

Chapter 1: Jordyn & Jackson

JJ tossed and turned all night, unable to get to sleep. Tomorrow was a big day that she didn't want to face. For months now, she had stressed about how to handle this anniversary. Should she make a big deal about it, or just treat it like any other day? Her mind was full of memories and images that transported her back to the worst day of her life. The day that had transformed her from Jordyn into JJ and set her life on a new path. It was a better path in so many ways . . . except for the hole that remained in her family. Finally, she dozed off only to be awakened by a noise that she didn't recognize. She picked up her cell phone to see it was 6:14 a.m. Tired or not, it was time to get this day started. It had been too many years since she had last visited her brother. There was no way she could avoid it any longer—not today.

"I can't believe it's been ten years," JJ said softly to herself as she placed flowers on Jackson's grave. She brushed off the dried leaves and pulled the weeds around the edges. Sitting on the grass, coffee in hand, she used a wet cloth to wipe the dirt off of the marker that read "Jackson William Gilbert, Beloved Son and Brother."

"Obviously, no one has been here in a long time. I'm sorry, Jackson. I think about you every day." JJ looked up to see the sun peeking through the April clouds. *If the weather had been like this ten years ago, we probably wouldn't be here*, she thought. Her eyes flooded with tears as she relived every moment of the day she lost her twin brother.

Jordyn sat near the back of the school bus by herself, glaring out the window with her gloved hands tucked into her jacket pockets. It was late spring and colder than usual. She shivered at the chill from the glass against her face as her breath fogged up the window. With each gust of wind, the rain pounded against the bus, sounding like popcorn hitting the top of a pan.

"Jackson, sit down!" the overweight bus driver yelled at Jordyn's twin brother, who was pretending to be a wide receiver going out for a pass.

"You can't keep me down, lard butt," Jackson said as he did his touchdown dance.

The other kids' laughter echoed in the stale, cold damp air. It was an all-too-common occurrence where Jackson was concerned. The number of days he spent in detention marked him as the class clown. His blue eyes, big dimples, and shaggy blond hair made him popular with the girls, while his natural athletic abilities and witty personality made him a favorite with the boys. Jordyn was sporty, the smart and aloof nerd, not popular at all. She tried to ignore Jackson's childish behavior, feeling the judging eyes of her classmates staring at her. *He is such an embarrassment*, she thought as she looked out the window at the water splashing from the tires as the bus headed down the freeway.

“Shit.” Jackson lost his balance and fell on the floor when a gust of wind shook the bus.

“Jackson, get in your seat and stay there!” the bus driver called out in a terrifying tone that captured everyone’s attention.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s halftime anyway,” he grumbled, finally taking his seat.

A silver delivery truck raced up alongside the bus. Jordyn wondered why they were out on such a rainy day and where they were going in such a hurry. “Slow down,” Jordyn whispered as her heart began to race. “Slow down,” she repeated loud enough for the kids sitting nearby to hear.

Karen, the most popular girl in school, turned and glared at her. “Backseat driver, much? Jackson is so cute and cool, and you are such a dork. I mean, look at that outfit. I can’t believe you are twins,” Karen said, laughing with her group of cohorts.

Jordyn’s face turned red as she tried to figure out why Karen was always so mean. *At least I’m not a total bitch whose friends talk crap about me behind my back. Oh, and my brother wouldn’t give a skank like you the time of day*, she thought, returning her attention to the delivery truck passing them by, going much faster than any other vehicle on the road.

“What the hell?” The bus driver slammed on his brakes when the delivery truck swerved into his lane, causing the kids to slide forward in their seats. The Jackson-induced laughter was then replaced with panic-filled screams. The back end of the bus slid to the right, and Jordyn heard the screech of tires followed by the smash of metal. “Oh, crap, we just hit that car!” she yelled, looking up at the terrified expression on the bus driver’s face in his rearview mirror. Her heart pounded in her chest and she realized she was holding her breath. She let out a lungful of air with the force of someone punching her in the gut as she looked back to see the smashed car sliding across several lanes. “Stop, stop, you have to stop!” Jordyn yelled as she tried to catch her breath.

The bus driver tried to recover, and the back of the bus skidded to the left. Jordyn looked out the window and spotted her side of the bus rising off the pavement. *Where is Jackson?* she thought as she desperately searched the bus. The frantic cries of her classmates overwhelmed her, and she realized that they were going to crash. *No, no, no, this is not happening*, she thought as her breaths became short and rapid, tears flooding her eyes.

Jordyn dropped her backpack and grabbed the bar on the seat in front of her as the bus began to tip over in what felt like slow motion. The metal grinded against the pavement, the smell of burning rubber filled the air, and shattered glass flew from all sides. *We are going to die—we are all going to die*. Jordyn closed her eyes so tight that the tears could no longer escape. When she raised her shaking hands to protect her face, her body began to lift off the seat like at the peak of a roller coaster. The next thing she remembered was waking up in the hospital.

