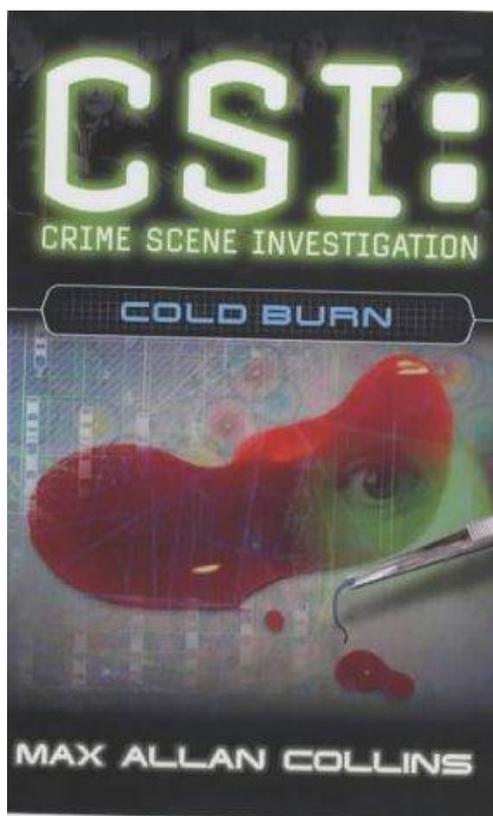


--03 Cold Burn (05-2003)



Synopsis

Remote. Peaceful. Picturesque. That's how the Mumford Mountain Hotel bills itself in its brochure, and it lives up to its billing--most of the time. But this year, the hotel is hosting a prestigious conference for the study of forensic science, and the organizers have extended CSI head Gil Grissom an invitation he can't refuse. Joined by fellow investigator Sara Sidle, Grissom leaves the department in the capable hands of Catherine Willows and heads east. But he and Sara soon find themselves in all too familiar territory--and back in Las Vegas, Catherine, Warrick Brown, and Nick Stokes have uncovered trouble of their own.

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For Anthony E. Zuiker-
without whom...

M.A.C. and M.V.C.

"With method and logic

one can accomplish anything."

-HERCULE POIROT

"Data! Data! Data!

I can't make bricks without clay."

-SHERLOCK HOLMES

LIKE THE BEACON OVER BETHLEHEM, THE FALLEN BUT bright star called Las Vegas had long ago guided wise guys from the east to this unholy city where Christmas of a sort was celebrated year-round. Ever since Ben "Bugsy" Siegel had died for the sins of tourists everywhere, men had journeyed across the desert, lured by the glowing neon temples called FLAMINGO and SANDS and CAESAR'S, summoned by celestial bodies with names like Liberace and Sinatra and Darin, to worship at the altar of the elusive fast buck.

Right now, with Christmas less than a month away, gamblers were high-rolling into town like a horde of last-minute shoppers, bucking the odds and dreaming of a green Christmas.

Driving through the Lake Mead National Recreation Area in the predawn darkness, Ranger Ally Scott-like most residents of Las Vegas-was contemplating the upcoming holiday in terms that had nothing to do with gambling. That is, except for the gamble she would take buying anything for her perennially hard-to-shop-for father. Then there was her sister Elisa...a gift certificate, that would just be cold.

Which was exactly what Ally was at the moment. She didn't have the Park Service Bronco's heater on and the vehicle's interior wasn't any warmer than the night she plowed through, the temperature hovering around a crisp forty. Ally had bundled herself up in her heavy jacket and Thinsulate gloves, but like so much of the Las Vegas population she had grown up somewhere else. Iowa in her case-so she damn well knew the difference between *real* winter and what Las Vegas only *thought* was winter.

Thin, practically scrawny, and barely over the mandatory Ranger height minimum, Ally enjoyed the relative chill of the December Vegas night as she tooted along the two-lane blacktop that snaked its way through the entire twenty-mile length of the Lake Mead facility.

The flat-brimmed campaign hat covered most of Ally's blonde hair, the rest ponytailed back and tucked inside the collar of her jacket.

Ally had joined the Park Service right out of college and had spent the six years since then working her way up the ladder. Barely a year ago, after bouncing from station to station in the Southwest, she'd landed this plum assignment, here at Lake Mead. Now and then, she drew the night shift like this, but she didn't mind. She was comfortable in her own company.

Headlights slashing the darkness, the Bronco rounded a curve, and the ranger felt (more than actually saw) a blur of motion to her left. Slamming on the brakes, she jolted the vehicle to a stop just as a creature tore across the road in front of her and disappeared into the blackness to her right.

Coyote.

Out here, the lights of the city were a glow on the horizon; otherwise, under a moonless desert sky scattered with half-hearted stars, the landscape remained a mystery. Still, Ally felt something-off to the passenger side of the Bronco.

With the windows rolled up, she could hear nothing, yet her well-trained senses were tingling. *Was that...something? Some muffled sound, out there in the night...?*

She shoved the gearshift into park, let out a deep breath, and pretended the goosebumps on her arms were from the cold. Opening the driver-side door, she dropped onto the blacktop and stilled as she listened, intently. At first, only the wind whipping through the foothills, like the ghost of a mule train driver thrashing his team, broke the silence. Then, between lashes of wind, Ally heard something else....

Something animal.

The ranger unsnapped her holster and rested her hand on the butt of her Smith and Wesson model 10, like a western gunfighter ready for the worst. Though most cops these days carried automatics, Glocks, Brownings, the Park Service still issued their rangers traditional, standard Smith and Wesson six-shooters with four-inch barrels. Ally wished she had something with a little more stopping power and, considering her prowess with the weapon, several more rounds at her disposal.

Stepping cautiously, quietly around the open door and walking to the front of the Bronco, Ally could see nothing, although her ears picked up something, something that might have been a far-off conversation. No words could be made out, but the ranger thought she heard voices....

Then, in one chilling moment, she understood what the "talk" was. The coyote that'd crossed her Bronco's path was over there, and the creature wasn't alone-a minor critter convention was under way. Ally didn't bother pretending that the shiver up her spine was caused by the wintry wind.

