

Presence: Awakening

By Charity Becker

PROLOGUE



Father writhed on the floor, bucking and flopping like a fish trapped on shore. Some trick of the moonlight and my sleep-bleary eyes turned his naked skin a sickly pale blue. He tossed his head side to side, keening like a frightened animal, oblivious to the fact I'd shuffled into the living room.

I made a sound, the beginning of a question, but when Father rolled onto his side to face me, the words froze on my tongue. A mask of blood covered most of his battered face, matting his beard. Wordless sounds tumbled from his cracked and trembling lips. Blood seeped from under the swollen and bruised left eyelid, while the right eye blinked rapidly, its attention darting around the room. I started to speak again, but Father's good eye focused in my direction, widened, then stared over my shoulder, his ruined chin quivering.

At twenty-one I knew fear better than any person ever should. A lifetime of begging for mercy that never came had taught me to immediately recognize it, even in others. Whatever Father saw over my shoulder now made his body shake, his face contort in terror and the anticipation of more pain. His fear was thick in the air, bitter on my tongue, choking me as I whirled around to face whatever horror lurked behind me.

Only the cold kitchen gaped back, empty in the dark of pre-dawn. It looked empty, but something was there, just out of sight. I could feel it, sense it somehow. My heart thundered against my rib cage as I scanned the room for any sign of the intruder, my hands balled into fists in front of my

chest—not that they would afford me much protection against whoever had beaten Father so severely.

At first my brain didn't comprehend what I was seeing. Or maybe it just refused to acknowledge what was there in some vain attempt to save my sanity. Suddenly though, as if someone had switched on a floodlight in the dark room of my mind, I knew what I was seeing—though it made no sense—and I had a brief moment of wishing I'd never looked at all.

The shadows in the kitchen swirled, and with each shift they gained substance until they appeared solid enough to touch. Before I could reach out or turn to run away, the darkness lurched forward, quickly expanding like a sinister black balloon. I stumbled back one, two steps, but the darkness came faster, filling in quick pulses, growing, stretching, until it burst with a soft pop and an icy breeze across my face.

A cool dark mist filled the room. Everywhere it touched I felt the tingle of damp spider webs creep along my body. The sensation brought goose bumps, and I looked down at my arm to find tiny shreds of shadow melting into my skin. There was a split second of panic, a terrible need to scrub the mist away, but then a soft calm moved through me from the outside-in, a hazy near-sleep where fear was quickly forgotten. I didn't even flinch when the shadows in the kitchen shifted again and a dark figure drifted toward me. Deep down I knew I should have panicked then, but the mist held me, absorbing my fear and leaving only detached curiosity as I watched his long, hooded, black cloak rippling in his wake.

The figure passed, and I slowly turned to watch him ride the breeze sweeping across the floor and churning around my bare ankles. And I watched as he floated toward Father. Watched as Father trembled, staring up into the blackness beneath the figure's hood. A small aware part of my mind screamed through the comforting fog for me to look away. But I couldn't turn away now. If Father suffered, I wanted to

see it. No, I *needed* to see it.

Hovering on the far side of my stepfather, the figure turned to face me. He raised his arms as if to conduct a ghostly orchestra, bone-thin fingers sticking out of the wide sleeves. Instead of phantom music when those pale fingers flexed, Father squealed, his arms flew above his head, his toes pointed, and his shaking legs went stiff. The figure's hands clenched into fists, and Father's wrists jerked upward, his ankles downward, stretching, reaching as if pulled by invisible hands. Father squirmed, his bulk jiggling in the silvery moonlight, an obscene puppet struggling against his unseen strings. And I simply watched, drunk on that strange cool calm swirling inside me.

"Please, Lord, help me!" Father cried, his voice a high, piteous squeal.

"And for eighteen years, Mr. Jaden," the stranger whispered, "who was there to help Mina?" His voice filled the room, brushing against my face like the wings of a thousand frantic moths. My eyelids fluttered and my body swayed as the words swirled around me.

"Please!" Father cried again.

"All those nights when you came to her," the stranger whispered, "all those nights when you *defiled* her, who was there to help Mina?"

