

Presence: Smoke and Fire

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Blysser Press

ONE

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Walter Garrot's heart exploded somewhere between Sidney Avenue and Kitsap Street, leaving a hole in his chest the size of a child's head. Or so the paramedics claimed.

Flipping through the report, I couldn't help but wonder why I was here. No doubt, a spontaneously exploding heart was weird. But Walter Garrot's situation seemed more like a Discovery Channel kind of weird. For *me* to get a call, it usually leaned more toward the Science Fiction Channel.

I'd recently become the Port Orchard police's unofficial expert on everything odd. It didn't take long for me to realize that *unofficial* is just fancy-talk for, "You're not getting paid, but can you pretty please pull our asses out of the fire anyway?" My *talents* were still under scrutiny by the powers that be, but that didn't stop them from asking for my help when the bizarre stuff slapped them in the face.

"What do you make of it, Ms. Jewel?" Detective Richards asked.

He sat across from me in the coffee shop, large hands folded on the table between us, his dark eyes watching my every move. Months ago, when I'd first met the detective,

I'd felt like I was under suspicion every time he turned that penetrating gaze on me. It was as if he could just stare the truth out of me, whether I knew anything or not. But now I was used to it, and I hardly noticed the weight of his gaze anymore.

"Well," I said between sips of coffee, "I'm not entirely sure why you called me. If you ask me, which you *did*, this looks like a medical anomaly. There's nothing paranormal about it."

I closed the file with my free hand and pushed the folder closer to the detective without looking past the initial report and witness statements. I knew what I'd find if I flipped a couple more pages in, and I really didn't want to see it; the statements had been graphic enough.

"You think it's a medical anomaly?" Detective Richards said with a slow shake of his head. "Our medical examiner says otherwise." He placed a hand flat on top of the folder. "She won't touch the body again. She says it makes her skin crawl just thinking about it."

"She's in the wrong line of work then, isn't she?"

He shrugged broad shoulders. "I'd have said the same thing if I hadn't been there when she ran out of the building shrieking like a banshee."

Setting my mug on the table, I glanced down at the closed folder again. Dr. Goodson was possibly the most calm and cool-headed person I knew. Normally, she was completely unshakable. For her to get spooked by a body, it *had* to be something awful.

I licked my lips and looked up to see the detective grinning. Great. I only got *that* look when he knew he'd won. Detective Richards had learned early on how to get my attention. Weird shit? Call Mina!

"She ran out the door still wearing her autopsy gloves and apron," he added, like chocolate sprinkles on top of the preternatural sundae.

I love chocolate sprinkles.

I raised an eyebrow and grinned at the detective. "The

janitor must have been thrilled," I said. "What the hell got into Dr. Goodson, anyway?"

Detective Richards flashed a victorious smile, then had the grace to put his professional face back on as he opened the folder. He riffled through a few papers, then produced a three-page statement signed by Dr. Goodson.

"It says right there," he said as he tapped the page, "when she touched the wound she felt something creeping up her arm. She didn't get the usual. . . *visions*, just this feeling like something was moving its way up her arm and she had to get away from it."

The detective's hesitation on the word *visions* wasn't lost on me. It wasn't new for Richards to be uncomfortable with the things I dealt with every day. Even after knowing each other this long he still couldn't wrap his mind around the supernatural. We'd had plenty of arguments over the impossible becoming the possible. *I* knew it was all true, but proof be damned, *he* wasn't willing to believe it just yet. For now I'd leave it alone. The time would come though that he'd either need to accept the changes or. . .

Well, he'd better just accept the changes, because the alternative wasn't very pleasant.

"I don't suppose she's had a psych evaluation recently," I asked, skimming the medical report.

"She's as sane as they come, Ms. Jewel, but she hasn't left her house since the incident."

"Yeah?" I said with a smirk. "Running out of the building screaming sure sounds like a sane person's response to me. *Totally* normal."

