

M A D N E S S



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Madness: by Derek E. Dykes

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Revised 2012, Caelmbre Publishing and Arts

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Cover Art and illustrations by Derek E. Dykes

*Special Thanks go out to Kate, Kristi and Rebecca.
And for my children, who are my miracles every day.*

Downtown Mobile hadn't changed a lot since the late 1990's; true, there were more interactive street signs, and computers had finally permeated their way into the most mundane things, but life was pretty much the same as it had been since my grandfather's days as a young man walking the streets with his camera. The statue of Raphael Semmes still stood on Water Street; the smell of the bay still drifted up well past Broad Street, and downtown still had its dark corners – places that people either went to disappear, or disappeared into purely by accident, never to be seen again. I often thought that my grandfather's addiction to photographing the Urban Ruin of these places had led to me working for the FBI. A lot of people could never see the connection, yet every time I visited a crime scene in one of these shells of an office park, or found human remains in the foundation of a demolished building, I found myself thinking of Granddaddy Gil, and looking at the scene not only with the trained eyes of a Criminologist, but through the lenses of his cameras, trying to capture the smallest details in ways that he always seemed to find so easily.

I made my way past the old Press Register

building and walked the side streets towards the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. The weather was overcast, which I always thought was nice because I didn't have to slather my pale, freckled skin in sun block on days like today. Dauphin Street was much less busy now than it had been in my youth. They had put in several raised highways and concrete platforms that looped around the historic district to handle the vehicular traffic; now Downtown was a "Foot Traffic, Personal Transport or Bicycle Only" zone – the kind that DC and Boston had implemented after the 2019 Civil breakdown, when government officials started commissioning car bombers to hit their own districts to "thin out" the population that had grown so poor and destitute during the Greater Depression. While lasting for only two months, most cities were hit with these strikes, killing a quarter of the US urban population. When Civil Reform was finally passed into law in 2022, all cities with a population over 100,000 had to have their governmental and financial offices centralized, with "safe passage" roads and pedestrian-only malls where cars and trucks simply weren't allowed. The upside, of course, was that the obesity epidemic quickly dwindled as people were forced to walk or bike their way around the central business districts of all major American cities. The downside was that areas that were once easily accessible by road could now only be reached by foot, and the dark, shadowy side of the old city grew darker in both its decay and its danger. Thousands of acres of raised platforms connected to the safe passage roads, enabling new cities to be built both next to, and on top of, their older counterparts. Places

that had once been neighborhoods filled with houses, groceries and churches were now well underneath the raised highways that drove the citizens to their destinations.

These 'Safeways' as they were billed had magnetic railings built into the pavement, to ensure safe lane changes, speed limits, and overall driving habits – once again a huge improvement in quality of life for most of the population. For those who lived under their shadow, however, the world was recast into a place of endless dusk, exhaust and crime. While the murder rates in the "safe" areas dropped below 1% for the first time in American History, the violent crime rate in these 'Dark Zones' jumped to over 30%. Even though there were no walls keeping the people in these social cells, those living there were essentially locked away from mainstream America and allowed to do as they would. Only in cases that were high profile, or where officers or their families were involved, would the police ever be called in, let alone the FBI. And like it or not, I was now only half a block away from leaving the 'safe zone' of the Historic and Business District, and headed for my next job – a crime scene one mile inside Mobile's Dark Zone.

I met my team at the end of Conception Street – the only line drawn to show the border between the zones was the ever-present shadow cast by the roadway overhead. Michaels, Roberts and Zimmerman were waiting for me, standing in a small circle surrounded by six MR-CSA's (Mobile Robotic Crime Scene Analyzers)

that looked like oddly-shaped filing cabinets on rotational treads. As they drained the last of their coffee, Michaels saw me walking towards them and shouted, "Ellie! What the hell took you so long?"

"You slowing down in your old age, Chief?" Roberts asked whimsically, tossing aside his cup and stomping it into dust on the ground.

"Twenty-seven is not old, Roberts," I quickly came back as I reached out to take the armor-weave Roberts held out to me. "There was a media frenzy at the courthouse that slowed me down... and maybe I got a little too deep in thought on my way here."

Zimmerman turned away from us and stood looking silently down the street into the darkness ahead. He'd been with another team six weeks before in St. Louis on a mission into their 'Dark Zone', but it hadn't gone well. Headquarters called it an *incident*; the rest of us called it a slaughter. He was one of only three agents that made it out alive – not only did he lose twelve other team members, but his team leader and his fiancé were among them. Zim had requested immediate transfer back to Mobile; back to a smaller team and people he had known since childhood. But after a tragic turn like St. Louis, it would take a long time for our Zim to really show himself, and we were all going to help him in any way we could.

I walked up behind him and gently placed my hand on his shoulder. "You up to this, Zim?"

Without turning to meet my eyes, a quiet “yup” passed his lips, and he pulled his pulser from his belt, letting it drink in the last of the sunlight and charge its batteries before going in.

"So why are we headed into the Dark Zone, Ellie?" Michaels asked, checking the MR-CSA's system controls with his palm computer, constantly cutting his eyes up to check on Zim. "Who is it this time? Did the Archbishop get lost on his walk home from the pub last night? Or has the President suddenly decided that some of these animals are actually people, and the time has come to treat them as such?"

"No, boys, this one is personal," I answered as I strapped down the armor-weave to my clothing, and wrestled my bright auburn curls into a ponytail. "One of ours, if our info is correct. The MR-CSA's should be able to let us know more soon."

"Who is the source? We haven't had an informant make it out of a Zone alive in almost two years," Roberts quipped as he too drew his pulser and strapped down his armor-weave one last time.

"A recovery drone went in to do a health sweep – on the spot cremation of any bodies found – the usual stuff. One of the buildings in the west end had a corpse that looked like it had been there for a while; recon video shows it's practically mummified," I replied.

"So why couldn't the drone just burn it down like all the others?" Zimmerman asked, turning finally to face the three of us. "Why send us in for a mummy?"

"You know the protocol, Zim – simple DNA test for identification with on-the-spot sampling. If the DNA matches anything we are looking for in the database, we go in and check it out. If it's all clear, the little guy brings out its laser and burns the body away into dust; no mess, no disease, no fuss. That was what it was designed for."

"So what was the match? What case are we looking to solve?" Roberts stammered excitedly. "We've only got seventeen relatively current case files, not counting the cold cases – why the hit on a mummified corpse?"

"It's a case we didn't even know we had." I paused, not really wanting to continue. "According to the DNA sample, **this** corpse is my Grandmother."