CHAPTER 1

Saturday, August 27, 2005—The Louisiana Bayous

He wiped the hot sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand but forgot that his hand was sealed in a latex glove. The rubber squeaked across his skin like a squeegee on a windshield, pushing the sweat toward his right eyebrow until it ran down into his eye and burned. He pulled up his shirttail and rubbed at his eyes.

He looked down at the water around his knees, undulating like oil against his waders. He twisted his legs and dug his feet in a little deeper; it wasn't easy keeping his balance standing in the soft peat that lined the banks. He turned and looked again at the abandoned tin shack, silhouetted like a gravestone against the starry sky. *This has to be the place*, he thought. *They must be around here somewhere.*

He shuffled forward in the water, probing with his toe until his boot finally struck something soft. He kicked at the object but it didn't move—whatever it was, it was large and heavy. He reached with both arms into the inky liquid until his chest almost touched the surface; the water seeped into his gloves around his wrists and ran down cool over his palms and fingertips. He pushed on the object; the lump felt spongy but firm. He felt along the surface until the lump abruptly narrowed at one end.

He felt the contours of a face—or what was left of one.

He pulled his arms from the water and looked at his gloves; he rubbed his fingertips together, making a mental note not to wipe his forehead again.

He looked across the water and saw the shadowy outline of the boat trolling slowly in the distance, its spotlight sweeping the water like a wandering eye. He took out his own flashlight and switched it on, then pointed it at the boat and waved it in a wide

arc. A moment later, the boat's spotlight swung toward him, flooding his position with blinding white light. He covered his eyes with his forearm.

"Did you find 'em?" a man's voice called out.

"One of them," he shouted back. "The other one must be nearby. Bring the boat alongside and get the tarp."

The moon was in its last quarter, allowing the stars to dominate the sky, and there were millions of them—more than he had ever seen before. You couldn't see them in the city, where the party never ended and the lights were never off. For stars like this you had to head deep into the southern bayous, which no one in his right mind ever did—at least not at this time of night.

It was a peaceful night, a beautiful night, a night a man could almost relax and enjoy—if he didn't know what was coming. The air was hot and heavy, allowing a thick gray mist to finger its way around the knees of the old bald cypresses and water tupelos that lined the banks of the water. Nothing in the bayou was moving—not the dangling strands of black moss, not the needle-sharp tips of the tall marsh grass, not even the mosquitoes—as if every living thing in the bayou was hunkered down and waiting. He thought about the stories he had heard, about the way animals and insects can sense a disaster before it occurs, and he wondered if it was true. Maybe it was; maybe the mosquitoes were smarter than the people in New Orleans. It wouldn't surprise him.

The boat's pilot brought the boat in close and killed the motor, then eased himself over the edge and into the black water. "Where is it?" he asked.

"You're almost standing on it. The head's up here; the feet are down there. Give me a hand."

Together the two men worked the plastic sheet under the body until it lay roughly in the center of the tarp. On the count of three, they slowly hoisted it to the surface and waited while the water drained from one end, revealing the badly decomposed body of a man in tattered clothing.

"He weighs a ton," the boat's pilot said. "How big was this guy?"

"His lungs and gut are full of water," the man said. "Let it drain for a minute."

The pilot made a gagging sound. "Geez—the smell."

"What did you expect? He's been here two weeks. C'mon, let's get him into the boat."

A few minutes later, the two men stood panting, resting against the edge of the boat, staring down at the loosely wrapped figure lying in the bottom of the fiberglass hull.

"This is a lot harder at night," the pilot grumbled. "Did we have to do it now?"

"They didn't make the evacuation order mandatory until late this afternoon—some of the shrimpers and crabbers stayed behind to take their chances with the storm. If somebody spotted us, this would be a little hard to explain, don't you think? Besides, this is our last chance—you won't be able to get anywhere near this place tomorrow night."

The pilot looked up at the cloudless southeastern sky. The air was clear and still, without a trace of breeze. "Are you sure this Hurricane Katrina is coming?"

"She's coming," he said. "It's still a few hundred miles offshore, that's all—too far to see yet. They say it doubled in size today. The thing can't miss us—it's a couple hundred miles across. It's a category 4 now—it'll hit 5 by morning. The first feeder bands will reach us tomorrow."

“I talked to the state police,” the pilot said. “They’ve implemented the contra-flow plan. Every road in New Orleans is one-way now—one-way out. A million people are trying to get out of town before it hits. All the highways are jammed; they say it takes ten hours just to reach Baton Rouge. They think this might be the Big One.”

“It’s big enough for what we need. The hurricane will push a storm surge ahead of it—some say it’ll overtop the levees by ten feet. If that happens, the whole city will fill up like a toilet.”

“You think the city’s ready?”

“We’re the ones who need to be ready. Let’s find that other body.”

The pilot let out a snort.

“Something funny?”

“I was just thinking: Everybody’s trying to get out of the city.”

“So?”

“We’re the only ones bringing bodies in.

CHAPTER 2

Same Time—Raleigh, North Carolina

From across the dinner table, Nick Polchak stared at the woman's mouth as it moved. It was a human mouth, just a simple pair of lipstick-lined labia surrounding an oral cavity, but it was like no mouth Nick had ever witnessed before. It was the *way* it moved: rhythmically, mechanically, hypnotically. Her lower jaw swung in a constant, circular motion, like a cow grinding cud—only much faster. Nick adjusted his huge glasses and stared.

Like a cow on amphetamines, he thought.

Her chewing never stopped—not for conversation, not to shovel in another chunk of Black Angus beef, not even to take a drink of water. The woman even chewed water—or maybe the water only served as a lubricant, like the oil a machinist pours over a spinning drill bit to keep it from overheating.