Detective Richards raised one bushy eyebrow, but said nothing as he pushed the folder toward me. Of course, he didn't need to say anything. The look that he gave me said, "No more stalling." When he looked at me that way, I didn't argue.

My smile melted into a grimace as I flipped through the papers, one by one, my gut tightening in anticipation with each turn. A lump had formed in my throat by the time I'd

found the photos, which was probably a good thing considering my stomach wanted to empty its contents right then and there.

The ragged, blood-soaked edges of Walter Garrot's clothes were a sight, but they were nothing compared to the tattered chunks of flesh clinging to the steering wheel. Soft bits had fallen all down the front of his freshly pressed Armani slacks, and sat in his lap, glistening in the flash from the camera.

I rubbed my temple, thankful that at least the pictures were black and white. It was too early in the evening to stomach a full-color photo of a gaping chest wound. Then again, for me, it was always too early for that. But I'd thought about it too long. Suddenly my imagination added the missing color, and a whole new level of discomfort hit me square in the gut.

I shut my eyes and counted to ten, attempting to gather my composure—and swallow down the coffee trying to climb back up my throat. Puking on the evidence wasn't very professional. Not to mention an awful waste of good java.

Something weird was going on and I was supposed to be the go-to gal for this type of shit. If I didn't pull myself together more bad things could happen, and before I knew it I'd be up to my eyeballs in bloody police photos and too many questions.

One deep breath in, slowly out, and I didn't puke. Good. Step one complete.

I opened my eyes, concentrating on the small details of the pictures. Individually, they weren't as bad as the whole scene put together. Individually, each one was interesting, but safe. If I didn't look at the pictures as a whole, maybe I could pretend it wasn't a bloody corpse I was staring at in the middle of this quaint little coffee shop on a beautiful spring evening.

Yeah, right.

I took another deep breath and forced myself to calm down and to look at the case from a distance. I didn't know

this guy. Garrot wasn't a friend or a loved one. I'd never even seen him walking the streets of Port Orchard before. His demise should mean nothing to me other than supplying me with an interesting case to be solved. And maybe some fresh nightmare fodder—as if I lacked that.

And that did it. Looking at this as just another case helped me pull my emotions out of the equation. Finally able to separate myself from the horror of the event, I took in the details of the photographs and added what I saw to what I'd previously read in the reports.

The shape of the wound, the tatters of shirt, and the splatter pattern of blood all held clues. But to *what* exactly?

The hole in Walter's chest didn't go all the way through his body, and according to the report, the car seat was untouched, so no gunshot to the back. The body fragments were all thrown out toward the front of the car, so definitely not an attack from the front. Both the driver's door and the passenger's seat were clean, so no attack from either side.

All signs pointed to the impossible. His heart had gone *ka-boom*, and the force of the blast had thrown everything forward through muscle, bone, and Nordstrom's finest.

Rolling my bottom lip into my mouth, I squinted at the photo and tapped my fingers on the table, my mind racing with questions and a few possibilities.

"What are you thinking, Ms. Jewel?"

"Hm?" I glanced up, then quickly back down to the photo so my train of thought wouldn't get derailed now that it was going in the right direction.

"You look thoughtful," Richards said. "Have any ideas? Anything you'd like to bounce off me?"

"I was just wondering what was so special about this guy," I said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"What was so special about Walter Garrot that someone had to make such a scene out of his death? Why not keep it under wraps?" I looked up at the detective. "Why not do it at home in a way that wasn't so . . . over the top?"

"*Do it?*" he asked, as he dug inside his tweed suit jacket with one hand. "No more medical anomaly?" He pulled a notebook and pen from his inside pocket and began scribbling. "You think someone *did* this to Garrot?"

His chocolate eyes flicked side to side as he wrote. When he looked at me again his face was blank, hinting at nothing. The perfect cop face. The weight was still there, that penetrating, knowing feel, but nothing else I could read.

"Don't *you* think someone did this to the poor S.O.B?" I asked.