The mention of my name brought my attention back just in time to see the stranger jerk his arms outward. A muffled snap accompanied Father's next scream. Father's hands convulsed, fat fingers like claws, slashing at the air. His skin pulled taut, then split in jagged lines across his side and over his mountainous belly. With a second jerk of the stranger's hands in the air, Father's skin gave way and a gush of dark fluid poured out around his body, heavier, glistening things slopping to the floor with a sickening thump.

By the time Father's last scream died on the still night air, the intruder had melted into the shadows once more and the eerie calm had lifted from my mind. Chilled and shaking, I was left staring at the mangled pieces of my stepfather, his

face locked forever in a silent scream, blood pooling beneath the two pieces of his body.

I retched and turned away, but the smell wafted toward me: Fresh blood, meat, and worse. My stomach gave up its meager contents, decorating the once white wall and splattering my bare toes. Crying, confused, and terrified I stumbled down the hall on numb legs. Stumbled away from the nightmare on the living room floor, away from the thing I could never un-see.

I'd taken just two shaky steps toward my bedroom, toward the illusion of safety, when I felt the tingling brush of webs on my arms again. My heart lurched into my throat, choking off my breath. Eyes squeezed shut, I pressed my back against the cool wall and prayed that I would wake up. Prayed for it to be over.

A soft sound pulled my attention to the right, down the hall. Slowly, I opened my eyes and turned my head, sweat prickling on my brow. The intruder hovered half in the hall, half in Mama's doorway, one piercing yellow eye framed between the doorjamb and his black hood, watching me. He raised a pale finger to his gray mouth and whispered, "Freedom," without moving his lips.

Before I could blink he'd slipped sideways into Mama's room. The door clicked shut. Long seconds ticked by, and I stood frozen by fear, paralyzed by indecision. When Mama's wail broke the silence a moment later, my legs buckled and I slid down the wall, tears running down my cheeks, my body wracked with convulsive shivers. I wrapped my arms around my shaking legs, buried my face in my knees, and waited for the boogeyman to get me, too.

ONE

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"Mina, get up."

The voice yanked me from my sleep, but I didn't open my

eyes. Opening my eyes would make it all real, make the punishments start again. Of course, I'd be punished no matter what I did; nothing I did was ever good enough. *I* was never good enough.

"Come on now," the voice said, "open your eyes."

My stomach cramped, waiting for the grabbing, hurting hands, but I cracked my eyelids, ready to face it because I had no other choice. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad this time. Maybe they'd get tired, or bored, or distracted by someone else for a change. Maybe.

"Welcome back to planet Earth."

I turned toward the voice, squinting against the bright morning light. Gradually, a face came into focus. A smiling, kind face framed by soft black curls.

"Alice," I whispered, and the memories hit me in a dizzying rush. I closed my eyes for a moment, basking in sweet relief. There were no more punishments, Cadric Jaden was really dead, and I . . . Well, I was here, safe at last. "I'm okay," I said softly as the last bits of fear drained away.

"That's debatable," Alice said with a little chuckle. "Now, come on. Get up. We gotta go."

I opened my eyes to see her still smiling, holding a hairbrush out for me to take.

Sitting up, I took the brush from Alice, then pulled it through my tangled curls. Static snapped with each stroke, and I cringed at the tingle against my neck. "Ugh," I said, pulling the brush away from my long hair. "If I don't shower first, I'll be the only white girl on the second floor with an Afro."

Alice folded her arms under her breasts, tipped her head to the side, and grinned. "Well, hurry it up, *Sistab*."

"Why the hurry?" I raised an eyebrow. "What's on the activity roster for today? Chess in the game-room? Square dancing? Maybe a little *papier-mache*?" I gave a mock shiver of excitement and dropped the brush onto my bed.

"Don't be a dork." Alice's dark eyes twinkled with good humor. "Doc wants to see you in his office. . ." she glanced at

her watch. "Like, ten minutes ago."

"Ah!" I said with a grin. "The truth comes out. Let me guess," I wiggled my eyebrows up and down. "Anthony on the fourth floor keeping you from your nursing duties?"

Alice blushed and looked to the floor, a smile tugging the corners of her mouth.