Ally clambered back into the Bronco and slipped the gearshift into reverse, backing the vehicle, blocking the road, and cranking the wheel so the front beams threw their small but insistent spotlights up onto the desert hillside.

Six...no, seven coyotes huddled around and hunkered over a large white lump on the ground. For just a moment, the shape was abstract in the harsh headlights. Then Ally knew. As acid rose in her stomach, Ally Scott recognized the lump as human flesh-the nude body of a woman, sprawled on her side.

The body wasn't moving.

Even with the presence of the coyotes, Ally held out hope that the woman might still be alive, that this was an unconscious body and not a dead one, despite the scavengers. She again hopped down from the Bronco, pulling her pistol to fire a round into the night sky.

The shot splitting the night and then echoing across the desert did get the attention of the animals, the coyotes' heads popping up, turning in her direction...but it didn't spook or disperse them.

Ally lowered the pistol and fired off another round, only a foot or so over the heads of the coyotes this time. The critters jumped and moved away, a few feet, claws scratching the desert floor, but most still lingered near the prone nude form.

And that pissed Ally off.

She charged right at them, screaming and firing off several more shots, and the animals finally took the hint, relinquishing their prize, and scampering like evil puppies into the night.

Making more noise than necessary, to help make sure the scavengers didn't return, Ally pulled off a glove and knelt next to the body. The woman-a brunette-appeared to be dead, after all. She lay on her side, as though she were sleeping...but she wasn't. Reaching down, Ally touched the woman's neck and, trained cop though she was, drew back her hand quickly as if she'd touched a hot stove.

What she had sensed was quite the opposite-the flesh felt more like cold rubber than anything warm and human. The woman's lank hair felt damp-had the woman crawled up here from the lake? Was this some skinny-dipping party gone awry?

Ally's stomach flipped and the ranger knew that her supper was about to make a return trip. She started panting on purpose, like a dog, just like her orthodontist had taught her back when she was a teenager getting braces. While Dr. McPike had taken that mold of her mouth, he'd instructed her that panting would help her overcome her gag reflex.

You just never know, she thought, when these little life lessons are going to come in handy.

Ally searched for a pulse-finding nothing stirring under the cold, clammy flesh. This was a dead body, clearly...and that put Ally right smack in the middle of what she knew damn well was a crime scene. The urge to drag the body back to the Bronco was nearly overwhelming, but Ally knew not to disturb the scene any more than she already had, rushing in to chase off the coyotes.

Pistol still in her hand, Ally backed carefully to the vehicle, her eyes sweeping the dark beyond the body and the Bronco beams, just waiting for the first coyote to creep back into the wash of the car's headlights, for her to pick off. She knew, too, that if this was a murder, the perpetrator could possibly still be in the area...though she doubted that. The coyotes wouldn't have made their move until they were alone with the corpse.

Her eyes still searching the hill, Ally reached inside, plucked the mike from its dashboard perch, pulled the long cord out so she'd have an unobstructed view of the body and pushed the talk button.

"Dispatch," she said, "this is mobile two."

No response from the base.

"Dispatch, this is mobile two. Aaron, it's your wake-up call! Get off your ass-I found a dead body."

The low-pitched male voice sounded groggy, which was hardly a surprise. "Ally? What the hell did you say?"

"Call the city cops, Aaron-we got a d.b."

A summer intern brought back on temporarily to help out during the holiday vacations, Aaron Davis had little experience beyond handing out maps to tourists and flirting with teenage girls come to swim in the lake.

"Aren't we supposed to notify the FBI, Ally?"

The mild irritation Ally felt was a relief compared to the creepiness that had come over her, touching that cold corpse.

"We will, Aaron," she said with feigned patience, "but the Fibbies won't make it for days." She sighed. "The Vegas P.D. will be here within the hour. Call 911."

"But we're the cops, aren't we, Ally?"

"Well...I am."

"You mean, cops can call 911, too?"

"Aaron...just make the call. Then you can go back to sleep."

"You don't have to be mean," Aaron said.

She clicked off then and the ridiculousness of the conversation made her laugh. She laughed and laughed, tears rolling down her cheeks, and then she thought to herself, *Laughin' like a damn hyena*, and that made her think of the coyotes.

And then she didn't laugh any more.

She just watched the still white lump of flesh, guarding it from scavengers. Ally Scott could protect the dead woman from the coyotes, no problem; but if the woman was a murder victim, it would take a different breed of cop to find the animal who had done this.

2

STANDING AT THE EDGE OF THE BLACKTOP, CATHERINE Willows-Las Vegas Metro P.D. crime scene investigator-let the headlights of the Park Services Bronco, blocking the road, give her her first view of the body.

The dead naked woman lay on her left side, arms folded chastely across her bosom, legs pulled up in a tight, fetal ball. At this distance, no signs of violence were apparent and Catherine wondered if this death could somehow be natural. According to the ranger, the woman's hair was damp and, even from here, Catherine could make out the dampness of the ground beneath the corpse. Maybe the woman had been swimming in the lake; perhaps this was a romantic tryst that had got out of...

Catherine stopped herself. Unlike her boss and colleague Gil Grissom, she almost always allowed herself to play with theories before all the facts were in. But she knew the practice could be dangerous if left unchecked, particularly this early on.

On their first case together, Grissom had said, "It's a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."

"That sounds like a quote," she'd said.

"It is," Grissom had said, with no attribution, just glancing at her with that little half-smile and smug twinkle of the eye she now knew so well.

Even so, the tryst notion was one of the few logical explanations that came readily to mind to answer the musical question, what was a nude woman doing wandering around the Lake Mead National Recreation Area in the middle of the night...?

Two squad cars, their rollers smudging the night with alternate smears of red and blue, blocked the road a hundred yards on either side of the scene. Detective Jim Brass's unmarked Taurus sat on the shoulder of the road near where Catherine and her partner tonight, Warrick Brown, had left their Tahoe.

