

## Chapter 1: Jury Duty

JJ sat in an open row at the back of the room with two empty chairs next to her. She tapped her fingers on the arm of the chair, unable to sit still. The reason for her nervousness was unclear; this was not the first time she'd had to report for jury duty at the Riverside Hall of Justice courthouse. The room was already half full, the round tables taken by people working on puzzles, and total strangers talked to each other like they had been friends for years. Everyone had one thing in common: they didn't want to be sitting in this room, and hoped they would not end up on a jury.

JJ looked down at her phone when it buzzed, and the word "innocent" appeared. *Who sent that?* she wondered. Moments later, when she began to feel hot and lightheaded, she knew a spirit was present. She let out a lengthy sigh, not wanting to be a psychic medium today, but it wasn't up to her. Spirits connected when *they* needed help. In her mind, she saw the image of the scales of justice, but they rested unequally, with one side much lower than the other.

The voices on the jury duty orientation film pulled her attention away from the spirit, but she kept hearing the banging of a gavel. At first, she assumed it was part of the film, but as it got louder and louder, she realized it was the spirit trying to get her attention. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Not today... Please not today.* She begged the spirit to leave her alone.

When JJ got up to grab some magazines, she noticed a light shining through a window, so she walked over and looked out. There was an older court building across the way. A handsome young man peeked over her shoulder and told her that Frank Sinatra had been married at the historic courthouse. JJ forced a smile and nodded as he told more of the building's history. Then he pointed to a multi-story, gray building he described as the jail. As she looked out, the window fogged up and letters appeared; an invisible hand wrote the word "innocent". JJ glanced over at the man, and he smiled, unaware of the spirit's message. When she returned her focus to the window, the writing had disappeared.

*Crap, I don't need this today,* she thought as she grabbed two magazines from a rack and returned to her seat. JJ rifled through the pages, looking at the pictures, but not taking the time to read any of the articles. Maybe the man who talked to her was part of a deeper message from the

spirit. He tried to be friendly, and JJ had been almost rude to him. *A good-looking guy talks to you and you walk away. It's no wonder you are single*, she scolded herself.

Thirty minutes later, the clerk announced that she was sending a panel to a courtroom. JJ took off the name tag they'd given her and looked at it while the clerk called out numbers. *Please, please don't call me*, she pleaded in her mind. Truthfully, she wasn't surprised to hear her number called, and wondered if the spirit pestering her was related to the case.

JJ and the others went to the fifth floor. After everyone sat down, the judge gave the same old boring speech about the important role the jurors would be asked to play, and also gave some history of the historic Riverside courthouse. It was where the famous Wineville Chicken Coop murder trial had been held in the late twenties. A man and his mother abducted and murdered a string of young males. The mother got life, and the son was sentenced to death by hanging. The judge joked with the would-be jurors that he was much too young to have been involved in that case. *Crap, I hope neither of them is the spirit who is with me*, JJ thought.

Today's case was one of vehicular manslaughter. After explaining the process, the court clerk began calling juror numbers, indicating a move into the jury box. JJ's number was called, and she took seat number three. As she listened to the first two prospective jurors answer the judge's questions, the word "innocent" flooded her mind. Then the sound of a gavel pounding over and over echoed in her ears so loudly that it gave her a headache. Rubbing her temples didn't help to relieve the pain.

"Juror number three," the judge said.

"Yes, sir." JJ looked up, startled by his voice.

"Please go through the questions on the board and speak up so everyone can hear you."

JJ answered that she lived in Riverside, and was a professional photographer. Then she summarized her prior jury duty experience. Her initial statement was quite unremarkable, but she knew that her answers to the next two questions would garner some attention.

"My twin brother died in an accident involving a truck and our school bus about twelve years ago," JJ explained.

"And were criminal charges filed in that case?" the judge asked.

"No, but a civil suit was settled out of court. Also, last year I was the victim of an assault, and that person pleaded guilty."

The judge scribbled on a sheet of paper before continuing his questions. "Is there anything about those experiences that would keep you from being impartial to the testimony of this defendant?"

