

CSI: CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION™

DARK SUNDAYS

a novel

Donn Cortez

Based on the hit CBS series “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation” produced by CBS PRODUCTIONS, a business unit of CBS Broadcasting Inc.

Executive Producers: Jerry Bruckheimer,
Carol Mendelsohn, Anthony E. Zuiker,
Ann Donahue, Naren Shankar, Cynthia Chvatal,
William Petersen, Jonathan Littman

Series created by: Anthony E. Zuiker



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CATHERINE RETURNED TO WHERE THE SLIDING GLASS DOOR HAD BEEN SMASHED.

She'd already noted the absence of blood; now she looked for other indicators.

"They would have headed for an exit," she muttered to herself. "Fork in the corridor—right or left?"

She went left, shining her flashlight at the floor, sweeping it from side to side in slow arcs. When she'd traveled twenty feet, she stopped, returned to the fork and went the other way.

Ten feet down it, a tiny piece of broken glass glinted on the floor.

She followed the corridor all the way to the nearest fire exit, then pushed it open. The ground outside was soft, and held the impression of two sets of running shoes; one large, one small.

They headed into the desert, and quickly disappeared on rocky, sun-hardened soil.

Dawn's not far off, she thought. Hyperthermia will work for them for a while, keep them from noticing how cold it is. Once that sun is up, though. . .

She wondered how quickly she could get a tracking dog out there. If Thera Kostopolis and John Bannister collapsed out in the desert, the heat would kill both of them even quicker than it normally would.

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Four Walls

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Pocket Star Books

A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

1230 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10020

www.SimonandSchuster.com

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First Pocket Star Books paperback edition June 2010

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Cover design by David Stevenson

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-1-4391-6086-2

ISBN 978-1-4391-6930-8 (ebook)

For my son Dez,
who did his best to arrive at the same time
the final galleys for this book did.

THE VIEW FROM the Panhandle Casino's penthouse suite was impressive, but to truly appreciate it you had to use the rooftop pool; one wall was clear glass, letting the swimmer enjoy the glittering lights of Vegas twenty floors below while floating weightless in heated water. The suite's owner, Andolph Dell, provided swimming goggles for his guests for this precise reason, and during one of his parties there was always at least one person contemplating the vista while holding their breath.

But not at this party—because on this particular Sunday night, there was a zeppelin.

A more accurate description was *dirigible*, for it was only twenty or so feet long and less than a third that in diameter. It was black, cigar-shaped, and piloted by a grinning clown wearing black coveralls.

No one was sure which direction the dirigible had come from, if it had risen from the ground or descended from the skies. It had simply appeared, circus music blaring tinnily from tiny speakers, floating at the penthouse level and circling slowly like a bird looking for a spot to land.

The clown wasn't so much piloting the craft as riding it; a large propellor at the rear provided thrust, powered by the clown's furiously pedaling legs. He gripped the handlebars tightly, leaning back in his seat, never pausing to wave at the crowd on the roof who were cheering him on, or even to glance at them—despite his wide, maniacal grin, he seemed to be a clown who took his zeppelin flying very seriously.

And then the zeppelin burst into flames.

The theme of the Panhandle Casino was the Gold Rush. There were plenty of pickaxes and gold pans on the walls, while women dressed as dancehall girls dealt blackjack and spun roulette wheels. But Andolph Dell had decided old mining equipment and a few corsets weren't a big enough draw; these days, in order to compete, a place needed something unique.

Dell had gone with bears.

Specifically, he'd built a large, glass-walled environment in the middle of the casino floor. Sensitive to modern attitudes toward animal exploitation, he'd ensured that the environment was completely soundproofed and that the bears spent only a few hours a day on display, in a daily rotation shared among sixteen animals. The rest of the time they lived on a ranch outside the city, where they were cared for by an experienced professional staff. The animals themselves were all rescued specimens, obtained largely from zoos or circuses that could no longer take care of them; they lived a pampered life on the ranch, punctuated with brief interludes riding in the back of a specially designed tractor-trailer, followed by a few hours staring at hordes of goggle-eyed tourists while snarfing back treats.

A flaming dirigible crashing to earth in the parking lot was not on their usual agenda—and the event occurred at the worst possible time, during the bears' transfer from truck to casino.

Jordan Tanner worked the midnight-to-eight-A.M. shift at the Panhandle as senior security officer. He had overseen hundreds of bear transfers and probably as many parties, and the bears had always provided much less trouble than the partiers. . . until now.

