. It’s too soon.” Okay, yes, it was probably love, but she needed to deal with one thing at a time. Saving Ramsay was on the top of her list.

“Coward,” Lucretia responded smugly.

“Whatever.” Ainslie could live with justified name-calling if it kept Ramsay alive. “I need to know about the occult.” That was what Ascanius dealt in. She would fight fire with fire.

“Why?” Lucretia sounded wary.

“Because I believe this evil bastard deals in it and I want to use it against him.”

Lucretia let out a deep sigh. “I’m not happy about this.”

“At this moment happiness is irrelevant; sorting out this problem is more important.”

“Okay, there is a Spooky Girls member who can advise you in occult matters, but it’s a very dangerous subject to discuss,” Lucretia warned her.

“More dangerous than what’s happening now?”

“Those who summon evil have powerful allies who like to keep their clients to themselves.”

“I don’t give a damn. Ramsay’s life is in danger and I’ll take on all hell to stop Ascanius.”

“Okay, if I could think of another option to help you I would make you do that, but I fear you’re taking the right yet dangerous path.” Lucretia sighed deeply. “I’ll set it up for you to meet Cindy in an hour.”

“Cindy doesn’t sound like a dark name.” Cindy of the occult? Cindy and the demons? Sounded like a pop group.

“Darkness hides in us all regardless of our name, Ainslie. You know that better than anyone.”

Chapter Twelve

Early that morning, she met Cindy at her home across town. She turned out to be a little wizened old lady who dressed like a 1960s hippie. In her ring-bedecked hand she held a suspiciously rolled cigarette. “The true occult is the study of wisdom, the mystical, and the unknown. Just because something belongs in the realm of paranormal it does not mean it is evil or dark. Unfortunately, the occult has been taken to another level by those who like to indulge in trendy fads and those who pay real tribute to Satan.” Cindy blew a smoke ring and studied Ainslie quietly.

“Satan really exists?” Ainslie was fairly sure what Cindy was smoking wasn’t legal but it was not up to her to make judgments about others. She needed facts and, as Lucretia believed Cindy was the best person to help her, that was all she needed to know.

“As many believe God exists—Satan exists. There is always a yin to a yang. You and I both have those who complement us, chickie.”

Immediately Ainslie thought about Ramsay. He was her opposite and her equal. “Okay, so how do you think I should I deal with Ascanius?”

“You need to find his weakness. Everyone has at least one that if tapped into can weaken them enough to destroy them. With those who call on dark forces, their weakness is so great it overwhelms them to the point that they believe what they are doing is justified. Then the dark power consumes them and they believe they are invincible.” Cindy dragged momentarily on her cigarette. “Darkness is a drug to them that places them in an unfeeling state where they can deal with whatever eats at them, effectively ignoring it.” Cindy flicked some ash off her cigarette into an ashtray. “Think about Ascanius. What does your instinct tell you about him?”

“That he’s an evil bastard.”

Cindy snorted in amusement at her words. “That’s surface stuff—go deeper.”

Ainslie thought about the man in question. “He says he needs me.” It was strange after all this time that anyone needed her—even the demented.

“He wants you because you are powerful and you are an innocent.”

Ainslie snorted. “I’m hardly that.”

“I’m not talking about sex, chickie. I’m talking about being pure of heart.”

“How do you know I am?” Like anyone, Ainslie had many dark thoughts she kept to herself.

Another smoke ring was blown. “I see all.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Don’t give me crap, chickie.” Cindy looked at her sharply. “I have seen evil that you cannot begin to imagine. As you have scars, so do I.” She reached up and covered her left eye with her hand.

Ainslie’s own eyes widened and her mouth dropped open as Cindy popped her eye out. “Okay, you win.”

“Damn straight.” Cindy replaced her glass eye. “Now, where were we?”

“Um, er—innocence.”

“Right. So think about Ascanius.”

Ainslie shook her head to clear it. The whole eyeball popping thing had thrown her.

“He has no innocence.”

“And why is that?” Cindy asked as if she already knew the answer.

“Because he lost it.”

“How?”

“Because maybe something crippled him in life and he lost faith in himself.” Ainslie was beginning to see Ascanius in a different light. Wounds—physical or mental—scarred people. It was how the individual reacted to them that defined one as a person. Ainslie had hidden and maybe Ascanius was lashing out in anger.

“And how do you find the source of a problem, Ainslie?”

Jeez, twenty questions when all she could focus on was the dream with Ramsay and wonder which chapel it was. She never went to church. Ainslie had lost faith in God after her sister died and she’d stopped believing altogether after her mother was stricken with cancer. She mentally slapped herself. *Okay, focus.* Cindy was asking valid questions. How did she find the answer to what had happened to Ascanius? What would make a mortal man delve into evil? Suddenly the answer came to her. It was obvious. “The Internet.” Cindy looked at her in surprise as if she had not been expecting that answer. “I’ll Google him.” Controversial people always had secrets and those secrets usually found their way to the World Wide Web.

“I was going to suggest meditation to find the answers, chickie.”

“I don’t have the time for gazing at my navel.” The Internet was fast, efficient, and as contemplative as Ainslie wanted to be at that moment.

“Just remember, in your rush to save your man, you make yourself vulnerable.”

“Got it.”

“And keep your eyes peeled.”

“Riiiiight.”

* * * *

Back home once more, Ainslie tapped the keys on her computer and brought up Google. “Well, frig—what is Ascanius’s real name?” Damn, she had not thought about that. It was highly unlikely that he was called Ascanius for real. Ainslie typed the name into the search engine and came up with several pages of information about an ancient Roman warrior called Ascanius. He had also been known as “Lulus” or “Julus.” “Well, that doesn’t bloody help at all.” Ainslie clicked on another entry and got the same information. She scanned farther down the page.

Entry number ten was “Welcome to the Dark World of Ascanius.” That sounded promising. She entered the site. Blackness dissolved into bloodred and Ascanius’s face came up on the page. Bingo. “The pretentious prick has a Web site and a fan base.” That was not surprising. Anyone could have a Web site. But him having one was particularly dangerous. She read on and discovered he had made a fantasy character out of himself. His character was a demon who fought those who opposed him. “Oh boy, creepy and dangerous—not just demented and power obsessed.” However, Ainslie knew there was no fantasy about him. But the hits to his Web site and the comments made were from people who believed otherwise.

Ainslie clicked on the various pages that comprised the Web site. There were various photos of him looking his malevolent best. The thing was, he was not an unattractive man. She could see how people would be drawn to him. What did he plan to do with the

fan base he had? Was it just for the purposes of stroking his ego, or was he going to use some of these people? "That's a scary thought." These people did not have a clue what they were getting involved in.

She thought back to the Roman warrior called Ascanius who she'd just read about. What were his other names? Ainslie flicked back to that page. "Lulus or Julius," she murmured to herself. Suddenly an idea came to her. Could Ascanius be called either of those names in real life? She typed them in. Not surprisingly, the same information about the Roman soldier came up once more. "Bugger," Ainslie cursed softly. "Think, woman." The name Julius was similar to Lulus. As she thought that, a sudden surge of energy flashed through her and she knew that felt instantly right to her. "Okay, good, but Julius what?" How many men were called Julius in the world? "Lots," Ainslie told herself. She went back to his Web site and went through the pages carefully. There had to be something there that would give her a clue. Everyone slipped up somehow. No one was ever truly anonymous as people were always linked back to their real identity somewhere on the net. Ainslie became frustrated as nothing obvious seemed to jump out at her. She pictured the man she knew as Ascanius in her mind. The stylized photos on the Web site were not the man. They glorified evil and made him out to be immortal. He was not. In essence, Ascanius was just a human, flawed like any other.

Gut instinct told her the name Julius was right. But what was his surname? She concentrated on the faces of the Web site. Thousands of words whirled past as she searched for any sort of clue to his identity. She stopped suddenly on the word "Arano." He was one of the demon game players on Ascanius's Web site game City of Doom. Going by Arano's bio, he was the hero who could save all and nothing stood in his way. His avatar was blond like Ascanius. Coincidence? "I think not." Ainslie jotted the name down on a nearby pad. Having exhausted what she considered all possible options, she scrolled down to the bottom of screen where she read the words "Arano Productions 2003-2010."

