

## Chapter 1: Thirtieth Birthday

“STOP! Please stop! I can’t take it anymore,” JJ Gilbert yelled as she held her face in her hands. She was exhausted and had slept little since connecting with an aggressive spirit. It had whispered “stop them” in her head over and over while she celebrated her birthday in Palm Springs with her parents. Now she was back in Riverside getting ready for a dinner with friends and the stalking spirit was back. JJ had delivered the messages to the correct person, but he had denied any knowledge of the spirit. Connecting spirits on the other side with their loved ones was her calling, but today, JJ hated being a medium.

She dabbed the tears from her green eyes and put on her favorite silver bracelet as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. The dark circles under her eyes would require an extra layer of makeup, but nothing would hide the puffiness. She pulled her brown hair back and clipped it into a ponytail before adding a belt to her denims and slipping into some sandals. The air was filled with jasmine as she sprayed on her favorite fragrance. *I wish I could stay home with you*, she thought as she stroked her cat, Spooky, who lay asleep on her bed. JJ took a deep breath and let it out before grabbing her purse and heading to Gradiados, her best friend’s family restaurant.

“There’s the birthday girl,” Luke said, giving JJ a hug. They had been best friends since middle school, and JJ sometimes wondered why they never took their relationship to the next level. Luke’s dark wavy hair was now shoulder length, and his stubble beard and charismatic smile made JJ smile for the first time in a week.

“Sorry I’m late. What can I do to help?” JJ asked, walking toward the table with the “happy thirtieth” balloons. The familiar smell of garlic eased the tension she had felt all day.

“No worries. The big bash doesn’t start until eight.” Luke opened two bottles of red wine.

JJ put a bottle on one end of the table and then took the second to the other side and poured herself a glass. She hung her purse on a chair, sat down, and took a sip, enjoying the soft tannins and cherry-chocolate flavor of her favorite merlot.

Luke sat in the chair next to her. “Are you okay? You look beat.”

“Do you remember the private reading I did for a family last week?” Luke nodded yes. “The spirit I channeled won’t leave me alone. He keeps saying the same thing over and over, and I can’t get him to stop.” JJ’s voice cracked and her hands were shaking.

Luke took the wine glass from her and set it on the table. “What does it say?” he asked, holding her hands.

“Stop them.” JJ could barely get the words out. She was at the end of her rope.

“I’ve never seen you like this before. Maybe we should cancel tonight so you can get some rest.”

“Am I interrupting something?” Luke’s girlfriend, Skyler Harper, came out of the kitchen. She was always nice to JJ’s face, but it was clear she did not like her boyfriend having such a close relationship with another woman.

“She’s having a tough time.” Luke scowled at his girlfriend, letting go of JJ’s hands.

*Give me a break*, JJ thought, picking up her wine glass and walking away from the drama.

“Jordyn Gilbert?”

JJ turned around to see a man and woman walking toward her. “Yes.” Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of the handsome man in an expensive suit. His blue eyes and warm smile were captivating.

“I’m Agent Cartwright, and this is Agent Klein,” he said, pointing to his female partner. “We need you to come with us to FBI headquarters.” Agent Cartwright held up his credentials.

“Why does the FBI want to talk to me?” JJ’s smile turned upside down. *I’m thirty and still can’t meet a nice guy*, she thought.

“We will explain everything when we get to our office.” Agent Klein marched ahead of her partner.

“Wait one minute! She is not going anywhere with you.” Luke stepped between JJ and the agents.

“Sir, please stay out of this. Miss Gilbert, it would be in your best interest to come with us,” Agent Klein said, narrowing her eyes.

“Hun, you can stop the FBI from taking her,” Skyler said, grabbing Luke’s arm and pulling him back.

“Stay out of this!” Luke yanked his arm free.

“What is this about?” JJ asked as tears rolled down her cheeks. She had hit her limit and could no longer control her emotions.

“We will explain everything when we get to our office. Please, I assure you this is urgent.” Agent Cartwright smiled as he reached out and loosely gripped JJ’s arm.

“You can’t just come in here and take her. Do you have a warrant?” Luke’s anger had caught the attention of his customers.

“Sir, this is official FBI business. I need you to step back and stay out of this.” Agent Klein held up a hand and walked toward Luke.

“Can’t I come to your office tomorrow?” JJ asked, wanting to get some advice from her police friends first.

“This cannot wait until tomorrow,” Agent Klein said in a demanding tone.

JJ wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at Luke. He shrugged his shoulders, not sure how to help.

“Miss Gilbert is going to cooperate. Aren’t you?” Agent Cartwright asked, trying to prevent the situation from escalating.

JJ put down her wine glass and grabbed her purse hanging on a chair. “Call Detective Warner,” she said to Luke. Every eye in the restaurant was on JJ as she walked past diners toward the exit. The agents followed her out the front door and placed her in the back seat of their dark blue sedan. *Can this day get any worse?* JJ thought as she dabbed the tears from her eyes.

She looked out the window and waved at Luke, who was standing on the curb with his cell phone.

“Sam, it’s Luke. The FBI just hauled JJ out of my place. Can you find out what’s going on?”