

JEOPARDY FALLS  1



ONE
WRONG
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To Calvin and Brenn

For all the laughter and joy you bring into my life
and for all our wild adventures—
crazy car rides, holding alligators,
petting stingrays, and nonstop days on the beach.
I love you and our adventures together so much!

PROLOGUE

HE INHALED THE STIFF RESOLUTION of her death. She'd seen Cyrus. Remembered him. Now he'd need to silence her before she could mention Cyrus to anyone at the gallery. The imbecile should have been more careful, but that's why *he* was in play. To assure things went according to plan, to remove anyone who stood in their way, and when it was done, to take out Cyrus and Casey. That he would delight in. Cyrus had been a pain in his rear as far back as he could recall. Casey. He was just a lamb to the slaughter, unfortunate fool.

Enrique released a smooth exhale, then inhaled the spicy scent of the girl's perfume wafting on the stiff October breeze—whistling through the wind tunnel the long row of downtown businesses made.

Killing her would alert Cyrus to his presence in the States, but, perhaps it would keep him on his toes. Someone needed to.

Maintaining a good distance from his prey, Enrique followed as she meandered through the shops, wearing one of those recyclable grocery bags slung over her shoulder. A baguette and fresh flowers peeked out of the top. She made another stop, this time popping into a coffee shop. He kept walking, stopping a handful of stores down on the opposite side of the street, and waited, letting the other shoppers meld him into the crowd.

A cup of coffee in hand, the girl emerged.

He turned back to look in the storefront before him, waiting until she was far enough ahead for him to resume following. Nearly a fifteen-minute walk out of town, in an isolated patch of wind-stirred mesa, sat a two-story adobe building. Four exterior doors, each with a letter on it. Apartments.

Watching from behind a copse of trees, he waited while she retrieved her keys from her pocket, opened the bottom exterior door on the right, and disappeared inside. He held back, awaiting night-fall. He glanced at his watch. Not long. He surveyed the building, using binoculars to peer through the sheer curtains of her unit. A light in the bedroom shone, and slips of it spilled from what he could only assume was the adjacent bathroom.

He smiled.

The sun dipped below the horizon, and soon darkness shrouded the land. Time to move. Heading around to the back of the building, he found a sliding door to her unit. Easy enough. He jimmied the lock and eased inside.

Water ran in the bathroom, but a voice carried in song from the other side of the apartment. “Carry on Wayward Son.” Interesting choice.

He moved with stealth, approaching what he discerned was the kitchen. A teakettle whistled as steam from the open bathroom door filled the space. The girl turned the corner, dressed in a robe, a teacup in her hand. Her eyes locked on his, and panic flashed across her face as the teacup fell and shattered on the floor.

He smiled. Time to have some fun.

ONE

“WAIT HERE,” Cyrus ordered.

“Why?” Casey asked—though pawn suited him better. As much as it galled him, Cyrus needed the insipid man. Needed his skills. For now. But when they were done, so was he. “Why?” he asked again.

Cyrus gritted his teeth. So incessant. He shook out his fists. Only a handful of locations to go and the questions would cease. *He* would cease. “It doesn’t take two of us to get what we came for,” he said, hoping Casey would accept the answer and let it drop, but he doubted it. “I’ve got this. Two of us will only draw more attention.”

“Fine.” Casey slumped back against the van’s passenger seat.

The imbecile was pouting like a girl. And, that knee. Cyrus wanted to break it. Always bouncing in that annoying, jittery way. The seat squeaked with the rapid, persistent motion. He shook his head on a grunted exhale. If Casey didn’t settle . . . if he blew their plans. Cyrus squeezed his fists tight, blood throbbing through his fingers. Too much was at stake. His own neck was on the line.

He turned his attention to the task at hand. “I won’t be long,” he said, surveying the space one last time before opening the van door. The lot behind them was dead, the building still. He climbed out, his breath a vapor in the cold night air. He glanced back at their van, barely visible in the pitch-black alley.

Shockingly, Casey remained in the passenger seat, his knee still bouncing high.

He shut the van door as eagerness coursed through him. The

thrill and rush of the score mere minutes away. Just one quick job and then it was finally time.

He slipped his gloved hands into his pockets. A deeper rush nestled hot inside him, adrenaline searing his limbs. His fervency was for the kill.

He moved toward the rear of the restaurant, where the rental rooms' entrance sat. His gloved fingers brushed the garrote in his right pocket, and he shifted his other hand to rest on the hilt of his gun. Which way would it go? Garrote or gun? Anticipation shot through him. Rounding the back of the building, he hung in the shadows and then stepped to the door and picked the lock—so simple a child could have done it. But what had he expected of a rent-by-the-hour-or-day establishment?

Opening the door, he stepped inside the minuscule foyer and studied the two doors on the ground level. Nothing but silence. He found the light switch and flipped off the ceiling bulb illuminating the stairwell, then crept up the stairs, pausing as one creaked. He held still, his back flush with the wall, once again shadowed in darkness. Nothing stirred.