"Bingo." Ainslie pulled up another Internet page and typed in the words "Julius Arano." Several hits jumped up on her screen. All had to do with a man who had lost his wife in a car accident six months ago. He had been speeding in the rain and the car had slammed into a tree on the south side of Brisbane. The wife had died instantly and the man had been charged with negligent driving. It was tragic stuff. Ainslie clicked on another page and a newspaper shot of Ascanius's face came on screen. "Hello, Julius." She knew then the death of his wife was his weakness. *Can I exploit something so painful?* "Hell yes, he started this game."

A sudden thought occurred to her. Was he doing all this playing with death stuff to try to bring his wife back? Ainslie knew grief made people irrational, but could it make them this crazy? She clicked on several more Internet articles until she came across the wife's photograph. Her name was Lisa and she had been quite lovely.

"Death truly does not pick favorites." The innocent and the attractive died as easily as the evil and the bizarre. She typed into the computer the Web site address for the electronic telephone directory. Ainslie was surprised to find a Julius Arano listed. Was he so sure of himself that he wasn't worried about anyone finding him? What the hell did he do in normal life? Ainslie had to find out more so she copied down the address. He lived in a neighboring suburb not more than ten minutes from her own home. As she finished taking the details down, her phone rang. It was Ramsay checking up on her.

“No, I’m not running with scissors,” Ainslie assured him in cynical amusement. It was strange yet nice to have someone care for her. “Nor will I open the door to strangers.” His rich, smooth chuckle in response sent a shiver of delight down her back.

“What are you doing then, darlin’?”

“Nothing much.” Ainslie knew if he was aware that she planned to track down Ascanius, or in this case Julius, by normal nonpsychic means he would tell her to stay out of it. That didn’t work for her. Ainslie was not someone who did as she was told. “What are you up to today?” *And are our paths going to cross?* She really did not need to duck and weave to avoid Ramsay.

“Why?” There was the sound of amused suspicion in his voice.

“No reason.”

“I think you’re a woman who always has a reason,” Ramsay responded. “Have you had another dream?”

“No.” The word shot out quicker than she had intended it to. But the thing was, she would not accept his death. In her eyes, denial made it so.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” *Just going to kick Ascanius’s suburban ass.*

“Ainslie, I know you’re lying.”

And he was right, but she had her reasons. “You don’t know me well enough to say that.”

“Don’t I?”

“Sex is not knowledge.”

“I never mentioned sex,” he responded. “I think you have sex on the brain.”

“I do not.” She clamped her legs together. His words came back to her. *I promise after the cemetery I will lick you from nose to toes real slowly.*

“I still plan on licking you, darlin’.”

Yay! “I forgot all about that.”

“Yeah, right.” Ramsay sighed in exasperation. “Don’t do anything silly.”

“As if I would.” Ainslie saw the dream flashback in her mind. “Don’t you go doing something silly either, James Bond.” She had to go and fall in love with a hero. They did stuff like that without thinking of the cost.

“You know, darlin’, we really have to talk about what’s between us after this is over.”

“Yes.” *Please God you’ll be alive.*

“I want to be with you, Ainslie. Anything that worries you or makes you feel uncomfortable, I need to know about. After all this is sorted, we’ll have all the time in the world.” Ramsay sounded confident in that fact.

And time was something Ainslie knew she did not have.

Chapter Thirteen

Ainslie stood outside Julius Arano's house. It was average, neat, and suburban. It was hard to believe the Ascanius she knew lived here. Someone like him should live in a Gothic castle complete with dungeons and maybe crocodiles swimming in the moat. But then, clearly by this residence his two personas did not meet. She decided attack was the best form of defense so she walked up the front steps and knocked on the door. There was no answer. She tried again, but still no response.

A neighbor poked her head over the fence, as nosy neighbors did, and called out to Ainslie. "Are you looking for Julius?"

Excellent. She would see what gossip she could glean from this woman. "Why yes, I am." *Tell me all.*

"He's at work, at the primary school. He teaches fifth grade there."

School? He was a teacher? Seriously? The man was responsible for molding young minds? Ainslie's own mind thought about all the schools she knew were in the area. Riverside Primary was the only one she believed could be considered local. The rest were some distance away. "Of course, it's Riverside he teaches at, isn't it?" She took a punt, hoping it was correct.

The woman smiled brightly and nodded. "Yes, that's it." She moved closer to the fence to chat. "It was a terrible shame about his wife. The poor man throws himself into his work to forget. And all those hours in that basement of his? But I guess a hobby takes his mind off his loss."

Yes, the hobby of black magic and killing people probably did that. "I'll go to the school and catch up with him. Thanks for your help."

When she got to the school, Ainslie contemplated her options. Did she go in with the proverbial guns blazing and rout him out, or did she go home, call Ramsay, and tell him what she'd found out? Good girl versus bad girl?

She didn't have long to contemplate either option because the school bell rang. Ainslie looked at her watch. It was noon—lunchtime. She saw kids come running out of the building, obviously pleased to have a break from learning.

Ainslie sensed Ascanius before she saw him. He was one of three teachers who walked out into the playground, no doubt to perform the rostered duty of supervising children. She watched as the blond man ambled to a position under a tree and stood still. He looked almost too normal in taupe trousers and a pale blue shirt.

Ainslie walked over to him. He had no idea she was approaching, as he had his back to her. However, he suddenly stiffened, then turned around to face her.

"Hello, Julius." She had the edge of surprise on him and she liked it.

"Ainslie." He looked around carefully as if to make sure no one was nearby listening. "Well done. How did you find me?" His hands clenched in fists at his side.

"I have spooky magical powers, remember?" She did not feel the slightest bit intimidated by him. Maybe it was because he wasn't dressed in his usual black, or maybe she had learned not to fear him. "So you're a schoolteacher by day and a necromancer in your spare time. You're a busy boy."

Ascanius smiled at her thinly. "Let's not discuss this here."

"I thought that the all mighty didn't care what others thought of them." What an interesting turn-up. Her knowledge of what he did in his spare time could ruin his career.

"You're pushing your luck, my dear." His words came out in a soft snarl.

"Actually, I really just wanted to come and offer my condolences on your wife's untimely death. Her name was Lisa, wasn't it?" Ainslie shook her head in exaggerated sadness. She did not fail to see the intense pain in his eyes. "Tragic stuff for someone to die so young." *Oh yeah, that was definitely the man's weakness.*

"You have no right talking about my wife."

Ainslie knew by the angry look in his eyes that he wanted to throttle her. "You started this game, Julius. You dragged me in so you must also expect to live with the consequences that come up."

"Oh Ainslie, there is no way you can best me." Ascanius's words were brash and full of bravado.

"Yes I can." She knew that for a fact. Seeing this man now so defenseless made her feel stronger than ever and that had nothing to do with any innate ability she had. "Tell me, Julius, are you looking to bring Lisa back? You can't, you know. She's dead and you killed her. That must eat at your soul." If it had been anyone else she would have felt horrible for her words. But this was Ascanius and he deserved no pity. "It's a damn shame you didn't know all this black magic you've been playing with before she died. Just think, you could have kept her alive like you have Malcolm." Ainslie saw him stagger slightly at her harsh words. "You must have really loved her to be going to all this trouble now."

"Leave here," Ascanius spat out at her.

"And you were speeding, huh? How careless were you? I understand she was quite lovely."

"I will kill you for this."

The evil hiss in his voice sounded frightening but Ainslie had no intention of giving in to the fear he expected in response. "Nah, you need me for whatever sick plan you have." She scanned the children running around the playground. "You're really exceedingly average, aren't you? You're not the big scary-assed guy you make out to be. You teach fifth graders. It's a bit of a comedown from the mighty necromancer you want everyone to fear."

"What do you want?"

"You know what I want."

Ascanius's eyes burned with hatred. "I will not give you or your friends their freedom."

"Oh Julius, how terrible to be so bitter and alone, lashing out at everyone for the ghastly mistake you made." Ainslie could feel the waves of pain and anger coming from him.

