

## ☞prologue☞

Oppressive was not a strong enough word to describe the springtime heat in Mobile. Being located in lower Alabama, right on the Gulf of Mexico, the humidity only added additional levels of discomfort. Of course, my mother had loved growing up here; she was always cold, no matter how hot it was. I, on the other hand, had an unnaturally high body temp and like my grandfather, could never seem to get comfortable when the ambient temperature was over seventy-five. I found myself looking across the square and over the old buildings of Mobile's Historic District at the hazy silhouette of New Mobile, almost wishing that my next case was in the Dark Zone that existed in its shadow, just so I could cool off.



The three tiered fountain in Bienville Square offered its cooling mist to me as I entered the center of the park. Despite the already high humidity, the water coming off the fountain always seemed cool, and made it tolerable to be outside. I could see my team, along with several policemen, surrounding one of the decades-old wrought iron benches that circled the fountain, each one backing up to a flower bed and bushes of various types. When I got close enough, I could see bare feet sticking out of the foliage.

Zimmerman stood, staring at the body, hands in his pockets and a blank look in his eyes. Zim had a tough time dealing with the dead, especially after a few years ago, when his fiancée had been violently killed in the Dark Zone under St. Louis. He was holding his own, and doing a lot better, but Zim still had his moments when he retreated into the safety of his mind. I knew he'd be there when I needed him. More importantly, I'd be there when he needed me.

Michaels was tapping away at the control unit for a MR-CSA (Mobile Robotic Crime Scene Analyzer) that he'd brought to the scene. He looked up long enough to acknowledge me, and turned immediately back to monitoring the MR-CSA as it continued its E-MRI scan of the body.

"What do we have today, boys?" I asked sleepily. The coffee had not yet hit my brain and it had been a very long week.

"Well Ellie, this is what we in the forensics lab of the FBI refer to as a corpse. Although from the identification in the victim's wallet, we could call him Mr. Preston Woodridge".

I gave Michaels a look and reached out to take the ID. The holographic photo of Mr. Woodridge matched the face of the man lying on the ground. His right cheek was pressed into the dirt and there were bloodless scratches on his visible left cheek, likely caused by the branched he'd fallen into.

"No blood in the facial abrasions; he was dumped here," I said, bringing out a small penlight to illuminate the victims remains. "His skin looks glossy, Aaron. Any idea what the substance is?"

Michaels checked the MR-CSA controls, and shuffled through the data on the small, handheld screen. "Nope - the scan is finishing up now, but the data hasn't all been processed".

"Did he have any family, Ellie?" Zim asked quietly. He'd been like this all week; even though he had made great strides since the incident, this was a back step. I stood up and took my own handheld out of my pocket, and accessed the main database using his National ID number.

"Looks like he has a sister here in Mobile, and a brother in Queens," I answered, feeling a knot suddenly grow in my stomach. I hated having to give people news like this.

My attention turned back to the crime scene as I continued to examine the body. His clothes were almost new; the pants still had threads on the back pocket where the paper label had been attached. A mass of black curly hair covered his head, but he was well groomed and clean cut from all I could see. I gloved my hand and reached out to gently lift the victims arm, but found it was completely immobile.

"Wow. Rigor has already set in". I turned my attention to one of the policemen keeping people away from the scene. "Who's in charge of your unit, Officer?"

The young officer pointed to an older man who was standing maybe fifteen feet away. I whistled to get his attention, then smiled and motioned for him to come toward me.

"When was the last patrol before the body was discovered?" I asked.

"Three AM. We send out regular patrols every three hours since the zone opens up into the historic district only two blocks away".

"So the body was discovered at six, then?" I asked, mapping a timeline in my head.

"Yes Ma'am. Officer McDonald was coming through to do his rounds as a litter crew was doing their weekly on the foliage. They converged on this area just as Officer McDonald did, and he called it in immediately".

Our conversation was cut short when the MR-CSA scanning the scene sounded a warning siren. Red lights started flashing on its dome, continuing to do so even after Michaels cut the siren so we could all hear.

"Hazard Warning, Ellie!" Michaels called. "The E-MRI has picked up an unknown biohazard. Whatever it is, it's been tagged as lethal".

The squad of police officers each took several steps back, leaving me and my boys close up and personal with the apparently tainted corpse. "Damn it!" I shouted, reaching into one of the built-in drawers on the MR-CSA and pulling out a large glass vial with a cutting tool built into the top. I took the device and used it to envelop the deceased forefinger. With a sharp turn of the metal iris atop the lid, the finger was quickly and cleanly removed. It dropped into the built-in hazard container that sealed itself immediately.

"Got a sample; lock it down, Michaels" I said, quickly backing away with Zimmerman. Michaels backed away too, all the while tapping in new commands into the mobile analyzer. The MR-CSA extended one of its few appendages, which flipped over and opened, revealing a high-powered laser which it aimed at the body. Usually we used recovery drones to burn away the dead that tended to pile up in the Dark Zone, but MR-CSA's were equipped with hazard removal lasers as well, for situations just like this. The laser beam fired, but instead of beginning the process of destroying the almost ceramic-looking tissue, the beam reflected off the corpse as soon as it had burned through the clothes, and hit a nearby storefront, knocking bricks and mortar onto the ground below. Michaels hit a different control; the colour of the beam shifted from red to blue, and widened two-fold. The more powerful laser beam stopped bouncing away from the victims' skin, and within seconds all that remained of the remains was a large, black smudge on the ground.

Smoke wafted up from the place where Mr. Woodridge had lain only moments before, and the police officers all gathered close to look at the carnage. Zim and Michaels huddled closer to me as I held up the only remaining portion of the deceased. In the small jar, closed tight for safety, sat a whitish, almost porcelain-looking finger. When I shook the vial, the finger tinkled against the glass, sounding like a piece of pottery being shaken in a vial.