

Presence: Wolf Moon

By Charity Becker

ONE

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The werewolf wasn't even trying to blend in. Sure, he might appear normal at first glance with his pressed gray business suit and expensive shoes. Even the curly black pony-tail could pass. But the long canine teeth and those black claws in his human hands ruined his polished appearance. Most Lycans that showed off their condition in public tended to be trouble, or so I'd been told. I only knew one werewolf personally, and he was nothing like this guy.

"What can I do for you today, Mr. Latrator?" I asked, giving my best professional smile. Judge not, and all that fluff.

"I'm looking for a Lycan." His speech was clear despite the doggie teeth—which, truthfully, you didn't even notice unless he smiled. He wasn't smiling now as he leaned back in the chair, shifting his weight to rest his right arm on my desk and tap his claws on my blotter.

"And what *kind* of Lycan are we looking for?"

"A wolf."

I waited for him to explain, to give me something to work with, something to think about besides the incessant rapping of those shining claws. I'd managed to get my ever-present headache down to a dull throb just before this meeting, but now it was pulsing against my skull in time with the tapping.

After several wordless seconds, I raised an eyebrow. I'd had reluctant clients before, but none quite this closed-off. It annoyed me to have to work so hard before I'd even agreed to take the case.

I pushed my irritation down and took a deep, calming breath before I asked, "Does this wolf have a *name*?"

"Brendon," he said, folding his hands in his lap.

Maybe he thought the ambiguity added mystery, or that it would make me want his case more. Maybe he thought all private investigators had some kind of Sherlock Holmes fantasy or something. Then again, maybe he was just an ass.

"This is how it works, Mr. Latrator," I said, forcing the words out slowly so I wouldn't yell. "*You* provide information, I find who you're looking for. I've got a lobby full of clients who *made* appointments today, so you aren't doing me any favors by being here. I don't need your case, your money, or this aggravation. Now, either cooperate or get out."

He pressed his lips together, squinting his bright green eyes, but he didn't speak. My shoulders tensed when his gaze skittered down my body, searching. Was he being macho and sizing me up, or was he wondering how many bites it would take to get to my chewy center?

Before I could comment, he straightened his already straight tie and said, "My apologies, Ms. Jewel."

The tension in my shoulders relaxed a little and I let out a soft, relieved breath. Picking up my pen and looking at my pad of paper, I asked, "So, how old is Brendon and what relation is he to you?"

"Brendon is my son. He's just turned twenty-eight."

Glancing up, I said, "I typically do missing children cases, Mr. Latrator." I had no intentions of bumping a missing kid case to find this pretentious asshole's adult son, and I was getting ready to say as much when he raised his clawed hand to stop me.

"I'm aware of your specialty," he said, his voice a shade softer. "However, I thought because of our parallel. . . *unusual* circumstances, you'd be more willing to help us than anyone else would."

Word had spread via the small-town grapevine that I had special abilities. Most people didn't believe it, but those who did believe, liked to talk. Latrator had probably heard the stories and assumed I was friendly to the surreptitious Lycanthrope community. It wasn't that I was *unfriendly* toward them, I just wasn't as familiar with Lycans as I was with other preternatural types. Being second in command of Presence had opened me up to all kinds of strange things, but only one real werewolf, Timothy. Well, until now.

Regardless of how I felt about the Lycan sitting across from me, looking into those worried eyes, part of me felt bad for the guy. His son was missing. It wasn't any easier for a parent just because the missing child happened to be an adult. It didn't make the pain of not knowing where they were any less. On top of that, Mr. Latrator couldn't just walk into any police station or private investigator's office asking for help. He and I both knew nobody would be willing to help the monsters. Nobody but me.

Knowing the crappy hand life had dealt him, I guess I could understand why Mr. Latrator might be acting like such an asshole. Under the same circumstances I'd probably be defensive and cautious, too. Maybe even a little bitchy.

I sighed, the remaining tension in my body easing away. I'd do my best for Latrator, not because I liked him, but because I felt bad for him.