"Bitch."

"Now, now, Mr. Arano, what will the children think at such language?"

"You will pay for this."

"Bring it on." Two days ago Ainslie would never have faced him like this. But a lot had changed since then. In fact, her whole life had turned upside down. "I can deal with whatever little party tricks you want to dish out." As she walked away, part of her knew she was pushing fate in a different way, but this time she felt she had a little more control

over it.

* * * *

When Ainslie got home Ramsay was leaning on the hood of his car waiting for her. “Where have you been?”

She watched as the gorgeous man walked toward her and her breath caught. *He wants me despite my fear and my temper—glory be, the man wants me.* “I was just checking out something.” There was no way she was going to tell him about Ascanius the schoolteacher.

“What?”

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

“It worries me when you say it like that.” Ramsay reached for her hand and clasped it in hers.

Sweet, bossy man. “I can look after myself.”

His eyes searched hers for a moment. “Yes, I feel you are stronger somehow.”

“I was always strong. I just forgot how much.” The heat of his touch raced around her body, making her feel more alive than ever. “Why are you here?” Ainslie realized that probably sounded snappish, but it wasn’t meant to be. It was more that she wasn’t used to anyone caring about her one way or the other.

“To see you, darlin’.” Ramsay pulled her close to him, their bodies touching. “I have a promise to keep.”

Mmm ... the licking thing. Ainslie tilted her head and surveyed him. “I’m not accustomed to this much attention.” Over the years she had developed the need to not have anyone in her life. It was hard to get used to the fact that someone she just met could potentially have such a huge part in her life. Ainslie looked at Ramsay’s lips and wondered if she dared make the first move and kiss him as she longed to do.

“Well, get used to it. I’m staying in your life.” It was said as a promise.

The dream she’d had of Ramsay being shot flashed into her mind. The coward’s way would be to break off whatever this was between them now to avoid heartache. However, heartache was assured if she walked away and never saw him again.

“What?” Ramsay looked at her, intrigued. “You look like you have a million thoughts running through your mind.”

“Nothing.” *Liar, liar, pants on fire.*

“You would tell me if there was a problem?” He sounded like he wanted to believe she would.

Belief was always a good thing. Reality was a different matter, though. “Yes, of course, but there is no problem.” To Ainslie’s mind a lie told to save someone pain was not necessarily a lie.

Ramsay shook his head and looked at her doubtfully. “So what you are saying is there is no problem as you see it, but I may see whatever is going on in your mind as a problem.”

The man was smart. She had to give him that. “Don’t try to put words in my mouth.” If she didn’t like him so much she would have told him then and there to push off.

“Ainslie—”

“Ramsay,” she responded in the same frustrated tone.

He wrapped his arms around her, hugging her close as he kissed her lips softly. “I

don't want to lose you," he murmured against her mouth.

Those lips tasted just as good as she remembered. Ainslie wanted to throw herself into kissing him and to forget that anything else was going on her life—scars, ghosts, and megalomaniacal fifth grade schoolteachers. But she couldn't. "Well, the same goes for me."

Ramsay looked pleased at her words. "Is this an admission?"

"Of sorts." Ainslie's wasn't ready for the whole "I love you" thing yet.

"It will do for the moment." Ramsay kissed her with a thoroughness that made her head spin. Ainslie clutched at him, not wanting the moment to end. She didn't care what her neighbors thought of the passionate embrace going on in her driveway. "Oh boy," she murmured as he let her go. Her knees were wobbling and hormones she wasn't even aware she had were doing a happy dance. *Lick me. Suck me.*

"Come with me." He took her hand and led her to the front door. "Key."

Ainslie handed it to him. The whole dominance thing worked for her. Once inside the house, Ramsay kicked the door shut and picked her up in his arms.

"Hey! Don't strain anything important."

Ramsay moved through the house to the kitchen. "Strip." He put her down and turned to the refrigerator.

Ainslie hesitated. "Um, what are you doing?" Was he going to make a sandwich?

He turned back to look at her. "I said strip. Are you waiting for music?"

"No, but—"

"Do it now or no licking."

Ainslie started pulling at her clothes. "You're very bossy."

"And you're slow. I expect you naked by the time I turn back around."

What was he looking for in her fridge? There was nothing of any great note in there. Some leftover lasagna, a couple of apples, a bag of carrots, and a third of a chocolate cake that Lucretia had made.

Ramsay pulled the cake out then turned around and nodded when he saw she was naked. "Good woman; now lie back on the table."

"What are you going to do with that cake?" Her back hit the wooden surface.

"Eat it off you."

Ainslie jerked back up. "Seriously?"

"Oh yeah." Ramsay laid the plate beside her and pushed her back down. "Now don't move." He picked up a gob of cake.

Cold chocolate cake on her breasts made her shiver. Ainslie squirmed as he smeared chocolate frosting from her breasts to her pussy and back up again. Bit by bit the cake was demolished as he covered her skin in chocolate. The last piece of frosting was dabbed on her nose.

"I did promise from nose to toes." Ramsay licked the blob of chocolate off and began his descent down her body.

Ainslie was a trembling wreck after her licked and sucked frosting from her breasts. Her nipples were red and engorged. Her hands shot out to touch him, but Ramsay just pushed them away.

"But I need you."

He looked at her for a moment. "This is about what I want, darlin'." He dragged his tongue down to her ribs, licking each one separately before slipping into the hollow of

her belly button.

“Oh God, you’re trying to kill me.” Ainslie was so wet that she knew she would explode when his tongue touched her clit.

“I’m loving you as you need to be loved,” he murmured against her lower stomach. Ramsay’s mouth poised over her clit for a moment.

His hot breath against her moist flesh made Ainslie arch her hips upward. She whimpered in despair when his mouth skimmed past her pussy and moved to her thighs. “Ramsay!”

“Shush, I’m eating.” He did as he promised and licked down to her toes and started up again.

Ainslie craned her head to the side and saw the bulge in his trousers. “I want cock.”

Ramsay chuckled against her inner thigh. “Not yet.” Instead he plunged his tongue inside her vagina.

The shock of it made Ainslie sit bolt upright. Ramsay lifted one hand and pushed her back, his tongue never leaving his target. Ainslie gripped the sides of the table and tried not to move but it was damn near impossible. His tongue thrust in and out of her just like his cock, and when he touched his thumb to her clit she screamed and came like she had never come before. Her whole body jerked and her head thrashed back and forward. Ramsay did not let up; he just increased the friction of fingers and tongue until Ainslie was a shuddering, panting heap of womanhood on the table.

He stood up and licked his lips. “I must dine here again.” Ramsay leaned over Ainslie and gave her one last smacking kiss. “I have to go.” He touched her face tenderly.

“But what about that?” She pointed out his erection poking at the fabric of his pants.

“I’ll be back later, but for now I have to go. We have an anonymous tip-off for this evening. I have to go and prepare.”

Instantly Ainslie was alert. “Oh yeah? Where?” She hoped she sounded more casual than she felt.

“St Mark’s Chapel. Satanic worshippers are supposed to be meeting there. We think they could be linked to Ascanius.”

That had to be the chapel she saw in her dream. St Mark’s—where was that again? “Do you have to go?” Ainslie knew he did. Her dreams played out despite her wishes to the contrary.

“It’s what I do, darlin’.” Ramsay reluctantly released her.

“Be careful, James Bond.” It was more a prayer than a warning.

“Always.” He kissed her once more. “I have you to come back to now.”

Ainslie watched him drive away. She knew she had to act fast, but what to do? *Hmm ... maybe getting dressed first would be a good idea.* Ascanius was momentarily stunned by her unmasking him, but she knew he would regroup. She dressed, then raced to ring Lucretia. “How do you summon the dead?”

“What?” the usually unflappable Lucretia shrieked.

Quickly Ainslie told her about Julius and Lisa.

“You can get into some serious trouble playing around with spirits.”

“Jeez, I’ve dealt with enough pissed-off ghosts in my time that I don’t think a possibly cranky spirit is going to worry me. Besides, how much more trouble can I get into?”