From time to time her lips would part, and the tip of her tongue would dart across her teeth and plunge into the deep recesses of her gums, searching out tiny morsels that had somehow escaped the crushing molars. Whenever this happened a little lump would appear in her cheek like a mouse under a rug, dart left and right, then vanish again. Nick wondered how the tongue had survived so long—how it had avoided being shorn clean off, because the relentless teeth waited for nothing. He imagined what would happen if the tongue hesitated a nanosecond too long: He envisioned the severed tip dropping off and landing like a crouton on her Caesar salad.

Nick sat mesmerized. Another bite, another drink, another cobralike lash of the tongue, and all the time the words kept coming—though he had long ago stopped comprehending them.

"Unbelievable," Nick said unconsciously.

"You're sweet," she said. "I like you too, pass the bread."

He slid the basket halfway across the table, using the misdirection as an opportunity to slide his cell phone from his pocket and check for messages. Unfortunately, there were none.

The woman smiled as she chewed. "You know, since we don't work in the same department, we probably never would have met. It was awfully nice of your friends to set this up."

"I owe them one," Nick said. *One Australian funnel-web spider in each of their shoes*. *Why can't they mind their own business?*

Every six months or so, Nick's married colleagues in the Entomology Department at North Carolina State University began to feel sorry for him, the only single professor in the department. Longing for Nick to share in their connubial bliss, his colleagues began to match him with up with "compatible" women from the faculty and staff of other departments—the term "compatible" apparently being loosely defined, as in, "She's a carbon-based life-form too."

But what really infuriated Nick was that every six months or so he gave in, despite two tragic object lessons per year that should have kept his memory fresh. Like clockwork, every six months his colleagues began to feel sorry for him, and then for some inexplicable reason Nick began to feel sorry for *them*, feeling sorry for *him*. The

inevitable result was a department-wide pity party culminating in some comic tragedy just like this one—a blind date from hell.

The whole thing was nuts—but here he was again, right on schedule, and his luck was no better this time than it had been in the past. *Who chose this woman?* he wondered. Which one of his dewy-eyed colleagues actually thought that the two of them might be compatible, and what selection criteria had he employed? Was this actually someone's idea of a life partner? The woman wasn't unattractive, she was just—dangerous. If they crashed together in the Andes, she would probably eat him before he was even dead.

And to make matters worse, he had invited her to *dinner*—and not at just any restaurant, at the Angus Barn, one of Raleigh's pricier establishments. Why did he have to commit himself to an entire meal? Why not a mocha grande at Starbucks—to go? Why didn't he ever *learn*? But no; every six months his optimism took over his common sense, and every six months Nick got stuck with the check—in more ways than one.

He glanced down at the bread basket; it was empty. She had done serious damage to the relish tray, grinding down the carrot sticks like a pencil sharpener and popping the olives like breath mints. She had single-handedly emptied two cheese crocks—both the sharp smoked cheddar and the tangy blue cheese; then came the three-cheese ravioli appetizer; then her ten-ounce filet, medium rare—

"What's the matter?" the woman asked unexpectedly. For the first time in forty-five minutes, she stopped chewing and looked at him.

Nick felt a twinge of panic, like one of his students caught sleeping in class. "What do you mean?"

"You're not eating."

Nick looked down at his plate. She was right—he had barely touched his own food; he had barely spoken, for that matter. For the last forty-five minutes, he had felt like a man pinned down by enemy fire.

"I've been—preoccupied," he said.

"You've been looking me over," she said with a grin. "A woman notices that."

Nick measured the distance to the fire exit.

"What is it you do again? I know you teach entomology."

"I teach entomology."

"So teach me something about entomology."

"What do you want to know?"

"I don't care. Anything."

Nick watched her knife and fork moving with the speed and precision of a hibachi chef. "Okay," he said. "The locust is a member of the genus *Schistocerca*. It has the unusual ability to change its habits and appearance according to its population density. By nature, the locust is a solitary creature that migrates individually. But as their numbers enlarge, the competition for food increases and they become more and more aggressive—that's when they begin to swarm. In the 1870s there was a swarm of locusts over the Great Plains eighteen hundred miles long and a hundred miles wide. Three and a half trillion locusts formed a dark cloud half a mile high. They ate everything in sight: grain, fabric, small animals—even one another."

"What happened to them?" she asked.

"They suddenly died off."

"All of them?"

Except for their queen. “Yes, all of them.”

“So that’s what you do—you teach about locusts?”

“No. I’m a forensic entomologist, actually. I only teach to pay the bills.”

“A *forensic* entomologist. What is that, exactly?”

“I study necrophilous insects.”

“What kind of insects?”

“*Necrophilous.* It means ‘dead-loving.’”

“They love to be dead?”

“No, they love to *eat* the dead. I study the insects that eat people after they die.”

Her mouth dropped open, which was not a pretty sight. “There are bugs that eat people?”

“Of course. What did you think happened to bodies after they die?”

“I never thought about it.”

“Americans die at a rate of six thousand per day. That’s a lot of corpses piling up. Where do you think they all go?”

“To funeral homes, I suppose.”

“To funeral homes—where they drain your blood and powder your nose to make you look nice for your family and friends. They’re not fooling nature; they’re just buying time.”

“What does that mean?”

“The instant you die—the very *instant*—your body begins to decompose. Every cell in your body needs oxygen to survive, but when the heart stops and the lungs cease to function there is no more oxygen. Without oxygen, the mitochondria fail; the cells begin

to starve. In desperation they begin to cannibalize themselves, consuming their own enzymes and membranes until the dying cells rip apart at the seams, scattering cellular debris everywhere—which is exactly what the bacteria have been waiting for."

"The bacteria?"

"Bacteria are everywhere in the bloodstream, ordinarily held in check by the body's immune system—but after death there is no immune system, so the bacteria engorge themselves on the cellular remains. They multiply exponentially, producing heat and gas as they grow. The body bloats, the gas escapes through the body's natural orifices, producing packets of scent molecules that drift away in the breeze—where the insects are waiting."