"Does your son have any enemies?" I asked.

"None that I'm aware of."

"Is he most often a man or a wolf?"

"I hardly see how that's relevant."

The tension snapped back across my shoulders, and I

pursed my lips. It took all I had not to scream in frustration. Maybe he *was* just an ass. Pushing the anger down again, I folded my hands on the desk and fixed him with a steady gaze. "I think you've wasted enough of my time."

His reply was a sneer and a wash of power biting its way up my arms. The energy spilled over me in a static-charged wave that made the tiny hairs on my arms tingle. Mr. Latrator grinned, obviously satisfied with my wide-eyed reaction.

A touch of dismay flashed on his face when I settled cold, unwavering eyes on the werewolf. The surprise didn't last long though. His arrogant grin came back almost at once, dismissing my silent warning as if I posed no threat.

Fine. We could do it the hard way.

I concentrated on a point just under the knot in his tie. When I flicked my index finger toward his throat, an invisible line of energy flew off my fingertip. The tie flipped out of his jacket and flapped up over his face. All at once, he wiped his left hand down his face to clear the tie, stood, and reached across the desk with his other hand, extending those razor claws toward my throat.

In the space of a heartbeat, I'd pushed my energy outward in a gush and let it spill over the Lycan. As my power enveloped him I could feel a connection to his body, a thin thread of energy from my hand to each of his muscles and joints. He was my puppet on unseen strings, and with just a thought I held him, half-standing, still reaching for me.

I smiled and knew it wasn't friendly. His wide eyes flicked from my face to my hand and then back again, gleaming emerald in the reflected light from my desk lamp.

It wasn't easy to hold him. Telekinesis takes a lot of concentration, especially on a living creature or for an extended period. I'd just started learning how to use it properly so my skills were limited. The headache pounding in my skull wasn't helping matters either. My concentration was

a trembling, delicate thing, losing strength by the second. I just hoped the werewolf didn't know that.

"Are you going to behave yourself now, Mr. Latrator?" I said in the calmest voice I could manage.

"Yes," he replied.

"And are we all done with the games?"

He ground his teeth together, his jaw working furiously under his smooth, tanned skin, and I could feel his movement as a tug at my fingers like a fish at the end of my line. "Quite through," he finally said.

I relaxed, imagining the puppet strings cut and drifting away. Mr. Latrator dropped heavily to his seat with an exhaled *oof*. I picked up my pen and looked down at my pad of paper again as if nothing had happened, though my heart was racing and sweat had blossomed on my face and arms.

"Is he most often a man or a wolf?" I repeated, hoping Latrator couldn't sense the exhausted tremor in my hands.

He cleared his throat and straightened his now rumpled tie. "Usually? A wolf. Though recently he's been spending more time as a man."

Resting his right ankle on top of his left knee, he settled back into his seat. Apparently, we were playing nice again. We looked so businesslike, so professional. If anyone came in just now they'd never have known we'd just had a metaphysical pissing match.

Rather than comment on his demeanor, I kept it professional and asked, "So, what's with Brendon's sudden change of . . . identity?"

"I fear Brendon has fallen in with a human hate group."

I raised an eyebrow. "Lycans who hate humans, or humans who hate Lycans?"

His face went tight. "The latter, I'm afraid."

"Humans who hate Lycans?" I shook my head. "That doesn't seem like a very werewolfy thing to do. Why would

Brendon want to harm your pack?"

"He's next in line for pack leader."

"So?"

I'd never had to deal with furry politics before, and quite frankly, didn't want to. Timothy was a loner, none of the rules applied to him, and I was glad of that. I'd heard that Lycanthrope precepts could be nasty. A cross between extremist humans and wild animals—if there was a difference at all. Again, it was all third-hand stuff I'd heard around the Presence meeting table down at HQ, but they'd been a reliable source so far. After all, it was their job to document and control preternatural beings and occurrences. I had no reason *not* to believe Presence about Lycans.

