

JEOPARDY FALLS  3



THREE STEPS BEHIND

DANI PETTREY

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PROLOGUE

DECEMBER 19

HARPER SLIPPED INTO THE DARKNESS of the rusty ship-ping container, praying they wouldn't come, but knowing she was next. Five days and counting. Twenty-two people all gone, save her.

Gunfire echoed through her mind—single shots popping in succession. Never ending. Wailing and pleading had rent the stale night air, but there had been no mercy. *None.*

Others went by silent measures. Necks slit or torture taken too far. Whimpers had radiated through the metal box before each person was yanked screaming from it, never to return.

Her fate was sealed, and it broke her. God had forsaken her in this godless country. She would die in a land of ghosts. So much death—it rose in the air thick and putrid.

Mounds of fresh basalt littered the harsh scrubland, black volcanic dirt attempting to cover death, but it only showed more. Open pits, not yet full, held bodies tossed asunder. Legs and arms askew.

The stench of death blanketed them—saturating the fibers

of their clothes, sticking to their skin like thick lotion. It consumed the abandoned village, seeped between the broken-down trucks

and crumbling walls. No more laughter filled the empty homes, no more families together, no more living.

And she was next to be dumped into a gaping hole.

Pain pulsed through her bruises. Her head, jaw, and side—all mottled in black and purple. All from beatings that had stolen her breath, penetrating deep into her marrow. With each kick, each club cracking against bone, she'd feared she wouldn't sur-vive but she had—so far. For what? To be tortured and tossed away, becoming one of the faceless. Nameless. No grave marker. No funeral. Just another unknown ghost in this barren Syrian hill country.

Cruel laughter echoed in the dank night air as rain thundered on the metal roof. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around her waist—trying to protect herself from the coming death. But there was no protection. No one to save her. No way to save herself.

The laughter grew louder, bouncing off the walls. The door creaked open and a man—the source of her bruises—smiled wide. The lighted poles silhouetted his husky form, framing him in a halo of light, but he was no angel. Quite the opposite. She'd been left to the demons.

"You're next, American *eahira*," he slurred.

She winced. Drunk again. The worst of the beatings had come then. The desire to holler back "*I'm not a whore*" rose in her chest, but he'd only beat her worse.

"I'll miss our time together." The words ran together, but she still heard the merciless lilt of laughter under his ripe breath.

With one last laugh on a belch, he turned and slid the creaking door back, shutting her in darkness—nearly. The door stopped an inch short. A minuscule shaft of light beamed across the excrement-covered floor.

Hope rose inside. *Hope*. Something nonexistent for the last five days.

Would the shaft of light remain? Was he so stumbling
drunk he'd missed sealing her in the coffin?

Her breath held thick in her chest. She counted the seconds, hope rising.

The inch remained.

Tiptoeing toward the door, she paused at the opening, her breath bursting in her lungs.

She braved a glance through the tiny slit. Rain, so thick it marred the land, bounced off the ground. Puddles dotted the barren hill. No cover. Her hope faltered.

The man—if a human term could be used for the swine—was not in sight.

This was her chance—her only chance. If caught, she'd die, but she was about to die anyway. Better to be shot in the back, racing for freedom, than die by torture for nothing she had to give.

She slid the door open another inch. Singing in Arabic over-powered the sound of gushing rain. She inched the door a bit wider and held again—her heart hitting the wall of her chest so hard she feared he'd hear and come running, but the singing grew distant.

Inch by inch she slid the door open. *Almost enough to slip through.*

A creak echoed.

Save me, Lord! she prayed to the God who'd abandoned her. Rain thudded, thunder cracking.

The man didn't come.

Her lungs begged for air, but she refused to gasp—to make any noise. Lights gleamed in the distance, their shape marred by the rain into glowing balls. She crept out, then slithered her way to the side of the container.

You can do this. You have no choice. Die now or die worse.

Her chest squeezed tight. She struggled for air, her body trembling.

Peering around the edge of the metal box, she spotted the man standing past the last light, peeing with his back to her.

Crouching low, she headed over the barren landscape—the thin scrub good only for noise if she stepped on it.

Once beyond the edge of the camp, she broke into a run, her weak legs seeming to move without her control as if God were carrying her. But it must be the fear driving her forward.

Cold rain soaked through her ripped pajamas, sticking to her skin.

Was she free? Hope radiated through the fear—the two spar-ring for control.

The ground shifted beneath her feet, tossing her forward.

Her chin collided with the loose stones, her body splayed out.

Noise emanated behind her, and light swathed the hill. A high holler rent the sage-infused air.

He was coming.

Scrambling to her feet, she pushed her body beyond its limits—barreling forward and tripping over crinkling scrub.

Light passed by again, and she hit the ground. Thorns scraped her face, tearing her bruised skin. She bit back a yelp.