"What insects?"

"The dead-lovers. Iridescent blue-and-green blowflies; gray, blunt-bodied flesh flies; insects that have adapted to feed solely on the decomposing tissues of the dead. The pregnant females circle in the air, tracking those scent molecules back to the body. They land, looking for a place where the tissues are soft and moist—the eyes, the ears, the oral and nasal cavities."

The woman's face began to slowly contort into a disgusted sneer. Nick didn't notice. He was a bug man and he was talking about bugs now; this was his subject area, his one true passion in life. Besides, he hadn't spoken in forty-five minutes, and he was on a roll.

"The flies lay their clutch of eggs," he said. "Three, maybe four hundred each—and then they take off again. The eggs hatch and maggots emerge; the maggots stuff themselves on the decomposing tissues—thousands upon thousands of them, consuming

the body at an astonishing rate. As the famous taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus once said, 'The progeny of three flies can consume a dead horse more quickly than can a lion.'"

She closed her eyes and held up one hand. "Nick."

"Since insects pass through distinct developmental stages, by studying the insects on a corpse we can determine almost exactly how long they've been there—and thus, the time of death. All you have to do is collect maggot samples from the various orifices. Take your filet, for example: It's basically a thick slab of muscle tissue, much like—oh, let's say a cross section of the human thigh—"

"Nick!"

Nick stopped. The woman had a strange look on her face—the sort of look a person gets when they first learn that calamari is really squid.

"Can we talk about something else?"

"You asked me what I do."

"I know, but I didn't know you did—*that*. Do you really have to work with dead people?"

"It helps."

"How can you stand it?"

"As coworkers go, I recommend them."

She shuddered. "Well, let's talk about something else."

"Like what?"

"Something besides work—*your* work, anyway."

Nick shrugged. "Okay. What do you do?"

She glared at him. "I've been telling you that for the last forty-five minutes."

Nick blinked. “Would you excuse me a moment?” He pulled out his cell phone and checked for messages again.

“You keep looking at your cell phone,” she grumbled. “A woman notices that too.”

“Sorry. I’m sort of on call.”

“In case somebody dies?”

“In a way, yes. I volunteer with an organization called DMORT—the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team. DMORT is a part of the National Disaster Medical System, under FEMA. Whenever there’s a disaster involving mass casualties—like the World Trade Center or United Flight 93 in Pennsylvania—then DMORT is called in. Whenever the number of casualties is too big for the local coroner’s office to handle, we show up. Our job is to help collect and identify human remains.”

“You *volunteer* to do that?”

“Sometimes I can’t believe the things I volunteer for.”

“Has there been a disaster somewhere?”

“There’s a hurricane called Katrina moving northwest across the Gulf of Mexico right now. It was a category 1 when it hit Florida the night before last; then it was downgraded to a tropical storm. But now it’s out over the Gulf again, and it’s sucking up energy from the hot sea; it’s up to a category 4 now, and some say it might become a 5. The National Hurricane Center says it’s heading for New Orleans; if it keeps going, my DMORT unit will be activated—just in case.”

At that moment, Nick’s cell phone mercifully rang. He scrambled to open it.

“Nick Polchak.”

“Nick. It’s Denny with DMORT.”

“It’s about time.”

“I called your office first. You’re usually there on a Saturday night.”

“I should be there now.”

“Some grad student answered your phone. He said you were on a *blind date*—in a *restaurant*—with a *woman*.”

Nick didn’t reply; he just kept nodding and staring straight ahead.

“Nick, is it true?”

“Denny. Please.”

“Just tell me: How’s it going?”

“A disaster of unprecedented proportions,” he said. “It makes you wonder if there’s a God.”

“That bad, huh?”

“All the needless suffering—all the wasted resources—it could have been prevented. Why don’t we ever learn?”

“Well, then, I’ve got good news for you. We just got word from the Emergency Operations Center: NDMS has activated us—Katrina’s predicted to make landfall early Monday morning. How far are you from the airport?”

“Twenty minutes. My go-bag is in the car.”

“Whoa, slow down. NDMS has to call you back with travel arrangements first. You should have four hours at least. Relax, have a cup of coffee. Enjoy your date.”

“*Ten* minutes? Okay, but I’ll have to leave right now.”

“Do what you want. I’ll see you in Baton Rouge.”

Nick folded the phone and looked apologetically at his date.

“You have to go, don’t you?” she said.

“Sorry.”

“It sounds terrible.”

“Relief is on the way. Have you seen our waiter? I’ll grab him on the way out.”

After repeating his condolences and offering a fictional promise to reschedule at a more opportune time, Nick hurried toward the exit.

The maître d’ met him in the doorway. “Leaving so soon, sir?”

“Gotta run. I was at that table over there—see it? The lady with the long red hair.” Nick pointed and the woman waved back.

“Yes, sir, I see it.”

Nick handed him a ten-dollar bill. “She needs more bread.”

CHAPTER 3

Sunday, August 28—St. Gabriel, Louisiana

"Folks, I need to ask you to pack in a little tighter so you can hear. Please move all the way into the warehouse. The wind is starting to pick up a bit, and we'd like to get you all out of the weather." Denny Behringer, the DMORT incident commander, motioned with both hands as if he were parking a 737, and the group began to slowly move forward.

Nick caught Denny's eye, and the two men nodded a silent greeting.

Nick looked at the group bunched tightly around him. He counted about seventy-five people, thirty of whom he knew. They were all members of his regional DMORT team—DMORT Region IV, consisting of forensic professionals from eight different states across the southeastern U.S. There were pathologists to conduct autopsies; anthropologists to examine fragments of bone; odontologists to match dental records; fingerprint specialists to establish lost identities; and a dozen other forensic subspecialties, including his own. The rest of the group consisted of computer experts, security personnel, and the myriad support staff necessary to run a morgue the size of a football field.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, each of them had been sitting comfortably in his or her home in Atlanta or Memphis or Nashville or Miami. Now, they huddled together in the darkness in the tiny town of St. Gabriel, Louisiana, seventy miles west of the city of New Orleans and just outside Baton Rouge. St. Gabriel had been selected from a short list of candidates as the location for DMORT's temporary morgue, the place where victims of the coming disaster could be collected and processed away from prying eyes.