"He doesn't want to be pack leader," Latrator said. "He wants to be *normal*."

He said the last word with such disdain I gave a short laugh.

He stiffened in his seat and said, "Is something funny?"

I shrugged and flashed an apologetic smile. "I'm not sure there's anyone normal *in* this town." A thought came to me then. A thought that wiped the smile off my face and sent a shiver through my body. "We haven't had a full werewolf pack in this part of Washington for at least twenty years. Why did you settle your pack here?"

He licked his lips and fidgeted with the bottom edge of his suit jacket. "We needed a new home, and this area's ideal for our way of life."

Something told me we'd be hearing about missing or mutilated hikers in the coming weeks. But I didn't say that out loud. "Tell you what," I said instead, "I'll take your case, but if anything looks odd, I'm bringing it to the police."

He nodded his understanding, then said softly, "Please, just find my son."

For a split second his expression changed, his eyes

softened. Then, before I could react, he quickly morphed back to the aloof Latrator I'd first met: All business and self-importance.

Mr. Latrator stood, offering his hand like any gentleman would. I reached across the desk and took his hand, and power crackled between us. It was a shock to feel all that raw energy crawling up my arm, especially when I was still recovering from our first encounter. But I looked Latrator in the eye and gave a firm shake. Werewolves, like natural wolves, respect solid eye contact. Looking away is a sign of submission, a sign that you acknowledge the other's dominance over you.

Nobody dominated me. Not anymore.

Latrator narrowed his eyes, the skin at the corner of his mouth twitching as if he fought not to smile. "They say you're just a human," he said.

"And?" That one word came out as hostile as I'd meant it to.

"I think they're mistaken." With a quick squeeze of my hand, he turned and left my office.

Just before my door closed I caught a glimpse of the overflowing waiting room, and my headache came back with a vengeance.

TWO

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Six o'clock found me exhausted as I shuffled through my front door, my mind set on a hot shower before Timothy and Justice came home. It wasn't vanity that drove me to the bathroom for a good scrub each evening. As silly as it sounded, I just felt like I needed to scour off the emotional *ick* clinging to me at the end of each day so it wouldn't infect

my guys. They had their own shit to shovel, no need to dump mine on them, too. Lord knew I'd done enough of that over the past year.

*You're a burden on everyone you touch. No shower can wash that away, no matter how hard you scrub!* The naysayer hissed poison into my brain. That voice had been a constant resident in my head for as long as I could remember, taunting, judging, making me doubt myself and those around me. I did my best to ignore the naysayer because I knew that oily, dark voice belonged to my past and that it only whispered lies. But sometimes the words leaked through my defenses. Sometimes I even believed them.

"Not now," I said, rubbing my face in my hands, trying to block out the words.

Tonight I wanted to stop thinking about the cases I hadn't solved yet, and the pain of my past, and how the two always seemed related. Tonight I wanted to forget about my self-loathing and my myriad problems. Tonight I wanted peace. Pure, simple peace.

The naysayer remained silent, and I sighed, closing the front door behind me. Maybe I'd get what I wanted for a change. Maybe I'd take my shower, eat a nice meal, and get to bed early. Maybe tomorrow I'd feel better. My headache would be gone, my stomach wouldn't hurt any longer, and the naysayer would stay quiet.

Positive thinking, happy thoughts, and all that bull, right? I gave a firm nod and stepped into the living room, determined to have a good evening. There was no time for psychosis anyway. There was an empty quiet to my house that I needed to fill, or things would get much worse for me.

Early evening light filtered in through the curtains and threw long shadows across the floor. By the time my shower was done it would be dark—that cold, bottomless dark you can only get in the deep woods, far from any city lights or distant houses. That cavernous dark bothered something inside of me, poked at that primal part that knew bad things lurked there in the blackness—things you couldn't see until it

was too late and you were already being swallowed whole.

*You're a mess*, the naysayer whispered just before fading into the back of my mind again on waves of high-pitched laughter.