The light bounced farther away, sweeping a dozen yards to her right.

Getting to her knees, she pulled the thorns from her bloody palms and crawled forward, skittering like a bug over rippling water.

Voices joined his—Arabic filling the hill.

Don't stop. Push past the pain. Freedom lies ahead.

Adrenaline burned her limbs, the mud-slick ground slipping beneath her.

Time evaporated and somehow stalled at the same time. Was she even making forward progress?

Flashlights shone near her as she hit a grove of olive trees.

Cover. Thankfulness rippled inside.

Low walls—crumbling but freestanding—covered the land as far as she could see in the thick streaking rain and mist rising from the ground.

She bolted through the copse and tangled vines—one grab-bing her hair and tugging her back. *No. No. No.*

Voices grew closer.

She tugged her hair, the vine refusing to let it go. Yanking hard, she broke free—a clump of wet hair remaining in the mass of vines.

Dogs barked in the distance.

She squeezed her eyes shut for the briefest moment—a flash of dogs devouring her skin passed through her mind. Blinking and sweeping away the rain clinging to her lashes, clouding her vision, she broke into a run, tumbling down into the valley below.

Reeds towered over her. “Thank you,” she murmured out of habit. How could she thank the God who’d allowed men to rip her from her bed in the middle of night—tearing her from safety and pummeling her with their fists, then throwing her into a container to wait to die?

A reed shifted, rustling. She powered forward, her feet hit-ting a narrow stream. Icy water swirled around her ankles as she slipped deeper into the surging water of the Yarmouk River gorge. Adrenaline infused her exhausted limbs.

Safety—if she could make it—lay on the other side.

Howling pierced the air, rising over the gurgle of the raging river, as she plunged deeper still into its seemingly never-ending depths. The freezing water pricked at every part of her, steal-ing what breath remained in her lungs. Flailing her arms, she worked to burst free of the swift current’s icy grip. The other side lay so near.

Reach it and you’re safe.

Grappling forward, she reached the shore, crawling onto the riverbank as a light landed on her from the border crossing ahead. She braved one glance back. The men held on the other side of the river, unable to cross into Jordan. She wanted to smile, but she feared she never would again.

ONE

NEARLY A WEEK LATER

HER HANDS CLUTCHING the steering wheel, Harper wove her way up the mountain—the curving road leading to the small ranch town of Jeopardy Falls. Something outside of her pulled her there—an invisible rope tugging her forward, guiding her to Second Chances Ranch and Deckard.

Cold slithered through her body—a chill that refused to leave her bones ever since she'd been shoved into that metal container prison.

Warmth refused to envelop her no matter how high she cranked up the thermostat.

Snow and sleet fell in shards—pelting like the sheets of rain on the night of her escape. The men's voices clanged in her ears, her skin crawling at the whoosh of their harsh taunts—the memories raw and fierce. She feared they'd found her—saw their shadows bobbing in the back seat as she bounced over the juts in the dirt road. A smothering fear she'd never known until they'd thrown her into that steel container, then it consumed her, thickening in her veins—seeping through every part of her.

Their cruel, merciless faces flashed in the rearview mirror.
No. She clenched the wheel, pain shocking her sliced hands.

They aren't real.

She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them, but the faces remained.

Stop seeing them!

Sparse tears trickled down her cheeks—the moisture still not fully returned to her body.

So dry. Her mouth still parched, her tears as weak as she was. Trembling, she turned left, entering the ranch's drive.

Would this be a second chance for her? Could she find normalcy here, though she hadn't elsewhere? Her demons taunted that she never would.

Her car slid sideways across the ice.

Let go. Give into the slide.

But her grip fought with the steering wheel.

She scarcely managed to right her car and avoid sliding straight off the embankment running parallel to the long, wind-ing drive.

Freezing rain streamed down, stabbing the windshield. The wipers swished back and forth at a frantic pace, just like the pulse thwacking in her throat.

Her parents had begged her to stay with them over Christmas, but the need for safety propelled her. *Get somewhere safe. Get to Deck.* Only he could protect her, at least from external foes—her inner demons she was on her own to battle.

Disconcertion riddled through her. What would he think of her, bruised and broken, showing up on his doorstep like a lost animal? He'd rescue her like a feral cat. Not at the soul level—no one could rescue her there. It was as dead as the bodies lit-tering that otherwise desolate hill in Syria. As vanished as her colleagues, Tracey and Amanda, who'd been pulled from the container—both screeching at their turn—begging the men to stop. But they'd had no mercy.

The three worked with the humanitarian group in Syria,

there to identify the dead in a rebel-torn area of the hostile
country. Working in an abandoned village of bodies left in
the rebels'

cruel wake, they'd identified many victims, then buried them in proper graves.