Lucretia sighed in exasperation. “You want to summon his wife to destroy him.”

“Yes.” If they could make the man vulnerable then they could eliminate the threat he posed. Ascanius was probably an ordinary, average guy but for the keeping the dead alive thing. “Well, not so much for her to destroy him, but she is his weakness.”

“As Ramsay is yours.”

That was true. Ainslie could not deny the man was under her skin. “I cannot watch him die.” She had lost too many people she loved and she refused to stand by helplessly and let another perish.

“You know you are really pushing the friendship, Ainslie.” Lucretia sounded peeved yet resigned to the inevitable.

Ainslie knew her friend would help her. She had never let her down yet. “Hey, you’re the one who introduced me to the whole Spooky Girls thing. You keep saying you want me to be more active, so I am.”

“I meant in fellowship, woman.”

“I’ll do that later. At the moment survival mode is more important.” Ainslie was not a team player. The Spooky Girls had seemed to understand that and they waited patiently for her to come to them. “I’ll look up the whole summoning the dead thing on the Internet if you won’t tell me.” She instantly knew what response she would get to this.

“No, do not do that. I’ll tell you what I know.” Lucretia’s voice sounded reconciled to the fact that she could not do anything else. “I can’t have you getting yourself killed.”

“You’re a wonderful woman, Lucretia.”

“And you are so bloody vexing.”

“I know. So tell me.”

Chapter Fourteen

The spell to summon the dead seemed awfully simple. You just needed a photo of the deceased and the will to do it. Ainslie had expected more involved stuff like you saw in the movies but then, you paid for the thrill of that adventure. This was anything but. Necessity was rarely ever thrilling. The photo had been easy to get off the Internet. She had momentarily contemplated trying to summon Jacinta and her mother, but Ainslie realized that she would see them when she was ready to. Summoning Lisa Arano was a matter of urgency. Lucretia explained the deceased would only appear if they wanted to. Ainslie hoped like hell Lisa would.

She sat down on the carpet and once more lit candles. Ainslie focused on the woman in the picture. She was quite lovely. How had she come to be with Ascanius? Had he always had that maniacal edge within him? No one but the parties involved ever really knew what went on in a couple's relationship. Things got hidden. Or was it a case of lost love embittering Julius Arano, making him turn into Ascanius in his guilt? Whatever it was, she knew she needed to concentrate. After forty minutes of staring at the picture and trying to will a dead woman to come to her, Ainslie was over the whole raising the dead thing.

"Frigging hell, what a waste of time this was." She threw the photo on the carpet and leaned forward to blow out the candle. Ainslie knew that everyone had some psychic ability and that it was just a matter of whether they chose to use it or not. Despite what everyone thought her powers were, this clearly wasn't one of them. As the flame was extinguished, she felt a sudden rush of soft warmth enter the room. The fine hairs on the back of her neck stood up and her heart rate quickened in anticipation. Was this Lisa Arano? "Cripes, I hope it's not someone else," Ainslie muttered to herself warily. She had enough to deal with without summoning strangers to answer her call. "Lisa?" She looked around her and waited for—well, what? A wraithlike spirit? A full-bodied woman?

Or in this case, a soft voice that whispered in her ear, making her jump.

"Who are you?" the voice asked. It was not unfriendly, merely curious.

"My name is Ainslie and I need to talk to you about your Julius." Although she could not see the woman she felt her presence near her.

"Julius?" There was great love in the spirit's voice.

Ainslie realized she had been holding her breath hoping Lisa Arano would listen to her. She let it go in a rush, words tumbling out the same way. "Yeah, he's doing some stuff he shouldn't."

"I know."

Well, duh. Of course she did. Ainslie had heard somewhere the spirits remained connected and watched over those they loved. "So I need you to talk to Julius." *He's been a bad, evil sod.*

Lisa sighed sadly. "He has shut himself off from me."

Crap. This was not what Ainslie wanted to hear. "I'm sure it's because he's still grieving and he's not thinking clearly."

"Yes," Lisa whispered in agreement.

“He has hurt a lot of people and I fear he will hurt more.” And there was no way Ainslie was going to let him injure Ramsay.

“I worry that he will.”

“Can you please try talking to him again?”

“Yes.”

“Will you come to me again if I call?” Hopefully without the forty-minute delay next time, Ainslie almost added impatiently. But then, spirits probably had stuff to do like everyone else.

“Yes.” The word was uttered as a simple promise.

“Thank you.” Ainslie was grateful for whatever aces she could stash up her sleeve when dealing with Ascanius.

* * * *

As churches went, St Mark’s was like any other to Ainslie. But then, she wasn’t religious and she wasn’t there to convert to their faith or seek forgiveness. She was there to stop fate from making her dream come horribly true. She crept warily inside. Ainslie did not want Ramsay to see her and question why she was there. She had not made up a good enough lie yet that she thought he would believe. It would not take much for Ramsay to put two and two together and work out she was at the church due to a dream. Luckily for her, there seemed to be no one around. That gave her plenty of time to scope the area out and work out the best place to hide and yet not miss out on being able to influence what happened. It was her dream and she had every intention of changing the conclusion.

Ainslie looked around her. It was all like her dream. There were the wooden pews, flowers bedecked the chapel in tasteful array, and Bibles were neatly stacked in a row on a shelf. She wished that she had some cunning plan in mind to save her man but at this moment, other than calling on a dead woman for input, she had nothing. When she heard the sound of footsteps coming from the side door she dashed over to the pulpit and hid. Thankfully it was the large, old-fashioned kind. It wasn’t the ideal hiding place, but it was all she had. She peered around the corner of it and saw Ramsay and Malcolm. Both looked grim but determined.

“The sooner all of this is over then the sooner Ainslie and I can get on with our lives.” Ramsay surveyed his surroundings, flexing his hands into fists as if ready for a fight.

Malcolm smiled softly. “You really love her, don’t you?”

“Yes, she is my future. I have never felt this way about any woman before. I cannot let Ascanius threaten her.”

“Ainslie is very strong willed.”

Ramsay chuckled lightly at his words. “Yes, but she is adorable and I will do whatever I can to make her happy.” He clapped his friend on the shoulder. “And I intend to make sure it will free you from this wretched existence Ascanius has placed you in.”

“I would like to be in peace.”

“You will, my friend. The key is Ascanius.”

“Did I hear someone mention my name?” The necromancer sauntered into the church like he did not have a care in the world.

Crap. This was happening faster than Ainslie imagined it would. There had been not

time for any plans or smart ideas. It was action straightaway. She watched surreptitiously as the three men faced off. They were positioned exactly as she remembered in her dream. "Lisa," she summoned softly and in panic.

"You have two options, Ascanius," Ramsay said as he looked the blond man in the eye. "You either come with us peacefully now or this will end badly for you."

Ascanius laughed at his words. "My, my, aren't you supposed to be a law-abiding man, Balfour?"

"If you want to flout the law I'll take whatever measures I believe are necessary."

Ainslie saw a muscle jump tightly in Ramsay's jaw and she knew something very bad was going to happen. "Lisa," she hissed out again. Where was she? They'd had an agreement, after all.

"I am here," Lisa Arano whispered softly.

Ainslie felt relief shoot through her body as the familiar warmth touched her. "Thank God. Please talk to Julius." Ainslie turned her attention back to the men, waiting to see what reaction Ascanius had. Hopefully it would be enough to distract him temporarily so Ramsay and Malcolm could capture him.

"You're no different from me, Balfour," Ascanius snapped out in contempt.

Ramsay shook his head at the man as if he was insane. "If you believe that, you are indeed mad."

Ascanius smiled in a restrained yet angry manner. "You know as soon as I kill you I will have your precious Ainslie."

"Self-belief is one thing, delusions of grandeur are another." Ramsay glanced at Malcolm questioningly.

Ainslie knew they had to have felt the rush of warmth that was Lisa's spirit.

"Julius," the spirit called softly.

Ascanius stiffened at the sound of the voice. "What games are you playing?"

Lisa tried patiently once more. "Julius, please listen to me."

"Can you hear that?" Ramsay asked Malcolm, seeking his reaction.