Ever the gentleman, Warrick was pulling their flightcase-like field kits out of the back of the SUV while Catherine had stepped to the edge of the road for an overview of the crime scene. Her hair whispered at her ears, thanks to the gentle desert wind-which had a bite to it, as the sting at her cheeks attested.

Captain Brass ambled up next to her. Despite the temperature, Brass wore no topcoat, just a plaid sport-coat over a gold shirt with a blue-and-gold striped tie. When she had first known the detective, Brass had been a rumbled sort, with the unkempt aura of the recently divorced; but time passed and the detective had long since spiffed up.

A small cloud huffed out as he spoke. "Dead nude woman."

As if that were the beginning and the end of it.

Catherine asked, "No ID?"

"Nude, Catherine," he said, dryly. "She wasn't strolling around buck naked with her purse."

"I don't go anywhere without mine."

"Nonetheless...we got nothing here."

"Not yet." Catherine smiled at him, teasing just a little. "Warrick and I'll have a look, if you don't mind."

"Knock yourself out."

Following her flashlight's beam, she slowly walked over the sandy ground, careful not to disturb any potential evidence as she approached the corpse.

Brass remained on the edge of the road.

She heard Warrick behind her, field kits clanking. Then he was beside her, asking, "How's it read?"

Tall, with a shaggy, modestly dreadlocked haircut, Warrick Brown had skin the color of coffee with just a hint of cream stirred in. He was a man with a ready smile, though Catherine knew him to be serious and even inclined to melancholy.

He watched as Catherine played the flashlight along the woman's back, as if painting an abstract picture. Then she crouched and shone the beam on the woman's disturbingly peaceful face: the eyes closed, a puggish nose above full colorless lips...but no sign of violence, no immediate cause of death visible.

"She doesn't have much to say yet," Catherine said. "Fortunately, the coyotes were just getting started when that ranger interrupted 'em-this could be a lot worse."

"Maybe not from Miss Nude Vegas's point of view," Warrick said, in his deadpan way. "Dumped, y'think?"

Catherine nodded. "Probably dropped here, yes-other than paw-and-claw prints, no signs of a struggle on the ground. But, damn...who is she?" Then to the corpse, "Who are you?"

"She went out of this life," Warrick said softly, "same way she came in-naked."

Catherine frowned. "Maybe not...I think I saw some sort of impression, maybe from underwear. Still, it's not a lot to go on."

"Well, you know what Gris would say."

She nodded. "'Just work the evidence.'"

"That's it."

"Well, even if that's what 'Gris' might say, allow me to point out that while we're 'working' the evidence, our fearless leader and his trusty aide will soon be sucking up room service in a first-class hotel."

Graveyard shift supervisor Grissom and another CSI, Sara Sidle, would be leaving early this morning for a forensics conference at a mountain lodge in upstate New York, where they would be teaching. Though forty degrees might be cold in Vegas, Catherine knew that where Grissom and Sara were headed, a minus sign would likely be in front of the temperature before the weekend was over. She really didn't envy the pair a bit.

Warrick made a clicking sound in his cheek and said, "Explain to me again why we're not there?"

"I didn't go because I declined the opportunity."

"You declined? A paid vacation?"

"Yes. Unlike some people, I have a life, and I didn't want to leave my daughter with a babysitter for that long."

"I have a life."

"Let's say you do. Even so, you hate the cold."

Warrick sighed. "Yeah, well. That cushy hotel, it's got heat, doesn't it?"

Catherine allowed that it probably did.

"And the classes are indoors, right?"

"Grissom's will be," she admitted. "There may be some outdoor crime scene stuff, but you don't bring people in from Vegas to teach criminalistics in the snow."

"Thank you. You make my point-I'm tellin' you, Cath...that could've been us on that trip."

She nodded. "If I hadn't declined...and you weren't such a baby."

"Hey-that's cold."

"See? Bellyachin' about the weather already."

Finished with her examination of the corpse, Catherine rose and faced her partner. "Time to go to work, before I start thinking you don't love your job."

He shook his head. "You can love your job, and still need a little R&R."

"Well," she said, as they headed back to the Tahoe, "how about, for fun, you find us a usable tire track on the shoulder of the road, before all these people tromping around turn Lake Mead into a dust bowl."

Catherine snapped off photos as fast as the flash would recharge, little pops of daylight in the night, two photos of each angle, for safety, covering the body five ways: from the right; the left; top of the head down; bottom of the feet up; and overhead.

Warrick poked around the side of the road, occasionally bending, now and then taking his own photos. Finally, satisfied he'd found all the pertinent, usable tire tracks, he spritzed them with hair spray to hold them together, then got his field kit and mixed up some goo-casting powder and dental stone-so he could cast some of the different tracks he'd marked.

Catherine didn't think about it, but nobody spoke to them while they processed the scene-and this was not unusual. Crime scene investigators, working their scientific wonders, created in those around them a quiet reverence, as if all the kneeling she and Warrick were doing was praying, not detecting.

Or maybe it was the dead woman, in the midst of the CSI rituals, who inspired the silence.

Over on the blacktop, Brass interviewed the ranger who'd found the body, while the uniformed men stood around and did their best to look official. Truth was, once the CSIs had shown up, a uniformed cop at a crime scene usually had just about the most boring job in the law enforcement book.

Under the bright light of some portable halogens, Catherine went over the corpse as carefully as she could-nothing seemed wrong, other than a few nibble marks on the arms and legs where the coyotes had begun. No signs of struggle, no skin under her fingernails, no black eyes or bruises-nothing to say this woman wasn't just sleeping, except for the absence of breath.

An indentation showed the curve of the victim's panty line, but Catherine could find not so much as a thread for evidence. It was as if the sky had given birth to Jane Doe and let her fall gently to the sandy ground-stillborn. Finally, as night surrendered the desert back to the sun, Brass approached with cups of coffee for the two criminalists.

"Life's blood," Catherine said as Brass handed her the steaming Styrofoam cup.

Warrick saluted with his and took a sip. "Here's to crime-without it, where would we be?"