There were two other officers in the monitoring room with him, watching the sequence of events unfold. Kyra Bourne was to his left, Kevin Priest to his right. None of them could quite believe what they were seeing on the bank of screens in front of them.

“Oh my God,” Kyra said. She was a twenty-two-year-old from Alabama working her way through a criminal-law degree. “It just hit the ground. It’s still burning. No way he could have survived that.”

“Fire department’s on its way,” said Kevin. “What is this? Is this a terrorist attack?”

Tanner shook his head. “A guy in a clown outfit? That doesn’t—”

“The bears!” said Kevin. “The bears are loose in the casino!”

Security monitors showed two bears lumbering between slot machines as panicked tourists screamed and ran.

“How many?” Tanner demanded. “Where’s the third one—”

“There!” said Kyra. “It’s moving a lot faster than the other two—”

The third bear wasn’t lumbering. It was running. And someone was trying to outrun it.

“It’s chasing a guard!” said Tanner. “Who is that?”

“I don’t know, I can’t see his face—”

“Is it Hernandez? I think it’s Hernandez—”

A high-pitched bell started to ring. Someone had triggered the fire alarm, adding to the panic as guests scrambled for the exits. All of the elevators headed for the ground floor, where they shut down after disgorging their passengers. The penthouse had its own private elevator—but when the car arrived, it was empty.

“Oh, no,” said Tanner. “The alcove for the penthouse elevator. It’s got him cornered.”

“Tell him to shoot the damn thing!”

“I can’t raise him—wait, that’s not him—”

“He’s trying to open the elevator—why isn’t it opening?”

“It’s locked down and he’s too rattled to remember the security code,” said Tanner. He leaned forward and started tapping keys. “I’m opening it remotely—if he can get inside I can shut them and he’ll be safe—”

“No!” Kyra shouted. “It’s rushing him! It’s in the—”

Bright arterial blood sprayed the lens of the elevator’s camera. All they could see was red.

“What a mess,” said Nick Stokes, surveying the smoking wreckage. “Took out an SUV, a pickup, and two subcompacts.”

“If Grissom were here,” said Greg Sanders, “he’d probably say something like ‘Oh, the zoo-manity.’”

“Probably. But his would be better.”

Greg shrugged. “Hey, you try working in a pun involving a flaming zeppelin and three rampaging bears.” He paused. “Maybe I should have gone with the Goldilocks thing . . .”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t,” said Sara Sidle. “Blondes have to deal with enough jokes as it is.” She glanced from the parking lot to the entrance. “How are we doing this?”

“The bear’s handlers have recaptured the three escapees,” said Nick. “Two came right back, while they had to use a tranquilizer dart on the third. Crime scene’s been cleared, but it’s gonna be messy—I’d like both of you on it. I’ll take the *Hindenburg* out here.”

“Let’s do it,” said Greg.

He and Sara headed into the casino. It was deserted now, the entire building ringed with yellow crime-scene tape.

“Weird to see the place empty,” said Greg. “Kinda postapocalyptic.”

“Post-ursine-alyptic, you mean. Nothing clears a room like a four-hundred-pound carnivore times three.”

A large, frowning man with a shaved head and muscular arms crossed against a massive chest was waiting for them at the private elevator alcove.

“Jordan Tanner,” he said. “I’m in charge of security at this time of night.”

“CSIs Greg Sanders and Sara Sidle,” said Greg. “So this is where the attack took place?”

Tanner nodded. “It’s where it started, yeah. The guard was trapped against the doors, so I opened them remotely. The bear rushed him.”

Sara glanced at the keypad beside the elevator doors. “So the body’s inside?”

“I’m not sure.”

Greg frowned. “What do you mean, you’re not sure?”

“The elevator camera was. . . splashed. We can’t see what’s inside. It’s not on this floor, anyway—the car went down after the doors closed. He must have hit a button before . . .”

“So the elevator’s in the basement?” asked Sara. “Why aren’t we?”

“Regular staff elevator is still in lockdown. And as for the stairs—well, I’ll show you.”

Tanner led them around a corner to the fire stairs. The door there was propped open, while four firemen struggled to get a makeshift stretcher of chain-link fence through the doorway. Sprawled across the mesh was an unmoving mass of black fur, its long pink tongue lolling out of the side of its bloodstained muzzle.

A man with a short gray beard and a baseball cap that read “Bruin Rescue Ranch” was supervising. “Careful!” he snapped. “Don’t drop him! Keep his head supported!”

“That’s his handler,” said Tanner. “He’s the one who tranquilized him. Nobody else has been down there since the staff bolted.”

