

**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR**

# **JAMES ROLLINS**

**AUTHOR OF *BLACK ORDER***



**"NONSTOP ACTION-ADVENTURE."**

*The Oklahoman*

# **SANDSTORM**

# *Sandstorm*

## *James Rollins*

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### Chapter 1

Fire and Rain NOVEMBER 14, 01:33 A. M. THE BRITISH MUSEUM  
LONDON, ENGLAND

HARRY MASTERSON would be dead in thirteen minutes.

If he had known this, he would've smoked his last cigarette down to the filter. Instead he stamped out the fag after only three drags and waved the cloud from around his face. If he was caught smoking outside the guards' break room, he would be shit-canned by that bastard Fleming, head of museum security. Harry was already on probation for coming in two hours late for his shift last week.

Harry swore under his breath and pocketed the stubbed cigarette. He'd finish it at his next break—that is, if they got a break this night.

Thunder echoed through the masonry walls. The winter storm had struck just after midnight, opening with a riotous volley of hail, followed by a deluge that threatened to wash London into the Thames. Lightning danced across the skies in forked displays from one horizon to another. According to the weatherman on the Beeb, it was one of the fiercest electrical storms in over a decade. Half the city had been blacked out, overwhelmed by a spectacular lightning barrage.

And as fortune would have it for Harry, it was his half of the city that went dark, including the British Museum on Great Russell Street. Though they had backup generators, the entire security team had been summoned for additional protection of the museum's property. They would be arriving in the

next half hour. But Harry, assigned to the night shift, was already on duty when the regular lights went out. And though the video surveillance cameras were still operational on the emergency grid, he and the shift were ordered by Fleming to proceed with an immediate security sweep of the museum's two and a half miles of halls.

That meant splitting up.

Harry picked up his electric torch and aimed it down the hall. He hated doing rounds at night, when the museum was lost in gloom. The only illumination came from the streetlamps outside the windows. But now, with the blackout, even those lamps had been extinguished. The museum had darkened to macabre shadows broken by pools of crimson from the low-voltage security lamps.

Harry had needed a few hits of nicotine to steel his nerve, but he could put off his duty no longer. Being the low man on the night shift's pecking order, he had been assigned to run the halls of the north wing, the farthest point from their underground security nest. But that didn't mean he couldn't take a shortcut. Turning his back on the long hall ahead, he crossed to the door leading into the Queen Elizabeth II Great Court.

This central two-acre court was surrounded by the four wings of the British Museum. At its heart rose the great copper-domed Round Reading Room, one of the world's finest libraries. Overhead, the entire two-acre courtyard had been enclosed by a gigantic Foster and Partners'-designed geodesic roof, creating Europe's largest covered square.

Using his passkey, Harry ducked into the cavernous space. Like the museum proper, the court was lost to darkness. Rain pattered against the glass roof far overhead. Still, Harry's footsteps echoed across the open space. Another lance of lightning shattered across the sky. The roof, divided into a thousand triangular panes, lit up for a blinding moment. Then darkness drowned back over the museum, drumming down with the rain.

Thunder followed, felt deep in the chest. The roof rattled, too. Harry ducked a bit, fearing the entire structure would come crashing down.

With his electric torch pointed forward, he crossed the court, heading for the north wing. He rounded past the central Reading Room. Lightning flashed

again, brightening the place for a handful of heartbeats. Giant statues, lost to the darkness, appeared as if from nowhere. The Lion of Cnidos reared beside the massive head of an Easter Island statue. Then darkness swallowed the guardians away as the lightning died out.

Harry felt a chill and pebbling of gooseflesh.

His pace hurried. He swore under his breath with each step, 'Bleeding buggered pieces of crap' His litany helped calm him.

He reached the doors to the north wing and ducked inside, greeted by the familiar mix of mustiness and ammonia. He was grateful to have solid walls around him again. He played his torch down the long hall. Nothing seemed amiss, but he was required to check each of the wing's galleries. He did a fast calculation. If he hurried, he could complete his circuit with enough time for another fast smoke. With the promise of a nicotine fix luring him, he set off down the hall, the beam of his torch preceding him.

The north wing had become host to the museum's anniversary show-case, an ethnographical collection portraying a complete picture of human achievement down the ages, spanning all cultures. Like the Egyptian gallery with its mummies and sarcophagi. He continued hurriedly, ticking off the various cultural galleries: Celtic, Byzantine, Russian, Chinese. Each suite of rooms was locked down by a security gate. With the loss of power, the gates had dropped automatically.

At last, the hall's end came into sight.

Most of the galleries' collections were only temporarily housed here, transferred from the Museum of Mankind for the anniversary celebration. But the end gallery had always been here, for as far back as Harry could recall. It housed the museum's Arabian display, a priceless collection of antiquity from across the Arabian Peninsula. The gallery had been commissioned and paid for by one family, a family grown rich by its oil ventures in that region. The donations to keep such a gallery in permanent residence at the British Museum was said to top five million pounds per annum.