St. Gabriel seemed the perfect choice: It was close to Baton Rouge, the location of FEMA's regional headquarters; it was situated just off Interstate 10, the major artery into and out of New Orleans; and it had no way to say no. The little hamlet of fifty-five hundred people, home to two prisons and a half dozen chemical plants, had been politely but bluntly informed that they would soon have the privilege of contributing to rescue-and-recovery efforts on behalf of their big sister to the east. Before long, a cadre of refrigerated tractor trailers would begin to deliver decomposing bodies right to their own back door. Not everyone in St. Gabriel appreciated the honor; but after repeated reassurances about safety and security, the little town resigned itself to its inevitable role.

FEMA, anticipating the closing of Louis Armstrong New Orleans International, and not wishing to add to the chaos at the airport in Baton Rouge, had decided to assemble the DMORT members at DFW in Dallas—not exactly a stone's throw away. From there, Nick's DMORT team had caravanned 370 miles by car and van, arriving just before midnight central time. The roads were desolate when they first headed east out of Dallas, but once they passed Shreveport and turned south on I-49, they found a steady and ominous increase in traffic coming from the direction of the Gulf Coast. By the time they reached Baton Rouge six hours later, the outbound lanes were aglow with headlights rising out of the south like sparks pouring from the mouth of a furnace.

In obedience to their commander's instructions, Nick's group dutifully shuffled forward through the entrance of the 150,000-square-foot warehouse. They were more than happy to move inside; the August heat and humidity were stifling and a light rain was beginning to fall, a presage of what was headed their way. As he approached the doorway Nick looked up into the sky; in the brilliant light of the mercury-vapor lamps,

raindrops magically appeared from the infinite darkness and streaked toward him like silver needles. Above the doorway was a sign in Latin: *Mortui Vivis Praecipiant*—"Let the Dead Teach the Living."

Nick felt a tap on his shoulder. A voice behind him said, "A woman walks into a funeral home."

Nick turned and found himself looking into the face of a very large man. The man looked directly into Nick's eyes, rivaling his six-foot-three stature, but the man outweighed Nick by at least forty pounds.

"C'mon," the man said. "A woman walks into a funeral home."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Go ahead."

"A woman walks into a funeral home. She tells the funeral director, 'I want my husband buried in a blue suit.' 'What's wrong with the black one he's wearing?' he asks. 'No, it has to be blue,' she says, and she hands him a blank check—whatever it costs, she tells him. So, at the viewing, the husband is wearing a beautiful blue suit. 'It's perfect,' the woman says. 'How much did it cost?' 'Not a thing,' the funeral director tells her. 'After you left, a body came in wearing a blue suit. The man was exactly the same size and build as your husband, so—I switched heads.'"

Nick just stared.

"C'mon, Nick, that's my newest joke."

"I believe you, Jerry."

The two men shook hands.

Jerry Kibbee was a member of Region V, the Great Lakes Region of DMORT. Jerry was a funeral director from Fort Wayne, Indiana, a town that Nick had visited once

and vowed never to do so again. Kibbee's Funeral Home served the good people of Ft. Wayne in all the conventional ways: selling caskets, ordering headstones, providing memorable floral arrangements, and coordinating with police over solemn funeral processions to local cemeteries. For his part, Jerry was a simple mortician with a two-year associate's degree in mortuary science from a local community college. Beyond that, Jerry had no forensic expertise, a fact those new to DMORT might find surprising—but DMORT was founded by people just like Jerry. In the early 1980s, the National Funeral Directors Association assembled the components of the nation's first portable morgue, and many funeral directors are still counted among its members. The simple reality is that people like Jerry will always be needed at DMORT; there's always a place for those who are comfortable handling the dead.

Jerry's weight was all in his torso. He wasn't fat, he just had a barrel-shaped trunk that overshadowed the rest of his body. His arms, by contrast, were slender, and his legs even more so—like a marshmallow on toothpicks, Nick always said. His face was wide and friendly, and his cheeks were always rosy regardless of temperature or season, giving him a look of constant energy and health—and making him look, Nick thought, like a poster boy for the embalmer's art.

"Didn't know if I'd see you for this one," Nick said.

"You kidding? Wouldn't miss it for the world. They've activated all ten regions this time, did you hear that? They say it's the first time; they only activated seven after 9/11. Everybody's here, or over in Gulfport. That's where they set up the other DPMU."

"What is this for us, Jerry? Five? Six?"

"Beats me. Are you counting the Houston flood in 2004?"

In fact, it was the seventh time the two men had been deployed together, beginning with the Oklahoma City bombing in April of ’95—DMORT’s first major duty. Like Nick, Jerry often volunteered to deploy with other regional teams to shorten the downtime between assignments. In the past, half of DMORT’s deployments had been in response to major transportation accidents, like the Flight 801 tragedy in Guam or the crash of Flight 587 in the New York borough of Queens. Each assignment posed its own challenges, but everyone knew that New Orleans would be unique—and everyone wanted to be there.

Nick and Jerry had become close friends over the years, perhaps bound together by each man’s own “uniqueness”—Jerry because he was a simple mortician among forensic specialists, and Nick because he was a forensic entomologist—a scientific discipline that even some in DMORT found bizarre. Nick never saw Jerry apart from these deployments, but that’s how DMORT worked: They were like a family, gathering only for special occasions but picking up right where they’d left off when they did.

In the doorway the two men anticipated a rush of cooler air, but they were both disappointed; the portable air-conditioning units had not yet been installed. The sounds of frenzied construction were everywhere, even at midnight.