Brass raised both eyebrows and suggested, "In bed, asleep?"

They watched as the ranger climbed into her Bronco-she paused to nod at them, professionally, and they returned the gesture-and then she slowly pulled away.

Using her coffee cup to indicate the departing vehicle, Catherine asked, "She seemed competent."

"Yeah," Brass said with a nod. "We got lucky, having her find our girl."

"She see anything?"

"Nearly hit a coyote with her Bronco." Brass shrugged one noncommittal shoulder. "About all she saw was coyotes, gathered around the corpse."

"Singing Kum-bayah," Warrick said dryly.

"Did those little doggies mess up your crime scene much?"

Catherine shook her head. "Hardly any marks on the body."

Eyes tightening, Brass asked, "What's that tell us?"

"Our vic probably did not just wander out here and die," Warrick said.

Brass looked at him.

"She's barefoot," Warrick continued, "and there's no bare footprints anywhere. You don't have to be an Eagle Scout to figure, if she was wandering dazed and nude, coyotes woulda got to her before she made it this far into the middle of the park. Somebody dropped her off."

Brass returned his gaze to Catherine. "That how you see it?"

"Makes sense to me," she said. "Lady Godiva's probably a dump, all right...but if the coyotes were around her and the ranger scared them off, she couldn't have been on the ground for very long, or else there wouldn't have been much left after the coyotes chowed down."

Frowning, Warrick asked the detective, "Ranger didn't see or hear a car?"

"Nope," Brass said. "She did mention that five bucks buys a car a five-day pass to the Lake Mead recreation area. Tourists can come and go as they please, whenever they please."

Warrick said, "Ever wonder what it's like to do this job in a town not crawling with tourists?"

"Oh but that would be too easy," Brass said. His sigh started in his belly and dragon-breathed out his nose. "Could be any car and it could be anywhere by now. You said there were no bare footprints-how 'bout shoeprints?"

"No," Catherine said, "whoever brought her in must've blotted them out, when they were leaving."

Almost to himself, Warrick said, "Ten million tourists a year visit this place."

"Yeah," Brass said grumpily. "Fish and Wildlife guy told us so, last time we had a dead naked woman out here."

Last autumn a woman's torso had been dredged from Lake Mead.

"We caught that guy," Warrick reminded Brass.

"How about cars?" Catherine asked. "How many in the park now?"

Brass offered up a two-shouldered shrug. "No records. It's a vacation spot-casual. Your guess is as good as mine."

Catherine frowned. "So they never know who's in the park?"

"Just happy campers-happy *anonymous* campers."

"So," Warrick said. "We have a dead naked woman...no ID, nothing around the body, and the only evidence we have is a track off a tire that could belong to just about any vehicle."

A grin put another crease in the rumpled detective's face. "And that's why you guys make the medium-sized bucks."

They exchanged tired smiles, which faded quickly as the trio watched two EMTs struggling to maneuver the gurney bearing the black-bagged body down to the road. The EMTs loaded the black bag-the woman finally clothed, in a way-into the back of the ambulance, closed the doors with two slams that made Catherine start a bit, then climbed in around front. The flashing lights had been on when the vehicle barreled in, and now came on again, automatically; but the driver shut them off, and the vehicle rolled away.

No hurry, not now.

"What's next?" Warrick asked.

Glancing at her watch, Catherine said, "We call it a night."

"We haven't even identified her yet," Warrick said to Catherine, but his eyes cut to Brass. "First twenty-four hours-"

"We don't even know," Brass interrupted, "if we have a homicide.... And if we did, can you point at any evidence that's time-sensitive here?"

Catherine shook her head.

After a moment, so did Warrick.

The detective held up his hands in front of him, palms out, his way of saying this was neither his fault nor his problem. They all knew that Sheriff Brian Mobley had put the kibosh on overtime except homicides, and even then on a case-by-case basis. Mobley was eyeing the mayor's seat in the next election and wanted to be seen as fiscally responsible, and that meant cutting most OT.

Catherine said to Warrick, "If it was up to me, we'd work this straight through-since homicide seems a possibility."

Brass, who'd had his own share of battles with the sheriff over the years, said, "We're all slaves to policy. You're on call, as usual-something pressing comes up, your beeper will let you know."

"I think our vic deserves better," Warrick said.

"Is she a vic? Do we even know that, yet?...Get some rest, come in tonight and look at this again, with a fresh eye."

In the rider's seat of the Tahoe, Catherine sat quietly, letting Warrick brood, and drive.

Truth be told, for Catherine the moratorium on overtime was sometimes a blessing of sorts. Sure, she wanted to find this woman's killer...if the woman had been killed...as much as Warrick or God or anybody; and she knew damn well the longer they waited, the colder the trail.

On the other hand, Mobley's penny-pinching gave her the chance to spend a little more time with daughter Lindsey after school. As much as she loved her job, Catherine loved her daughter more, and Lindsey was at that stage where the girl seemed to have grown an inch every time Catherine saw her.

But this was a homicide. She wouldn't say it out loud just yet, but she knew in every well-trained fiber of her being that some sicko had left that woman out here as meal for the coyotes.

And that just wouldn't do.

When she came in that night, right after ten, Catherine Willows was already dragging. She'd slept through the morning, catching a good four hours, but did housework and bills in the afternoon, then spent the evening helping Lindsey with her homework. The latter, anyway, was worth losing a little sleep over.

Until Sheriff Mobley's recent fiscal responsibility manifesto, the CSIs had worked whatever overtime was necessary to crack the case they happened to be on. Catching a case on the night shift meant that certain tasks just couldn't be accomplished during their regular shift. And the level of cooperation with the day shift was less than stellar-Conrad Ecklie, the supervisor on days, considered Grissom a rival, and Grissom considered Ecklie a jerk. This did not encourage team playing between graveyard and days.

Now, with OT curtailed, the CSIs just had to try to cram more work into a normal shift. Although the new policy might pave the way for Mobley's advancement, Catherine knew that rushing to cover so much ground in such a short time could lead to sloppiness, which was the bane of any CSI's existence.