Her car bounced over another rut in the ice-covered mesa road, jarring her and her thoughts as Deckard's house—the first of three on the property—came into view. Riley's sat in the middle and Christian's home last on the lane. The lights from Deck's porch glowed like fireflies in the inky black sky. Shone as beacons in the moonless night.

Shifting her car into park, she fixed her attention on the stillness surrounding her. Her bestie, Andi Forester was dating Deck's brother, Christian. She and Greyson Chadwick, another friend of the group, were already spending Christmas at the ranch. During their call earlier today, Andi had insisted Deck would be thrilled to see Bristol too, but . . .

She bit her scabbed, swollen lip, and the metallic taste of blood trickled in her mouth.

Grabbing a tissue, she swiped at it—the red smearing on white like the victims' blood had covered the barren scrub outside the rusted metal container, the smell of death assailing her nostrils night and day until the two blended into one inside the window-less box.

Her heart thumping against her chest, she uncurled her fingers from the steering wheel, her hands furling like claws ready to pounce, the movement lancing the slices on her palms.

The frigid temps burned her lungs with each ragged intake of breath. Pain stabbed her cracked rib, stealing the air from her in a whoosh.

She shook it off.

You can do this. You have to, or you won't survive.

Primal instinct had drawn her here. Now it was time to step out of the car. Her hand wrapped around the door handle as the ghosts whispered from the back seat. She refused to look, to see their shadows—the faces that had

tormented her for blurred days on end.

Enough!

She shoved her door open, a groan wresting from the metal screws—the sound too similar to the screeching of that prison door.

You. Can. Do. This. You have to.

The bitter air seared her lungs. Snow and ice crunched be-neath her boots as she rounded the car, then grabbed her pre-sumptuous new duffel bag off the passenger seat. Again, Andi had assured her Deck would welcome her to stay, but would it be out of caring or pity?

Hurrying for the porch and what she hoped was safety, she slipped but righted herself, avoiding slamming onto the ice-slicked earth. Reaching the door, she held her trembling gloved hand poised over the doorbell. Deck wouldn't hound her for answers, for details of her "ordeal," as her parents called it when they pressured her to talk. Deck held his own secrets, his own demons, so surely, he'd let her have hers.

Forcing her hand, she pressed the bell and waited.

Footsteps and a shadow breaking the inner light through the cut-glass door moved toward her. She wrestled the overpowering urge to bolt but held immovable in fear.

"Harp," Andi said, her voice a whisper as she leaned out and enveloped her with a hug, then pulled back, worry etched on her brow.

Harper had tried not to go rigid. Really, she had. But her body moved and reacted of its own accord now, and it terri-fied her.

Footsteps sounded behind Andi. Was it her bestie's boyfriend, Christian, or—her breath caught in her throat—Deckard? The man she'd come to see. The man who'd keep her safe.

"Harper?" His deep voice echoed in her ears.

Deckard.

Warmth flashed through her—only for a second, but it was a second longer than she'd experienced since being thrust into that container.

She squeezed her eyes shut, afraid of how he'd react to the

bruises, to the forming scars, then on a sharp breath opened them. Concern clenched his jaw, an unknown emotion radiating in his eyes. It wasn't pity, not like how her parents had looked at her.

The man was stunningly handsome. She'd forgotten how much so. His good looks next to her battered body and barren-ness of soul marked a stark contrast.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concern lancing his raspy voice.

His question . . . *Answer it.* The words refused to come. She just stood there, frozen before finally managing a nod.

He struggled to get a read on her, his eyes assessing each bruise. But he didn't freak out like her folks had at the sight of her. She couldn't blame them on that count, but gratitude that Deck wasn't losing it welled inside her. Anger held in the fists curled at his side, his shoulders broad, his stance tight. He wanted to take justice on who'd hurt her. But they were a world away. It was all that consoled her.

She shuffled her feet on the de-iced porch—gravel-like pellets shifting and grating beneath the soles of her boots. "Can I come in?" she asked, the sound small. She couldn't even keep the hurt from her voice. Beyond embarrassing.

"Of course." Deck stepped back, clearing the doorway. "Please," he said with a sweep of his arm.

Moving inside, he held out his arms, indicating a hug. They always hugged hello and good-bye.

He wrapped her in his arms, and she tried her best not to stiffen, but . . .

Epic fail.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything?" she pushed on, trying to diffuse the confusion and concern in Deck's light blue eyes.

"Don't be silly." Andi moved to wrap her arm around her shoulders, and she jerked back. Again, not of her own accord.

Andi frowned but quickly masked her disappointment.

“Andi, why don’t you get Harper some cider to warm her up.

It's freezing out there," Deck said, already looking out for her. Protecting was what he did best, and why she was here, risking the questions that would come. He would keep her safe. She trusted that with all her might, despite how her traitorous body might protest otherwise.

