

## PROLOGUE

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Lauren Heller's husband disappeared at a few minutes after ten thirty on a rainy evening.

They were walking to their car after dinner at his favorite Japanese restaurant, on Thirty-third Street in Georgetown. Roger, a serious sushi connoisseur, considered Oji-San the best, most authentic place in all of D.C. Lauren didn't care one way or another. Raw fish was raw fish, she thought: pretty, but inedible. But Roger—the Mussolini of maki, the Stalin of sashimi—never settled for less than the best. “Hey, I married you, right?” he pointed out on the way over, and how was she supposed to argue with that?

She was just grateful they were finally having a date night. They hadn't had one in almost three months.

Not that it had been much of a date, actually. He'd seemed awfully preoccupied. Worried about something. Then again, he got that way sometimes, for days at a time. That was just the way he dealt with stress at the office. A very male thing, she'd always thought. Men tended to internalize their problems. Women usually let it out, got emotional, screamed or cried or just got mad, and ended up coping a lot better in the long run. If that wasn't emotional intelligence, then what was?

But Roger, whom she loved and admired and who was probably the smartest guy she'd ever met, handled stress like a typical man. Plus, he didn't like to talk about things. That was just his way. That was how he'd been brought up. She remembered once saying to him, "We need to talk," and he replied, "Those are the scarier four words in the English language."

Anyway, they had a firm rule: no shop talk. Since they both worked at Gifford Industries—he as a senior finance guy, she as admin to the CEO—that was the only way to keep work from invading their home life.

So at dinner, Roger barely said a word, checked his BlackBerry every few minutes, and scarfed down his nigiri. She'd ordered something recommended by their waiter, which sounded good but turned out to be layers of miso-soaked black cod. The house specialty. Yuck. She left it untouched, picked at her seaweed salad, drank too much sake, got a little tipsy.

They'd cut through Cady's Alley, a narrow cobblestone walkway lined with old red-brick warehouses converted to high-end German kitchen stores and Italian lighting boutiques. Their footsteps echoed hollowly.

She stopped at the top of the concrete steps that led down to Water Street and said, "Feel like getting some ice cream? Thomas Sweet, maybe?"

The oblique beam of a streetlight caught his white teeth, his strong nose, the pouches that had recently appeared under his eyes. "I thought you're on South Beach."

"They have some sugar-free stuff that's not bad."

"It's all the way over on P, isn't it?"

"There's a Ben & Jerry's on M."

"We probably shouldn't press our luck with Gabe."

"He'll be fine," she said. Their son was fourteen: old enough to stay home by himself. In truth, staying home alone made him a little nervous though he'd never admit it. The kid was as stubborn as his parents.

Water Street was dark, deserted, kind of creepy at that time of night. A row of cars were parked along a chain-link fence, the scrubby banks of the Potomac just beyond. Roger's black S-Class Mercedes was wedged between a white panel van and a battered Toyota.

He stood for a moment, rummaged through his pockets, then turned abruptly. "Damn. Left the keys back in the restaurant."

She grunted, annoyed but not wanting to make a big deal out of it.

"You didn't bring yours, did you?"

Lauren shook her head. She rarely drove his Mercedes anyway. He was too fussy about his car. "Check your pockets?"

He patted the pockets of his trench coat and his pants and suit jacket as if to prove it. "Yeah. Must've left them on the table in the restaurant when I took out my BlackBerry. Sorry about that. Come on."

"We don't both have to go back. I'll wait here."

A motorcycle blatted by from somewhere below. The white-noise roar of trucks on the Whitehurst Freeway overhead.

"I don't want you standing out here alone."

"I'll be fine. Just hurry, okay?"

He hesitated, took a step toward her, then suddenly kissed her on the lips. "I love you," he said.

She stared at his back as he hustled across the street. It pleased her to hear that *I love you*, but she wasn't used to it, really. Roger Heller was a good husband and father, but not the most demonstrative of men.

A distant shout, then raucous laughter: frat kids, probably Georgetown or GW.

A scuffling sound from the pavement behind her.

She turned to look, felt a sudden gust of air, and a hand was clamped over her mouth.

She tried to scream, but it was stifled beneath the

large hand, and she struggled frantically. Roger so close. Maybe a few hundred feet away by then. Close enough to see what was happening to her, if only he'd turn around.

Powerful arms had grabbed her from behind.

She needed to get Roger's attention, but he obviously couldn't hear anything at that distance, the scuffling masked by the traffic sounds.

*Turn around, damn it!* she thought. *Good God, please turn around!*

"Roger!" she screamed, but it came out a pathetic mewl. She smelled some kind of cheap cologne, mixed with stale cigarette smoke.

She tried to twist her body around, to wrench free, but her arms were trapped, pinioned against the sides of her body, and she felt something cold and hard at her temple, and she heard a click, and then something struck the side of her head, a jagged lightning bolt of pain piercing her eyes.

*The foot. Stomp on his foot*—some half-remembered martial-arts self-defense class from long ago.

*Stomp his instep.*

She jammed her left foot down hard, striking nothing, then kicked backwards, hit the Mercedes with a hollow metallic crunch. She tried to pivot, and—

Roger swiveled suddenly, alerted by the sound. He shouted, "Lauren!"

Raced back across the street.

"What the hell are you doing to her?" he screamed. "Why *her*?"

Something slammed against the back of her head. She tasted blood.

She tried to make sense of what was going on, but she was falling backwards, hurtling through space, and that was the last thing she remembered.

# 1

## LOS ANGELES

It was a dark and stormy night.

