

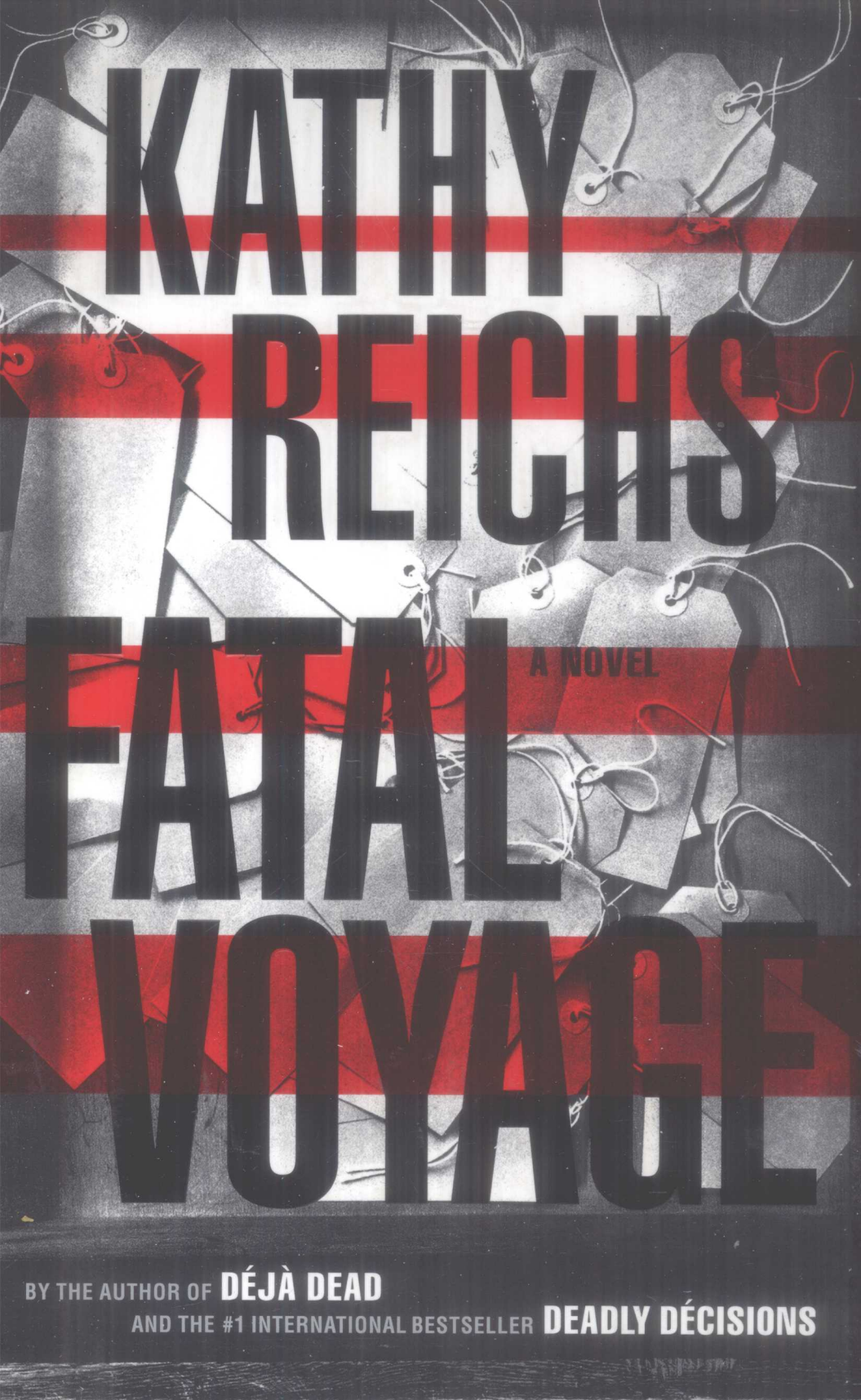
KATHY REICHS

A NOVEL

FATAL VOYAGE

BY THE AUTHOR OF **DÉJÀ DEAD**

AND THE #1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER **DEADLY DÉCISIONS**



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CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR KATHY REICHS AND **DEADLY DÉCISIONS**

"If there is anyone as good at the forensic thriller, I don't know who it is. Kathy Reichs's science is cold and elegant, and her characters are warm and complex. The result is irresistible." —Anne Rivers Siddons

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FATAL VOYAGE



KATHY REICHS

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedicated with button-bursting pride to:

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Class of 2000

Courtney Anne Reichs, B.A., University of Georgia,
Class of 2000

Brendan Christopher Reichs, B.A. (*cum laude*), Wake Forest University,
Class of 2000

Yippee!!!