Her heels clicked like castanets on the tile floor as she strode down the hall toward the morgue. When she arrived, she found what she had hoped to find-Dr. Robbins, hard at work on her case. His metal crutch stashed in the corner, the coroner-in blue scrubs, a pair of which Catherine would put on over her own street clothes-hovered over the slab bearing their Jane Doe, a measuring tape in his hands, sweat beaded on his brow.

The balding, chubby-cheeked coroner, his salt-and-pepper beard mostly salt by now, was the night shift's secret weapon. His sharp dark eyes missed nothing and, despite having to use the metal crutch after a car

crash some years ago, he moved around the morgue with a nimbleness that ex-dancer Catherine could only envy.

"Getting anywhere?" she asked lightly.

He shrugged without looking up. "Catherine," he said by way of acknowledgment, then answered her question with: "Early yet."

For all the time she'd spent studying the dead woman under her flashlight beam, Catherine moved in eagerly for a good look under better conditions. Crime scene protocol had meant Catherine had left the woman in her fetal position; now the nude female was on her back on a silver slab.

Her flesh ashen gray, Jane Doe had a pageboy haircut, wide-set closed eyes and full lips that had a ghastly bleached look. A nice figure, for a corpse.

"Funny," Catherine said.

"What is?"

"She kinda looks like Batgirl."

Robbins glanced up, then returned to his work.

"From the old TV show," Catherine explained. "Not that you'd-"

"Yvonne Craig." Robbins flicked her a look. "You don't want to play Trivial Pursuit with me, Catherine."

"I'll keep that in mind. Sex crime?"

"No evidence of it. When she died, she hadn't had intercourse in a while."

Catherine gestured to the woman's waist. "What about the visible panty line?"

"She died clothed-marks from a bra too."

"Cause of death?"

"Asphyxia, I would venture." He thumbed open one of Jane Doe's eyelids and revealed red filigree in what should have been the white of an eye. "She has petechial hemorrhaging in the conjunctivae."

Catherine leaned in for a closer look. "That's asphyxia's calling card, all right. Strangulation?"

"Strangely, doesn't appear that way-no ligature marks, no bruising."

Catherine pondered that a moment. "So...you've ruled out what, so far? Suicide?"

He smiled. "Unless you know a way she might have killed herself, then stripped off her clothes."

"Where are we, then?"

He shrugged. "As I said...early. Printed her and gave them to Nick to run through AFIS."

Nick Stokes was another of the graveyard shift CSIs. He'd been working his own case last night, so he hadn't joined them on the trip out to Lake Mead.

"Nick's in already?" she asked.

"Few minutes before you. Closed his case before he went home last night and was looking for something to do."

"We all feel a little lost without Grissom around," she said, attempting to be sarcastic and yet not completely kidding.

"Couple of odd things that will, I think, interest you," he said. "Have a look. No charge...." He pointed to the victim's right arm.

Catherine moved around where she could get a better view. The victim had an indentation in her left arm above the point of the elbow—a faint stripe, resembling a hash mark.

"And here," Robbins said, pointing to the victim's left cheek, which had been out of sight at the crime scene.

"Any ideas?" asked Catherine as she looked at a small, round indentation that appeared as if the tip of a lipstick tube...or a bullet, maybe...had been pressed into the woman's cheek.

Again Robbins shook his head. "I was hoping you might have one.... Found postmortem lividity in the buttocks, lower legs and feet, as well as the left cheek. I checked your photos and they show her lying on her left side."

Catherine shrugged. "That's the way we found her."

"Well, it almost looks like she was in a sitting position, after she died." Robbins then abruptly changed the subject. "Tell me—how cold did it get last night, anyway? What did the temp get down to?"

Thrown by this seemingly out-of-left-field question, Catherine shrugged again, more elaborately this time. "Chilly but no big deal. Forty, maybe."

Robbins shook his head again, but this time it was more an act of bemusement than disagreement. "Body's pretty cold—colder than I would have expected."

"She was cold to the touch last night, too."

"And the hair was wet, you said?"

"Yeah—damp."

"Does it seem reasonable to you that someone might have been swimming in the lake on a night that cold?"

"No...but we run into people doing a lot of things that don't seem reasonable, Doc."

"That's true. That much is true. No pile of clothing found?"

"Not a scrap."

"Interesting."

And with this, he fired up the bone saw and got ready to start the more in-depth procedures.

Frustrated, Catherine wandered off to find Nick. She checked the AFIS computer room-no sign of him. Wandering the aquamarine halls of the facility, a glass-and-wood world of soothing institutional sterility, she passed a couple of labs and Grissom's office before she finally tracked Nick down in the break room. He sipped his coffee and took a bite of doughnut as Catherine walked in.

"Hey, Nick," she said, trying to sound more nonchalant than she felt. Solving Jane Doe's murder would be a lot easier if they could ID her quickly.

Using the Styrofoam cup, Nick gave her a little salute as he finished chewing his doughnut.

Catherine dropped into a chair across the table from him and waited, knowing the doughnut just might be Nick's dinner. The break room always seemed to be undergoing some sort of massive cleanup, but no matter what either they themselves or the janitorial staff attempted, the room still smelled like one of Grissom's experiments gone awry. The refrigerator against the far wall held items that looked more like mutant life-forms than food, and the coffeepot was home to a sludgy mass that reminded Catherine too much of things she'd seen on the job.

She asked, "Any luck with AFIS?"

"Nope," he said, then took another bite of doughnut.

"So we don't know any more about her now than we did this morning?"

He shook his head. "I put her into the Missing Persons database, but..." He made a sound that was half snort, half laugh. "...you know how long that can take."

Catherine nodded glumly.

Warrick came in, wearing a brown turtleneck, brown jeans, and his usual sneakers. "Hey," he said.

"Hey," said Catherine.

Nick nodded and finished chewing the last of his doughnut. "I'm on the Jane Doe with you guys, now."

"More the merrier," Warrick said. "Anything new?"