Reaching her room, he picked the lock, stepped inside, and shut the door, locking it behind him.

She was asleep on the shoddy sofa, a ratty blanket draped across her. Getting rid of her now might be easier, but what fun was it killing someone while they slept? And he needed to make sure she had the items.

He stood a moment, watching her chest rise and fall with what would be her final breaths, then he knocked her feet with his elbow.

Her eyes flashed open as she lurched to a seated position. She rubbed her eyes. "You're late."

Less chance of witnesses.

"You have the items?"

She nodded.

"Get them. We're in a hurry."

She got to her feet and headed for the bedroom.

He followed.

To his surprise, she climbed up on the dresser and reached for the heating vent.

Huh. She was smarter than he'd expected, yet not bright enough to know what was coming.

Pulling the dingy grate back, she retrieved a black velvet pouch and a bundle of letters held in place by a thick rubber band.

"Hand them over," he said.

She hopped down and hesitated. "I get my cut, right?" She clutched the items to her pale chest.

"You'll get your cut," he said, wrapping his hands around the garrote.

She released her hold. Taking the bag first, he slid it into his upper jacket pocket, then slipped the letters into his pant pocket. "Good job."

She brushed a strand of hair behind her ear, revealing her creamy neck. "Thanks."

Restless energy pulsed through him.

"Are we done here?" she asked, shifting her stance, her arms wrapped around her slender waist.

"Just about."

"What's left to do?" she asked, her head cocked, and then she stilled. She took a step back. So she'd finally figured it out.

"No." She shook her head, backing into the paneled wall. In one movement, left hand to right shoulder, he spun her around and slipped the garrote over her head.

He'd intended to give her the option—the easy way with a gunshot to the head or the hard way with the garrote. But the hard way was far more pleasurable, giving him the best elated high.

It really was a shame. She was a pretty thing.

Five minutes later, he was back in the van, leaving the body behind.

"You got everything?" Casey asked as they pulled onto the street, their headlights off.

Cyrus smiled and handed both items to him. They were a go. The appetite for what was to come gnawed at Cyrus's gut, but in a good way. It was time to feed the anticipation that had been growing in him for nigh on a year. It was time to scratch that itch.

TWO

CHRISTIAN'S HANDS gripped the rock face. Granules abraded the tender flesh beneath his nails, leaving them raw. Pushing up on the ball of his foot, he strained, his fingers searching for the crag. Finally, his hand landed on the cold surface—only three inches deep. On a sharp inhale and slow exhale, he lunged upward—only the slightest hold kept him from the hundred-foot drop to the forest below. His foot landed on the next hold, and he settled, his muscles hot in the brisk dawn air. Blood throbbing through his fingers, he shifted the weight onto the balls of his feet.

Mapping the next route in his head, he leaped for the next hold. Air replaced the solid rock for the breath of a second, and searing adrenaline crashed through him as the hold slipped away. His pulse whooshing in his ears, he slid down, finally grabbing hold of a crag on his rapid descent. His fingers gripped hard—the only thing holding his body weight and keeping him from the ground far below.

He examined the cliff, looking for a foothold. Something. Anything. Adrenaline raked through him, quivering his arms. *Not good.* Time held motionless until he anchored his foot on a narrow ledge, small rocks shifting under the soles of his climbing shoes. He kept his weight on the ball of his foot while scanning for a new route up. He exhaled as he found it, but it was going to require another leap of faith.

Releasing his hold, he lunged for a more solid handhold. Grip-

ping it, he worked his way up to another ledge—this one deep enough to settle comfortably onto.

His breathing quickened by the climb, he turned and pressed his back against the volcanic rock—cool against his heated and perspiring skin—and exhaled in a whoosh. Talk about a close one. He smiled. One more adventure down.

He held for a moment, taking in the morning light spreading across what seemed an endless sky. Man, he loved this view. Narrow shafts of sunlight streamed down through the early morning fog, lighting the yellow-and-orange foliage ablaze. Everyone talked about the beautiful fall colors in New England, but for him nothing beat fall in New Mexico, and it was peak season.

He sank into the silence. Only the occasional chirping of birds in the trees below rushed by his ears on the stiff, mounting breeze.

The brilliant orange sun rose higher above the horizon, its rays glinting off the rushing water of the swift creek at the bottom of the valley—chasing away the fading chill of night and replacing it with renewed warmth of the coming day.

“Ain’t Worried About It” broke the silence with its melody. Who on earth was calling so early? He prayed nothing was wrong. It was the only reason he kept his cell on him while climbing—in case there was an emergency and his family needed him.

He shimmied the phone from the Velcro pocket on his right thigh and maneuvered it to his ear without bothering to look at who was calling. “O’Brady.”

“I need you here now!” Tad Gaiman’s voice shook with rage.

Why on earth was Tad calling him so early? Why was he calling him, period?

Tad’s heated words tumbled out. “My gallery’s been robbed!”

“What?” Christian blinked. There was no way. The security system upgrades he’d installed made it impenetrable, or so he’d thought.

“Do you hear me? My gallery has been robbed!”

