

Chapter 1: Goodbye

JJ pulled into the driveway of her childhood home, where her mother, Patty, still lived. The sky was gray, and there was a slight chill in the air, typical for November in Riverside, California. Visiting there always reminded her of a happy childhood, which had ended the day her twin brother died. The school bus accident that took his life had been the beginning of the end of her family. JJ wondered why her mother remained in a place full of so many reminders of everything she had lost. Some days, it took every ounce of energy JJ had to walk through its front door.

But not today... She had been looking forward to tonight's going away party for Frank. He had dated her mother for almost two years, but JJ wasn't a fan. When JJ had photographed Frank's granddaughter's birthday party, she had seen his temper first hand. Still, Patty seemed happy with him and had even considered selling her home to follow him to Arizona. But something happened on their last trip to look at houses. There was tension between them now and a sadness in Patty's eyes that JJ hadn't seen since her parents' divorce. Her mother wouldn't tell her what had caused the sudden shift in their relationship.

JJ got her camera bag out of the back of her SUV. Being a professional photographer meant people expected her to take pictures at every event; tonight, she didn't mind. JJ was all smiles, knowing that at the end of the evening, this arrogant, angry man would be out of her mother's life forever.

"Hi, Mom. What can I do to help?" JJ asked when she entered the kitchen. The soft curls of her long brown hair bounced lightly on her shoulders. She wore a pair of brown slacks, a green shirt that matched her emerald eyes, and chocolate brown boots: all carefully chosen out of her closet, and the perfect outfit for a cool, fall evening.

"Good evening, Jordyn; you look very nice. Please take the appetizers into the dining room and place them on the serving table." Stress was etched into Patty's face.

"How many guests are you expecting?" JJ asked as she grabbed the plate of vegetables and dip.

"I suppose about twenty-five. Most are people we know from church." Patty moved around the kitchen, putting the final touches on the casseroles before sliding them into the oven.

The bar in the living room contained a large tub full of ice and drinks. JJ opened a bottle of white wine and added it to the collection of sodas and sparkling water. Then she opened two bottles of red wine and left them on the counter. “Are we using real glasses?” she called out.

“No, I have plastic in the pantry. Set out the plates and napkins too.” Patty’s tone was that of an officer ordering her troops into action.

The doorbell rang, and Patty froze. She looked around the room, panicked that she was not yet ready for guests. It had been decades since she last entertained this number of people. She pulled off her apron, tossed it onto the counter, and ran her fingers through her dark brown hair. She tugged on her purple dress, normally devoted to Sunday church. “Is this dress alright?”

“You look great. Mom, everything is perfect.” JJ tried to calm her mother’s nerves.

Frank rushed to answer the door. His gray hair was slicked back, and his fingernails were freshly manicured. The smell of his cheap cologne made JJ’s eyes water. “JJ, please get our guests a drink.” He directed the first arrivals toward the living room.

Yes, sir, she thought. “Of course. What can I get you?” JJ asked, smiling.

Frank greeted each of the guests as they arrived. He bragged about the large house he had purchased in Arizona and showed photographs to every person who came through the door. JJ was sick of hearing his same story, so she walked around taking photographs and making sure everyone had a drink.

Several women had gathered in the kitchen to help Patty with the preparations. They were whispering and laughing. Patty’s smile caught JJ’s attention, and she rushed to capture it with her camera. Everyone was enjoying themselves—well, everyone except for one woman. Erica Zeller stood in the doorway to the kitchen, not quite stepping in, watching the others from a distance. Patty had a quiet word with her before sending her toward the living room. JJ noticed the other women whispering and staring at Erica as she walked away from them. *She doesn’t seem like part of their group*, JJ thought.

“Jordyn, your mother asked me to bring this to you,” Erica Zeller said, handing JJ a bottle of wine. Erica was tall and thin and made no effort to hide the gray taking over her hair. Her eyes were dark and sad, and the avocado green dress she was wearing was a size too large. She wore a gold cross around her neck and the Mother Teresa medal on her collar.

“Jordyn is my given name, but most people call me JJ.” When JJ took the bottle and their hands grazed one another, she sensed the powerful presence of a spirit – tonight would require her medium skills. Just then, dizziness overwhelmed her as if she was intoxicated. JJ put down the bottle and leaned against the bar. She had a vision of a colorful hummingbird. It hovered for a second and then flew toward a fence. It stopped, looked back at JJ, and then flew over the fence and disappeared.

“Are you all right, dear?” Erica reached out and touched her arm.

JJ grabbed a glass and poured Erica some red wine. “I’m fine. Please help yourself to the appetizers in the dining room.” She handed Erica the glass. JJ didn’t want to be dealing with a spirit tonight.

After taking multiple pictures of each of the guests, she stored her camera in the bag that sat behind the bar. JJ poured herself a glass of wine and reflected on the strange vision she'd had earlier. It was possible that a spirit was attached to Erica Zeller. JJ took a few sips and then went into the dining room and loaded a plate with a variety of vegetables and spinach artichoke dip and bread.

Erica was standing outside on the patio by herself, not interacting with any of the other guests. The women in the kitchen gossiping about their so-called church friend made JJ's pulse race. She felt pulled to help this woman she had just met, so JJ headed outside.

"Erica, would you like something to eat? I brought plenty." JJ sat down at the patio table.

"No, thank you. I should not have come, but I got a strong impression this morning that I was meant to be here." Erica stood with her arms crossed, glaring out at the yard, deep in thought.

After a few minutes, JJ broke the silence. "I couldn't help but notice how sad you look tonight. Is everything okay?"

Erica dropped her head, then turned and faced JJ. "No... My daughter did not come home last night." Her voice cracked, and she tried to control her emotions.

"Oh, no. Are the police searching for her?"

"They suspect she simply ran away."

"Why did they jump to that conclusion?"

"Brooke had some problems in the past, and it wouldn't be the first time she took off for a few days, but she is only sixteen. Even if she ran away, the police should search for her – don't you agree?" Tears formed in Erica's eyes as she shared her fears with a woman she had just met.

JJ sensed a presence again. In her mind, she asked the spirit what it wanted. She was dizzy once more, and this time, she felt claustrophobic, like she was in a small space. JJ closed her eyes and took a deep breath to clear her head. A deep feeling of regret engulfed her, and her heart raced. *What do you regret?* she asked the spirit. There was no answer.

"I'm sorry. I should not be bothering you with my problems. This is a party after all." Erica turned away and dabbed the tears from her eyes with a handkerchief she pulled from her purse.

"Please don't worry about it. Do *you* think she ran away?" JJ held out her plate and offered vegetables.

"No. I told Detective Ballard that Brooke would not leave without packing clothes and taking her phone charger." Erica sounded frustrated. She took a carrot and sat down at the table. She obviously needed someone to talk to.

"I know Detective Ballard. If you would like, I can talk to him tomorrow and see what I can find out."

"Really? I would appreciate it...if it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all. Now, how about we get some of those ribs before Frank eats them all?" JJ said.

Well, spirit – I sure hope you aren't Brooke. I don't know how I would break it to this woman, JJ thought.