One had to respect that sort of dedication.

Or not.

With a snort at such a foolish waste of good money, Harry splayed his torch's spot across the engraved brass plate above the doorway: THE KENSINGTON GALLERY. Also known as The Bitch's Attic.

While Harry had never encountered Lady Kensington, from the talk among the employees, it was clear that any slight to her gallery dust on a cabinet, a display card with a smudge on it, a piece of antiquity not properly positioned was met with the severest reprimand. The gallery was her personal pet project, and none withstood her wrath. Jobs were lost in her wake, claiming even a former director.

It was this concern that kept Harry a few moments longer at his post outside the gallery's security gate. He swept his torch around the entrance room with more than casual thoroughness. Yet again, all was in order.

As he turned away, withdrawing his torch, movement drew his eye.

He froze, torch pointing at the floor.

Deep within the Kensington Gallery, in one of the farther rooms, a bluish glow wandered slowly, shifting shadows with its passage.

Another torch'someone was in the gallery'

Harry felt his heart pounding in his throat. A break-in. He fell against the neighboring wall. His fingers scrambled for his radio. Through the walls, thunder reverberated, sonorous and deep.

He thumbed his radio. I have a possible intruder here in the north wing. Please advise.

He waited for his shift leader to respond. Gene Johnson might be a wanker, but he was also a former RAF officer. He knew his shit.

The man's voice answered his call, but dropouts ate most of his words, interference from the electrical storm. `possible'are you sure?'hold until'are the gates secure?

Harry stared back at the lowered security gates. Of course he should have checked to see if they had been breeched. Each gallery had only one entrance into the hall. The only other way into the sealed rooms was through one of

the high windows, but they were wired against breakage or intrusion. And though the storm had knocked out main power, the backup generators kept the security grid online. No alarms had been raised at central command.

Harry imagined Johnson was already switching cameras, running through this wing, bearing down on the Kensington Gallery. He risked a glance into the five-room suite. The glow persisted deep in the gallery. Its passage seemed aimless, casual, not the determined sweep of a thief. He did a quick check on the security gate. Its electronic lock glowed green. It had not been breached.

He stared back at the glow. Maybe it was just the passing of some car's headlights through the gallery's windows.

Johnson's voice over his radio, cutting in and out, startled him. Not picking up anything on the vid'Camera five is out. Stay put'others on the way. Any remaining words disappeared into the ether, fritzed by the electrical storm.

Harry stood by the gate. Other guards were coming as backup. What if it wasn't an intruder? What if it was just the sweep of headlights? He was already on thin ice with Fleming. All he needed was to be made a fool of.

He took a chance and raised his torch. You there! he yelled. He thought to sound commanding, but it came out more of a shrill whine.

Still, there was no change in the wandering pattern of the light. It seemed to be heading even deeper into the gallery not in panicked retreat, just a meandering slow pace. No thief could have that much ice in his veins.

Harry crossed to the gate's electronic lock and used his passkey to open it. The magnetic seals released. He pulled the gate high enough to crawl under and entered the first room. Straightening, he lifted his torch again. He refused to be embarrassed by his momentary panic. He should've investigated further before raising the alarm.

But the damage was done. The best he could do was save a bit of face by clearing up the mystery himself.

He called out again, just in case. Security! Don't move!

His shout had no effect. The glow continued its steady but meandering pace into the gallery.

He glanced back out the gate to the hall. The others would be here in under a minute. Bugger it, he mumbled under his breath. He hurried into the gallery, pursuing the light, determined to root out its cause before the others arrived.

With hardly a glance, he passed treasures of timeless significance and priceless value: glass cabinets displaying clay tablets from Assyrian king Ashurbanipal; hulking statues of sandstone dating back to pre-Persian times; swords and weapons from every age; Phoenician ivories depicting ancient kings and queens; even a first printing of *The Arabian Nights*, under its original title, *The Oriental Moralist*.

Harry swept forward through the rooms, slipping from one dynasty to another from the times of the Crusades to the birth of Christ, from the glories of Alexander the Great to the ages of King Solomon and Queen Sheba.

At last, he reached the farthest room, one of the largest. It contained objects more of interest to a naturalist, all from the region: rare stones and jewels, fossilized remains, Neolithic tools.

The source of the glow became clear. Near the center of the domed chamber, a half-meter globe of blue light floated lazily across the room. It shimmered, and its surface seemed to run with a flame of prismatic blue oil.

As Harry watched, the globe sailed through a glass cabinet as if it were made of air. He stood stunned. A sulfurous smell reached his nostrils, issuing forth from the ball of cerulean light.

The globe rolled over one of the crimson-glowing security lamps, shorting it out with a sizzling pop. The noise startled Harry back a step. The same fate must have been dealt to camera five in the room behind him. He glanced to the camera in this room. A red light glowed above it. Still working.

As if noting his attention, Johnson came back on his radio. For some reason, there was no static. Harry, maybe you'd better get out of there!