Riley rounded the corner, followed by Greyson—Deckard's most trusted friend and a fellow PI in their firm. He'd been the one to sell the practice to Deck, though she didn't know why. Riley stopped short as her gaze shifted to Harp's swollen eye. Grey held behind Riley, resting his hands on her shoulders.

Hmm. An unusual personal touch from Grey. He and Riley were close but not that level of close . . . unless she'd missed something.

Riley schooled her features from concern to softness. "Harper, I'm so glad to see you."

Of course Riley would read the room and react accordingly. "Let's get you something warm to drink," she repeated Deck's suggestion. "Cider or cocoa?"

Her hollow stomach flipped. Comfort from food and drink, other than water, had alluded her—pounds dropping off—but she craved warmth. "Cocoa, please."

"You got it." Riley smiled. "Why don't you come into the kitchen? I've got a whole cocoa bar set up, and we can make it the way you like it."

Of course Riley did. She was the Christmas elf, according to her brothers. All things merry and festive, they'd said.

"I'm so glad you came," Deck said, keeping a comfortable distance between them. All the MacLeods, Grey, and Andi kindly did as well.

She placed her order for dark chocolate and whipped cream from Riley's plethora of offerings.

"Thanks," she said when Riley handed her the red mug dotted with white snowflakes. She cupped it, hoping it

would infuse some heat into her bones.

Deckard's gaze flashed to the duffel bag she'd set off to the

side as they'd entered the kitchen. "I hope you plan on staying awhile."

She would thank God for Deck's kindness, but God had abandoned her on that scrubbed hill of death.

TWO

NEEDING SOME AIR, Harper excused herself from the Christmas movie marathon the following night.

"Where you headed?" Deck asked, stepping out of the living room after her.

She grabbed her coat off the white—had to be Pottery Barn—hall tree. "At the Christmas Eve service today, Mrs. Watkins mentioned that Kreger's is open tonight. According to her, going to Kreger's on Christmas Eve is tradition." But the truth was she needed air, needed the cold to slap away the fear churning inside of her.

"Let me guess." He smiled. "Peppermint milkshake?"

He remembered. There was that hint of warmth raking through her again. "Yep."

"Give me a sec and I'll go with you." Just what she'd hoped he'd say.

"Let me just tell the gang. We may have takeout orders." He chuckled.

"I'm going to grab my gloves." She'd started down the hallway to the guest bedroom when the doorbell rang. It wasn't a fearful sound usually, but her muscles tensed.

"I wonder who it is this time?" Deck asked.

“I’ll get it,” Riley called, but Deck’s footsteps echoed across the foyer over the movie soundtrack.

Curiosity and trepidation shifted through her. Who was there? The door creaked.

"Dad?" Disbelief radiated in Deckard's holler.

"No time for chitchat," the man said. "Your sister is in grave danger."

Heavy footfalls sounded toward the door as Harper rounded the hall's corner edge.

Christian's six-foot-four frame towered over the other two men, despite Deckard being six-two.

"Dad?" Shock rumbled in Christian's deep voice.

"Did you say da—" Riley halted halfway to the door.

"How . . . ?"

Greyson was at Riley's side before Harper could blink. He stepped around Riley, shielding her.

"Hello, Riley Anne," their dad said.

Harper shifted, meeting Riley's gaze. She stood like a deer fixed in headlights.

"You need to leave, *now*." Rage rang in Deckard's voice. He moved to shut the door, but the man's hand wedged in it, un-moving.

Greyson turned to Riley. "Let's go back in the living room, luv."

Love? Harper arched her brows. What was up with that? All kinds of surprises tonight.

"We don't need to listen to this," he added. Greyson reached for Riley's hand, and she took hold tight, if her white knuckles were any indicator. "Your brothers can handle this."

Riley nodded. Her expression bewildered, she strode with Greyson back to the living room.

"You need to understand," the man hollered, the sound strained as he pushed against the wooden door.

"No. *You* need to understand," Deck countered, pushing back. "You're not welcome here."

"That may be, but your sister is in grave danger. You need

to know—”

“We can protect Riley. We’ve been doing it for years.”

She couldn’t see the man’s face clearly with the wind swiping

snow sideways across the porch and his face, not to mention Christian's still widened shoulders.

"Not Riley," the man urged.

"Bristol." Deck's chiseled jaw clenched.

Bristol? The sister they never spoke about. Curiosity nipped at Harper as she remained poised at the hall's edge.

Christian shifted his stance, clearing her view. The porch's motion lights illuminated the man's carriage. There *was* some-thing eerily familiar about it.

The man's gaze shifted over Deck's shoulder, landing on her. "Hello." The gravel of his voice echoed Deck's.

The snow stilled long enough for his face to be clear. Gap-ing, her gaze swept back and forth between the two men—one a reflection of the other.

Deckard's dad. His dead dad.