“Heard any more about the storm?” Jerry asked.

“I listened to the radio on the way down,” Nick said. “Not much new. Katrina keeps picking up steam; they declared it a category 5 this morning.”

“Wow. She’s a big girl now.”

“No kidding. Sustained winds of 175 miles per hour and gusts up to 215.”

“That’s hard to imagine.”

“That’s the problem—nobody knows what to expect.”

“Is she still headed for New Orleans?”

“The National Hurricane Center’s sticking to its original prediction: landfall at 6:00 a.m. this morning near some town called Buras-Triumph—about sixty-five miles southeast of the city.”

The two men continued to exchange the miscellaneous bits of information that each had been able to collect in transit: The Louisiana governor, Kathleen Blanco, had declared a state of emergency on Friday afternoon; in response, President Bush declared a federal state of emergency the following day, triggering the activation of DMORT. Jerry said that the mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, had refused to order a mandatory evacuation of the city until just the day before; he planned instead to stick to his city’s preexisting emergency evacuation plan. Nick replied that no preexisting emergency plan had ever anticipated a storm of this size or magnitude, and no one knew what would happen when it actually hit. Only residents of the parishes closest to the Gulf had actually been ordered to evacuate, and even then there was no one to enforce the order, so many had stayed behind. In the city itself untold thousands more remained, reluctant to leave their houses or pets or possessions, unwilling to believe that this storm would be any different from the last—or unable to comprehend the potential destructive power of the fourth-largest hurricane in recorded history.

On the radio, political pundits and talk-show hosts had delighted in unearthing the latest dark secrets about the city and its vulnerabilities: New Orleans, they said, is one of the poorest and most violent cities in America; 28 percent of the city’s residents live below the poverty line, more than twice the national average; most of the poor are black,

living in the most crowded and lowest-lying neighborhoods; more than half of the elderly have disabilities, making it difficult if not impossible for them to flee the city.

And most ominous of all: The city of New Orleans, situated on a narrow bridge of alluvial silt between a river and a massive lake, is the lowest point in the United States besides Death Valley.

The two men finally reached the warehouse and stepped out of the misty rain. The building itself was an abandoned rubber-storage warehouse, but it was rapidly being converted to house DMORT's Disaster Portable Morgue Unit—the DPMU, as it was commonly known. The DPMU was a marvel of portable medical engineering, a complete and transportable morgue-in-a-box. FEMA maintains two of these units in constant readiness at its logistics centers in Rockville, Maryland, and San Jose, California. Each DPMU contains more than ten thousand individual items, from scalpels and forceps to autopsy tables and full-body X-ray machines. It also includes computers, fax machines, and state-of-the-art communications equipment, everything necessary to carry out the business of dealing with the dead—in very large numbers.

The concrete floor was covered with a heavy-gauge black polyethylene sheet to help insulate against the dampness and to facilitate the process of repeated decontamination. Nick stepped onto the plastic and felt his wet soles slide just a little and then catch, the way they would on snow-covered ice.

With everyone finally inside the building, the commander called out, "My name is Denny Behringer. I'm the DMORT commander here at St. Gabriel, and I'd like to welcome you all to beautiful Louisiana—the Pelican State, in case this is your first time here. Before we go any further, are there any members of the press present? I want to

reiterate what I said outside: This DPMU will be closed to both the press and the public. At DMORT we do everything we can to treat victims and their families with the utmost dignity and respect. Please understand: This is not about secrecy; it's about privacy. I want you all to take a look at the person standing beside you; if you don't recognize him or her, ask to see an ID."

Denny waited. Apparently there were no infiltrators in the group.

"I know it's late," he continued, "and I know you've all had a very long day already, so I won't keep you any longer than I have to. I want to give you a quick tour of the DPMU, just to make you all familiar with our basic function and layout. If this is not your first deployment, please be patient—our newcomers need to hear this. After the tour, we'll hold a quick incident briefing. I know you're all just dying to sit through a meeting right about now, but hey, what can I say? You're federal employees now."

The last remark garnered a laugh from almost everyone. When a DMORT team is activated, its members become temporary employees of the federal government, with all the accompanying rights and privileges—like a mountain of required paperwork and a substantial reduction in pay. Some members of Nick's DMORT team were highly paid professionals back home—physicians and dentists among them—and volunteering with DMORT involved considerable financial sacrifice.

No one complained. Many of these people were veterans of several past DMORT deployments, yet here they were again. As any of them would tell you: It's not about the money. Some of them were there for the adrenaline; they were used to weekends on call or sleepless nights in the ER, and they loved the demanding pace. Some simply loved their profession, and DMORT gave them a chance to do more in two weeks than they

might in six months back home. Others, like Nick, were there to serve the living by doing what they loved most—studying the dead, and there was no better place than DMORT to do it.

Nick loved the DPMU. Permanent city morgues were usually relegated to some isolated, subterranean corner of a crumbling municipal building, but the DPMU was always brand-spanking-new, bright and aboveground, and, once up and running, bustling with activity. The cavernous warehouse was divided into two major sections, the largest reserved for storage, office space, and casketing operations. The remainder of the warehouse housed a series of long carnival tents, some an ordinary canvas color, while others sported colorful striped canopies complete with scalloped trim. Each tent contained a different forensic station, and each station was further divided into separate postmortem bays to allow three or four forensic specialists to work simultaneously. Each man or woman worked a twelve-hour, seven-to-seven shift, ideally rotating out of the disaster site after two exhausting weeks of duty, though the tour of duty depended entirely on the nature and scope of the disaster—and every disaster was different.

"This is the admitting area," Denny began. "Whenever a body is admitted to the DPMU, a rigid protocol will be followed. The body will first be decontaminated with a chlorine solution, then assigned a number, folder, and a personal escort who will accompany it throughout its examination. The escort will not only ensure that proper procedures are followed, he will also establish a chain of evidence in the event that any criminal activity is indicated."