"Don't worry," I said as I slid out of bed and moved toward my dresser. "Dr. Stevens won't hear from me how you've been gallivanting around the surgery ward with the interns."

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"Good morning," Dr. Stevens said with a crisp nod. The sudden movement sent his glasses sliding down his long nose, saved only by the red, allergy-swollen tip.

"Aw, no lecture on the importance of promptness, Doc?" I said with a little pout. I slumped down into the rigid leather chair across from the doctor's.

"Not today." He smiled pleasantly and folded his hands on his desk. "You've made amazing progress, Mina, and done far better than I could have hoped for in these nine years."

"Did I miss the 'Make A Loony Feel Special Day' memo?"

Dr. Stevens pushed his thick glasses back in place, ignoring my attempts to rattle him. He'd gotten good over the years, but I was determined to shake him today. I was about to try again when he cut me off with one raised hand.

"Now, I'm not saying we want you to leave us—"

My playfulness dropped like a boulder to the bottom of my stomach, and I sat up straight, gripping the arms of the chair. "You're sending me away?"

"No, not *sending away*. I believe you're ready for the next step in your recovery, to venture out on your own. Isn't that exciting?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I . . . I'm not ready." The first wave of panic rolled my stomach around the boulder, squeezing it into a painful knot.

"In this phase of your rehabilitation, you'll live your life

the way it was meant to be lived, using all the skills we've taught you here at Divine Hope." Dr. Stevens picked up a slip of paper from his desk, quickly looked it over, then held it out to me. "This man is willing to give you a job."

I swallowed hard, staring at the doctor. "A job?" This wasn't real. They wouldn't just toss me out into the big wide world like this. I'd never had a job before, unless you counted working in the hospital library. But that was just busy work, something Dr. Stevens cooked up to keep me from pestering the hospital staff.

When I didn't take the paper, the doctor stood and leaned across his desk to push it into my hands. I blinked once, then glanced at the paper. There was an address and *Oliver Page* written in neat block letters. My chest tightened around my pounding heart. It *was* real. They were throwing me away.

"But. . ." I looked up. "But, where will I live?" I asked, scrambling for something to say, something to keep me here just a little bit longer.

"As part of our rehabilitation program, we've secured an apartment for you a few blocks from your new job. Your landlord has many years of experience with ex-patients, so you'll be in good hands. Each week you'll come back here for your sessions, and you can always call if you need anything." Dr. Stevens glanced down at my lap. "Just relax, Mina."

I'd entwined my fingers so tightly around the paper that my knuckles were white and my fingertips had gone numb. I hadn't even noticed my hands folded in my lap, my good girl posture, something I hadn't done in years. I pulled my hands apart, flexing my fingers, leaving the paper crumpled in my lap. Quietly, I counted, concentrating on taking slow, steady breaths between each number.

"Good," Dr. Stevens said softly. "Good. Now remember, you're not a prisoner to Cadric anymore. You've earned your freedom."

"Right," I said, my skin prickling. "Freedom."

Alice tried to hide the fact she'd been crying, but her face was flushed, the skin around her eyes red and puffy. It made me uncomfortable to see her this way. I didn't know how to react. My pillar of strength was crying!

Alice sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve as she said, "You'll come and visit me, right?"

"I can't think of anything else I'd rather do," I said.

Alice gave a weak laugh and looked to the floor. "You'll find some good-looking guy and forget all about me."

I gave a short, humorless laugh. "What guy would want a woman who's been locked up in a nuthouse for almost a decade?"

In the blink of an eye Sad-Alice changed back to the Strong-Alice I'd come to know. She squared her shoulders, placed a hand on each of my cheeks, and made me look up into her fierce, brown eyes. All traces of sadness were gone when she said, "Don't you ever say that again. That's not who you are, Mina Jewel. It's where you've been, but it doesn't define you. *This*—" she motioned to my now empty room, "doesn't define you."