Catherine said, "Robbins thinks asphyxia-but not strangulation, and not a sex crime. How about you?"

"Nothing on the tire mark so far, but the computer's still working."

A familiar voice squawked on the intercom. "Catherine, you in there?"

She spoke up. "Yes, Doc-with Nick and Warrick."

"Well," the voice said, "I have something to show you."

They exchanged looks, already getting to their feet, Catherine calling, "We're on our way!"

Nick slugged down the last of his coffee and the three of them moved silently but quickly to the morgue. When they walked in, in scrubs, they found Robbins bent not over the corpse-opened like a grotesque flower on the slab nearby-but a microscope. Immune from Sheriff Mobley's overtime edict, the doc regularly put in punishing hours, a habit that was helpful to the CSIs in this current Scrooge-like climate.

"Notice anything odd about this body?" he asked, directing the question to Catherine, senior member of the group.

"Nothing we haven't talked about already," she said, with a glance over at the autopsy-in-progress. "For some reason her hair was wet, and she was cold, but why not? It was chilly out last night."

Robbins nodded and gestured with an open palm for her to take his place at the microscope. "Yes, but was it this cold?"

Sitting down, Catherine gave Robbins a look, then pressed her eye to the eyepiece of the microscope. On the slide he'd prepared, she saw what appeared to be a flesh sample with several notable oddities—specifically, distortions in the nuclei of some cells, vacuoles and spaces around the nuclei of others.

Catherine looked up at Robbins. "Is this what I think it is?"

He nodded. "Your Jane Doe was a corpse-sickle."

Warrick and Nick exchanged glances.

"Say again?" Warrick prompted.

"A frozen treat," Robbins said again, in his flat, low-key way. "What Catherine is looking at under the microscope is a tissue sample from Jane Doe's heart."

"She *froze* to death?" Warrick asked, his usually unflappable demeanor seeming sorely tested.

Robbins shrugged one shoulder. "Still working that one out. Suffocation is cause of death, but I don't know the circumstances for sure."

First Nick, then Warrick took turns gazing into the microscope.

Robbins said, "Notice those discolorations, vacuoles and spaces?"

Warrick nodded, eyes glued to the slide.

The doctor continued: "Ice crystal artifacts."

"So she was frozen," Nick said, trying to process this information. "But maybe after she was dead."

"Frozen God knows when...and rather carefully frozen, at that."

Warrick's eyes were wide and his upper lip curled. "And then what?"

"And then," Robbins said, "thawed...which is why her hair was damp. Catherine, the ground beneath the body was damp, I believe?"

She nodded. "Wet underneath and in a small area downhill from where she lay."

"Suffocated," Warrick said. "Then frozen."

Robbins did not answer immediately. But, finally, he said, "Yes."

Catherine's mind was racing. She expressed some of her thoughts: "And because Jane Doe was frozen, we can't pinpoint when she died."

Robbins grunted a small laugh. "Pinpoint isn't an issue. It could've been a week ago, it could've been six months, or even longer, for that matter."

Nick was shaking his head. "Well, hell-how did we not notice she'd been frozen?"

The doctor raised a finger. "As I said...she was 'carefully frozen.' Someone took precautions to avoid freezer burn. Wetted her down-a spray bottle would be enough. Kept wetting her down, all over, as the freezing process continued. And that is what kept her from getting freezer burn."

"So," Catherine said. "Our killer knew what he was doing."

"Or she," Nick put in.

Robbins sighed, nodded and then explained his theory.

Jane Doe has probably been either sedated or restrained or both. She's still clothed at this point, then something clean cuts off her breathing, plastic over her nose and mouth maybe, and she's out within five minutes.... Dead in not much more than that.

The killer strips her, then seats her inside a chest-style freezer. Could be an upright, but a chest freezer would be easier; then he...or she...cranks the freezer up to its highest setting...but is careful to use a pitcher or a squirt bottle, maybe even a hose, to wet down the corpse. The killer checks on her at least once a day, and wets the body every time he checks the progress of the freezing. After some unspecified time, the killer pulls her out and allows her to defrost naturally...then dumps her body in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area.

Warrick's eyes were tight with thought. "If he...or she...thought we'd be fooled into thinking we had a fresh body, then-"

"Then on that effort, our killer failed," Catherine said. "But even so, we've still had the time of death stolen from us, here."

"Exactly," Robbins said.

"So..." Catherine lifted her eyebrows, smiled at her colleagues. "...if we can't determine when she died, let's start with who she was."

"Which'll lead," Nick said, arching an eyebrow, "to finding out who wanted her dead."

"Which'll lead," Warrick said, with finality, "to putting the bastard on ice."

3

INITIALLY, THE IDEA OF A GETAWAY WEEKEND WITH HER BOSS had appealed to Sara Sidle, for all kinds of reasons. But somehow in the thirteen hours between when she'd left her apartment and fallen gratefully onto this cloud of a bed in a posh hotel, she had gotten lost in some newly discovered circle of Hell.

Grissom had picked her up just after 10 P.M., the time they normally would have been heading into the lab. Instead, they drove to long-term parking at McCarran and schlepped into the airport with their carry-ons as well as two suitcases of equipment for their presentation; the attendees would mostly be East Coast CSIs with the instructors flown in from around the country. Typically, the boyishly handsome, forty-something Grissom wore black slacks, a black three-button shirt, and a CSI windbreaker.

"That's the coat you're taking?" she had asked. Sara had a Gortex-lined parka on over her blue jeans and a plain dark tee shirt.

He looked at her as though a lamp had talked. "I've got a heavier one in my bag."

She glanced at his two canvas duffels, both barely larger than gym bags, and wondered how he got a heavy coat into either of them. Deciding not to think about it, she got into the check-in line right behind her boss. Both were using their carry-ons for clothing, and checking their suitcases of equipment on through. No need to freak out the security staff, who would not be prepared for X-ray views of the sort of tools, instruments, chemistry sets, and other dubious implements that the CSIs were traveling with.