Denny motioned the group into the first tent. "The first forensic station will focus on victim identification. Personal effects such as jewelry and watches will be collected

and inventoried here. Fingerprints will be taken—if there are fingers still present and if the condition of the tissues allows it. One of our pathologists will then make a cursory examination, searching the body for scars, tattoos, or other identifying marks. In the absence of these, the body might be x-rayed or even autopsied to search for orthopedic devices or surgical implants. As some of you know, newer devices bear serial numbers that can be tracked through manufacturers' records. In cases of severe decomposition, a forensic anthropologist will be called in to examine fragments of bone. This should allow us to at least determine age, sex, stature, and ethnicity.

A hand went up in the back. "Will every body be autopsied?"

"Not necessarily," Denny said. "DMORT autopsies have a different purpose than those conducted under normal circumstances. The goal of our procedure is simply to identify the victim, not determine the cause of death. However, if foul play is indicated, the body will immediately be turned over to the jurisdictional coroner for a more thorough autopsy."

He moved the group forward into a second tent. "Next comes the dental examination station. Here, X-rays will be taken to check against existing dental records. The problem in New Orleans will be finding those existing dental records. For the old, the homeless, and the disabled, regular dental care tends to fall low on the priority list. For many of them there might be no records to find. And there's another complication we might have to contend with: Dental records are very hard to locate when they're underwater."

Denny motioned the group into the final tent. "At the final station, a DNA sample will be extracted from bone—which might still give us a viable sample even if the softer

tissues have decomposed. The right tibia is the bone of choice; the sample will then be labeled, frozen, and stored for later identification."

Nick shook his head; it sounded so simple, but the reality was something else. Thanks to the media, DNA identification was familiar to everyone by now—but so much had been said in its favor that the public now expected almost magical results. Nick knew that in the real world, DNA identification was a long, slow, and expensive process. Nick and Jerry had both worked the 1996 crash of TWA Flight 800; all 230 victims were eventually identified through DNA, but the process took thirteen months.

"Finally, when every station has completed its examination, the body along with its personal effects will be placed in a fresh body bag and returned to refrigeration, awaiting formal identification. The body, once identified, will be referred to by name. Our newcomers will please take note of this—this is a personal touch that DMORT prides itself on. Once identified, the remains will hopefully be released to a waiting family. If no family can be located, then the body will be buried or cremated by DMORT itself. Are there any questions about our facility or procedures?"

There were none.

"In that case, this completes our tour of the DPMU. Please help yourselves to some water—do your best to stay hydrated."

The group now gathered in a large, open meeting area and spread out a bit to allow the stagnant air to circulate between them. The air-conditioning still wasn't working, but at least the high warehouse roof allowed the heat to rise away from them. Along one side of the room was a table covered with water bottles; first in line were the

sweat-soaked members of Region IX, who were forced to make the sudden transition from the bone-dry climate of Arizona or Nevada to the oppressive humidity of Louisiana.

"Not a bad tour," Nick said. "It was informative, it held my attention, and it kept moving. We've had better—I still like the '99 Amtrak derailment best. Overall, I give it one thumbs-up."

"Thanks for the review," Jerry said.

"Let's get the briefing started," Denny called out. "As I said, I don't want to keep you any longer than necessary—but I've got a few things that you all need to know."

CHAPTER 4

Nick and Jerry took seats in the back of the room, and Denny stepped in front of a small podium.

"First of all, you're probably wondering about sleeping arrangements. As you may have noticed, our facility is still under construction. There's an unused elementary school nearby, and we also have an unfinished condo unit available to us; we'll provide cots or air mattresses for many of you there. I'm afraid some of you will have to sleep in your cars at first—sorry about that. I should also mention another option: We have a few refrigerated tractor trailers outside, which will be used to transport bodies from New Orleans and then to store them again after processing. Some of them are FEMA trucks, but the good folks at Wal-Mart and Ben & Jerry's were nice enough to donate a few too. The trucks sleep twenty-four each—or I should say, they're each capable of transporting twenty-four bodies. Don't worry, we promise not to keep the thermostat at 38 degrees."

The group laughed, but Jerry whispered, "It's okay by me. I'll take the air-conditioning."

Nick nodded. "Yeah, me too."

"As I said before, the DPMU will be a secured area beginning immediately. I'm sure you've all noticed that the compound is surrounded by fence and razor wire. A guard will be posted at the gate at all times, courtesy of the St. Gabriel Police Department. You'll need your credentials to get in or out 24/7—so be sure to keep them with you.

"As for meals, if you've been on a DMORT deployment before, then you're familiar with our executive dining plan: The National Guard has been kind enough to

provide us with their mouthwatering Meals-Ready-to-Eat. Just stop by our cafeteria, affectionately known as the 'McDMORT Café,' and see what you can find. Our menu features everything on God's green earth that can possibly be freeze-dried or crammed into a brown Mylar bag. If you get sick of the MREs, I've been told that at the St. Gabriel Truck Stop the crawfish omelet comes with hash browns and a biscuit. You might want to have your cholesterol checked at the end of your deployment."

"I love MREs," Jerry said. "Especially the Chili with Macaroni."

"They definitely beat the NC State dining halls," Nick said.

The MREs were a constant source of derision for DMORT members, but Nick and Jerry never complained. They were both single men, and both found the MREs to be a big improvement over their usual fare of Tuna Surprise or take-out Chinese.

"Now I want to say a few words about the situation facing us," Denny segued, and the tone of his address began to change. "I see a lot of familiar faces out there; many of you have been with us before. Some of you were there after 9/11. You were with us at the DPMU in Hangar 7 at LaGuardia Airport, and you probably thought that was as bad as it gets—we all did. But I want you to know that we've never faced anything like this before. New Orleans represents what we call an 'open system.' In a situation like an airline crash—even in the case of the World Trade Center—we've usually got some kind of passenger manifest or occupant list to work against. Not in New Orleans; we have absolutely no idea how many people are still there or where they're located. At other mass-casualty sites the victims are usually confined to a limited area—say, a field or a building site. In New Orleans, the victims could be dispersed all over the city. That's not going to make it easy for us.

