

## Chapter 1: Not Again!

JJ Gilbert's gut was screaming caution, but she had no idea why. Her plane had landed at Ontario International Airport in Southern California just after six o'clock that evening. Photographing a dude ranch in Montana had been an exhausting experience. She was sore from three days of horseback riding and ready to soak in a bath and sleep in her own bed. JJ limped through the airport doorway, pulling her luggage, and looked up. The November sky was full of daunting dark gray clouds, and there was rain in the distance. The wind, which had driven her plane sideways for a terrifying landing, now grabbed hold of a woman's hat, blowing it off her head. JJ snatched it from the breeze and handed it to its grateful owner as she inched her way forward in line, waiting for a taxi.

A man old enough to be JJ's grandfather jumped from his cab to load her suitcase and camera bags into the trunk. He smiled as he held the door open for her, acting more like a chauffeur than a taxi driver. The backseat was sparkling clean and smelled of the jasmine freshener he had attached to the air vent. This man cared about the comfort of his passengers and deserved a larger than normal tip.

The freeway was wide open, with cars buzzing by at least ten miles an hour over the posted speed limit. JJ began to relax as she gazed out the window at raindrops bouncing off the car in the next lane. She was happy to be home and looked forward to a few days off before finishing her latest photography job.

"Hey, sis."

JJ turned to her left and Jackson's spirit was sitting next to her, appearing exactly the same as the day he died. Her head jerked back and her eyes widened. Her twin brother was killed in a school bus accident when they were in high school. As a medium, JJ could communicate with people who had died. She reached out to touch Jackson's arm, but her fingers moved right through the apparition. "What's going on?" she asked.

Jackson smiled with that silly grin he had when he was up to something. “Don’t worry, you will be fine.”

“What are you saying?” JJ glanced over her brother’s shoulder and saw a van sliding across the wet pavement toward the cab. Everything moved in slow motion as Jackson squeezed her hand and the van slammed into the driver’s door. JJ screamed, closed her eyes, and lowered her face into her arm, her body jerking against the seatbelt every time the cab rolled over. Pieces of shattered glass stung her face and the sound of grinding metal screeched as the car slid to a stop. Everything went black.

“JJ! JJ, you need to get out!” Jackson’s spirit yelled to wake his sister.

The sound of voices echoed in her ears as people got out of their cars and tended to the injured. JJ struggled to focus her vision, then a cry for help pulled her out of her daze. She unbuckled her seat belt and leaned forward to check on her driver. He was dead. After taking the full force of the impact, his side of the cab was completely gone. *I’ve got to get out of here!* she told herself. JJ kicked her door over and over until she forced it open. She got out, careful not to cut herself on the broken window. Every step caused a crunching sound as she crept across the glass-covered road. Her head pounded and blood trickled down her face and splashed on the wet ground. She bent over and grabbed at her side when she felt a sharp pain.

The freeway looked like a war zone. Smoke rose from the hood of her taxi and a truck twenty feet away was engulfed in fire, flames filling the air with the stench of gasoline and rubber. People ran from car to car, assisting those trapped. The cries from the injured sent chills down JJ’s spine. *Jackson, why did you let this happen?* Tears ran down her face.

Behind the site of the accident, traffic had stopped. Drivers stood beside their cars, talking on their cellphones, grateful they had been far enough behind to avoid disaster. In the distance, JJ could see the flashing lights of approaching emergency vehicles.

Another cry drew her attention. It was a teenager who had been thrown from a vehicle. JJ staggered over, took off her jacket, and covered his broken body. She kneeled next to him and held his hand. Comforting him took focus away from her own injuries. Today, being a medium was irrelevant: it hadn’t kept her from getting hurt, and it wouldn’t save this young man.

“I’m JJ. What’s your name?”

“Colin. I can’t feel my legs.” He squinted as he looked into JJ’s eyes, frightened and confused.

“You just need to lie real still until help arrives.” JJ’s heart raced and her voice shook. She could sense this young man slipping away. “Is that a golf shirt you’re wearing?” She had to keep him awake and talking.

“I’m on my high school team. I hope to be a pro someday. Who is that?” Colin's face was pale, and he loosened his grip on JJ’s hand.

She turned and looked, and Jackson’s spirit was standing behind her. “That’s my brother. He is here to help you.” JJ's voice cracked and tears ran down her face.

“Ma’am, you need to step aside.” A paramedic had arrived.

JJ stood up and moved back a few feet, watching as they tried to save this young man. She knew Colin being able to see Jackson meant he would not make it.

Flashing lights were coming from all directions as JJ stood motionless, still in shock. Her side ached, and she felt weak. Someone ran toward her through the smoke, calling out, but the words sounded muffled. JJ closed her eyes and reopened them when someone grabbed her arm. “JJ, are you hurt?” Detective Sam Warner held a bandage to JJ’s bleeding forehead. They had met during a murder investigation and had developed a mutual respect. Sam took her jacket off and put it around JJ.

“What are you doing here?” JJ asked, grabbing Sam’s arm to keep balance.

“I was in the area and heard the call on the radio. Were you in one of these cars?” The horrific scene was startling to witness.

“Yeah, that cab. We rolled over at least twice. The driver is dead.” JJ spoke slowly as she pointed to the crumpled taxi. Her breathing quickened as she realized how lucky she was to be alive.

“You got out of that cab? Are you hurt anywhere else?” Sam’s voice burst with emotion as she held JJ’s arm and looked her over for additional injuries.

“I don’t know.” JJ leaned against Sam. *Jackson said I would be all right*, she thought, looking over at the spirit of her brother standing over Colin. “Sam, I think I need help.” JJ’s eyes rolled back in her head and she was out.

Sam caught her and lowered her body gently to the ground. “JJ? JJ?” There was no response. “I need some help over here! Please, I need help!”