Sara spent the flight from McCarran to O'Hare squashed in the middle seat in coach-Grissom took the window seat, not because he was rude, she knew, but because it was his assigned seat, and Grissom never argued with numbers.

Sara dug into an Agatha Christie mystery-the CSI could only read cozy mysteries, anything "realistic" just distracted and annoyed her with constant inaccuracies-and Grissom was engrossed in an entomology text like a teenager reading the new Stephen King.

The whole trip went like that-the two of them reading their respective books (Sara actually went through two) with little conversation, including an O'Hare breakfast that killed some of their four-hour layover in Chicago. Then it was two hours to Dulles in D.C., another forty-five minutes on the ground, and a ninety-minute flight to Gordon International, in Newburgh, New York. Grissom was better company on the trip than a potted plant-barely.

They were met by a landscape covered with four or five inches of snow that, judging by its grayish tint, appeared to have fallen at least a week ago. The cold air felt like the inside of a freezer compared to what they'd left behind in Vegas, and as the pair stood outside the airport waiting for the bus that would haul them and their gear the twenty miles from Newburgh to New Paltz, Grissom glanced around curiously, as though winter in upstate New York was one big crime scene he'd stumbled onto.

Sara, on the other hand, felt at home-spiritually at home, anyway. The temperature here, just above thirty, took Sara back to her days at Harvard; the frigid air of winter in the east had a different scent than the desert cold of Vegas.

At the curb in front of the New Paltz bus station, an old man in a flap-ear cap, chocolate-colored Mackinaw, jeans and dark work boots, waited next to a purring woody-style station wagon, the side door of which was stenciled: MUMFORD MOUNTAIN HOTEL.

Carry-ons draped over them like military gear, Grissom and Sara made their cumbersome way toward their down-home chauffeur. As soon as the codger figured out they were headed his way, he rushed over and pried one of the suitcases from Sara's hand.

"Help you with that, Miss?"

But he'd already taken it.

"Thanks," she said, breath pluming.

The Mumford man was tall, reedy, with wispy gray hair; his hook nose had an "S" curve in the middle where it had been broken more than once.

After slinging Sara's bag in the back, he turned and took one from Grissom and tossed it in. The man's smile was wide and came fast, revealing two rows of small, even teeth.

"Herm Cormier," he said, shaking first Grissom's hand, then Sara's. "I've managed the hotel since Jesus was a baby."

"Gil Grissom. Honor to be picked up by the top man himself."

"Sara Sidle. We're here for the forensics conference...?"

"Course you are. You're the folks from Vegas."

Grissom smiled. "Is it that easy to spot us?"

Cormier nodded. "Your coat's not heavy enough," he said, with a glance toward Grissom's CSI windbreaker. "And you both got a healthy tan. We got nobody comin' in from Florida or California for this thing, and I knew two of you were coming from Vegas.... Plus which, all but a handful of you folks won't be in till tomorrow."

Grissom nodded.

"You, though, Miss," Cormier said, turning his attention to Sara, "you've been around this part of the country before."

Though anxious to get into that warm station wagon, Sara couldn't resist asking: "And how did you reach that conclusion?"

The old man looked her up and down, but there was nothing improper about it. "Good coat, good boots, heavy gloves-where you from, before you lit in Vegas?"

"San Francisco."

"No, that ain't it." His eyes narrowed. "Where'd you go to college?"

She grinned. "Boston."

Cormier returned the grin. "Thought so. Knew you had to've spent some time in this part of the country."

The driver opened the rear door of the wagon and they were about to climb in, when another man sauntered up. A husky blonde six-footer in his late thirties, the new arrival had dark little eyes in a pale, bland fleshy face, like raisins punched into cookie dough. He wore a red-and-black plaid coat that looked warm, aided and abetted by a black woolen muffler. In one black gloved hand was a silver flight case-this was another CSI, Sara thought, and that was his field kit-and in the other a green plaid bag that jarred against the competing plaid coat.

"Gordon Maher," he said to all of them.

Cormier stepped forward, shook the man's hand and made the introductions, then said to the new arrival, "You must be the forensics fella from Saskatchewan."

They piled into the station wagon, Grissom and Maher in the back, Sara and Cormier in the front. Despite the snow blanketing the area, the roads were clean. As the station wagon wended its way through the countryside toward Lake Mumford, Sara allowed herself to enjoy the ride, relishing the wave of nostalgia she felt, watching the snow-touched skeletal trees they glided past.

Harvard had been where Sara first took wing, first got out from the shadow of her parents. She sought out kindred spirits, overachievers like herself, and soon she was no longer seen as too smart, too driven, too tense.

The very air in this part of the country smelled different to her now-like freedom, and success. She didn't know when she fell asleep, exactly, but suddenly Cormier was nudging her gently. The car was parked on the shoulder and, when she looked around, Sara realized that Grissom and Maher had gotten out.

"Thought you might like to catch the hotel and lake," Cormier said, "from their best side."

Slowly, Sara got out of the car, the chill air helping her wake up; she stretched. Grissom and Maher stood in front of the car, staring at something off to the right. Going to join them, she looked in that direction as well, shading her brow with her hand as she gazed down the hill through the leafless branches at an ice-covered lake surrounded mostly by woods.

In preparing for this trip, Sara had understandably assumed Mumford Mountain Hotel would perch atop a mountain. Instead, the lodge hunkered in a valley between two mountains, overlooking the lake-and from this distance, situated as it was on the far side of the frozen expanse, the sprawling structure brought nothing so much to mind as a gigantic ice castle from the fairy tales her mother had read to her as a child.

It wasn't beautiful, really, more like bizarre-and mind-numbingly large, which was especially startling out here in the middle of nowhere. A hodgepodge of five interconnected structures, Mumford Mountain Hotel might have been a junkyard for old buildings: in front, near the lake, sat a squat dark-wood ski chalet; to the right and behind the chalet, a huge gray castle complete with turrets and chimneys rose seven stories. That gothic monstrosity was flanked by two functional-looking green four-story buildings that might have been the boys' and girls' dormitories at an old private school.