Scowling, I imagined a huge stone wall slamming down between my thoughts and my subconscious, cutting off the naysayer and its chiding. I paused, listening, waiting.

Satisfied I'd beaten the naysayer for now, I turned from the living room and flipped on the hall light. As I moved down the hall toward the bathroom, I left a trail of jacket, shirt, shoes, and skirt, knowing Timothy would pick them up when he got home. In the face of all my issues and my seemingly endless list of oh-so-important tasks, it was nice to have something as mundane as laundry taken care of. Even if the maid *did* howl at the moon once a month.

As I stepped into the shower my belly growled. The office had been so packed I hadn't taken a lunch break. A snack-size bag of corn chips and a pot of coffee spread out over the whole day hardly constituted good nutrition. Chances were good that fabulous diet was a contributing factor to my shitty mood tonight, my headache, and my burning stomach. But my job was important; I couldn't just walk away.

Today I'd handled four scheduled appointments and two walk-ins. Yesterday I had six new cases. The day before that, four. All of them had missing kids, and I already suspected two of them were some horrendous thing the parents had done to their own children.

One thing I'd never understand was why they hired me if they were guilty. Maybe they thought hiring a PI would make it look like they weren't involved, like they really were just loving, doting parents worried sick about their children. And maybe that worked with other private eyes, but I could see right through them. I knew exactly what they were. And though I might not know all the terrifying details to start with, I'd find out sooner or later. I always did.

That thought brought a cold, heavy feeling to my

stomach. I'd seen more than my fair share of violence and crimes against the weak and powerless. When I was small there hadn't been anyone there to help me. I'd survived by strength of will and a streak of stubbornness a mile wide.

Sure, my savior had come eventually, but the damage had already been done. Nine years in a mental institution had healed most of the psychological wounds, but along with the nagging naysayer, my memories still haunted me. Sometimes I could push them down and pretend it had happened to someone else. Sometimes I could look back on it all and take strength from knowing I'd survived and gotten revenge on my stepfather and his sick cult. But sometimes those memories tightened my throat, tied my insides into knots, and reawakened that old pain.

I plunged my face into the steaming water, letting it wash the fresh tears from my cheeks and soothe my stinging eyes. The harder my work day, the worse the memories could be. But that's all they were. Just memories.

"Memories can't hurt you," I whispered into the water over and over.

It took a few minutes of deep breathing between splashes of water on my face and repeating my mantra before I got a grip on myself. The naysayer was still locked behind the wall in my mind, and the queasy feeling in my belly was subsiding, leaving only the familiar burn and the growl of hunger.

Crisis averted, I finished my shower and began toweling my long curls dry when I heard the front door shut. Justice was right on time.

"I'll be out in a minute," I shouted, feeling better just knowing he was home. A snuggle on the couch was just what I needed tonight. Maybe Justice would read to me until I fell asleep in his lap.

I slipped into my fuzzy bathrobe, flipped off the bathroom light, and opened the door. When my toes hit the hall carpet, I froze.

The house was dark.

"Justice?" I called, but there was no answer.

Timothy wasn't due back from his nightly romp in the woods for hours still, but Justice was supposed to be home by now. If he'd been in the house he'd have answered me. Justice was well aware of my past—in fact, he'd been my savior all those years ago—so he was sensitive to my fears, irrational as they might be. He'd never play tricks on me.

But if it wasn't one of my guys. . .

I held my breath, listening, but the only thing I could hear was my own heart thudding in my ears. I drew in a slow, steady breath, held it for a second, then let it out, willing my heart to slow and my thoughts to calm.

Just that much relaxation helped me focus and turn the fear into power. My energy swirled inside my body, rising up in tingling bubbles, spreading into my chest and out to my shoulders and arms. I lifted my left arm out to the side, splaying my fingers wide, my right hand braced against the bathroom doorframe. Closing my eyes, I directed the power over my arm, off my fingertips, and down the dark hall. The power became an extension of my hands, and I used my Insight to feel my house, searching for whoever was hiding in the dark.