“What’s down there?” asked Sara.

“Offices, mostly. When the bear came out of the elevator, it started wandering around. Staff elevator was frozen, so everybody ran for the fire exit and got out.”

The firemen finally succeeded in negotiating the unconscious animal out of the stairwell. They lugged it toward the exit, the handler barking orders every step of the way.

“Let’s see what we’ve got,” said Sara.

“There’s no body,” Doc Robbins said. He stood beside Nick, leaning on his arm crutch and gesturing with his other hand. “Either this guy walked away from the crash, or the fire vaporized him completely—which is impossible.”

“Not completely,” said Nick. He used a stick to lift a partially melted rubber clown mask. “See? Part of his face survived.”

“That’s great. Call me when you have something that isn’t made out of rubber—I’m going to examine the victim of the bear attack.” He headed toward the casino entrance.

The damage to the vehicles had mostly been done by fire; the dirigible hadn’t weighed enough to do serious harm through impact alone, and its twenty-story plummet had been slowed by the physics of the craft itself.

Nick got to work documenting the wreckage, dropping markers and taking pictures. He found no footprints—clown or otherwise—leading away from the crash, no blood trail or spatter. He did find bits of electronics, fragments of framework made mostly of balsawood, and a small electric motor. He bagged and tagged everything, then took samples of the ashes that remained.

Doc Robbins had joined Greg and Sara at the open elevator car on the basement level, where there was an abundance of blood—but no corpse.

“There’s no body?” Doc Robbins said. “Again? What happened to this one—did the bear eat him?”

“I’m no expert, but I don’t think bears do that,” said Sara. “I mean, there’s nothing here at all—no clothing, no shoes, not even a bone fragment. These bears are well fed, right? Even a starving grizzly in the wild wouldn’t lick his plate *this* clean.”

“Well, there’s no drag trail,” said Greg. “It didn’t haul him off somewhere to snack on later.”

“So where is he?” said Robbins.

Tanner walked up. “That’s not the only question. I don’t know *who* he is, either—none of my people are missing.”

Greg pointed at the floor, where bloody bear pawprints led from the foyer toward the offices. “We might not know where the guard is, but we know where the bear went.”

They followed the tracks away from the elevator. The bear had gone down the hallway to the very end, where it had apparently stopped in front of a large metal door.

“What’s in here?” asked Sara.

“It’s where they keep the alternate casino chips,” said Tanner. “State law says the casino has to have them on hand in case the ones in use are compromised.”

Greg tried the door. “It’s still locked, but we’re going to have to take a look inside.”

“I have the access code,” said Tanner. “Step back, please.” He blocked the keypad with his body and entered the code, opening the door.

Greg stepped in and looked around. Wheeled shelving units lined the walls, filled with clear plexiglass cases full of casino chips. “I don’t see any tracks.”

“Bears,” said Sara, “tend to be more interested in fish than chips.”

Greg grinned. “I see married life is already changing you.”

Sara gave him a look. She paced the room, studying each rack of chips. “It doesn’t look as if anything’s been disturbed, but the casino should do an inventory of these chips, see if anything’s missing.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” said Tanner. “But I don’t know why anyone would even want to steal these. They’re the new kind, with a radio-frequency ID chip embedded in each one. Until they’ve been activated, they’re about as valuable as a Starbucks gift card with no money on it.”

“Worthless money and a nonexistent guard,” said Sara. “What’s next?”

Greg shrugged. “Porridge that’s too hot or too cold?”

The bear tracks doubled back down the hall, where they entered the first office on the left. “The tracks go around the perimeter,” noted Sara. “Nobody else was attacked?”

“Not that I know of,” said Tanner.

Greg surveyed the room, which held half a dozen cubicles. “So it charges in here, runs around the outside of the room—giving everyone not only a good look at it but enough time to escape—then heads back out the door.”

Sara was already on to the next room. “Where it does exactly the same thing,” she said. “It’s like the bear was *herding* them.”

“Maybe it was raised by sheepdogs?” Greg suggested.

It was the same in every office. The bear’s wandering was methodical, ending just outside the door to the fire stairs where it had been shot with a tranquilizer dart.

“And still no guard,” said Sara.

Greg stood in the blood-splashed elevator, peering at the wall. “Lot of spatter in here, but look at this.” He pointed to the railing at waist height that ran around the periphery. “Is that a footprint?”

“Could be,” said Sara. She looked up. “People trying to escape bears sometimes climb trees—maybe the guard went up instead of out?”