Alice had always been more like a sister to me than a nurse. She treated me like a human being instead of a patient. She brought me surprises and taught me things from the outside world, like using sarcasm to cover uncomfortable moments and how to cuss at just the right time for the best comedic effect. But it was more than the fun stuff. More than the jokes and the presents and the games. Her unwavering strength had held me together in those early years when I knew nothing of the real world, when I was scared and alone. Even now I clung to her confidence. Alice was my lifeline. I owed her so much already and here she was again keeping me from doubting myself or getting caught up in my own self-deprecating comments.

Alice saw something in me I'd never seen, never understood. She'd always tried to bring out the very best in me, even on my worst days. I smiled then, feeling a rare

twinge of self-confidence that hadn't been there nine years ago. It was just a twinge, a twinkle of light in my abysmally dark mind, but it was there and it was mine and I latched onto it. If Alice saw something in me, believed in me, maybe I could, too.

TWO

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A short cab ride brought me to the apartment building where, just as Dr. Stevens had said it would be, a key in an envelope waited for me under the doormat. I unlocked the door and stepped inside, taking in my new surroundings. One room acted as my living space, kitchen, and dining room set apart by neatly spaced rugs and furniture. There was a small computer desk against the far wall and to the left of the kitchen window, and a black cordless phone on the counter to the right. Two purple flower-print couches sat around a glass coffee table in front the entertainment center. The bedroom was off to the left, and just big enough for a queen bed and a tall dresser, but not much else. The only access to the tiny bathroom was through the bedroom. I guess nobody expected me to have company.

After having tucked all my clothes into one dresser drawer, I flopped down on the brass bed, stared at the ceiling, and listened to the sounds of my new home. A small dog yapped somewhere in the building, and people were talking in the hallway outside my door. Occasionally, a car *whooshed* by sending the dog into another barking frenzy. All normal, everyday sounds. All the comforting things you'd expect to hear while sitting safe in your home.

But none of the sounds gave *me* comfort. None of them made *me* feel at home.

That spark of confidence I'd felt at the hospital had fizzled out during the short trip here, replaced by questions and uncertainty. Why was I out here? I didn't feel "better" at

all. If anything, I felt abandoned. Dr. Stevens said I'd learned a lot, but all I'd learned was how to lie, how to pretend I hadn't seen what I'd seen. I still had so many questions and nobody willing to answer them. Who or *what* was the dark intruder? Why hadn't he killed me, too? What had he done to Mama?

The therapists at Divine Hope never mentioned the intruder, and if I asked, they'd plead ignorance and look embarrassed or scold me for hanging onto fairy tales and crazy-talk. Dr. Stevens was no better, he simply repeated the same thing every time I tried to talk about my visitor that night: "The traumatized mind can conjure images and stories to help you cope with the things you're doing, seeing, or experiencing."

A lot of good those little talks did me. They just made me feel that much crazier, that much more out of control.

Sometimes I felt embarrassed that I couldn't just let it go. Why couldn't I just listen to what the therapists tried to grind into my head? What they said made sense. Hell, anything made more sense than what *I* thought happened. So, why didn't I believe that I'd made it all up? Why didn't I believe at my core that I was really that crazy?

Simple. I'd felt the intruder brush against me that night, saw him kill Cadric without ever touching him, heard him speak without moving his lips. Every night for nine years I'd expected him to appear again and finish what he'd started: To kill me and leave me splattered on the walls for Alice to find in the morning. For years I'd waited, sweating under my blankets, afraid to close my eyes, obsessing over. . . What? The boogeyman?

A knock at the front door jerked me out of my thoughts, sending a jolt of guilt through me. I sat up, catching my breath, trying to push the shameful, crazy thoughts from my mind. Another round of knocking, louder this time, got me out of bed and moving through the apartment. Who could possibly be knocking on *my* door? Everyone I knew was at Divine Hope, either working there or a resident on the

second floor.

Heart pounding, I peered through the peephole. A young man in a brown uniform stood in front of my door holding a paper-wrapped package under one arm. He glanced at the clipboard in his other hand, shifting his weight to his right foot.

"Get a grip," I whispered, my forehead pressed to the door, eyes squeezed tight. With a deep breath, I forced what I hoped was a friendly smile, and opened the door.

"Package for Mina Jewel," the man said without looking up.

I froze. I'd never gotten a letter before let alone a package just for me. It had to be a mistake.