"That's why I called you, Ms. Jewel. This whole case reeks of. . ."

"Weird?" I said with a smirk.

He frowned. "That's not what I meant."

I grinned and wiggled my eyebrows up and down. Then I reached across the table and poked his shoulder. "I was just giving you crap, Richards."

He rolled his eyes up. "When are you *not* giving someone crap?"

I lifted my coffee cup in a silent *touche'* and grinned before I took another sip.

He smiled, an affable expression, and one I didn't get from him often. We weren't friends, and probably never would be, but he trusted my opinion on matters of the strange, even if he didn't necessarily believe in it himself.

Much to my chagrin, I'd become a bit of a local celebrity in the past year and a half. I'd helped recover dozens of missing persons, many of whom had some kind of odd, supernatural twist to their cases. Most of the locals refused to believe the *supernatural* part and focused on the *odd* instead. Semantics. I didn't see much of a difference, but hey, whatever made them feel safe at night. Eventually though, just like Detective Richards, they'd *have* to believe.

The past few months had seen more and more gifted people coming out. Psychic gifts weren't mainstream by any stretch of the imagination, and they weren't readily accepted either, but a few brave souls had come out in the open,

admitting what they were, and showing others what they could do. Psychic abilities were still regarded as a novelty by most people, and just plain evil by some.

I hadn't personally *come out* so much as made people wonder about the way I solved my cases. None of them ever made national news, but the local papers loved to grab interviews with the rare client who was willing to talk about their story. I'd never admitted to anyone that I was anything more than a good private investigator with unorthodox methods, but I didn't get squeamish when the news articles came out questioning just how I'd solved that last "unsolvable" case. Some of the theories kept me laughing for days.

Dr. Goodson was one of the gifted who'd recently come out to the public. How she did her job each day was beyond me. You'd think being able to see what happened just by touching objects or people would discourage her from going elbows-deep into murder victims' bodies. But Dr. Goodson loved her job and went to it each day knowing she was making a difference. Not just that she helped solve murder cases, but that she was showing the world that psychic gifts and unexplainable occurrences weren't things to be feared.

Until Walter Garrot burst onto the scene, that is.

Detective Richards waited quietly, his smile having faded back to the blank cop face I'd come to know so well. He was on the fence with what he believed. He trusted me, but only when it got his cases solved. He didn't like to talk about it more than he had to, and he didn't like to admit he'd called me in for help. That suited me just fine; I had no desire to put myself on the front page, and generally avoided reporters like they carried the black plague. As long as they talked *about* me, and not *to* me, I could handle the media.

"Who could have done this, how, and why?" Detective Richards asked after I'd been quiet for some time.

"I was wondering that myself," I said. "How? I'm not really sure. Microwaves? Too much cell phone use? Some high-tech implant? But then you wouldn't need me; you'd

have called some super spy or techie genius. As to *why* Garrot went *boom?*" I paused, scratched my head, then said, "I'd love to give you an answer, Richards." I slid the file back to the detective. "Right now I've got a big heap of nothing, but if I come up with anything I'll give you a call."

"That's all I ask, Ms. Jewel."

If he was disappointed in my lack of quick answers, I couldn't tell. His face was still neutral, like we'd been discussing the weather instead of exploding body parts. He collected his papers and gory photos, arranged them neatly in the file, then nodded his good-bye.

I was left sitting in the coffee shop, recovering from the experience while I eves dropped on the other patrons. Many of them were discussing the big story of the day. Apparently, some huge, exotic snake had been set loose in the Kitsap Mall. The whole place had been shut down while Silverdale animal control tried to find it. I didn't see how that was big news, but then again, I knew a lot stranger things went on right under their noses.

For instance, there was a Lycan in the restaurant right now. A real live werewolf was sitting in the booth behind the guy with the brown bowler hat. However, none of these people knew that. None of them would ever suspect that little Mina Jewel was a Lycan and could turn at any moment and rip their faces off.