He remained transfixed, half out of fear, half out of wonder. Besides, the

phenomenon was floating away from him, toward the darkened corner of the room.

The globe's glow illuminated a lump of metal within a glass cube. It was a chunk of red iron as large as a calf, a kneeling calf. The display card described it as a camel. Such a resemblance was dodgy at best, but Harry understood the supposed depiction. The item had been discovered in the desert.

The glow hovered over the iron camel.

Harry backed a cautious step and raised his radio. Christ!

The shimmering ball of light fell through the glass and landed upon the camel. Its glow winked out as quickly as a snuffed candle.

The sudden darkness blinded Harry for a breath. He lifted his torch. The iron camel still rested within its glass cube, undisturbed. It's gone'

Are you safe?

Yeah. What the hell was that?

Johnson answered, awe in his voice, A sodding lightning ball, I think! I heard stories from mates aboard warplanes as they flew through thunderclaps. Storm must have spit it out. But bloody hell if that wasn't brilliant!

It's not brilliant anymore, Harry thought with a sigh, and shook his head. Whatever the hell it was, it at least saved him from an embarrassing ribbing from his fellow guards.

He lowered his torch. But as the light fell away, the iron camel continued to glow in the darkness. A deep ruddy color.

What the hell now? Harry mumbled, and grabbed his radio. A severe static shock bit his fingers. Swearing, he shook it off. He raised his radio. Something's odd. I don't think

The glow in the iron flared brighter. Harry fell back. The iron flowed across the camel's surface, melting as if exposed to a wash of acid rain. He was not the only one to note the change.

The radio barked in his hand: Harry, get out of there!

He didn't argue. He swung around but was too late.

The glass enclosure exploded outward. Stabbing spears pierced his left side. A jagged shard sliced clear through his cheek. But he barely felt the cuts as a wave of blast-furnace heat struck him, searing, burning away all the oxygen.

A scream lay upon his lips, never to be aired.

The next explosion ripped Harry from his feet and threw his body clear across the gallery. But only flaming bones hit the security gate, melting themselves into the steel grating.

01:53 A. M.

S AFIA AL-MAAZ awoke in a dead panic. Sirens rang from all directions. Flashes of red emergency lights strobed the bedroom walls. Terror gripped her in a vise. She could not breathe; cold sweat pebbled her brow, squeezed from her tightening skin. Clawed fingers clutched the bedsheets to her throat. Unable to blink, she was trapped for a moment between the past and the present.

Sirens blaring, blasts echoing in the distance'and closer still, screams of the wounded, the dying, her own voice adding to the chorus of pain and shock'

Bullhorns boomed from the streets below her flat. Clear out for the engines! Everyone pull back!

English'not Arabic, not Hebrew'

A low rumble rolled past her apartment building and off into the distance.

The voices of the emergency crews drew her back to her bed, back to the present. She was in London, not Tel Aviv. A long strangled breath escaped her. Tears rose to her eyes. She wiped them with shaky fingers.

Panic attack.

She sat wrapped in her comforter for several more breaths. She still felt

like crying. It was always this way, she told herself, but the words didn't help. She gathered the woolen comforter around her shoulders, eyes closed, heart hammering in her ears. She practiced the breathing and calming exercises taught to her by her therapist. Inhale for two counts, out for four. She let the tension flow away with each breath. Her cold skin slowly warmed.

Something heavy landed on her bed. A small sound accompanied it. Like a squeaky hinge.

She reached out a hand, met by a purring welcome. Come here, Billie, she whispered to the overweight black Persian.

Billie leaned into her palm and rubbed the underside of his chin across Safia's fingers, then simply collapsed across her thighs as if the invisible strings supporting the cat had been sliced. The sirens must have disturbed him from his usual nighttime haunting of her flat.

The low purr continued on Safia's lap, a contented sound.

This, more than her breathing exercises, relaxed the taut muscles of her shoulders. Only then did she notice the wary hunch in her back, as if fearing a blow that never came. She forced her posture straight, stretching her neck.

The sirens and commotion continued half a block from her building. She needed to stand, find out what was happening. Anything simply to be moving. Panic had transmuted into nervous energy.

She shifted her legs, careful to slide Billie onto the comforter. The purring halted for a moment, then resumed when it was clear he was not being evicted. Billie had been born in the streets of London, alley feral, a wild fluff of matted fur and spit. Safia had found the kitten sprawled and bloodied on the flat's stoop with a broken leg, covered in oil, hit by a car. Despite her help, he had bitten her in the fleshy meat of her thumb. Friends had told her to take the kitten to the animal shelter, but Safia knew such a place was no better than an orphanage. So instead, she had scooped him up in a pillow linen and transported him to the local veterinary clinic.

It would have been easy to step over him that evening, but she had once been as abandoned and alone as the kitten. Someone had taken her in at the time, too. And like Billie, she had been domesticated but neither ended up