"You're all probably wondering, 'How bad could this get?' The storm is still predicted to make landfall early this morning; what will happen when it does, nobody knows for sure. The National Weather Service issued this warning earlier today; let me read you a few excerpts:

> *Hurricane Katrina . . . A most powerful hurricane with unprecedented strength . . . Devastating damage expected . . .*
>
> *Most of the area will be uninhabitable for weeks . . . perhaps longer. At least one half of well-constructed homes will have roof and wall failure . . . leaving those homes severely damaged or destroyed.*
>
> *The majority of industrial buildings will become nonfunctional. Partial to complete wall and roof failure is expected. All wood-framed low-rising apartment buildings will be destroyed. Concrete-block low-rise apartments will sustain major damage . . . including some wall and roof failure.*
>
> *High-rise office and apartment buildings will sway dangerously . . . a few to the point of total collapse. All windows will blow out.*
>
> *Airborne debris will be widespread . . . and may include heavy items such as household appliances and even light vehicles . . . The blown debris will create additional destruction. Persons . . . pets . . . and livestock exposed to the winds will face certain death if struck.*
>
> *Power outages will last for weeks . . . as most power poles will be down and transformers destroyed. Water shortages will make human suffering incredible by modern standards.*

Denny stopped reading and looked at the group. From the back of the room, someone let out a low whistle.

"Are there any predictions about casualties yet?" Nick asked.

"There's just no way to tell," Denny replied. "All we can do is prepare for the worst. They estimate that about a million people have left the greater New Orleans area so far; nobody knows how many have chosen to remain behind. Mayor Nagin has opened up ten emergency shelters for them, including the New Orleans Superdome; I've been told that facility stocks thirty-six hours' worth of food in reserve. The city is surrounded by water on three sides, and 70 percent of it is below sea level. Our DPMU is capable of processing 140 bodies a day for as long as we have to be here. We brought twenty-five thousand body bags with us; let's just pray we take some home."

"What about the levees?" someone asked. "Are they expected to hold?"

"The Army Corps of Engineers tells us that the levees were only designed to protect against a category 3 hurricane. At the lowest points, the levees can only hold back a storm surge of about fourteen feet. Some say Katrina might double that; if that happens, the entire city will be underwater."

There was a pause, and then a lone voice spoke for everyone in the room: "The *whole city*?"

"That's what they tell us. If there is significant flooding in the city, then there are going to be casualties—a lot of them—and they're not going to be easy to identify. It happens in every flood: People get separated from their identifying documents—wallets,

purses, that sort of thing. Bodies get washed around by the currents too, so we might not even know what neighborhood the victim came from.

"What I'm trying to say is that we're not really sure what we're up against yet; the next twenty-four hours will tell. As always, DMORT will be functioning under the authority of FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security, and alongside local relief and law enforcement agencies. This is a team effort, everybody, and we just play one part. The first thing I want everybody to do is get a good night's sleep—as good as you can, under the conditions. We'll spend tomorrow getting the DPMU in shape; then, as soon as the storm has safely passed, all nonadministrative members will be transported to New Orleans to assist in rescue efforts. You are to report to the agency in charge of the rescue efforts in that area and follow their instructions. Are there any questions?"

Nick frowned, then slowly raised his hand.

"Yes. Nick."

"Did you say, 'Assist in *rescue* efforts'? I assume you meant *recovery* efforts."

"No, you heard me right. If there is extensive flooding across the city, tens of thousands of people are expected to be trapped in their homes or on rooftops. As I said, this is a team effort; the decision has been made by FEMA to focus all available resources on rescuing the living first."

"Instead of recovering the dead?"

"At first, yes. I think you'll agree, Nick, it's a lot more important to rescue the living than it is to recover the dead."

"I'm not sure I do," Nick said, rising to his feet.

"Fasten your seat belts," Jerry mumbled. "Here we go."

“We stopped for gas on the way down here,” Nick said. “A little station just north of Baton Rouge—some of you were with me.” He glanced around the room and a few heads nodded. “There was a line a mile long waiting for gas—it took us an hour to get through. While we were there, two men pulled up to a pump at the same time. They began to argue about who got there first. The argument got heated. I thought there was going to be a fight—until one of them pulled up his shirt and showed the other guy a gun.”

Nick paused to allow the point to sink in.

“That’s what stress does to your species, Denny. Those two men were on their way *out* of town—what about the people who stay behind? What sort of stress will they be under? Hunger, fatigue, competition for available resources—and I’d like to remind everyone that New Orleans holds the record for the highest murder rate ever recorded, and that’s *without* a hurricane. Human nature isn’t going to improve after a major disaster; it’s going to get worse—maybe a lot worse.”

“What’s your point, Nick?”

“You say we’re looking at a lot of casualties here. All I’m saying is that some of them won’t have died from natural causes—you can count on that. We owe something to those people too.”

“So what are you suggesting?”

“That we divide our resources. Surely at least a few of us could be assigned to the recovery of the dead.”

Denny shook his head. “FEMA estimates that one out of four residents of New Orleans has no access to an automobile. There’s no way to estimate how many people

have stayed behind—it could be in the hundreds of thousands. And if the city floods, there's no telling how many people will be in need of rescue. Nobody knows if all the government agencies combined can handle it; that's why FEMA wants all available personnel to focus on rescue first."

"Why was DMORT created?" Nick asked. "To help family members identify and recover the remains of their loved ones."

"Thanks, Nick, I'm familiar with the training manual."