“Exit hatch is closed,” said Greg. “Could be he used it, then put the cover back in place.”

Tanner nodded. “There should be a stepladder in the supply closet. I’ll be right back.”

One mile past the Vegas city limits, a man and a woman shamle out of the desert. The moon above them is a giant eye, staring at them with cold, unblinking hostility.

The woman’s throat has been cut, but the wound has long since stopped bleeding. It hasn’t healed; it’s run dry. Her eyes are empty and lifeless, her skin as white as hospital linen under the lunar glare.

The man is lean and muscular, his hair a black military bristle over a skull etched with scars. His right hand is bound in a kind of sling, the wrist lashed to the forearm with strips of torn cloth. The arm bears only a cursory resemblance to a human limb; it is covered with thick, overlapping scales of a deep orange, and it ends in a hand tipped with long, curving black claws. The hand twitches grotesquely as the man walks, flopping against his chest and wagging its long fingers like a spider on its back.

The many-hued lights of the city rise before them: flame-flickering reds, lurid alien greens, blues and whites arcing like lightning.

“Tired, Bannister,” the woman says. Her voice is a harsh croak. “So tired.”

“Soon, Theria,” he promises. “We’re almost there. You’ll be able to rest then.”

“Rest. Yes. Rest forever . . .”

They continue on, their footsteps slow but resolute. They don’t pause when they reach the sign at the outskirts; they already know exactly where they are and where they’re going.

They’re in hell.

SARA PUSHED OPEN the hatch in the elevator's roof cautiously, then poked her head inside. She shone a flashlight around.

"No guard," she called down. "But I think I've got some transfer on the edge of the hatch."

Greg handed her up a pair of tweezers and an evidence bag. She collected the sample carefully and handed it back down.

Greg studied the sample. "I think there's some blood on it, too."

"There's more blood on the edge. I think our guard must have been here."

"But he's not now? Maybe he climbed up to the next floor."

"I doubt it," said Tanner. "We were right outside that door a few minutes ago. I didn't see any blood or signs that it had been forced open from the other side."

Greg put the evidence bag aside. "Maybe he climbed up to another floor?"

Tanner shook his head. "He'd have a long way to go. This is the owner's private elevator, and it only stops at three places: here, the main floor, and the penthouse suite. Ain't nothing in between but a twenty-story concrete tunnel running straight up and down."

Sara clambered all the way through the hatch and stood up on the roof of the car. Her flashlight's beam found the steel rungs of a ladder set into one wall and a crimson smear of blood on two of them. "I've got blood on the ladder." She shone her light straight up. "Can't see anything above me—if he's stuck somewhere up there, he must be near the top. . . Hello! Is there anyone up there?"

Her voice boomed and echoed up the shaft, but there was no reply.

"I'm not climbing twenty stories without safety gear," said Sara. "Let's use the regular elevators and try this from the top."

Sara grabbed a more powerful searchlight from her vehicle, then ran into Nick as she headed for the lobby. "We're going to the roof," she said. Greg was waiting at the elevator and gave Nick a quick rundown of what they'd found.

"Two missing bodies, huh?" said Nick as they rode up together. "No idea what happened to yours, but I've got an idea about mine."

"Does it involve a really, *really* hungry bear?" asked Greg.

"Nope. But I need to talk to someone who saw the dirigible before it went down."

The elevator let them out one floor below the penthouse, and they all followed Tanner to the fire stairs. "There was a big party going on here until all the excitement started," Tanner said. "Once the alarms went off and the elevators locked down, everyone had to use the stairs. Of course, we tried to keep everyone out of the casino—last thing we wanted was more people on the floor while the bears were roaming around."

They went up the stairs and Tanner unlocked the door at the penthouse level. "Party's over now, but some staff are still here."

The fire door led to a small foyer that also held the private elevator. A gigantic display of tropical flowers in a cut-glass vase adorned the opposite wall, beside a wide, arched doorway.

A broad-shouldered, short-haired security guard in a black tuxedo stood in front of the doorway, his arms crossed, a transparent cord coiling from one ear into his collar.

“This is Ian Stackwell,” said Tanner.

Stackwell nodded. Greg went straight to the elevator door and began to examine it. “Have you heard any strange noises from behind here?” he asked. “Banging, scratching, maybe moaning?”

Stackwell frowned. “No, sir. But it was pretty noisy in here until a little while ago. I could have missed something like that.”

Sara nodded. “I think we should go all the way up—the elevator machine room should be right above this.”

“You two go ahead,” said Nick. “I’m going to stay here and talk to a few people.”