The living room was empty, but I sensed a faint trail of the stranger there, a warm wisp of life in the chilly room. I followed the trail to the left, through the dining room, wrapping my energy around it, a delicate rope of life-essence guiding me through the dark into the kitchen. That's where I felt gentle resistance, like pressing hands against an under-inflated balloon.

Insight was one of my weakest gifts so I wasn't in-tune to it yet. I often had trouble interpreting what I felt, but I could glean some knowledge from it if I concentrated. Though I wasn't sure how it worked or why I was so certain, I just *knew* the strange man in my kitchen wasn't yet aware of me.

My energy fingers curled around his feet and moved up his legs and hips. I directed the energy further up, along his

belly and chest. When I came to his face, a sledgehammer-shock skipped up my arm and slammed into my shoulder.

I stumbled back into the bathroom and smacked the door with my right hand, slamming it shut.

"Shit," I whispered. My arm throbbed as a numbing tingle picked at my fingertips. "So much for stealth."

If he'd been just any normal somebody off the street I'd have been in control. If he'd been a mundane I could have just held him in place until the cops got here to arrest his sneaky ass. Unfortunately, he was anything *but* normal, and a gifted intruder raised the stakes considerably.

What were the chances that a gifted robber just happened to stumble upon *my* house? It's not like I lived in a well-populated neighborhood. Hell, even the mailman didn't come out this far. No, this guy didn't just happen to be in the area; he *knew* I was here, and he'd come looking for trouble. The only people that ever hunted me down were the sickos from the Congregation of Truth—especially since they thought I'd killed my stepfather, their leader.

"Shit," I said again, louder this time because there was no reason to whisper if the guy already knew I was here.

I scanned the bathroom for something to wear besides my robe. I don't know why, but being nearly nude made me feel vulnerable, as if clothes somehow made me harder to hurt. Fear my impenetrable armor of cotton and rayon!

I scowled and cursed under my breath. Who would have thought my laziness would be the key to my demise? If I wasn't such a slob my clothes would have been in the bathroom with me instead of spread along the hallway. And where the hell was Justice anyway?

My heart climbed into my throat at the thought of Justice. Maybe he wasn't here because something was wrong. Had the stranger caught my sweetie out in the driveway? Were there more Congregation psychos out there holding him hostage while the scout came in to get me? Was Justice hurt? *Dead?* An icy fist of panic closed around my chest.

Before I could draw another breath, I heard the front

door open, and I felt the touch of a cool breeze flow under the bathroom door. "Sorry I'm late, Mina," came Justice's cheery voice.

Warm relief flooded over me, melting the cold panic. I yanked the bathroom door open. Justice's smile faltered when he saw me. He turned to his right, toward the kitchen, and brushed some of his long black hair out of his face at the same time something big came barreling down the dark hall. Justice balled his hands into fists and pulled the shadows around himself, turning to gray smoke just before the intruder fell into him.

The stranger hit the floor and immediately started to rise, swaying on hands and knees, his feet tangled in my abandoned clothes. Without thinking, I took aim with my right hand and sent a blast of telekinetic energy toward the stranger, popping him in the back of the head. The blow sent him sprawling face-first to the floor.

Justice reappeared next to me with a sigh of damp air. He flipped the hall light on and looked down.

Then he laughed.

It was a rich, melodic sound that usually made me tingle with remembered caresses. Right now, it just pissed me off.

"What's so funny about this?" I said, motioning to the massive, unconscious lump resting peacefully in a nest of my discarded clothing.

"Normally, nothing," Justice said.

His deep voice was made gentle by the British accent peppered here and there and his soft tone. His voice was comfort to me, safety. It was the same voice that soothed me to sleep on the roughest of nights. The voice I'd cling to when my world threatened to crash down around my ears. The voice I *needed* right now.

Hanging onto my anger, I shook off the warm fuzzies and said, "Care to explain, oh, cryptic one?"

"He's harmless."

"And you know that, how?"