Malcolm looked around if trying to locate the voice. "It's a woman, but I can't see her."

"Julius, I want you to stop what you are doing to these people," Lisa begged her husband.

Ascanius looked in front of him in amazement. "Lisa?"

Bloody hell. Ascanius could obviously see his wife whereas none of the rest of them could. Ainslie watched with interest. All her hopes were pinned on a dead woman.

"Yes, it's me, Julius."

"How?" He tried to reach out to her but seemingly there was nothing to hold on to.

"Okay, I'm assuming some ghost from his past has come to visit him," Ramsay murmured to Malcolm. "This could work in our favor."

"Ainslie is here and she summoned me," Lisa told her husband.

"Oh crap," Ainslie muttered to herself. She hadn't wanted the bit about her input let out so soon.

"Ainslie," Ramsay called out, not turning his head due to the threat of Ascanius before him.

She tossed up whether to continue hiding or stand up. When she heard her name called once more in an impatient tone, Ainslie showed herself.

“Why?” Ramsay looked exasperated and worried and yet not surprised at seeing her.

“Well, I found out about Julius’s deceased wife—Julius is Ascanius’s real name, by the way—and I thought she may be able to talk some sense into him.” Ainslie was fascinated by the genuine look of love she saw in Ascanius’s eyes as he stared before him, obviously looking at his wife.

Ramsay shot a frustrated look at Ainslie. “You could have told us about this.”

“Yes, I could have and you would have gone all he-man and said ‘don’t do it’ and I would have done it anyway.” Ainslie smiled sweetly at him, then turned to Ascanius. “Lisa, please make him understand what he does to others also hurts you.” Guilt was an excellent motivator.

“Yes, she is right. It upsets me terribly, Julius.”

Ascanius looked before him desperately. “Lisa, you don’t understand. I am so lost without you.”

“I know, but what you are doing is wrong.”

“I wanted to find a way to bring you back.” His voice cracked with his anxiety.

“Julius, I never really left,” she responded. “I’m always around. You can feel me any time if you really try.”

The look of heartache and despair in Ascanius’s eyes had Ainslie feeling momentarily bad. That was, until she looked over and her eyes locked with the startling blue eyes of Malcolm. Yeah, Julius Arano had been through a tragedy, but that did not mean that everyone had to pay for it.

“Please let these people be.” Lisa Arano’s voice was firm but loving.

“I can’t.”

Oh, why the hell not? Ainslie felt like stamping her foot. She traded glances with Ramsay. She wanted this over and done with. Ainslie wanted to take a look at what a future with Ramsay would be like. All Ascanius had to do was be a human being and not some weird little man playing with the forces of the unknown to manipulate lives.

Ascanius shook his head mutinously. “No, these people will try to stop me from bringing you back.”

A low, sad sigh ran through the room. “I cannot come back, my love.”

“But you can—I’ve been experimenting on others and—”

“Julius, you have been working with darkness and it is close to conquering you.”

“But I love you, Lisa; I miss you.”

“One day we will be together.”

“I want that now.”

“That time is coming soon enough. Do not make it any quicker, Julius.”

“Lisa—what do you mean?”

“Please let them be at peace,” she murmured.

Ainslie felt the warmth leave the room. She knew Lisa was gone. Only an angry man, two determined Summit agents, and a woman who had strange dreams remained.

“Lisa is right; it’s over, Julius.”

“My name is Ascanius,” he spat out, venom in his eyes as he looked at Ainslie. “If I cannot be with my love, then neither can you.” She gasped when she saw Ascanius pull out the gun. Before anyone could react the gun went off and Ramsay clutched at the left side of his body in agony. Just like in her dream, Ainslie screamed and rushed to him, dropping to her knees, frantically using her hands to try to stem the flow of blood. But

there was so much that was pumping out. Despite wanting to be strong, Ainslie could not stop crying. While she tried to stanch the blood flow with one hand, she searched for her cell phone in her hip pocket to call for paramedics.

“I will deal with Ascanius.” There was a look of utter resolve on Malcolm’s face.

Ascanius looked at Ainslie and laughed. “This is your own stupid fault. You could have saved him if you’d just come with me without putting up a ridiculous fight.”

Blood spilled on her clothes as Ainslie tried to pull Ramsay into her arms.

“Please, Ramsay, stay with me,” she begged, not wanting to believe that once again fate had pushed her into this.

“He won’t and you’ll become like me.” Ascanius looked pleased with the thought.

“I will never be like you.”

“Yes, you will, because killing him weakened you.” He held out his hand to her.

“Come to me now, Ainslie.”

She felt Ramsay suddenly still in her arms, she heard Malcolm shout and Ascanius howl in pain, and then her world went black.

Chapter Fifteen

“Oh yeah, and how are we supposed to get a rug this size back to Australia?” Ainslie looked from the rich, multicolored woven rug to the man she loved with skeptical cynicism. It was crazy to want a rug so large but she was swept up in the whole Moroccan fantasy of their holiday. Everything about the souk in Marrakech excited the tourist in her. She had gone crazy buying things and her credit card had developed some serious racing stripes. But it was so exciting to be traveling in an exotic land with Ramsay that the thought of paying bills did not seem to matter.

“Darlin’, if you want it then I’ll make it happen.” Ramsay lifted her palm to his lips and kissed it. “I adore you and would do anything for you.”

“Crazy man, where would I be without you?” Ainslie smiled into his eyes. She had never felt happier in her life and it was all because of this man.

“Having trouble sleeping, sweetie?”

Ainslie woke with a start and squinted into the semidarkness. A uniformed woman stood over her. “Where am I?” She tried to sit up but her head throbbed and slumping back down seemed a better option.

“In hospital.” The woman’s voice was soothing as she gently touched her arm. “You’re okay, you just took a bump to your head. I’ll get you something mild to help you sleep.”

And that’s when it hit Ainslie with the force of a ten-ton truck. Ramsay was dead. A terrible aching like none she had ever experienced before tore through her body. Even the burns she’d sustained had not hurt this badly. Ainslie choked back the sob of pain. She would never see Ramsay again.

“Swallow this, it will help you sleep. You’ll feel better tomorrow.”

“I will feel nothing tomorrow,” Ainslie muttered in response. For years she had closed herself off and for a brief, shining moment she had felt love and been loved. But now it was gone. Fate had pushed her just far enough to give her a glimpse of happiness before it ripped it away from her. “Fucking fate.” She did as directed and gulped down the pill, wishing for a moment that she would never wake up because she realized without Ramsay, her life had no meaning. Ainslie had always wondered how women got themselves so caught up in a man and now she knew. Love screwed you up and over and maybe it was better not to feel anything. Maybe the oblivion of deep sleep was what she needed now.

But that was not what she got. This time she dreamed Ramsay was lying naked between her thighs, his mouth on her bare breast as his hand massaged her clit in a slow, erotic circle. She was holding onto him and panting for breath as a wave of pleasure tore through her body. She could feel his engorged penis against her inner thigh and she longed for him to slide inside her and fill the emptiness that she knew only he could fill.

“You make me weak with need,” she moaned as she gently pushed his mouth from her swollen nipple. The passion she saw in his beautiful green eyes she was sure mirrored that in her own.

“I need you, darlin’ Ainslie.” He lifted her legs up until they locked around his waist.

“Then have me.” The thought of being completely with the man she loved was more

powerful than any drug. She rubbed her pussy against his cock.

Ramsay growled impatiently as if he was trying to control himself. “Are you sure?”

“If you don’t come inside me now, I will scream.”

“I love you, Ainslie,” he said as his lips sought hers and his penis pushed slowly inside her body.

The feeling was like nothing Ainslie had imagined. It was wild and primitive and possessive and she wanted more. “Oh Ramsay...”

A loud clanging in the hallway instantly jerked Ainslie awake. Her legs were not wrapped around her beloved’s body and there was nothing filling her but the empty ache of loneliness. It took Ainslie a couple of minutes to work out where she was. It was not where she wanted to be and the man she wanted was not beside her. So, in many ways, she really did not care where she found herself. One place was as much like another when you were alone. Still, she opened her eyes fully and looked around her. It was a white sterile room that smelled of antiseptic. Ainslie started to sit up but a sharp pain shot through her head.