When Jackson died, Jordyn had decided she wanted to be called JJ so that she would always carry her twin brother’s name with her. “I remember it like it was yesterday. I really miss you, Jackson,” she said as she came back to reality, taking a sip of her coffee. She took a deep breath and tried to calm her emotions as she looked around, wondering what sad event caused the other people to be visiting the cemetery today. Not far from her was a pile of dirt next to a newly dug hole and a few rows of chairs.

“Looks like you’ll get a new neighbor today. You know what I don’t miss? Mom dressing us in matching outfits,” JJ said, shaking her head back and forth. One time, their mother had dressed Jackson in a pair of denim pants and a red shirt. Then she made Jordyn wear a denim skirt and a red tank top. He had a blue cap, and she had a blue ribbon in her hair. “Do you remember when we came home on the first day of sixth grade and I threw my backpack across the living room and broke that ugly lamp? Mom was so pissed, I thought she was going to have a stroke. But she didn’t say a word the next day when I wore what I wanted,” JJ said as if Jackson could hear every word.

The Gilbert family was pretty normal. They went to church every Sunday and out to dinner every Friday night. They didn’t go on too many vacations, but they made it to Disneyland every summer break. “Things were never the same without you, especially for Dad. He missed his buddy.” Jackson and their dad had bonded over sports, watching whatever game was on for hours every weekend. If it wasn’t the Lakers, it was the Dodgers, and during football season it was the Green Bay Packers, which always seemed strange to her. The same was not true for Jordyn and their mom; they had never found anything to connect over. While the guys watched TV, Patty spent time in the kitchen or sat nearby, sewing or reading. Jordyn mostly stayed in her room by herself, studying or daydreaming about the future. She felt like an outsider in her own family.

JJ wiped the tears from her eyes, got up, and brushed the grass from her pants. “Well, Jackson, I’ve got to get going. I promise I won’t wait so long before coming back.”

“Not here.” A whisper caught JJ’s attention. She turned and looked around, but no one was standing close enough to have spoken to her.

“That was strange . . . I think I’m hearing things,” JJ said.

“Not here. He’s alive.” The whisper sounded like it was coming from the breeze. JJ looked around again and wondered if there could be a spirit present. She hesitated for a moment, waiting for more, but nothing happened. If it was a spirit, it was gone.

When JJ got home that evening, she poured herself a glass of wine and sat on her back patio. “Hello, Spooky,” she said to her orange-haired, green-eyed cat when he jumped up on her lap. Spooky had been a stray living near her mother’s house and always seemed to be around when JJ was visiting. Finally, she gave in and brought him home. “You are a little messy and sometimes too demanding, but all in all a pretty good roommate.” JJ gently pet him, feeling happy she had given him a home.

“Not here! He’s alive!” the voice rang out once more. There was no longer any doubt—a spirit from the other side was trying to connect with JJ.

Spooky hissed, jumped from her lap, and darted into the house. JJ took a deep breath, leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes to listen to her abrupt visitor. From the time she was very young, she had been able to connect with dead people, a gift rejected by her parents and one that didn’t always feel like a gift to her. JJ reluctantly focused her thoughts on the spirit, whose message felt urgent.

Who is alive? Who are you? JJ directed her thoughts toward the spirit. She sometimes received words, sometimes images, sometimes numbers, and other times just a feeling.

“He’s alive. He’s lost,” the spirit repeated with increasing intensity.

“Someone is in real trouble,” JJ said aloud as her heart began to race. *Do I know you? You feel familiar.*

“He’s alive,” the spirit repeated over and over, louder and louder, causing a pounding in JJ’s head.

I want to help you, but you need to show me more. Who are you? Who am I looking for? The force of the messages caused JJ’s heart to race and her breaths were so rapid, she began to hyperventilate. She began to cry as the spirit’s intense emotions penetrated her like a knife to the chest. Suddenly, she got an image of a market, and then the spirit was gone. “Wait, come back!” JJ opened her eyes and looked around her yard. “What the heck was that? A spirit’s presence has never made me feel this dizzy before,” she said as she bent over, trying to regain her balance. She sat back in her chair, closed her eyes, and took several deep breaths.

The message was the same one that she heard at Jackson’s grave, yet there didn’t seem to be any logical connection between that bus accident, Jackson, and the message “He’s alive.” The image of a market didn’t make any sense to her at all. JJ didn’t have any idea what the spirit was trying to tell her, but it felt more urgent than any message she had ever received. On top of that, the spirit felt familiar to her, as if she had known the person in life. It couldn’t be a coincidence this was happening on the ten-year anniversary of Jackson’s death, or that the first message had come to her while she was at his grave site. She reached out and grabbed her wine glass, drinking the rest in one gulp. *I knew this day would be a nightmare.*