The one on the right had a deeply sloped, gabled roof, while its fraternal twin at the other end had a flatter roof with a single sharp point rising like the conical hat of a Brothers Grimm princess. If those buildings didn't supply enough rooms for Mumford's guests, a last building-what looked like a two-story gingerbread house-had been cobbled together on the far right end. The whole unlikely assembly seemed to shimmer under a heavy ice-crystal-flung dusting of snow.

"The Mumford Mountain Hotel," Cormier said, pride obvious in his voice.

"Can't say I've seen its like before," Maher admitted, arms folded against himself. "What's the story on the various building styles?"

"Well, that castle part came first-then wings were added, to suit whoever was running the place at the time. The hotel just sort of grew over the years. It's hard for people to get an idea of how big she is, when they're up close. I like to give folks the chance to see it from a distance, get a little perspective."

Sara said, "You could get lost in that place."

Cormier nodded, breath smoking. "Over two hundred fifty guest rooms, grand ballroom, complete gym, meeting rooms, tennis courts, golf course."

"The lake get any action in the winter?" Maher asked.

Again Cormier nodded. "They'll clear the snow off and play hockey on it when the weather gets a mite colder."

Soon they were back in the car and following the narrow road that wound down the mountain and ended at the check-in entrance of the hotel, which was alongside the building-otherwise the guests would have

had to maneuver the flight of stairs to the actual main entrance and the vast covered porch where countless rocking chairs sat unattended. A light snow began to fall as Cormier directed several bellboys to unload the station wagon, piling the guest luggage onto carts, a process Grissom watched with suspicion-his precious tools and toys were in those bags.

They checked in, having just missed lunch, but Grissom shared with her a fruit basket the conference chairman had sent, and Sara left him at his room, where he was eating a pear as he unpacked. She headed down the wide, carpeted hall for her own accommodations, eating an apple along the way. She felt like Alice gone through the mirror into a Victorian wonderland-dark, polished woodwork; soft-focus, yellow-tinted lighting; plush antique furniture; wide wooden stairways; and little sitting areas with fresh-cut flowers and frondy plants and their own fireplaces.

Now, midafternoon, having gotten the nap she so desperately needed (sleeping in the car had actually made her feel worse), Sara felt an irresistible urge to go exploring-there were only a few hours left before sundown. She wondered if Grissom would feel the same.

Of course he wouldn't.

He was probably curled up with that damned bug book again. Not that she didn't understand his almost hermit-like behavior-she was a loner herself. But ever since the Marks case, Sara had tried to force herself out into the world more, to have a life beyond the crime lab, after noting the work-is-everything, stay-at-home, shop-out-of-catalogues existence that had contributed to the death of a woman way too much like herself.

She had come to Mumford with a plan to embroil Grissom in an outing and Sara Sidle was nothing if not thorough. Quickly she changed from her traveling clothes into black jeans, a heavier thermal undershirt and a dark flannel blouse. She slipped into her parka, snatched up her camera, briefly considered taking along her collapsed portable tripod, then decided not to be encumbered. Maybe later. She locked the door behind her and went to Grissom's room.

Her first knock inspired no answer, and she tried again. Still nothing. On the third, more insistent knock, the door opened to reveal Grissom, entomology text held in his hand like a priest with a Bible-it was as if she'd interrupted an exorcism.

"Hey," she said, chipper.

"Hey," he said, opening the door wide. "You look rested."

Wow-that was one of the nicest things he'd ever said to her.

Encouraged, she tried, "You wanna go for a walk?"

He glanced toward the window on the far side of the room, then turned back to her. "Sara-it's snowing."

She nodded. "And?"

He considered that for a while.

"I don't do snow," he said. He was still in the black slacks and black three-button shirt. Gesturing with the bug book, he said, "It's cozy, reading by the fire. You should try it."

That almost sounded romantic....

He frowned at her and added: "Don't you have a fireplace in your room?"

"...I finished my books already."

"The first thing the pioneers did was build shelter and go inside. Out of respect to them, I-

"Did you know there are 274 winter insects in eastern New York state alone?"

He stilled, but clearly sensed a trap. "You made that up."

Grinning, she handed him the printout. "Snow-born Boreus, Midwinter Boreus, Large and Small Snowflies and the Snow-born Midge...just to name a few."

After a quick scan of the page, he said, "If you've got your heart set on it, I guess I'll get my coat."

To Grissom's credit, the coat he withdrew like a rabbit out of a hat from his canvas carry-on-a black, leather-sleeved varsity-type jacket, sans letter or any other embellishment-was heavier than the windbreaker, though still not really sufficient for this weather. He slipped some specimen bottles into the pockets, zipped up the coat, yanked on black fur-lined leather gloves and they were off.

The first hour or so they spent hiking through the snow-covered woods, Grissom stopping every now and then to look for insects on the ground and on trees. Sara-who found Grissom's behavior endearingly Boy Scout-ish-snapped off about a dozen nature shots, barely putting a dent in her Toshiba's 64-mg memory card; but after a while the snowfall made that impossible. It was getting heavier, and Sara knew they should head back.

But she was having too good a time. The wintry woods were delightful, idyllic. A charmingly gleeful Grissom actually found several specimens that he had carefully bottled for transport back to the hotel. He was close to her, their cold-steam breath mingling, showing her one of his prizes, when they heard it.

A pop!

They swung as one toward the forest.

Frowning, Sara asked, "Hunters?"

Grissom shook his head, but before he could speak, four more pops interrupted.

Shots-no doubt now in her mind, and clearly none in Grissom's, either.

Even though the shots were in the distance, they both found trees to duck behind.

"If it's hunters," he said, looking over at her, "they're using handguns."

"Where?"

"Can't tell.... Over there, maybe," he said, pointing to their left. Without another word, he took off walking in that direction, and Sara fell in behind him.

"Should we really be moving toward the gunfire?" she asked.

He threw her a sharp sideways glance. "It's our job, Sara."

"I know that, but we're not in our jurisdiction and we're not armed. What are you going to do if we meet the shooter?"