“Bloody hell.” It felt like she had been on a three-day bender and had the mother of all hangovers. Ainslie dropped back onto the bed and horizontally assessed her surroundings. It was then she remembered she was in a hospital. Everything that had happened in the last couple days came crashing back into her mind. Ramsay was dead. He had died in her arms. Ainslie recalled blackness and then nothing until she woke up. No, wait—there were those dreams. “Dreaming of things that can never be.” This was no gift. It was a bloody nightmare.

“I’m glad to see that mild sedative we gave you helped you to sleep,” a nurse said as she came in at that moment.

Okay, so that explained why her head felt like soggy cotton wool. Ainslie looked at the woman quizzically as she ticked and flicked her chart. “Where am I?”

“Royal Brisbane Hospital—you took a nasty crack to your head.”

Like that mattered with Ramsay dead. Nothing mattered now. “I’m fine. I’d like to go home.” And do what? Sit and mope? Drink a bottle of tequila to forget for a moment? Maybe.

“What about the man in the room down the hall?” the nurse responded brightly. “He really wants to see you.”

Man in the room down the hall? It could only be Ascanius. Ramsay was dead and Malcolm was beyond hospitals. So that meant Ascanius was alive and Ainslie wanted to kill him. She was not violent by nature. She believed in live and let live—until now.

“Oh, yeah, I’ll see him.” *Bring it on.* He had won this round but she would make it her life’s work to destroy him for what he’d done to Ramsay. She refused the wheelchair that was offered to her, instead preferring to travel under her own steam. Vengeance was an excellent motivator. It put steel in her spine and fire in her heart. Ainslie allowed the nurse to direct her to the room down the hall but she insisted on going in alone. As she entered the chamber, Ainslie swiped a fork, the only weapon she could find, off a dinner tray. The only bed in the small room had a curtain around it. *Perfect.* The fewer witnesses who saw her stab Ascanius, the better. Of course, forking someone to death may take a while but she was determined to make Ascanius pay. She had never imagined herself as a killer, but people did things when pushed to their limits. Ainslie pulled the curtain aside. Her eyes opened wide in shock. She staggered when she recognized the man in the bed.

“How? What? Why?” She trembled and promptly fainted in a heap on the floor.

* * * *

“Darlin’, wake up.” Ramsay slapped Ainslie’s face lightly.

She slapped back at the hands as she fought her way back to consciousness. Her head spun as a million thoughts scrambled together, all looking to make sense out of what she’d just seen—or did she see it? What the hell was going on? Was she hallucinating?

“She should go back to bed; she’s in shock,” the nurse said in concern.

“Huh...” Ainslie mumbled groggily. She had heard people in shock shivered with cold, yet she felt toasty warm lying on the bed beside a nice, hot male body. “What the...?” She opened her eyes and looked directly into the green eyes of Ramsay Balfour. “How?” Ramsay caught her before she rolled off the bed in surprise.

“Don’t you dare think you can get away from me that easily.” He curled an arm around her and pulled her in close beside him.

Visions of the dream she had the night before shot into her mind. Of course, Ramsay wasn’t naked but he felt awfully nice to lie beside. Then realization hit her. This was another dream. “I am sick of dreaming. Give me a fucking break, fate!”

“It’s no dream,” Ramsay assured her.

She looked at him carefully. He didn’t look all ethereal like a specter normally did, but nothing had been normal for days. “Are you a ghost, James Bond?”

“Nope.” Indulgent amusement shone in Ramsay’s eyes.

“I saw you die.” Ainslie had held him in her arms and had felt his life ebb from his body.

“I assure you I am very much alive, darlin’.” He leaned in and kissed her nose teasingly.

Okay, that certainly felt like a real kiss, but then she hadn’t kissed a ghost before so she had no comparison. Ainslie ran her hands over his body, feeling the hard planes and angles that defined the man. When her hand settled over his heart and she felt the strong beat, Ainslie felt an incredible wave of happiness wash over her. “You’re not a ghost. You’re alive.” How could that be? *Do I care? Hell no.* Maybe fate wasn’t such a bastard after all.

Ramsay grinned at her words. “If you keep touching me like that, I’m going to have to ask the nurse to leave us.” The nurse giggled at his words. “I think we’ll be okay now.”

“Well, not too long, either of you. You’ve both been through a lot.”

Ainslie waited until the nurse left. She had a million things she had to know but they were not necessarily things that normal people would understand. “What the hell happened? I dreamed everything that occurred right down to the shooting. You’re supposed to be dead.” Ainslie turned on her side so she could see him properly.

“Surprise.” Ramsay leaned in and kissed her softly. “You should have told me about the dream, Ainslie.”

“I didn’t want to believe it was going to happen.” Her mind now whirled to the possibilities of the dream she had of a naked Ramsay between her legs. Now that was a dream worth making real.

“What are you thinking?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with until you’re up to the task.” She smiled at him simply. The man was hers. She could wait for the perfect moment for them to be

together. *It will be interesting to see if he looks like he did when he was naked. If he does, I'm going to be one happy girl.* Ainslie shook her head to dispel the picture of the naked man she loved. *Focus, woman. Answers now, sex later.* "So tell me everything." She looked at the bandage on his left shoulder. "Does it hurt?"

"It's just a shoulder wound." He linked his right hand with hers. "I like the way you touch me, darlin'."

Ainslie slapped his chest lightly. "You scared me, James Bond."

"I couldn't help that you fainted before I had a chance to tell you I was okay."

"I've never fainted before." Ainslie had never fainted in her life. She thought it only happened to weak, mealymouthed people. But clearly not.

"You have been through a lot."

The love she saw in his eyes was overwhelming. "Ascanius?" Where was he? What would they have to deal with next from him?

"We believe he is dead," Ramsay reported as if he was reading a news bulletin. "He's just disappeared."

"Vanished?" That seemed amazing to Ainslie. "The last time I saw him he had a smoking gun in his hand and he was talking trash about me being with him."

"But then you fainted and hit your head. You're still woozy now if that swan dive you just did is anything to go by," Ramsay pointed out, happy to fill in the blanks.

"So what happened then?"

"It was odd. Ascanius dropped suddenly onto the floor as if his legs had been pulled out from under him and then this wild wind rushed through the room." Ramsay shook his head slightly as if he still could not believe it. "The wind was like a minitornado. It tore into Ascanius and picked him up. He was wailing in fright. It whirled him around and around several times before it spun out the door and disappeared, taking Ascanius with it." He kissed her once more as if the taste of her was all he savored.

"Bizarro world." Ainslie doubted it had anything to do with his wife Lisa, as she seemed like such a gentle soul. "You know he had to've gotten what he wanted." Ascanius had wanted to be with his wife and it appeared he had succeeded.

"I'm not so sure about that. Your friend Lucretia believes it was those he summoned from hell taking him back with them to pay the price for using them."

"Love, even the sick, twisted kind that Ascanius had, makes people do crazy things."

"Or glorious things." Ramsay smoothed the tangled hair from her face.

When he looked at her with such pure devotion Ainslie wondered why she had ever doubted him. *Oh yeah, the fear thing. But I'm over that.* "You make me feel stronger than I have ever felt before. I need no spooky powers. I just need you." Her lips sought his and they kissed hungrily as if making up for lost time.

"Ahem." Malcolm suddenly appeared before them.

"Malcolm." Ainslie was thrilled to see him again. She assessed the man who stood before her. He looked different to her. He was somehow lighter and his eyes looked less intensely blue. In fact, he looked less distinct and more ghostlike. "You're free?" Ainslie smiled in realization of the fact.

"Yes, and I need a shove to the light," Malcolm responded with a nod. "I understand you are very good at that."

This was one ghost she was glad to help. He did not question the whys or the wherefores of his passing. Malcolm just looked eager to go.

“You’re not going to ask me if they have fifty-seven flavors of ice cream in heaven or if there is a sports channel up there, are you, Malcolm?”

Ramsay laughed at her words. “Do ghosts seriously ask that?”