"Murder victims have families too," Nick said, "and they want more than that—they want the murderers brought to justice. That's why the bodies can't wait, Denny. This isn't just about recovery; it's about preserving forensic evidence. You said yourself that this is a unique situation; let's not forget the problems posed by the water. Any pathologist here will tell you that a body decomposes much faster in water than it does on land—but in this case it'll be even worse. The water will be hot, and it will be filled with God-knows-what: bacteria, toxins, sewage, chemicals, pesticides—just to name a few. If the city does flood, we're going to have bodies floating in a toxic brew—"

"Nick—"

"—and it won't just be a problem for visual identification. I'm talking about major decomposition of tissues, even degradation of DNA. Nothing will last long in that soup; by the time we get around to recovering bodies, there'll be nothing left to find."

"Nick—"

"We're working against the clock here, Denny. This may be an open system, but time is the one thing that's not open. In Somerset County we had all the time in the world

to collect the remains from United 93. We had time to mark off the whole field, and walk the grid, but if we take that long here—"

"First the living," someone shouted from across the room.

"That's incredibly shortsighted," Nick said. "How many of you have actually viewed a cadaver recovered in water? Let me tell you, it's an evidential nightmare. The tissues soften; the fingers swell until the fingerprints disappear; the hair is lost; the face becomes bloated and unrecognizable—at some point even gender becomes difficult to distinguish. I'm talking about complete loss of forensic evidence: knife wounds, contusions, bullet tracks—all of it disappears. Are we really willing to let that happen?"

The room began to stir; Denny gestured for everyone to quiet down. "Nick, if you want to talk more about this, then see me after the meeting. I'm sure the rest of the team would like to get some sleep. I've scheduled our next briefing for 7:00 a.m. I know, that's awfully early—welcome to DMORT.

"There is one more thing I want to cover tonight; I'd save it for tomorrow, but I think it's that important. If you've been with us before, you know this kind of work can take a lot out of you. The hours are long, nobody gets enough sleep, and then—well, there's the nature of the work itself. That's why DMORT always includes mental health professionals on every deployment, and this time is no exception."

"Uh-oh," Jerry said. "I smell trouble."

"Some experts are predicting that Hurricane Katrina will be the worst natural disaster in our nation's history. If they're right, we'll be working longer hours and we'll be under more stress than ever before—and we need to make sure that we're dealing with

that stress in a healthy way. To make sure we do, we're fortunate to have with us this time Dr. Elizabeth Woodbridge."

"I knew it," Jerry said.

Nick let out a groan.

"Dr. Woodbridge is a distinguished psychiatrist in private practice in the San Francisco area. She is a longtime member of DMORT Region IX, and she's been with us on several prior DMORT deployments. Since Dr. Woodbridge will be serving such an important role here in St. Gabriel, I've asked her if she would close our briefing with a few introductory comments. Dr. Woodbridge?"

The woman who stood up looked strangely out of place. She was unusually pretty—not that the other women present weren't attractive, but the physical demands of DMORT required a what-you-see-is-what-you-get approach: Pull your hair back in a ponytail, scrub your face, and forget the makeup. But this woman looked as if she had just stepped out of a corporate office—which she probably had, just a few hours ago on the West Coast. Her hair was blonde and shoulder-length, cut in a trendy style, with a long straight wisp that crossed her forehead from left to right, causing her to forever brush it back. Her skin was fair and smooth and her eyes were unexpectedly dark and almond-shaped. Her face was beautiful but her eyes were piercing, like thorns on the stem of a rose. It was a quality that Nick found especially annoying—among others.

"I still say she's the hottest babe in DMORT," Jerry said.

"Good evening and welcome," Dr. Woodbridge began. "Or should I say, 'Welcome back.' I see a lot of familiar faces out there." As she said this, her eyes scanned the audience; when she came to Nick, she hesitated for a split second.

Jerry leaned over to Nick. “I saw that.”

“Shut up,” Nick said.

“As Denny told you, this deployment could pose unique challenges for all of us—including challenges of a psychological nature. Traumatic stress, sleep deprivation, insomnia or nightmares—these are things we’re all susceptible to. My job, to put it simply, is to help you avoid these things—or to help you through them if necessary. If you’ll allow me to be a bit pedantic for a moment, I’d like to read to you from the DMORT Field Operations Guide.”

Jerry leaned in again. “What does ‘pedantic’ mean?”

“It means you went to a community college. Shut up.”

“‘Description of Duties of the DMORT Mental Health Officer,’” she read. “‘(1) Monitors incident stress levels of all personnel and implements stress reduction measures as necessary. (2) Identifies appropriate assessments, interventions, prevention techniques, and counseling for early identification of personnel at risk of mental health and related problems.’ That pretty much says it all: My job is to help each of you assess your individual stress level and keep it at a manageable level.”

“I came here for the stress,” Nick said. “Why can’t she mind her own business?”

“Now, how will this happen? First of all, there are things you can do to help. I’m reading again from the Field Operations Guide: ‘Be responsible for your well-being and keep in touch with your family. It is important that you monitor and maintain yourself in areas such as: stress levels, medical fitness, physical fitness, proper hydration, proper foods, and regular bowel movements.’”

“Freudians,” Nick said. “She’s been here for five minutes, and she’s already talking about bowel movements.”

“Those are things that you can do,” she said. “What I can do is listen. As in all past DMORT deployments, each team member will be required to undergo an exit interview when his or her rotation is completed. But here in St. Gabriel, due to the extreme pressures we may all be forced to work under, I’ll also be conducting informal interviews along the way just to keep an eye out for unhealthy coping mechanisms. So if I ask you, ‘How are you doing?’ please don’t brush me off—because I really do care and I really want to know. Thank you.”

She concluded to scattered applause. At this point the meeting broke up and people began to slowly rise and mingle. Nick just sat there, slumped down in his chair.

“Terrific,” he grumbled. “A perfectly good disaster ruined.”