

Chapter 1: Crime Scene

The sky was dark, and there was an eerie calmness in the air. JJ Gilbert sat in the passenger seat looking out the window, wondering why Detective Brad Wilson had instructed his father to drag her out of the grand opening of Luke's Bistro. She glanced at David, who was tapping his thumb nervously against the steering wheel, avoiding making eye contact. If anything had happened to Brad, JJ would be doing the driving. That meant something must have happened to JJ's friend, Detective Sam Warner, and based on the part of town they had entered, it happened at Sam's house. JJ had a bad feeling an earthquake was about to shake up her life—she just wasn't sure of the magnitude.

When they turned onto Sam's street, there was a barricade and lights flashing in the distance. The police officer was expecting David's car and waved him through. Three patrol cars and two detective sedans surrounded Sam's house. The closer they got, the louder JJ's heart pounded in her chest. She couldn't believe her friend's house was a crime scene, and she had only one question on her mind. Was Sam all right? She looked over at David as he pulled his car to the opposite side of the street. If he knew what had taken place, he wasn't saying, but the look on his face said it was bad.

JJ and David hurried across the street, standing behind the yellow crime scene tape. An officer held up his hand to stop them from going further and got on his radio. JJ gripped David's arm, hoping to steady her weakening legs.

"JJ," a voice called out.

"Sam?" JJ spun around, but no one was behind her.

"What is it?" David asked.

"I thought Sam called my name," JJ said quietly, tears in her eyes. A psychic medium hearing someone's voice was not a good sign. Had the worst happened? Could it be that Sam was dead and her spirit was trying to connect?

"Now don't go pitching a fit. It's just your mind playing tricks on you," David replied.

Brad's voice came over the radio then, clearing David and JJ to come up to the house. The officer frowned and looked away as he raised the tape for David and JJ to slip under. They rushed up the long pathway until they reached the top of the stairs. Inside, officers were moving around the room and Brad was talking on his cellphone. When he looked up and saw JJ and his father, he joined them at the front door. "Come in, but touch nothing." The concern on Brad's face was alarming.

"Is Sam all right?" JJ's words burst out like a shaken up soda.

Brad took a deep breath and rubbed the whiskers on his chin. "My partner is missing, but she put up a heck of a fight." Brad turned and walked into the house, JJ and David following behind.

JJ continued to clutch David's arm tightly as she surveyed the room. It stunk of cigarette smoke. The couch was lying on its side, and the coffee table was smashed into pieces as if someone had fallen on top. Glass from a shattered lamp was spread over three feet. Blood covered several of the pieces. A puddle of water and flowers lay next to the fireplace as if someone had thrown a vase against the mantel. Two file boxes were turned over and papers covered the floor. JJ's pulse raced as she looked around, trying to imagine what had caused this chaos.

An officer found a gun underneath a chair. Brad used his pencil to pick it up. "It's Sam's," he concluded after checking the serial number. Brad sniffed the barrel before dropping it into an evidence bag. "I don't think it has been fired. Get this to the lab and see if they can pull any prints."

JJ walked toward the back door. Someone had ripped the screen open and the glass around the door handle was missing. "Was the glass on the door cut or broken?"

"Cut," Brad said, scrutinizing his notes. He could feel JJ staring at him, waiting for more, so he finally glanced at her. "Yes, only a professional would carry a glass cutter. Whoever did this came prepared."

Brad's wife, Carrie, was the crime scene investigator on the scene. JJ walked toward her but then gasped and stepped back, unable to make eye contact. "Is that Sam's blood?" JJ asked in a panic, nearly screeching.

"Um . . . we don't know yet," Brad said, moving his hand up and down like he was trying to lower her emotions.

"Crap, that is a lot of blood!" JJ was desperate for someone to say something that would ease her fears. *Sam is a good person. This shouldn't be happening to her*, JJ thought, furious that bad things were allowed to happen to good people.

"It looks like there was blood, then a footprint, and then more blood. Testing will show whether there are multiple victims. And we should be able to tell you something about the shoe

that left this print. It appears to be a tennis shoe, size eight or nine,” Carrie reported, restraining her emotions.

“When Sam didn’t show up at Luke’s grand opening, I called her, but there was no answer,” JJ said quietly.

“Yep, I saw the missed call. Her cellphone is on the counter.” Brad walked over to the kitchen. “Sam was making dinner. The barbeque was on, and she had set the table for two. Do you know who was coming over?” he asked, turning toward JJ.

“Last time we talked, she was planning to come to Luke’s for dinner. There’s only one wine glass on the table.”

“The other is in the kitchen. Sam likely poured herself a glass to drink while she was cooking. Was Sam seeing someone new?”

“Not that I know of, but Sam’s pretty private with her personal life.”

“I’ll get a warrant to check her phone and see who she has been calling.” Brad pulled his cellphone out of his pocket and sent a text message to someone at the station.

“Why do you need a warrant?” JJ raised her voice, reaching to pull the phone out of the evidence bag and look for herself.

Brad grabbed the bag and pulled it away from her. “Hold on—we have to do this by the book. Besides, the phone is locked. I don’t know the code. Do you?”

“No, I just think the key to finding Sam is to figure out who was here for dinner. If he’s hurt, Sam would have taken him to the hospital.”

“That wouldn’t explain the violence that occurred in this room.” Brad turned and faced a patrol officer. “Get the license plates for every car on the street and run them. Her guest’s car could still be here,” he said, making notes.

“What about Sam’s car?” JJ asked.

“It’s in the garage, and the keys are in her purse,” he answered, pointing to another evidence bag. Sam’s car, purse, keys, and cellphone were all still in the house. There was no way the detective would leave those behind unless someone took her against her will.

David had stood by watching his son work, waiting for JJ to tell him what happened outside. When she didn’t, David walked over and put his arm around JJ. “You better tell him.”

“Tell me what?” Brad asked, curious about what his father knew.

“It’s nothing.” JJ waved her hand in the air as if she were swatting the question away.

“Come on, darling. He needs to know everything.” David raised his eyebrows.

JJ wiped the tears from her cheeks and shook her head. “Fine. When we were outside waiting to come up, I heard Sam call my name, but when I turned around, no one was there,” she revealed, barely able to get the words out.

Brad walked toward JJ and David. “Look, if Sam were dead, her body would be here. It’s more likely someone took her against her will. Maybe Sam or her guest was wounded in the fight, or possibly my partner injured her assailant. We don’t know what happened here yet, so let’s not jump to conclusions.”

Carrie came over, took off her gloves, and put her hand on JJ’s back. “Let’s take this one step at a time. The crime lab will process the evidence, and Brad will review the cases Detective Warner was working.”

“I want to be involved!” JJ protested.

“Hold on! This isn’t one of your spirit mysteries. Someone abducted a Riverside Police detective, and they are likely pros. It is far too dangerous for a civilian to be involved,” Brad argued.

No way am I sitting this one out, JJ thought. “I’ll be at the station first thing in the morning.” She ignored Brad’s statement, turned, and walked toward the front door. David shrugged his shoulders and followed.