“You have no idea.” She turned to the man who stood patiently beside the bed.

“No, Ainslie.” He smiled at her softly. “I just want to go home.”

Home—it was the place everyone alive or dead aspired to. It was the need to belong, to rest, and to be at peace.

“Do you see the light?”

“Yes.” He gazed into a corner of the room.

Ainslie slipped off the bed and went to him. “I’m glad, but I’ll miss you.” She hugged him. Malcolm no longer felt solid. He was more flowing, as if his soul was vibrating with an intensity that was just waiting to be set free.

Malcolm touched her face gently. “That’s probably the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.” He reached over and shook hands with Ramsay. “Until we meet again, take care of this one. She’s special.”

“I know.” Ramsay smiled at his friend. “Be at peace.”

Malcolm lifted his hand in farewell, then he turned and walked toward the wall.

“Can you see the light?” Ramsay asked her as they watched him disappear.

Ainslie went back and sat beside Ramsay on the bed. “No, but then I’m not ready to.” She wiped back a tear. She felt both joyful and sad for Malcolm. Ainslie had liked the man. Despite his horrible circumstances he had held himself with dignity and courage.

Ramsay held Ainslie close against him. “Don’t cry, darlin’.”

“I’m happy—not sad.” Ramsay was alive and Malcolm was at peace. As for Ascanius, she wasn’t sure how she felt. Ainslie had seen the raw emotion in his eyes when it came to his wife, and yet he had shot Ramsay. Wherever he was, she hoped he was able to find his own measure of peace. However, if Lucretia was right, as she normally was, it seemed doubtful. Ainslie locked eyes with the gorgeous man at her side. *How did I ever get so lucky?*

“You know I plan to marry you,” Ramsay stated rather than asked a question.

“You’re pretty pushy there, James Bond.” Though, if she was honest, the lack of tradition did not bother Ainslie. It had hardly been a conventional courtship. Woman meets superspy over a chat with a ghost while chasing an evil necromancer. Maybe it was the stuff of soap operas, but strangely, it worked for them. Why start worrying about the formalities now? A week ago the thought of marriage would have scared her to death. Marriage meant a physical and emotional intimacy Ainslie shied away from. Her scars alone had been a fortress she had hidden behind, but she no longer needed to hide for—glory be—this man actually seemed to understand her. Sure, it was early days yet, but every instinct she possessed told her this man was the one.

“So?” Ramsay looked at her with the slightest edge of concern in his eyes.

“What?”

“What do you mean, what?”

She smiled at the slight edge of frustration in his voice. It was just like old times with him. That was, if you could count less than a week ago “old times.” “What do you think I mean?”

“You’re not going to do the twenty questions thing you did when we met, are you?”

He shook her gently.

“Why? Was it annoying?” She grinned at him.

“Ainslie—”

“Ramsay.” She mimicked his exasperated tone. It was cute to think this man was worried that she would turn him down. “Of course I’ll bloody marry you. Who else could I possibly love more than you?” His sigh of relief made her smile.

“So you’re not worried how little time we’ve known each other?”

“Why? Do you think I should marry someone else?” She held up her hands in surrender. Teasing Ramsay was fun, but loving him was better. And no, she wasn’t worried about marrying him. It did not either concern or surprise her as it once would have, as she felt an amazing sense of rightness. “I believe I have known you forever but I was just too blind to see it.”

“More like stubborn,” Ramsay retorted with a grin.

“Hey, I don’t need to marry you.”

Ramsay tweaked her nose. “Darlin’, if we’re not together then neither of us will be happy.”

“Okay then, just so you know that.” Ainslie knew he was correct and she was willing to attach her life to his because deep inside she knew it was the right thing to do. Sure, part of her was a little scared at what she was doing, but fear, she knew, was her mind’s way of accepting she was aware of the magnitude of her decision. *Good grief, I think I have grown up at last.* It had taken twenty-six years for her to work it all out. But then, it was better late than never.

“I don’t believe in long engagements,” Ramsay told her as he moved in and started placing soft, wet kisses on her mouth.

Yum. The man was heavenly and all hers. *Who’s a lucky girl?* “There’s no need. We have been through our trial by fire.” Whatever else happened, she knew they could handle it. Ramsay knew everything about her.

“How do you feel about North Africa for a honeymoon?”

Ah, the dream. It was good to know she was going to fall in love with a large, cumbersome rug as now she could start making plans to get it back to Australia. *Maybe dreams aren’t so bad after all.* Ainslie smiled in memory of the naked Ramsay from her other dream.

“I would love to know why you’re smiling like that, darlin’.”

You will soon enough. “The day I met you and you told me about going on a holiday to North Africa, I knew I would be going there with you.”

“And I took one look at you and wanted to jump your beautiful bones.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and chuckled at the playful slap she gave his face. “I still want to, but we’ll take it slowly.”

“Oh hell no. We’ve both seen firsthand that life is too short for waiting around.”

Ramsay let go of her and started to get out of bed.

“What are you doing?”

“Let’s not wait around, then. I want to be with you now.”

Ainslie pushed him back into the bedding. Although Ramsay was a powerfully built man, the loss of blood had weakened him. “You have a gunshot wound in your shoulder.”

“My shoulder is not the part I’m thinking of using.” He smiled at her blush. “You’re sweet and I adore you, Ainslie Croft.”

“And I love you.” Well, there you go. The words she never imagined saying to anyone came out so easily. But then, true love made the impossible seem possible.

“Finally the woman says it.” Ramsay collapsed back on the bed as if his strength deserted him. “My darlin’ loves me.”

“Jeez, give a girl a break. I’ve known you less than a week, James Bond.”

“I’m thinking we go on our honeymoon next week,” Ramsay announced in a decisive manner.

Ainslie laughed at his overly confident plan. “Okay, sure, why not.” There was nothing holding her back from being with him. She doubted the call centre would care one way or the other due to the amount of work she had missed over the last week.

“Thank you.”

“What for?” Ainslie responded in amusement. Ramsay had given her everything. She felt like she was alive.

“For giving us a chance.”

Chapter Sixteen

"I miss him but I'm glad he's at peace," Ainslie said as they returned to her house from visiting Malcolm's grave at the North Brisbane cemetery. She had placed daisies and prayed that Malcolm was finally home and at peace as he had longed to be. Ainslie looked at Ramsay. He had been out of the hospital for a couple of weeks and he was healing well, but that didn't mean she didn't worry about him. It was actually quite nice to have someone to care for. "How are you feeling?"

The sudden glow in his eyes made her wary.

"I'm fine, darlin'," Ramsay responded as he backed her into a nearby wall in the living room.

They had not made love yet due to his wound, but there had been many long, passionate encounters that had made Ainslie wish that modern medicine could produce miracles when it came to shortening recuperation time.

"What are you doing?" Ramsay was pulling up her T-shirt and Ainslie was not of a mind to stop him. The need to touch Ramsay and to be touched had been overwhelming since that moment in the hospital. Ainslie had gone from not wanting any physical contact to craving the feel of her lover's body.

"Lift your arms."

This wasn't the first time he had wanted her topless. She loved the touch of his hands and the sucking wet pressure of his mouth on her breasts. Though it made it damn hard to stop and be mindful of his wound sometimes. "The doctor said—"

"To hell with the doctor." Ramsay flung her shirt off and reached around to unsnap her bra. "I want you." He caressed her full breasts lovingly, then bent down to suck on one taut nipple.

"Oh boy," she moaned. Ainslie loved it when he sucked her breasts. It made her whole body light up with a white heat that burned furiously, seeking an outlet.

"You like?" Ramsay growled as he paid attention to the other rosy peak.

"Oh yeah." His hands were now undoing her jeans. Ainslie wanted him, but she wasn't sure if this was the time or place. *The man was wounded*, the good girl within her pointed out. *Oh, shut up and let him devour me*, screeched the bad girl. "Um..." What to do?

"Um what?" Ramsay smiled at her confusion.

"Should we be doing this now?" She hated being rational and practical.

He took her hand and held it to the front of his trousers. "Oh hell yeah, darlin'."