They returned to the stairwell and went up another flight. Tanner punched in the code that opened the door, and they stepped out onto the roof. The elevator machine room was a blocky structure only a few feet away.

Their footsteps crunched on the tar and gravel roof. The beam of Greg’s flashlight fell on the door to the machine room—it was ajar. “This door looks like it was forced open,” said Greg. “Hello? Anybody up here?”

No answer. They pushed the door to the machine room open. Inside, the motor that moved the elevator stood silently, thick cables leading from twin spools down through an opening in the floor. A hatch that led into the shaft itself stood open beside it.

Sara switched the spotlight on and shone it into the shaft. “Hello? Is there anyone there?”

Still no reply. “Greg, I’m not seeing anything. The shaft is empty, all the way to the bottom. If our guard was here, he’s not anymore.”

“Oh, he was here. Look.” Greg shone his flashlight at one corner of the room. A pile of bloody clothes lay in an untidy heap.

Greg knelt and studied them. “Pants and shirt. So now we have a missing, unidentified, injured guard in his underwear. This case keeps getting better and better.” He glanced over at Tanner. “Uh, and by better, I mean weirder.” He took out an evidence bag and stuffed the clothes into it.

Sara stood and walked back to the door. “Greg, take a look at this. See these scratch marks on the frame? This door was broken into from the *outside*.”

“So. . . the guard, bleeding profusely, manages to climb twenty stories, then gets naked while someone else breaks in?”

“Blood loss can affect critical thinking—he might have been delusional. Or maybe he didn’t undress himself—whoever broke in could have.”

Greg nodded. “Maybe someone from the party was out here. They hear someone in distress, bust down the door, get him out of his clothes to see how badly he’s injured.”

“And then what?” said Tanner. “Nobody at the party reported any kind of medical emergency.”

“Maybe he didn’t survive,” said Sara. “The guest panicked, went back to the party, and didn’t say anything.”

“In which case,” said Greg, “there’s only two places he can be. Up here . . .”

Sara walked over to the roof's edge. ". . . or down there," she said. Nick started with Stackwell, the doorman. "What time did the party start?" Nick asked.

"Ten o'clock."

"You have a guest list?"

"Yes, sir." Stackwell pulled a small notepad from his breast pocket. "All these people were preapproved by Mr. Dell. I was told that they were also allowed to bring dates or friends."

Nick took the notebook and studied it. "High rollers, huh? I recognize a bunch of these names."

"Mr. Dell's parties are always popular."

"I'll bet. I don't suppose you saw the flaming zeppelin?"

"No, sir. I stayed at my post all night. I did hear other people talking about it, though."

"How about other staff? Bartenders, servers?"

"One of the servers, Linda, brought me out a club soda afterward. She says she saw the whole thing."

"She still here?"

"She's inside, cleaning up."

Nick thanked him and went inside. The penthouse suite was large and sprawling, the pool clearly visible through a wall made of glass. Comfortable couches of teal and caramel were arranged artfully throughout the space, and empty wine glasses and plates of half-eaten food were clustered on low-slung tables of polished teak. A woman in her twenties dressed in a short black skirt and blue silk blouse was busy filling a plastic bus pan with glasses but stopped when Nick walked in.

"Hi," said Nick. "Are you Linda?"

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"I'm Nick Stokes, Las Vegas Crime Lab." He showed her his ID. "I understand you saw the whole flaming-dirigible incident?"

She leaned the bus pan against one hip. "The blimp that caught on fire? Yeah, I saw it. Second-craziest thing I've ever seen in Vegas—I mean, the thing was being driven by a guy in a clown suit."

"So I hear. Can you show me where you were when it happened?"

"Sure." She put the bus pan down on the table, then led him to the other side of the room. A large sliding glass door led to a deck area with seating and patio tables.

Outside, Linda stopped next to the waist-high railing that led around the deck. "I was right about here, I guess. Didn't see him at first—I don't know where he came from. He was suddenly just there, pedaling away like crazy, about twenty feet from the edge."

"Uh-huh. Did he wave at anyone?"

"Ummm. . . not that I saw."

"How about *look* at anyone? Did he turn his head at all?"

She thought about it. "I don't think so. He seemed really focused, you know? I think he just stared straight ahead the whole time."

"And how did he react when the craft caught on fire?"

"That was the weirdest thing of all. He didn't. I mean, he just kept pedaling away,

like nothing was wrong. And that creepy circus music kept playing, all the way down . . .” She shuddered.