Of course, I'd never *do* that. Not unless they did something nasty to deserve it.

Personal rule number one: Only eat bad guys.

The bell above the door jingled and I glanced toward the front of the restaurant. Timothy, my friend, house mate, and fellow Lycan, waved and came toward me. I saw the heads turn as he passed each table, and the smiles creep over faces.

Women always gave Timothy a second glance, and who could blame them? He was an eye-catcher with that bright auburn hair and those sparkling blue eyes. Six-foot four-inches of stud. He wasn't the smartest man to grace the

planet, but his naivety lent him a certain little-boy charm that some women found irresistible. He didn't really do it for me, but I could see the attraction.

"I thought I'd find you here," Timothy said as he slipped into the seat Detective Richards had recently vacated.

"That's because I'm always here," I replied.

His smile faltered. "When you're not working."

"Technically, I'm still working now."

Timothy frowned. "Why are you here then?"

"I just needed a change of scenery," I said as I clasped my hands over my head and stretched my arms up. My back cracked with the movement and I winced. "I stopped in for some coffee to wake my ass up, then I got spotted and made to look at disturbing crime-scene photos. You know, typical day for me."

Timothy didn't return my playful smile. I wasn't in the mood for more melancholy, so I didn't bother asking what his issue was. Instead I asked, "Did you need something?"

"Beckett wanted to see you." Timothy lowered his voice and added, "He's down at HQ waiting for you. He's been there for an hour."

"Beckett?"

I reached in my purse, pulled out my new cell phone—which was more like a tiny computer than a phone—and checked the calendar on the screen. Today's date was blinking, and a note flashed up on the screen every few seconds reminding me to meet Beckett an hour ago. There were also six missed calls. Guess I'd turned off the ringer and hadn't realized it. Damn touchscreen technology.

"Ah, shit!" I said. "I forgot all about him."

"We noticed."

I scooted to the end of the booth. Timothy watched me rummage through my purse and tuck five dollars under my coffee mug for the waitress. With his forearms resting on the table and his chin on his arms, he rolled his eyes up to meet mine, looking every bit like a lost puppy.

Before I stood, I leaned in close and asked, "Did you

need something else, Timothy?"

He sat up, sighed dramatically, and shook his head. The shake sent his mane dancing around his face. He looked up at me through a shaggy curtain of hair.

Moody again? No surprise; he'd been moody off and on for weeks, but I didn't have time to sit and psychoanalyze the werewolf. What the hell did he have to worry about, anyway? His only real responsibility in the world was to keep my house clean. Granted, I could be a slob, so cleaning my house could easily be a full-time job. But still, it wasn't that tough of a life. Timothy's biggest worry in the last month had been which fabric softener to use on my unmentionables.

I shook my head, patted his arm, and left the gloomy Lycan to pout by himself in the coffee shop.

TWO



Presence HQ was housed in the basement of Page's Pages—though *basement* didn't quite cover what was below the quiet book store at the edge of town. A sprawling, multilevel maze of twisting, brick-lined tunnels secretly spread out under half of downtown Port Orchard. I'd only been in a few of the upper tunnels in the handful of years I'd been with Presence. Quite frankly, that was plenty for me. What I'd seen down there was enough to keep me supplied with nightmares for several lifetimes. I wasn't about to go looking for more.

The cavernous meeting room was lit by small rectangular bulbs stuck in the walls and spaced so far apart the light couldn't quite reach the whole room. In the center of the polished stone floor stood an equally-polished long wood table. No chairs, no papers, no phones, pencils, or pens. Just a big lonely table and a green reading lamp reflecting off the liquid-looking surface and the gold-embossed symbol of

our organization: An elegant capital *P* surrounded by swirling lines and shimmering dots.

Beckett leaned against the table, his arms crossed over his chest. He wore his typical tailored black tuxedo like it was a part of him. Beckett was one of those men who seemed to take up the whole room just by being there. He was wide and thick with dark, smooth skin free of any distinguishing features. No freckles, no blemishes, no scars, not even stubble on his squared chin. He wore his black hair in shoulder-length braids ending in white beads that clicked against each other when he moved.