“I do.” He kept his voice level. Tad was frantic enough for the both of them. “Which gallery?” The man owned three.

“Jeopardy Falls.”

The one in their hometown? Crime was nearly nonexistent in their small ranching, lately turned tourist, town of five hundred. “Take a deep breath and calm down so you can focus.”

“Calm down?” Tad shrieked, and Christian held the phone away from his ear. Even his sister Riley couldn’t hit that high of a pitch. “Did you not hear me? My gallery’s been robbed.”

“I hear you. Let me call you back.”

“Call me back? You cannot be serious!”

“I’m balanced on a ledge on Manzano.”

“Of course you are.” Tad scoffed.

“I’ll call you when I’m on the road.”

“And how long will it take you to get here? This is a DEFCON 5 situation.”

Christian shook his head. Clearly, Tad had no idea what he was talking about. DEFCON 5 meant peacetime.

“Christian! How soon?”

“I need to climb down and make the drive back to town. I’ll see you in an hour.”

“An hour!”

“We’ll talk through it on my way in.”

Scaling down the rock face as fast as he could, Christian reached his vintage Bronco.

Climbing inside, he clicked on the Bluetooth he’d installed. It’d cost a lot, but in his line of work, he needed to be able to talk while on the road chasing down a case. He shook his head, still baffled that anyone had beat the security system.

He dialed Tad.

Normally his drive along the winding dirt roads through the mountains was calming, but not today.

Tad picked up on the third ring.

“Okay,” Christian said, swiping the chalk from his hands onto his pants—the climbing towel too far to reach. “Walk me through it. Did the alarm go off?”

“The one on the security system you said couldn’t be beat? No!”

Christian took a stiff inhale. How on earth had someone gotten

through the door without the key fob? *The fob* . . . “Tad, do you have your key fob?”

Silence hung thick in the air as Christian’s Bronco bumped over the ruts in the dirt road, the drop-off only inches from his tires. He rounded the bend, and the road—if it could be deemed one—widened. “Tad?” he pressed.

“Okay, fine. I don’t have it.”

“Where is it?” Christian asked as he headed for the main road that led back to Jeopardy Falls.

Tad swallowed, the slippery, gulping sound echoing over the line. “I think the woman I spent last night with after the gala took it.”

“Riley mentioned she might attend the gala, but she couldn’t make it.”

“It was well attended.”

“And the woman you mentioned?”

“I met her at the gala.”

“She’s not local?”

“I’ve never seen her before last night.”

“So she just strolled into the gala?”

“Yes. It was a semiprivate affair. I sent out invites but welcomed anyone, given it was Friday Night on the Town.”

Their small town had instituted the night on the town for one Friday a month about a year ago, and it had really drummed up business for the eclectic downtown shops.

“Let’s shift back to the gallery,” Christian said. “I’m assuming you used Alex’s fob to get into the building?”

“No. I can’t get in.”

“Why not?” Christian pulled out onto the paved road.

“I can’t reach Alex, despite the fact she’s supposed to open this morning.”

“Okay . . . so walk me through what happened with the fob.”

“I woke up and that . . . woman was gone, and the fob wasn’t where I’d left it. I searched my place, but it’s not there, so I rushed to the gallery. I stopped at Alex’s place on the way, but no answer. She is so—”

“Settle down, Tad. Let’s think this through. Do you think Martha would let you into Alex’s place if you explained the situation?” Maybe the landlady would understand. Jeopardy Falls was a small enough town where everyone knew everyone, which was still taking time for him to get used to. To be known. Well, known at what he was willing to show, which wasn’t much.

“I’m not leaving my gallery. Not until I get inside and see what damage is done. You get the fob from Martha.”

Christian furrowed his brows. “If you can’t get in the gallery and the alarm didn’t go off, how do you know it’s been robbed?”

“Because I can see the three front cases through the porthole windows in the door. They’re open and empty.” A sob escaped Tad’s throat, though he tried to cover it with a cough.

Christian exhaled. “All right. I’ll call Martha, but she might not feel comfortable letting us in.” It was a lot to ask. “Actually, I think in this case, it’s best to have Sheriff Brunswick to reach out to Martha.”

“That’s a good idea,” Tad said. “Give him a call.”

“Wait?” Christian tapped the wheel. “He’s not there yet?”

“No.”

“Did he give you an ETA?” Maybe Joel was on another call. Their county was large, and with only him and one undersheriff, they had a lot of ground to cover.

“I haven’t called him yet.”

Christian’s brows hiked. “You called me before the sheriff?” Where was the sense in that?

“You put the supposedly impenetrable system in. I want to know what went wrong. And I need you to get me inside if we can’t get Alex’s fob.”

“Me?” Christian tapped the wheel.

“You installed the system, so surely you know how to beat it. And, regardless, you’re the one the sheriff calls when they need a locksmith or safecracker on a case. Though you’re quite more than a simple locksmith, aren’t you?”

Christian stiffened. “Meaning?”

“Whoever did this obviously had knowledge of the system.”