Nick nodded. “If it’s any consolation,” he said, “I’m pretty sure he didn’t suffer.” Greg stepped back from the roof’s edge and lowered his radio. “If our guy did a half-gainer off the roof, either he never reached the bottom or he got up and walked away. Uniforms did a sweep of the perimeter and didn’t find a thing.”

“Well, I don’t think he dropped in on the party.” Sara was over by the ten-foot-high wall that separated the elevator machine room and ventilator ducts from the rest of the roof, presumably so people relaxing poolside wouldn’t have to stare at industrial fixtures. “Topped with razor wire, no less,” she noted. “Guess Mr. Dell is serious about his privacy.”

“And if you did get over it,” said Greg, “there’s a security camera.” He pointed. “Even if someone scaled it, they’d be spotted—either by the camera or by someone at the party.”

“Unless everyone was busy watching a burning blimp,” said Sara.

Tanner shook his head. “I was on duty. There was a lot of commotion right around then, but nobody came over that wall. You can check the footage yourself.”

“We will,” said Sara. “Nick said he was going to do interviews with the partygoers. I’ll get him to ask about any possible wall vaulters, too.”

They spread out, looking for anything else on the roof out of the ordinary.

Greg knelt beside a pipe and said, “I’ve got something odd here.”

Sara joined him. “It’s bent.”

“Yeah, and there are fresh tool marks on it, too. Pretty deep scratches.” Greg snapped a few quick photos. “Whatever did this must have exerted a lot of force.”

“Like the kind of force exerted by a tethered dirigible?”

Greg considered that. “You think our flying clown and bleeding guard are connected?”

“I don’t know. That guard had to have gotten off the roof somehow.”

“Yeah, but the dirigible crashed before the guard was attacked. That puts him up here while the *Hindenburg* barbecues down in the parking lot.”

“Which leaves the other side of this wall,” said Sara. “Guess we should see how Nick’s doing.”

* * *

Andolph Dell was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a spreading paunch he hid with expensive, hand-tailored suits. His hair was short, brown, and well groomed, his face just a little pudgy. He stalked out of one of the penthouse’s back bedrooms with a glower on his face, plainly upset by the evening’s events.

“You!” he barked at Nick. “Can you tell me what the hell’s going on?”

Nick gave him a professional smile—he’d dealt with rich people before.

“Not yet,” he said. “I’m Nick Stokes, Las Vegas Crime Lab. You’re Mr. Dell, correct?”

“That’s right. Are we under attack by time-traveling Nazis or something?” His tone was more incredulous than angry. “I mean, a *blimp*? I didn’t think those things even *could* catch on fire anymore.”

“Mr. Dell, do you have any idea what this might be all about?”

“How the hell should I know? Bears running wild in my casino and flaming clowns on zeppelins—I mean, what the *hell*?”

“Well, you *were* having a party.”

Dell frowned, then smiled. “Oh. I see. Okay, I may throw some pretty memorable shindigs, but this was *not* part of the entertainment. Any idea who that poor guard was yet?”

“We’re working on it.” Nick glanced over and noticed Sara and Greg walking through the door. “In fact, I have to confer with two of my colleagues right now. Excuse me.”

Nick joined his fellow CSIs as they headed toward the pool. “What have you got?”

Greg crossed his arms. “A bloody guard’s uniform, a machine-room door that was broken into from the outside, and a stressed-out pipe with some heavy-duty tool marks.”

“No guard?”

Sara shook her head. “No guard. Nothing at the base of the building, either. We think he must have come this way.”

“Blood trail?”

Greg and Sara glanced at each other. “No,” said Greg.

“I’ve got something similar,” said Nick. “The clown piloting the dirigible never took his hands off the handlebars, never turned his head, never spoke. Want to guess what I found in the wreckage?”

“A small electric motor?” said Greg.

“Bingo. The clown was a dummy—paper suit and rubber mask over an inflatable body is my guess. The motor drives the pedals and makes it look as if the clown is riding the thing.”

“So who was really in control?” asked Sara.

“My money’s on someone at the party,” said Nick. “Someone with a clear view and a remote control.”

“Not to mention a burning hatred of clowns,” said Greg.

Bannister and Theria stand outside the building and watch zombie tourists in loud shirts stumble in and out of the entrance, maggots squirming in sockets behind designer sunglasses. The corpses grip skulls with their rotting hands, sucking fluid through straws jutting from the eye sockets. “Hard Risk Café” is painted on the white bone. Rock music blares from loudspeakers shaped like coffins, dead pop stars singing about loneliness and heartache.

They enter.