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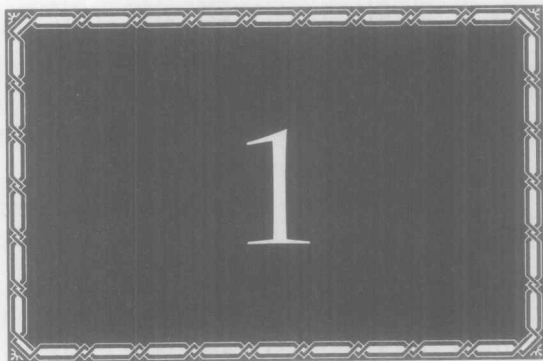
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FATAL VOYAGE





I STARED AT THE WOMAN FLYING THROUGH THE TREES. HER HEAD was forward, chin raised, arms flung backward like the tiny chrome goddess on the hood of a Rolls-Royce. But the tree lady was naked, and her body ended at the waist. Blood-coated leaves and branches imprisoned her lifeless torso.

Lowering my eyes, I looked around. Except for the narrow gravel road on which I was parked, there was nothing but dense forest. The trees were mostly pine, the few hardwoods like wreaths marking the death of summer, their foliage every shade of red, orange, and yellow.

Though it was hot in Charlotte, at this elevation the early October weather was pleasant. But it would soon grow cool. I took a wind-breaker from the backseat, stood still, and listened.

Birdsong. Wind. The scurrying of a small animal. Then, in the distance, one man calling to another. A muffled response.

Tying the jacket around my waist, I locked the car and set off toward the voices, my feet swishing through dead leaves and pine needles.

Ten yards into the woods I passed a seated figure leaning against a mossy stone, knees flexed to his chest, laptop computer at his side. He was missing both arms, and a small china pitcher protruded from his left temple.

On the computer lay a face, teeth laced with orthodontic wiring,

one brow pierced by a delicate gold ring. The eyes were open, the pupils dilated, giving the face an expression of alarm. I felt a tremor beneath my tongue, and quickly moved on.

Within yards I saw a leg, the foot still bound in its hiking boot. The limb had been torn off at the hip, and I wondered if it belonged to the Rolls-Royce torso.

Beyond the leg, two men rested side by side, seat belts fastened, necks mushrooming into red blossoms. One man sat with legs crossed, as if reading a magazine.

I picked my way deeper into the forest, now and then hearing disconnected shouts, carried to me at the wind's whim. Brushing back branches and climbing over rocks and fallen logs, I continued on.

Luggage and pieces of metal lay among the trees. Most suitcases had burst, spewing their contents in random patterns. Clothing, curling irons, and electric shavers were jumbled with containers of hand lotion, shampoo, aftershave, and perfume. One small carry-on had disgorged hundreds of pilfered hotel toiletries. The smell of drugstore products and airplane fuel mingled with the scent of pine and mountain air. And from far off, a hint of smoke.

I was moving through a steep-walled gully whose thick canopy allowed only mottled sunlight to reach the ground. It was cool in the shadows, but sweat dampened my hairline and glued my clothing to my skin. I caught my foot on a backpack and went hurtling forward, tearing my sleeve on a jagged bough truncated by falling debris.

I lay a moment, hands trembling, breath coming in ragged gulps. Though I'd trained myself to hide emotion, I could feel despair rising in me. So much death. Dear God, how many would there be?

Closing my eyes, I centered myself mentally, then pushed to my feet.

Aeons later, I stepped over a rotting log, circled a stand of rhododendron, and, seeming no closer to the distant voices, stopped to get my bearings. The muted wail of a siren told me the rescue operation was gathering somewhere over a ridge to the east.

Way to get directions, Brennan.

But there hadn't been time to ask questions. First responders to airline crashes or other disasters are usually well intentioned, but woefully ill-prepared to deal with mass fatalities. I'd been on my way from Charlotte to Knoxville, nearing the state line, when I'd been asked

to get to the scene as quickly as possible. Doubling back on I-40, I'd cut south toward Waynesville, then west through Bryson City, a North Carolina hamlet approximately 175 miles west of Charlotte, 50 miles east of Tennessee, and 50 miles north of Georgia. I'd followed county blacktop to the point where state maintenance ended, then proceeded on gravel to a Forest Service road that snaked up the mountain.

Though the instructions I'd been given had been accurate, I suspected there was a better route, perhaps a small logging trail that allowed a closer approach to the adjacent valley. I debated returning to the car, decided to press on. Perhaps those already at the site had trekked overland, as I was doing. The Forest Service road had looked like it was going nowhere beyond where I'd left the car.

After an exhausting uphill scramble, I grabbed the trunk of a Douglas fir, planted one foot, and heaved myself onto a ridge. Straightening, I stared into the button eyes of Raggedy Ann. The doll was dangling upside down, her dress entangled in the fir's lower branches.

An image of my daughter's Raggedy flashed to mind, and I reached out.

Stop!

I lowered my arm, knowing that every item must be mapped and recorded before removal. Only then could someone claim the sad memento.

From my position on the ridge I had a clear view of what was probably the main crash site. I could see an engine, half buried in dirt and debris, and what looked like pieces of wing flap. A portion of fuselage lay with the bottom peeled back, like a diagram in an instructional manual for model planes. Through the windows I could see seats, some occupied, most empty.

Wreckage and body parts covered the landscape like refuse discarded at a dump. From where I stood, the skin-covered body portions looked starkly pale against the backdrop of forest floor, viscera, and airplane parts. Articles dangled from trees or lay snarled in the leaves and branches. Fabric. Wiring. Sheet metal. Insulation. Molded plastic.