Beckett could have palmed my face and crushed my skull with little more than a flinch, but I wasn't worried when he came toward me with one hand extended. Beckett may have been big and imposing, but he was one of the most gentle and soft-spoken men I'd ever known.

We shook hands and he turned back to the table. He pointed a finger to the right of the table, and just like that, a well-padded office chair rolled smoothly out of the shadows as if an invisible servant had run up to him pushing the chair. The chair stopped in front of Beckett and he settled into it. He then looked up at me and gave a slow single nod.

I grinned, raised my hand, and called a chair for myself—although mine wobbled slowly toward me as if *my* invisible servant was missing a leg and both arms. The chair jolted, rolled forward one more inch, then stopped. I'm pretty sure it was my shin that stopped the chair and not my *amazing* control.

I sat in the chair and crossed my legs, my right ankle resting on top of my left knee. I'd been accused of sitting like a man more than once, but I didn't really care. In jeans, sitting like a "proper" lady meant cut-off circulation and pinched skin in places most people don't *want* pinched.

Beckett sat with his back straight, his hands folded in his lap, and his attention all on me. His voice was a deep bass, but gentle when he said, "You should make time for practice every day, Mina."

"Telekinesis has never been one of my stronger gifts," I said quietly. It was a lame excuse, and I knew it.

Beckett knew it too. He shook his head slowly, the beads in his hair clicking softly against one another. "All the more reason to make time for your practice. You could be so powerful if you'd just *try*. I'd hate to think that all the things I've taught you are going to waste."

"Way to lay the guilt," I said as I looked away from his stern gaze.

Technically, I was his boss. But Beckett had been with Presence for much longer than I had, and he knew a lot more about psychic gifts and supernatural goodies than me. Truthfully, I felt like I was only second in command because my father had been the founder of the underground society and had ruled it for so long. It also helped that Justice, the current leader, was also my live-in boyfriend.

A shrill beep echoed through the room, and Beckett turned his thick wrist to look at his watch.

"God!" I said, suddenly remembering why I was there. "I'm so sorry I'm late. I forgot all about the antique show."

"It's fine," he said. "It's just started. If we leave now we can still get there in time to peruse the offerings. They're open until nine this evening."

"I can't," I said with a shake of my head. "My case-load is too heavy. I've got a bunch of missing teens. Some kind of rave gone bad or something. I'm not sure yet. I've been up all night working on it."

Beckett looked disappointed, but he nodded and offered, "Anything I can help with?"

"I don't know," I said with a grin. "Spend a lot of time at raves?"

He smiled, shaking his head. "Sorry. Not really my thing." He raised his arms out to the sides and looked down at himself. "I don't blend in very well with the younger set."

I grinned wider, imagining calm composed Beckett at a rave surrounded by young people high on every drug imaginable. Maybe he'd even have one of those giant, light up

baby pacifiers hanging from a brightly-colored string around his neck.

I laughed and said, "Don't worry about it. Hey, why don't you grab Oliver and Beth-Anne before you hit the show? They love that crap. They'll probably be more fun than I would anyway." I added softly, "Sorry again, Beckett."

"I understand." Beckett nodded and stood, straightening his jacket. "Before I go," he said, "Justice was here not long ago looking for you."

"Yeah," I said, my smile dropping away. "I'm not surprised. I haven't seen him since yesterday morning, and I didn't have time to answer his emails this afternoon."

"He seemed distressed. . ."

"He's fine," I said with a small shake of my head. "I'll send him a text before I go back to the office to be sure, but he's *not* distressed."

"Perhaps you should go home," Beckett said. "Maybe spend some time with your sweetheart before you forget what he looks like."

Sliding down my seat a little, I took in a deep breath, steeling myself for the inevitable. "Yeah, you're probably right."