Inside, the theme of the place becomes clear. Buddy Holly screams as he burns in the wreckage of a plane; the wings have been turned into roulette tables. There’s a fountain in the middle of the room built around a white bathtub—in it, a bloated Jim Morrison sinks beneath the surface while a giant hypodermic needle sprays neon red into the air.

No one takes any notice of Bannister or Theria as they stagger through the crowds. They are only two more victims, after all, in a torrent of suffering.

Skeletons bounce dice made of bone off craps tables covered in human skin, the croupier raking in piles of pills and syringes from the losing bets.

Theria stops, leaning against a column upholstered in rotting blue suede. “Leave me here, Bannister.”

He looks around. “Here? Why?”

“It’s as good a place as any.”

“Does this place mean something to you? Does it remind you of something, of a happier time—”

“No. Music is for the living. I hear nothing but noise.”

“Then how can you rest?”

She has no reply to that, but after a moment, she repeats her demand: “Go on without me.”

“I won’t do that. Not to you.”

“Bannister.” Her voice is weary and completely devoid of hope. “I’m not even real, Bannister. Don’t you know that?”

“You’re real to me, Theria. And you deserve better than this.”

She neither agrees nor denies this. After a moment, she pushes herself away from the column, and they continue on their way.

RAY LANGSTON HAD BEEN many things in his life: a university professor, an MD, an author, and now a crime-scene investigator. But regardless of his current title, he always defined himself by one simple aim: he was trying to leave the world a little better than he found it. He had done that through medicine, through teaching and writing, and now through the pursuit of justice.

But no matter what his current title, he never forgot his previous incarnations or their responsibilities. A part of him would always be an academic, trying to find the best way to communicate what he had learned; part of him would always be a doctor, looking for the best way to fulfill the Hippocratic Oath.

Even after being forced to take a suspect's life in self-defense. That shooting had shaken him personally, but his core beliefs still held. He had not killed the man out of anger or fear; it had been a matter of survival, with no other choice available.

Still, the words "First, do no harm" rose in his mind more often since the shooting, a reminder of his obligation to uphold life. Doing so by putting criminals behind bars might not be as direct as doing so by saving a patient's life, but it ultimately accomplished the same goal. The intellectual satisfaction thus derived was, in some ways, more fulfilling than the emotional.

But then, his specialty was forensic pathology. He had usually been at least one step removed from the process of saving lives. . . and had always been oddly comfortable with that.

Maybe that was why he didn't mind his office's proximity to the morgue.

Then again, it might just be Doc Robbins's company. He and Robbins had found common ground in a number of areas—rare blues music among them—and took turns in supplying the soundtrack to whatever autopsy was currently being performed. "If the bodies that pass through our hands wind up crossing the River Styx," Ray had told Robbins one evening, "there's no reason they can't enjoy the sounds of the Mississippi Delta first."

Ray was currently listening to a little Muddy Waters on the sound system of a crime lab Denali as he drove through the desert night. He was on his way to meet Catherine Willows, supervisor of the lab's night shift and Gil Grissom's replacement, at a facility a few miles outside Vegas city limits. They had a somewhat unusual crime scene to process, and Catherine had told Ray his background might come in handy.

He pulled into the parking lot of a long, low-slung building with two separate wings. The Nevada Neurological Studies Institute didn't look much like a medical facility—let alone one that did cutting-edge research—but Ray's experienced eyes spotted the dark outline of an incinerator's smokestack, used to dispose of medical waste.

He parked, took out his customary oversize CSI kit on its rolling luggage stand, and wheeled his way to the front entrance. He noted that Catherine was already there,

parked right out front.

There was no receptionist on duty at this time of night, but a security guard met him at the front door and directed him to one of the wings. The hallway was long and dimly lit, reminding Ray of night shifts when he was an intern; he'd always enjoyed that sensation of stillness, of being one of the few people awake and alert deep in the A.M. There was a certain serenity to it.

He heard voices up ahead, one of them Catherine's. He turned a bend in the corridor and saw broken glass scattered at his feet, the remains of a shattered sliding door that sealed off the ward. The sign above the entrance read "Secure Area."

Catherine Willows, dressed in a blue CSI windbreaker and ball cap, was talking to a balding, bearded man in a white coat.

"—didn't think he was violent," the man said. His attention shifted to Ray as he walked up. "Hello. I'm Dr. Hiram Wincroft."

"I'm Ray Langston from the crime lab. Hello, Catherine."

"Hi, Ray. Ray here is being too modest; he's an MD, too. Hopefully that'll be an asset for our investigation."