The locals had arrived and were securing the site and checking for survivors. Figures searched among the trees, others stretched tape around the perimeter of the debris field. They wore yellow

jackets with *Swain County Sheriff's Department* printed on the back. Still others just wandered or stood in clumps, smoking, talking, or staring aimlessly.

Way off through the trees I noticed the flashing of red, blue, and yellow lights, marking the location of the access route I'd failed to find. In my mind I saw the police cruisers, fire engines, rescue trucks, ambulances, and vehicles of citizen volunteers that would clog that road by tomorrow morning.

The wind shifted and the smell of smoke grew stronger. I turned and saw a thin, black plume curling upward just beyond the next ridge. My stomach tightened, for I was close enough now to detect another odor mingling with the sharp, acrid scent.

Being a forensic anthropologist, it is my job to investigate violent death. I have examined hundreds of fire victims for coroners and medical examiners, and know the smell of charred flesh. One gorge over, people were burning.

I swallowed hard and refocused on the rescue operation. Some who had been inactive were now moving across the site. I watched a sheriff's deputy bend and inspect debris at his feet. He straightened, and an object flashed in his left hand. Another deputy had begun stacking debris.

"Shit!"

I started picking my way downward, clinging to underbrush and zigzagging between trees and boulders to control my balance. The gradient was steep, and a stumble could turn into a headlong plunge.

Ten yards from the bottom I stepped on a sheet of metal that slid and sent me into the air like a snowboarder on a major wipeout. I landed hard and began to half roll, half slide down the slope, bringing with me an avalanche of pebbles, branches, leaves, and pinecones.

To stop my fall, I grabbed for a handhold, skinning my palms and tearing my nails before my left hand struck something solid and my fingers closed around it. My wrist jerked painfully as it took the weight of my body, breaking my downward momentum.

I hung there a moment, then rolled onto my side, pulled with both hands, and scooped myself to a sitting position. Never easing my grasp, I looked up.

The object I clutched was a long metal bar, angling skyward from

a rock at my hip to a truncated tree a yard upslope. I planted my feet, tested for traction, and worked my way to a standing position. Wiping bleeding hands on my pants, I retied my jacket and continued downward to level ground.

At the bottom, I quickened my pace. Though my *terra* felt far from *firma*, at least gravity was now on my side. At the cordoned-off area, I lifted the tape and ducked under.

"Whoa, lady. Not so fast."

I stopped and turned. The man who had spoken wore a Swain County Sheriff's Department jacket.

"I'm with DMORT."

"What the hell is DMORT?" Gruff.

"Is the sheriff on site?"

"Who's asking?" The deputy's face was rigid, his mouth compressed into a hard, tight line. An orange hunting cap rested low over his eyes.

"Dr. Temperance Brennan."

"We ain't gonna need no doctor here."

"I'll be identifying the victims."

"Got proof?"

In mass disasters, each government agency has specific responsibilities. The Office of Emergency Preparedness, OEP, manages and directs the National Disaster Medical System, NDMS, which provides medical response and victim identification and mortuary services in the event of a mass fatality incident.

To meet its mission, NDMS created the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team, DMORT, and Disaster Medical Assistance Team, DMAT, systems. In officially declared disasters, DMAT looks after the needs of the living, while DMORT deals with the dead.

I dug out and extended my NDMS identification.

The deputy studied the card, then tipped his head in the direction of the fuselage.

"Sheriff's with the fire chiefs." His voice cracked and he wiped a hand across his mouth. Then he dropped his eyes and walked away, embarrassed to have shown emotion.

I was not surprised at the deputy's demeanor. The toughest and most capable of cops and rescue workers, no matter how extensive

their training or experience, are never psychologically prepared for their first major.

Majors. That's what the National Transportation Safety Board dubbed these crashes. I wasn't sure what was required to qualify as a major, but I'd worked several and knew one thing with certainty: Each was a horror. I was never prepared, either, and shared his anguish. I'd just learned not to show it.

Threading toward the fuselage, I passed a deputy covering a body.

"Take that off," I ordered.

"What?"

"Don't blanket them."

"Who says?"

I showed my ID again.

"But they're lying in the open." His voice sounded flat, like a computer recording.

"Everything must remain in place."

"We've got to do something. It's getting dark. Bears are gonna scent on these"—he stumbled for a word—"people."

I'd seen what *Ursus* could do to a corpse and sympathized with the man's concerns. Nevertheless, I had to stop him.

"Everything must be photographed and recorded before it can be touched."

He bunched the blanket with both hands, his face pinched with pain. I knew exactly what he was feeling. The need to do something, the uncertainty as to what. The sense of helplessness in the midst of overwhelming tragedy.

"Please spread the word that everything has to stay put. Then search for survivors."

"You've got to be kidding." His eyes swept the scene around us. "No one could survive this."

"If anyone *is* alive they've got more to fear from bears than these folks do." I indicated the body at his feet.

"And wolves," he added in a hollow voice.

"What's the sheriff's name?"

"Crowe."

"Which one?"

He glanced toward a group near the fuselage.

"Tall one in the green jacket."