

## Chapter 1: The Girl

It was like looking at herself in the mirror. JJ Gilbert stared through the window, watching Detective Sam Warner interrogate a fourteen-year-old homeless girl. A girl who claimed a ghost had told her where to find a dead body. Sam didn't buy it, and she had asked JJ to come to the Riverside Police Station at one in the morning to prove the girl was lying. JJ, however, had a different goal; she wanted to help this young girl learn about being a medium. She believed every word of her story, and she knew from her own experience how hard it was at that age to admit to being able to communicate with the dead.

The young girl was quite thin. She smelled of the dirt smudged on her face and arms. Her shirt appeared to be two sizes too small, and there were holes in the toes of her tennis shoes. She said her name was Addison, but she refused to tell the police her last name or the reason she had been sleeping on a park bench that night. Addison claimed to have been woken during the night by the sound of some type of vehicle approaching. Fearing it might be the police, she had rolled off her bench and crawled behind some shrubs. It was dark, but she had clearly seen two men in an all-terrain vehicle head up a pathway past some large trees. Just then, a spirit had connected with her, instructing her to stay behind the shrubs. It wasn't the first time she had sensed a spirit. In fact, she had connected with that same spirit dozens of times.

Detective Warner glanced at the mirror on the wall, wondering if her friend had arrived yet to blow holes in this girl's story. She decided to let JJ deal with the "messages from the dead" part of her story and instead focus on the murder the homeless girl claimed to be able to help solve.

"What happened after the ATV disappeared behind the trees?" Detective Warner asked, tapping her pencil against her pad of paper.

"Nothing for at least ten minutes. Then I heard two bangs that sounded like gunshots," Addison explained, her hands shaking.

"Then you won't mind if I have the lab test your clothing and hands for gun residue." Sam sent a text message to her partner, Detective Brad Wilson, asking him to send a female lab assistant into the interrogation room.

Tears rolled down Addison's cheeks. "Do whatever you want. I'm telling the truth." She spoke softly, avoiding eye contact.

"What happened next?" The detective appeared unaffected by the girl's emotions.

JJ's muscles tensed as she watched, wondering why Detective Warner was being so hard on this young girl.

"The ATV came back down and stopped near a light. The man made a call, and I heard him tell the other person not to worry. Then he said, 'Don't go nutty.' I remember it because it was such a strange thing to say."

"What did this man look like?" Sam still sounded like she didn't trust this girl's story.

"It was really dark, and he had a hoodie on, so I didn't see much."

"You just said he stopped under a light. Was he white? Black? Did he have facial hair? Was he average build, thin, or overweight?" Detective Warner bombarded her suspect with questions.

Addison stomped her feet in frustration. "I said he was near the light, and I didn't have a good view of him."

"Fine. What color was the ATV?"

"It was dark. Black, dark gray, or blue, and it was a two-seater."

"And what time did this happen?" Sam asked.

Addison held up her arm to show she didn't have a watch. "I don't know."

Before Sam could push her further, a lab technician came into the room to collect the girl's clothes and check her hands for gun residue. Sam closed the blinds and then joined JJ and her partner in the next room.

"I bet the lab finds evidence that she pulled the trigger," Sam said.

"Doesn't seem to be any reason for her to kill someone. Let's go to the park at sunup and see what we find," Detective Brad Wilson suggested.

Both detectives stared at JJ, waiting for her assessment. "I need to talk to her and look her in the eyes before I can tell you anything." Sam rolled her eyes in response and reached for the doorknob. "Alone," JJ added.

"You want me to let you talk to my murder suspect without me being in the room?" Sam asked sharply, eyebrows raised.

“If I’m going to get her to open up, she has to trust me. The way you’re badgering her with questions will make that impossible.”

“I’m questioning her like any other person of interest,” Sam said, sounding defensive.

“That is exactly what I’m talking about. This girl is trying to provide information as a witness, but you’re treating her like a suspect. What makes you think she’s lying?” JJ was losing patience with her friend.

“Officers found that girl in someone’s backyard during the night. She was probably going to break in and steal whatever she could sell on the street. This story of hers is simply a way to take our focus away from what she was doing,” Sam speculated.

“Well, we’ll know for sure if we go to the park and search the area where she claims we will find a body,” Brad pointed out.

“You can’t search the park until daylight, so let me talk to her and see what I can find out. You can watch from here,” JJ said, opening the door and leaving without waiting for a reply.

When JJ entered the interrogation room, she opened the blinds and sat down. Addison had her arms crossed on the table, her head resting on top. Her clothes had been confiscated, and she wore a light-blue jumpsuit. “Hi, my name is JJ.”

Addison sat up cautiously. “Are you a cop?”

“Actually, I’m a professional photographer, but I’m also a medium. Detective Warner asked me to help make sense of the messages you have been receiving from the spirit.”

Addison’s eyes widened in shock, and her face flushed. At first she looked away, evidently not wanting to discuss her interaction with spirits. JJ waited patiently, giving the girl a chance to think. After a moment Addison returned her focus to JJ, trying to figure out whether this woman was there to help or to test her claim about hearing from a ghost. In truth, the answer was both.

“Oh, hell, she’s not even going to *try* to determine whether the girl is telling the truth,” Sam grumbled, pacing back and forth.

“Hold on, partner. JJ is just trying to establish trust so that she can get the complete story,” Brad said.

“Tell me what happened after the man on the ATV drove away.” JJ leaned back in her chair, her posture relaxed.

Addison tapped her fingers on the table and stared down at her hands. “I walked up the hill to see if I could find the other man, just in case he was hurt and needed help, but when I got

halfway, I felt a presence. I'm sure it was the dead man's spirit, and he was mad." She looked up and started to cry.

"What makes you say that?" JJ handed Addison a tissue.

"He said I should have stopped the man from killing him, and then he chased me. That's why I was in those people's yard—I jumped the fence to get away from the ghost."

"To be honest, I've never had an experience connecting with a spirit immediately after their death. Are you sure it was the spirit chasing you? Could it have been the killer?"

"I knew no one would take me seriously." Addison lowered her head and picked at her fingers.

"It's important the police get a clear picture of what happened, that's all. Did the angry spirit make physical contact with you?"

Addison's eyes widened, surprised by the question. "Yeah . . . it put its hand on my shoulder, and it burned me." She jumped to her feet, unzipped her jumpsuit, and turned around. A red outline of a hand was visible on her shoulder.

JJ turned and faced the mirror. "Sam, you better get in here. We have a problem."

Sam returned to the room with a lab technician. The woman took photographs of the injury and swabbed it for DNA. Even so, JJ was confident the test was a waste of time; ghosts didn't leave DNA.

Sam studied the wound. "That appears to be a handprint."

"A spirit causing an injury is a *really* bad sign." JJ's voice cracked with emotion.

"How can you be sure a spirit did that?"

"Can you identify any living person who can put their hand on someone and cause a burn like that, right through her shirt, without burning said shirt?" JJ raised her eyebrows, waiting for an answer.

Sam shook her head. She had no explanation for what she was looking at.

*Crap. This girl really was being chased by an angry spirit, JJ thought.*