"What, exactly, are we investigating?" Ray asked.

"Two of our patients have escaped," said Wincroft. "Two of our more. . . *unusual* patients. One of them used an office chair to smash through this door— The other is much more passive."

"How about security?"

"The guard was making his rounds at the time. He came running when he heard the crash, but they were already gone."

"What can you tell us about the patients?"

Dr. Wincroft paused, then loosened his tie. "Damn air conditioning must be on the fritz again. Hot enough to fry an egg in here. All right, the one who busted the glass is John Bannister. Formerly Sergeant John Bannister, now discharged. Served in Iraq and wound up in a coma for a week after a bomb he was defusing went off. He began to present some very unusual symptoms at the VA hospital where he was getting poststress counseling. They were having trouble diagnosing him, so they sent him here. We eventually figured out he was suffering from corticobasal degeneration syndrome."

"How old is he?"

"Only forty-two. We still don't know what causes CBDS, but it rarely shows up in men his age. But he started displaying limb rigidity and gait disorder—he walks very stiffly." Wincroft paused. "Sometimes it almost looks as if one of his goddamn feet is nailed to the floor. Doesn't so much walk as *lurch*, like a goddamn *zombie*."

Wincroft abruptly shrugged out of his lab coat, tossing it aside. "Lord, it's hot in here. You ever see a zombie movie? Dead people rising from the grave, trying to eat people's brains . . ." He laughed. "Not that most people use them, anyhow. Most people don't have the sense to come in out of the rain!"

A look passed between Catherine and Ray.

"Doctor," said Catherine, "are you feeling all right?"

"Fine, absolutely fine. Must be that chicken I had for lunch, making me a little scattered. Chickens have extremely small brains, so you have to be careful about. . . uh, catalytic metabolism refraction." He began to unbutton his shirt.

Ray stepped forward and peered into Wincroft's eyes. "Doctor, have you taken any medication recently?"

"What? No, I haven't."

"Your pupils are fully dilated. Your skin is flushed and you seem to be overheating, but you're not sweating."

"Really?" Wincroft frowned, clearly trying to concentrate. "Yes, of course. That explains why my thinking is so. . . what were we just discussing?"

"I'll see if I can find a nurse," said Catherine.

Ray had Wincroft sit in a chair, then conducted a few basic tests. He found that Wincroft's heart rate was elevated, his mouth dry, his vision slightly blurred. He displayed both muscle weakness and a heightened stretch reflex.

Catherine returned, a nurse in tow. "Ray, I think we have a problem."

The nurse, a leggy blonde in her thirties, had stripped down to her underwear, white stockings, and orthopedic shoes. She looked at them blankly, then giggled.

The doctor and the nurse weren't the only ones affected. It soon became apparent that everyone on the ward was experiencing the same symptoms—the CSIs were forced to move them all to a different part of the building and isolate the entire wing.

Fortunately, the total affected was less than a dozen people. The Institute was primarily a research facility, with few patients staying there full-time. Both CSIs changed into hazmat suits before returning.

"What do you think, Professor?" Catherine asked as they surveyed the broken glass through the transparent plastic of their face plates. "Epidemic or mass poisoning?"

"Chemical exposure is my guess. The onset of symptoms is too sudden and uniform for anything bacterial or viral—people don't all get sick at exactly the same time and in exactly the same way."

They made their way down the hall. "I've got a break room over here," she said. "Coffee urn, some pastries. I'll take samples for a tox screen."

He nodded. "I'm going to check Bannister's room."

Ray continued down the hall until he came to an unlocked room marked 2C. He pushed it open.

The room was spare and simple, with a hospital bed, a dresser, and a small table with two chairs. There was a window with reinforced safety glass but no bars. Ray turned on the small lamp over the neatly made bed, then searched through the dresser drawers. He found only some clothes and a few toiletry articles.

He looked around the room, trying to see things not through the eyes of a doctor but as a CSI. He looked under the bed, behind the drawers, beneath and behind the dresser itself. Nothing.

Then he looked up and noticed the air vent near the ceiling.

He stood on the bed and examined the vent. There were scratches on and around the heads of the two screws that held it in place. He took a multitool—he'd learned quickly how essential it was always to have one on hand—undid the screws, and pulled the grille off.

He peered inside. He could see something round and metal, pushed far back into the duct. He reached in, grabbed it, and carefully pulled it out.

It was a small, green metal canister, with a U.S. Army insignia stenciled on one side and "BZ-4598" on the other. The end was capped with an aerosol nozzle, jammed