The tightly contained bulge of his cock made Ainslie lick her lips. Her jeans easily fell down to her ankles under Ramsay's ministrations. He caressed the scarred tissue on her back.

"Why is it women always wear underwear?" He shook his head in frustration. "It gets in the way of what a man wants."

"Good girls are supposed to."

"Want to be bad with me?"

"Most definitely," Ainslie answered as her panties hit the floor. Ramsay cupped her pussy, three long fingers sliding into the cleft to touch her clit.

"You are so wet."

"I have been since I met you." It was no lie. The man could heat her up with a glance.

"Oh darlin'," Ramsay groaned as if her words were tearing down what little control he had. He kissed her hungrily, his hand going under her ass so he could lift her up against the wall.

Ainslie wrapped her legs around his waist. "This is not like my dream," she said between kisses. "But I like it." She tried to pull his zipper down to release his engorged cock but it was awkward from the position she was in.

"Oh yeah?" Ramsay looked at her with interest. "What dream?"

"Well, you were naked and lying between my legs and—" Suddenly they were moving fast. She clutched hold of the man who held her. "Hey, where are we going?"

"To get both of us naked and horizontal immediately. You know you must always follow your dreams."

"You don't know the rest of it." Though this wasn't part of her dream, she liked the improvisation.

"So tell me." Ramsay kicked the bedroom door open.

"Well, we fell asleep," she teased.

"Liar." Ramsay grinned as he dropped her on the bed and started stripping his shirt off.

Ainslie lay there watching the show. The ugly, puckered scar did little to mar the beauty of his body. *Ah, those abs.* When he unzipped his pants and she saw his cock once more, she smiled. "Hello, beautiful. I've missed you."

Ramsay chuckled in amusement.

"This is exactly like the dream."

"And?"

"What?"

"How do I compare to your dream?" He kicked his shoes off, sending them across the room.

"You're okay." Ainslie watched as his cock bobbed in excitement. The thought of all that inside her made her want to beg him to fuck her then and there.

Ramsay dropped his trousers and kicked them. "Just okay?"

Ainslie snorted in mock cynicism. "Men—such egos." But on her man, he wore that well.

"Darlin', for you I want to be more than okay."

Ainslie's heart flip-flopped at his words. Ramsay was so sweet. "You are everything and more to me and you know it. Now get on the bed." A month ago she couldn't envision herself saying that to any man. But then, this was Ramsay and he was hers.

"You're pretty bossy."

"James Bond, I have been waiting for you for two whole weeks. I will explode if I do not have you inside me." She opened her legs for him as in her dream.

"Well now, we can't have you exploding." Ramsay eagerly lay down in the cradle of her thighs. "What happened next in your dream?"

"I'm not really sure because I woke up. However, I'm sure you can think of something to do." She shrieked suddenly when he lifted her legs in the air so they were on his shoulders.

The first stroke of his tongue against her clit made her scream. "Oh my God." Ramsay licked in long, slow strokes back and forward relentlessly as Ainslie panted and moaned. When he sucked her clit, a wave of pleasure shot through her and she gripped the sheet beneath her trying to keep what was left of her control. But it was useless. She screamed loudly as she came, shuddering against his mouth.

"I love that you're a screamer." Ramsay chuckled with male delight.

"Is that bad?" Not that she cared. She was what she was. And besides, Ramsay looked mighty pleased with himself.

"Not in my book." Ramsay pulled her legs around his waist. His cock was against the opening of her body, seeking entrance. "Are you ready for me? I long to be inside you."

This was so much better than the dream. "I am beyond ready."

"I love you." Ramsay's mouth captured her lips as he pushed inside her.

The stretching feel of his cock filled her once more. It was better than chocolate.

"Okay?" He touched her face tenderly, his eyes filled with concern.

"Fuck me hard, James Bond." She needed heat and passion and good old reliable cock.

He groaned at her words. "You say things that make me crazy."

"Oh yeah?" Ainslie could happily be like this forever.

"Because I want to fuck you senseless."

Ainslie smiled up at the man she loved. "Please do." She kissed his lips softly. "I don't want to be able to walk straight for a week. Abstaining nearly killed me."

"Yeah, me too." Ramsay thrust in and out of her body, each stroke harder than the next. "I came close to using my hand."

Ainslie slapped him on the back. "Hey, do not *ever* do that. Your cock is mine."

"Possessive?"

"When it comes to you—yes." She clutched his shoulders and enjoyed the pumping thrust of his body.

"You know, I don't think I can hold on."

"So don't. I need you as much as you need me."

"I promise a chocolate cake session after this."

"Perfect." That was exactly the reason she'd gotten Lucretia to make another one.

Epilogue

“We cannot possibly get that rug back to Australia.” Ramsay looked at her in exasperation. “It’s too bloody big, Ainslie.”

“Hey, husband of mine, in my dream you said you would do anything for me.” Ainslie was surprised her dream was not panning out the way she had dreamed it. But still, she would have this rug come hell or high water. Lucretia always told her to follow her dreams and she would.

“Darlin’, you have single-handedly kept the Marrakech economy in the black for another day, but that rug is not going back home with us—and don’t look at me like that,” Ramsay added as if he could already guess what was going on in her mind.

“Like what?” Damn, the man was astute. As much as Ainslie loved that about him, it annoyed her because there wasn’t much she could get past Ramsay.

“Like you have a plan.”

“Maybe I do,” she conceded quietly. She had been organizing for this moment since the minute they confirmed their travel plans. Ainslie had tracked down a company that would ship the rug for a reasonable cost.

Ramsay shook his head in indulgent amusement at his wife. “Why do I sense that rug is going to be on our dining room floor at home?”

“Maybe you’re psychic?” Ainslie smiled sweetly at her husband. “Actually, it’s going on the living room floor, James Bond, and it will look fantastic.” She moved over and linked her arm with his, rubbing up tightly against him. The heat from his body made her instantly wet between her legs as she remembered a hot and sweaty moment on the hotel balcony they had indulged in only a couple of hours ago. *Hmm, rubbing is good.* “Come on, admit it, you love me.” If Ainslie knew nothing else, she knew that.

Ramsay blew out a long sigh. “That goes without saying, but sometimes you are the most frustrating woman and rubbing yourself against me like that will not get you what you want.”

“Won’t it?” She could see the flare of hot passion in his eyes and Ainslie knew the need between them was mutual.

“You are an annoyingly accurate woman.”

“I know, it’s my gift.” Her other so-called gift, the dreams, still occurred, but they were easier to deal with due to Ramsay lying beside her when she woke up. Instead of wanting to fight the dream or worrying about what she should do, Ainslie told Ramsay what she had seen in her mind and they worked on the problem together. While it still felt like she was pushing fate, she was making more of a conscious choice to assist those who called to her in her sleep rather than grudgingly going to them afterward in trepidation of what might happen. With Ramsay in her life, she felt the power to cope with things that had scared her in the past.

“Okay, it’s a nice rug and yes, I would do anything for you, darlin’,” Ramsay conceded as he smiled into his wife’s eyes lovingly.

“Correct answer,” Ainslie responded smugly. She jumped in surprise when he slapped her ass playfully.

“How did I ever live without you, Ainslie Balfour?”

“I’m really not sure.” Suddenly Ramsay started moving and Ainslie, holding onto him, followed. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you back to the hotel where I plan to make love to you until you cannot walk.”

That sounded like an excellent plan to Ainslie. “But what about the rug?”

“Darlin’, there’s a rug in our hotel room and I’m more than happy to use that.”

“And you promise I’m not going to be able to walk after we’re finished?”

“Absolutely.”

“Lead on, James Bond.” The rug seller already had her details.

The End

About the Author:

Amarinda Jones/Penn Halligan believes anything is possible and sometimes just asking for the impossible will surprise someone enough that they will give it to you. Writing is like that. Put it out there and wait for a response. There is always the possibility you may fall on your arse but, after all, that’s what cellulite is for. Amarinda/Penn believes in taking chances, speaking her mind, and aging disgracefully. Twenty years from now she plans on being the neighborhood witch that all the kids are scared of. But then, everyone has to have a hobby.

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