Justice bent and picked up his jeans. Like always, his

clothes had dropped off when he shifted to smoke. I'd often find scattered piles in the house and all over Presence headquarters.

He stepped into the jeans, and I pretended not to notice the firm thighs and the finely cut abs as the jeans slid up, or the way he seemed to button the fly slower than necessary. He knew I was watching and he played it up. He knew that if he could distract me, I'd stop being mad. Lately, it seemed like he was always trying to curb my anger, always doing something to take the sting out of my temper.

Justice gave a sly, sideways smile, his soft lips looking oh-so kissable.

I glared harder.

He shrugged pale shoulders with a sigh, then he bent again and turned the stranger over onto his back, the muscles in his long arms straining under the weight of the larger man.

The stranger had at least four inches on Justice—which made him almost six-eight—and a flabby belly that jiggled even after his back rested on the floor. His nose was upturned like a pig's snout, and short, reddish-brown hair left his big ears stranded too-low on the sides of his head. His pale skin looked translucent in the bright overhead light, except for the smattering of dark freckles over his entire face. He looked like a giant, sweaty, mean version of the *Mad Magazine* mascot.

"I know he's harmless," Justice said, "because I *know* him." He looked down at the man and poked him with his bare toe.

"Oh, yeah?" I said. Heat crept up my neck and over my cheeks. "Who is he and why the hell was he sneaking into my house and turning off the lights? And if you know him so well, why'd he just try to attack you?"

I don't know why it made me angrier that Justice knew this guy than if he'd been a Congregation flunky. I should have been relieved. Everything seemed to make me angry these days.

"His name is Herbert," Justice said sedately, "and he

wasn't sneaking around; *you* left the door unlocked again."

What could I say? I was guilty, but for good reason? Timothy had come home late one night and ended up sleeping on the porch. It went against all my deep-rooted paranoia to leave the house unlocked, but I didn't like Timothy sleeping on the porch either. As a wolf he couldn't hold a key—he'd already lost two that way. Tonight's episode made me reconsider installing a doggy door. Of course, any doggy door big enough for a werewolf to squeeze through would be big enough for an intruder, too. Not your typical conundrum, and definitely *not* one I could ponder at the moment.

"Besides," Justice continued, "he wasn't attacking me."

"That sure as hell didn't look like a friendly man-hug to me. He tried to bowl you over!"

Justice shook his head, looking at the man on the floor. "No, I think he was just messing around. He does that. It just backfired this time because I wasn't expecting him, and he doesn't usually have to watch out for scattered clothing."

"And the lights?" I tried to keep some of my anger in the face of Justice's maddeningly reasonable explanations.

"He turned off the lights because he's photosensitive," Justice said as he looked at me again. "They hurt his eyes."

"Oh." I blinked a few times and frowned. "So, he's not Congregation?"

Justice shook his head. "He sure isn't."

"Oh," I said again, a little softer. Could I really stay mad at a disabled intruder who wasn't really an intruder after all? Despite my desire to stay angry, not even *I* could hold that kind of a grudge. "Well," I said quietly, "should we turn off the lights then?"

## THREE



Justice flicked the light switch. As the hall was enveloped in blackness once more, I leaned my back against the wall, my arms crossed over my stomach. The dark didn't scare me if Justice was in it with me. Since there wasn't any fear, I had plenty of room for annoyance.

"I don't recall seeing any 'Herbert' on the roster," I said.

"He's not Presence," Justice replied.

"Why not? He's got at least one gift." I rubbed my still tingling arm and glowered at the man on the floor.

"We made the offer," Justice said, shrugging. "He refused."

I'd never heard of anyone refusing an offer to join Presence. Who *wouldn't* want to join an underground society of psychics? Who *wouldn't* want to spend the rest of their lives studying, documenting, and controlling preternatural phenomena? All that excitement *and* the pay was damn good. You just don't refuse working for Presence. Not unless you're stupid.

*Or you have something to hide*, the naysayer offered.

Justice saw the doubt on my face, but he didn't elaborate. Instead, he bent and shook Herbert's shoulder. "Hey, Herbie. Nap time is over."