After a few breaths the man looked up and raised a thin eyebrow. "Mina Jewel?"

I cleared my throat. "That's me. Sorry."

He shrugged and shoved the package toward me.

I took the bundle, looking at the wrapping. It was my name and address all right, but instead of a return address, in the upper left corner someone had drawn a fancy capital 'P' surrounded by swirly lines and dots, all done in shimmering gold ink. I wasn't sure what it meant, if it meant anything at all. A family crest or the insignia of some company? Not that I knew anyone who'd have either of those things. Or anyone who'd have a reason to send me a package, for that matter.

"Ma'am?" the man said, holding the clipboard out to me.

For a second I just blinked at him. A memory of an old movie I'd seen at the hospital surfaced. "Oh," I said, "Just a minute." I transferred the package under my left arm and fumbled in my empty right pocket for money for a tip.

The man sighed and pointed to a line on the top sheet of paper. "All I need's a signature."

My face went hot. I pulled my hand out of my pocket and signed my name. He nodded, then walked off mumbling. Once his head disappeared below the top step, I let out my breath, backed into my house, and locked the door.

The jewelry box was no wider than a paperback book and barely six inches high. Fancy carved filigree laced the edges of the top, bottom, and sides of the gleaming silver box. The center of the lid was unadorned and polished to a brilliant shine.

The surprisingly weighty lid gave a faint *click* as I opened it, and a soft, tinkling song drifted out of the box. It was familiar, though I couldn't exactly place it. Maybe something I'd heard in a movie long ago, or a tune hummed by someone walking the halls of Divine Hope. It was one of those floating songs that stuck with you, forever looping in your brain, but you could never quite remember it well enough to sing along unless it was playing right then.

A moment or two passed and my head felt lighter, but somehow fuller at the same time, like my thoughts were being pushed out my ears and my skull was slowly filling with fluffy down feathers. Even that thought didn't stay long, and I found myself just sitting and blinking, swaying slowly side to side. I finally stopped fighting it and let the music take me.

Now that it had my full attention, the music seemed to swell and tug at my brain, conjuring vague images like a shaky movie projected in front of my eyes: A heavy iron door swinging open. Wide stone steps leading down. A dimly lit hallway stretching out forever into a vast blackness. I floated forward, weightless, toward tiny, shimmering yellow lights at the end of the hall, like the quivering flames of two candles in the distance. An urgent whisper touched my ears, and I strained to make out the words.

The neighbor's dog barked, shattering the vision, throwing me back into my now dark apartment with a jolt. I rubbed my face in both hands to clear the last bits of fuzz from my head, then glanced at the digital clock on my microwave. Ten p.m.

"Jesus," I said, snapping the music box shut. I'd wasted hours planted on my couch, daydreaming, listening to voices that weren't really there. "Yeah," I said, shooting a dirty look

toward the music box. "Yeah, I'm 'better' all right."

For the next hour I busied myself setting out breakfast dishes, choosing clothes for the morning, making sure my wallet was in my purse; anything to bury that nagging urge to open the music box again. Would I slip out of my body once more if I opened the lid? Would I get sucked back into the dream if I listened to the song again? Did I really want to know the answers?

Absolutely not.

Leaving the music box on my coffee table, I went to my room, set my alarm, and crawled into bed. For a long time I watched the glowing green numbers on my digital clock change, sleep evading me at every turn.

It was too quiet here. Not that it was loud at Divine Hope at night, but there was always something going on. Soft footsteps of the night staff making their rounds, occasional cries from nearby rooms followed by soothing voices. It gave me comfort all those years to know people were close by if I ever needed anything. Not that I'd have ever admitted that I needed comfort, but it was nice to know there were people there, just in case.

Tonight it was just me. Sure, there were neighbors in the apartments around mine, but they didn't know me or care if I was having a tough night. There was supposedly a landlord in the building somewhere that had experience with ex-psychiatric patients, but he was a stranger to me, not someone I'd go to for help.

I was utterly alone.

Wide awake, I pulled the unfamiliar, scratchy blanket up to my chin and watched the numbers continue to change, the soft song of the music box and that distant, impelling whisper echoing in my head.

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