It wasn't that I didn't want to see Justice or to spend any time at home; I really did need that recharge. It was just that things in my personal life hadn't been so great lately. I wasn't pointing fingers or trying to place blame, but home wasn't as relaxing as it should be. Admittedly, it wasn't *always* bad, but it wasn't always good either. There were some issues that needed to be addressed, and I was too chickenshit to bring them up. Then again, so was Justice. For months we'd been playing this immature game of pretending everything was just fine, and it was taking its toll on us both. Despite my efforts to keep things between just us, I suspected our issues were taking their toll on our work and our friends, too. But I wasn't sure how to stop it.

Beckett tipped his head toward me and smiled softly, as if he understood my trepidation, but he didn't ask. Without

another word he left through the big metal door, leaving me to decide whether to go home and face a possible emotionally devastating situation, or to be a coward and just send a text.



The fact that Justice was standing on my front porch when I drove up to my house meant Beckett had called ahead to let him know I was on my way. I'm not sure how I felt about Beckett's meddling in my personal life. He meant well, but some things really should just stay between the parties involved. Nobody in Presence knew all the crap that had been thrown between Justice and I lately in the privacy of our own home. Sure, they probably had their assumptions, but nobody really knew the truth, and I wanted to keep it that way.

But Justice didn't appear to be annoyed or angry. In fact, he looked quite eager to see me, so maybe things wouldn't be so bad. One could always hope.

He stood with his back against my front door, his right ankle crossed casually over his left. He held a single white daisy, twirling it round and round in his long, pale fingers. A breeze blew his black hair over his right shoulder and across his chest, the ends brushing the banister on the other side.

I got out of my car, walked around to the passenger's side, and leaned my back against it. Smiling, I folded my arms across my stomach and waited. Justice took the cue and came slowly down the steps and across the yard, giving me plenty of time to watch him move toward me, knowing I'd enjoy the view. He stopped in front of me and bent to lay a soft kiss on my forehead.

I sighed and closed my eyes as Justice pulled me closer, folding me into his arms. A rare peace moved between us on the warmth of our bodies, and for a moment I just breathed him in, all my anxiety starting to melt away at last.

"I've missed you," he whispered.

With my head snuggled into his chest, his silken hair

caressed my face. I could just wrap myself in that hair and twirl it around my fingers for hours. And on good days I sometimes did just that. But before I could sink into that beautiful hair, the house phone rang, interrupting the sweet reunion.

My shoulders went tense at the sound. "Dammit," I whispered, pushing away from Justice.

At first he didn't let go. He didn't hold me tight or prevent me from moving, but he didn't let go either. He left his arms wrapped around me and he stared down into my face, his bright yellow eyes almost pleading. The phone rang a second time and I pushed harder to get away. He released me with a frown. I went up on tip-toes, kissed his cheek to ease his worry, then turned and jogged to the porch and up the steps. As I reached for the doorknob, a skinny black cat ran out from under the porch and took off into the woods.

"You know," I shouted after it, "I'm gonna pet you one of these days, you stupid cat!"

"It'll take more than a few meals for that stray to let *you* touch it," Justice said as he came up the steps behind me.

"Ingrate," I grumbled, and pushed the door open.

The bedroom phone was the closest, so I turned left and jogged down the short hall, took another left, and snatched the receiver off my dresser.

"What?" I said as I dropped my purse and keys on the floor next to me.

"Hey, it's Alex."

A twinge of pain shot through my temple. I pressed my forehead against the cool wall, my visions of a relaxing evening crumbling away at the sound of my assistant's tentative voice.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I've got a lead."

"Alex," I said with a heavy sigh. "I just got home. I've been wearing the same clothes since yesterday, I haven't slept in God-knows how long, and the last meal I had was a bagel at ten yesterday morning—unless you count the buckets of

coffee I've been drinking since then. Can't this wait until the morning?"

"No," he said softly. "No, I think you should take a look at this."

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