“No.” JJ looked at the next question on the board. “I do have friends who work for the Riverside police department.” JJ wasn’t sure how much to say about her having worked cases with them in the past.

“If you were on the jury, would you be able to be around those same officers without discussing this case?”

“Yes sir,” JJ replied. She was torn: part of her wanted to do her civic duty, and the other part wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. If she told the judge and lawyers that she was a medium who sometimes worked with the police to solve cases, she figured that she would be excused.

After everyone answered the questions, the defense attorney stood up and approached the jury box. “Juror number 3: you said that you personally know members of the police department... Would that cause you to assume that because they are the police officers, they are more credible than other witnesses?”

JJ hesitated to answer. “Well, I would listen to their testimony and not jump to any conclusions. Police, like everyone else, can make mistakes.”

After the defense attorney finished, the prosecutor got her turn to question the prospective jurors. She examined the background of several of the jurors, but she skipped JJ. After reviewing her notes, she came back toward the jury box and stood right in front of JJ. “Juror number three—you said that the police can make mistakes. Have you had that experience?”

*Here we go*, JJ thought. She glanced out at the jury pool: over a hundred eyes stared right at her. “Several years ago, I got involved in a missing persons cold case. The police suspected the parents had killed their son, so they didn’t look for him. I found him, still living with the man who had kidnapped him fifteen years earlier.”

A rumble occurred in the courtroom as the audience reacted to the story. The prosecutor’s face turned red, and she glanced at the judge before returning her attention to JJ. “I am aware of that case. Can you please share with the court how you were able to find the victim after so many years?”

JJ took a deep breath and lowered her head. *Crap, why didn’t I keep my mouth shut? They are all going to think I am crazy.*

“Juror number three, would you like to approach the bench and answer in private?” the judge asked.

She wanted to say yes, but for some reason, she didn’t. “No, that won’t be necessary, Your Honor. I’m a psychic medium. The spirit of the missing person’s mother communicated with me.”

JJ stared right at the prosecutor and tried not to react to the whispers from the audience. Her face became flushed and the negative things she assumed everyone was thinking filled her mind.

“Thank you,” the prosecutor said before approaching the bench with the defense attorney to have a quiet conversation.

The judge explained that the court would excuse some jurors, and that the defense attorney and prosecutor would each be allowed to excuse some others. The process would continue until they had twelve jurors and three alternates. He instructed anyone excused to return to the jury lounge. Looking down at his file, he announced, “The court would like to thank and excuse juror number three.” He smiled and looked toward the jury box. There was a murmur in the courtroom; no one was surprised that juror was the first to go.

JJ’s hands shook as she grabbed her purse and made her way out of the jury box. She walked up the aisle toward the exit, sensing all eyes on her. One woman quickly looked away when JJ made eye contact, and an older man, sitting on the aisle, leaned away from her when she walked by as if he was afraid to catch something from her.

Several people were waiting for the elevator when JJ got there. *I should not be embarrassed*, she thought, giving herself a dirty look in the shiny elevator doors. She wanted to be accepted, but also feared the repercussions of telling people about her supernatural powers. It was like a dark hole she couldn’t get out of. *I’m surprised the judge didn’t have me committed*.

JJ’s attention was drawn to a painting nearby; the eyes of its subject seemed to be looking right at her. She walked several steps to the right, and the eyes followed her. Nothing like that had ever happened before. Reading the nameplate, she saw that the painting was of a Judge Gerald Brodie. She felt hot and her palms were sweating. JJ walked to the left, and the eyes followed her again, just like the optical illusions found in the haunted mansion at Disneyland. The image of the judge stared right at her and then his eyes seemed to glow. JJ’s head snapped back, and her muscles tensed. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head back and forth. When she opened her eyes, the painting had turned back to normal. She wrote the judge's name on the back of an envelope before getting onto the elevator.

*I don’t know what you want, spirit, but how about letting me get out of here, and then I’ll help you?* she thought as the elevator doors closed.