With a snort, Herbert flopped a thick, freckled hand over his forehead and turned his face toward Justice's voice. "What the fuck happened?" Herbert mumbled.

"Charming," I said.

Herbert sat up quickly. "Bitch, I'm gonna—"

"Herbert, my friend," Justice interrupted, "I'd like you to meet Mina Jewel." He held his hand out and helped Herbert stand on bulky legs.

Herbert's angry expression morphed into wide-eyed surprise. He let go of Justice's hand and dropped his arm to his side as he stared down at me.

"I'd like to say, 'Nice to meet you, Herbert', but under the circumstances. . ." I let the words trail off and offered my hand.

Herbert just rubbed the back of his head and stared at

my hand like it would jump off my arm and slap him.

I narrowed my eyes and asked, "You can say more than 'fuck' and 'bitch', right?"

"Sorry, ma'am," Herbert mumbled, but he still didn't take my hand.

"Ma'am?" I scowled up at Herbert. "I'm not your mother." I slipped my hands into the deep pockets of my bathrobe and quietly seethed. No reason to let my hand hang out in the air if the cretin wasn't going to accept my offer of a friendly handshake.

"Ms. Jewel," he said with a quick nod. "I wasn't expectin' anyone but Justice tonight. They said you was busy at the office."

"Who said that?"

Herbert blinked slowly in response.

Did he not understand the question or was he being difficult on purpose? I'd had my fill of obstinate people today. My sour stomach flared with growing anger.

"You *do* realize this is my house, not Justice's, right?"

Herbert nodded. Justice frowned. I ignored Justice and narrowed my eyes at Herbert once again.

"Why did you come here looking for Justice if you knew this wasn't his house?"

"No disrespect meant, ma'am—I mean Ms. Jewel—but Justice been sleepin' here for months. Almost every night far's I can tell. If I was to find him anywhere, it'd be here."

That made me blush from my forehead to my toes, but I tried to play it off, hoping the lack of light in the house would cover my embarrassment. "Well, what do you need with Justice?"

"He told me to come see him when I had news."

Herbert turned his attention to Justice who stood with his arms crossed over his bare chest. His hair trailed over his arms, and he leaned his back against the opposite wall, an amused smile on his face. Something told me his amusement *wasn't* aimed at Herbert.

"The Congregation is in Poulsbo," Herbert said quietly.

At those words, Justice's smile dropped away, and my annoyance with our visitor quickly gave way to frustration aimed elsewhere.

Presence would destroy one Congregation hive and another would pop up in its place. We'd take down one leader and another, more wicked and twisted one, would pop up in his or her place. Centuries of fighting and Presence didn't seem any closer to eradicating the vermin that fed off the innocent. My anger seethed again.

"Is the church already built?" Justice asked.

Herbert shook his head, slow to the left, slow to the right. "No church. Just a big warehouse."

Maybe I was just cranky, or tired, or just fed up tonight, but the story seemed too convenient. I asked Herbert, "What do *you* get out of helping us?"

Even though Justice obviously trusted the guy, I didn't. Anyone outside of Presence was a potential enemy. Recently, even some people *within* Presence had turned out to be bad guys. My list of trustworthy souls was damn short and I just couldn't accept anyone new without getting to know them myself.

Herbert turned his pale eyes to me and blinked once. "I just think they're bad people, Ms. Jewel, that's all."

"So why not join Presence?"

"Don't really get along with people."

"But you get along with Justice," I pressed.

"I don't work well with others," Herbert said in a voice gone low and dangerous.

In that moment I felt something furry crawl up my neck and the back of my skull. I swiped at it and yipped like a scared puppy. As soon as I touched the back of my neck the feeling disappeared. But it didn't just go away. The furry thing melted into my scalp with the shiver of icy water running over my head and down my neck and back. I shuddered and took a step back into the bathroom again, where I stayed, until Justice had walked our creepy guest to the door and said

good night.

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