

Chapter 1: June Wedding

JJ checked herself in the mirror one more time. The royal blue, sleeveless lace dress was perfect for Lexi's wedding. Her light brown hair was up and her makeup and nails were perfect, just like her mother taught her. She splashed on her favorite jasmine and lavender perfume and then put on earrings and a pearl necklace. Her piercing green eyes stared back at her in the mirror. *Very nice*, she thought before heading to her office.

The large photography bag contained a camera, lenses, batteries, and memory cards. JJ grabbed a tripod and a smaller bag to carry, for when she walked around the reception as she took photographs. She was excited about helping her friend celebrate her dream wedding and happy to do this job as a wedding gift.

After high school, JJ attended Arizona State University on a tennis scholarship, and Lexi Duncan joined her mother's real estate firm. Because of a reoccurring wrist injury, JJ quit school and returned to her hometown of Riverside, California to start a photography business. Lexi gave JJ her first job, photographing a listing that had a spirit attached to it. JJ knew from an early age that she had the ability to connect with dead people. On that job, she doubled as a photographer and as a medium.

A late June afternoon wedding was not ideal in Riverside. It would hit the upper eighties by the time guests arrived at the church. JJ was born and raised in the area, so she was accustomed to the dusty summer heat. The air in her car was blasting as she made her way across town. She was regretting not bringing a second dress to change into before the reception.

When JJ got to the church, she double checked her camera bag and grabbed her tripod from the back of her SUV. Halfway to the church, a loud noise startled her. It sounded like metal hitting metal. She stopped and spun around to look. There was nothing out of the ordinary. After walking a few additional feet, she heard screeching tires, followed by another loud bang. Her heart raced, and her breaths shortened. She felt dizzy, like she was spinning around in a circle. Another loud crash caused her to let out a lungful of air, like someone had punched her in the gut. She closed her eyes and shook her head back and forth, trying to clear her mind. *Crap, I don't need to deal with a spirit right now*, she thought.

JJ took several deep breaths to calm her nerves. After another five feet, she heard thunder and felt raindrops falling on her head and dripping down her face. She feared her perfect hair and makeup would be ruined. The earthly fragrance of the rain filled her nose, and a chill shot down her back. She looked down to find the ground dry—no sign of drops. What point was this spirit making? JJ had experienced nothing like it before. When she looked up, she noticed Lexi's mom waving at her from in front of the church. JJ smiled and nodded at Donna before resuming her journey. Regardless of what had just happened, she needed to focus on the wedding.

The Riverside Fellowship Church was one of the most beautiful churches in the area, large enough to host the sizable number of guests expected. It was built in the 1800s with Spanish style architecture. The upper level of the sanctuary had stained-glass windows, and the tower was home to a dozen bells, each of which rang at a different pitch.

Most of the invitees would be clients of the Duncan Real Estate firm, but there would also be high school friends who JJ hadn't seen in years. Donna looked stunning in her long burgundy dress and off-white jacket with a diamond angel brooch. The smile on her face showed the joy she felt on this special day. Her hair was cut shorter and dyed a darker shade of brown than JJ remembered from the last time they were together. Donna's large diamond ring was just one benefit of being the top realtor in the area. She had an amiable personality that was great for real estate, but JJ wondered if her sticky sweetness was genuine or just a sales tool.

"Look who's here," Donna said, escorting JJ to the private room where Lexi was getting ready.

"Wow, Lexi, you look like a princess in that ball gown," JJ said as she set up her tripod. She was still pondering what happened with the strange spirit in the parking lot.

"Thank you, JJ. I see you're getting right to business. We need to get you married next," Lexi said.

"Maybe dating the same person more than twice would be a more realistic goal."

"We're not getting any younger. If you want to have kids, you'd better get moving."

"We're only twenty-six. I think we have time." JJ checked the lighting in the room before taking any shots.

"Sweetie, you don't want to wait beyond thirty or so to have kids," Donna said.

"I was so disappointed Luke couldn't make it," Lexi said, smiling.

Luke and JJ have known each other since grade school and became close friends in high school. He was handsome with his athletic build, dark curly hair, and a charismatic smile. Most girls dreamed of dating him in high school, but JJ never wanted to take their relationship to the next level. She ignored the comment and continued to take photographs as Donna put the final touches on Lexi's hair.

"Come on, JJ, when are you going to admit how you feel about Luke? I can see it on your face whenever he's around."

"She's not wrong," Donna said, looking over at JJ and smiling for another photograph.

"We're just friends." JJ's face flushed as she previewed the photo on her digital camera.

JJ took a variety of shots of the bride with her mother and with her maid of honor. Lexi insisted on getting a few with JJ, so she set the camera timer and quickly joined the group. After a toast and a quick sip of champagne, JJ moved to the front of the church to take shots of the arriving guests.

"Jordyn, you look very nice," JJ's mom, Patty, said when she arrived.

JJ's parents named her Jordyn, but she asked to be called JJ to honor her twin brother Jackson, who died in a school bus accident when they were fifteen. Her mother ignored her wishes and continued to call her by her given name. JJ's relationship with her religious mother was difficult, at best. The way JJ dressed or how she wore her hair was a constant source of stress between them. Patty just would not accept her tomboy daughter who talked to the dead.

"Hi, Mom. I love that new yellow dress," JJ said. "Frank, it is nice to see you. Let me get a few shots of you." Frank and JJ's mom had been dating for about a year. JJ wasn't a fan of his violent temper, which she witnessed when she photographed his granddaughter's birthday party. Frank was a retired school teacher but seemed more like a politician. His black-and-gray hair was

slicked back, and he wore a suit way too expensive for his occupation. Teeth whitening and manicures were a normal part of his routine.

As JJ took their photograph, she noticed Karen Quinn moving past the line to get into the church. JJ got a sharp pain in her shoulder, and the sound of thunder echoed in her head. *Not again*, she thought. Karen was the stereotypical mean girl in high school. She had a small group of girlfriends, and if you weren't one, you became a target of their bullying. JJ was one of Karen's favorite marks because she was so different from her popular twin brother—and because JJ could speak to the dead. Karen took every opportunity to question her sanity.

JJ made her way to the front of the church and took pictures throughout the ceremony. She also captured some of the attendees as they watched. When she peeked through the lens at Karen, there was a strange darkness around her. JJ looked without the camera, but saw nothing. Karen's face turned red, and she wiped sweat from her forehead with a handkerchief. JJ took a few more photographs, and when she previewed them, she noticed a gray orb next to Karen. *That can't be good*, she told herself.

After the happy couple said their "I do's", JJ took all the traditional family photographs, starting inside the church. Then she moved everyone outside near a large tree, which provided a nice backdrop for dozens of photos. "Okay everyone, that's a wrap. Time to party," JJ said as she folded up her tripod.

As JJ put her camera into the bag, she heard another loud crash. She took a deep breath and then glanced around, but all she observed were family members making their way to their cars. JJ's hands were shaking so much she couldn't zip her bag. She collected her equipment and made her way to her car. When she got in, she closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. She didn't like the way this spirit made her feel.

Go easy on me, and I'll do my best to help you. Maybe we can do this tomorrow when I'm not working, she thought.