Actually, it wasn't stormy. But it was dark and rainy and miserable and, for L.A., pretty damned cold. I stood in the drizzle at eleven o'clock at night, under the sickly yellow light from the high-pressure sodium lamps, wearing a fleece and jeans that were soaking wet and good leather shoes that were in the process of getting destroyed.

I'd had the shoes handmade in London for some ridiculous amount of money, and I made a mental note to bill my employer, Stoddard Associates, for the damage, just on general principle.

I hadn't expected rain. Though, as a putatively high-powered international investigator with a reputation for being able to see around corners, I supposed I could have checked Weather.com.

"That's the one," the man standing next to me grunted, pointing at a jet parked a few hundred feet away. He was wearing a long yellow rain slicker with a hood—he hadn't offered me one back in the office—and his face was concealed by shadows. All I could see was his bristly white mustache.

Elwood Sawyer was the corporate security director

of Argon Express Cargo, a competitor of DHL and FedEx, though a lot smaller. He wasn't happy to see me, but I couldn't blame him. I didn't want to be here myself. My boss, Jay Stoddard, had sent me here at the last minute to handle an emergency for a new client I'd never heard of.

An entire planeload of cargo had vanished sometime in the last twenty-four hours. Someone had cleaned out one of their planes at this small regional airport south of L.A. Twenty thousand pounds of boxes and envelopes and packages that had arrived the previous day from Brussels. Gone.

You couldn't even begin to calculate the loss. Thousands of missing packages meant thousands of enraged customers and lawsuits up the wazoo. A part of the shipment belonged to one customer, Traverse Development Group, which had hired my firm to locate their cargo. They were urgent about it, and they weren't going to rely on some second-string cargo company to find it for them.

But the last thing Elwood Sawyer wanted was some high-priced corporate investigator from Washington, D.C., standing there in a pair of fancy shoes telling him how he'd screwed up.

The cargo jet he was pointing at stood solitary and dark and rain-slicked, gleaming in the airfield lights. It was glossy white, like all Argon cargo jets, with the company's name painted across the fuselage in bold orange Helvetica. It was a Boeing 727, immense and magnificent.

An airplane up close is a thing of beauty. Much more awe-inspiring than the view from inside when you're trapped with the seat of the guy in front of you tilted all the way back, crushing your knees. The jet was one of maybe twenty planes parked in a row on the apron nearby. Some of them, I guessed, were there for the

weekend, some for the night, since the control tower closed at ten o'clock. There were chocks under their wheels and traffic cones around each one denoting the circle of safety.

"Let's take a look inside, Elwood," I said.

Sawyer turned to look at me. He had bloodshot basset-hound eyes with big saggy pouches beneath them.

"Woody," he said. He was correcting me, not trying to be friends.

"Okay. Woody."

"There's nothing to see. They cleaned it out." In his right hand he clutched one of those aluminum clipboards in a hinged box, the kind that truck drivers and cops always carry around.

"Mind if I take a look anyway? I've never seen the inside of a cargo plane."

"Mr. Keller—"

"Heller."

"Mr. Keller, we didn't hire you, and I don't have time to play tour guide, so why don't you go back to interviewing the ground crew while I try to figure out how someone managed to smuggle three truckloads of freight out of this airport without anyone noticing?"

He turned to walk back to the terminal, and I said, "Woody, look. I'm not here to make you look bad. We both want the same thing—to find the missing cargo. I might be able to help. Two heads are better than one, and all that."

He kept walking. "Uh-huh. Well, that's real thoughtful, but I'm kinda busy right now."

"Okay. So . . . Mind if I use your name?" I said.

He stopped, didn't turn around. "For what?"

"My client's going to ask for a name. The guy at Traverse Development can be a vindictive son of a bitch." Actually, I didn't even know who at Traverse had hired my firm.

Woody didn't move.

"You know how these guys work," I said. "When I tell my client how Argon Express wasn't interested in any outside assistance, he's going to ask me for a name. Maybe he'll admire your independent spirit—that go-it-alone thing. Then again, maybe he'll just get pissed off so bad that they'll just stop doing business with you guys. No big deal to them. Then word gets around. Like maybe you guys were covering something up, right? Maybe there's the threat of a huge lawsuit. Pretty soon, Argon Express goes belly-up. And all because of you."

Woody still wasn't moving, but I could see his shoulders start to slump. The back of his yellow slicker was streaked with oil and grime.

"But between you and me, Woody, I gotta admire you for having the guts to tell Traverse Development where to get off. Not too many people have the balls to do that."

Woody turned around slowly. I don't think I'd ever seen anyone blink so slowly and with such obvious hostility. He headed toward the plane, and I followed close behind.

There was a hydraulic hum, and the big cargo door came open like the lift gate on a suburban minivan. Woody was standing in the belly of the plane. He gestured me inside with a weary flip of his hand.

He must have switched on an auxiliary power unit because the lights inside the plane were on, a series of naked bulbs in wire cages mounted on the ceiling. The interior was cavernous. You could see the rails where the rows of seats used to be. Just a black floor marked with red lines where the huge cargo containers were supposed to go, only there were no containers here. White windowless walls lined with some kind of papery white material.

I whistled. Totally bare. “The plane was full when it flew in?”

“Mmm-hmm. Twelve igloos.”

“‘Igloos’ are the containers, right?”

He walked over to the open cargo door. The rain was thrumming against the plane’s aluminum skin. “Look for yourself.”

A crew was loading another Argon cargo jet right next to us. They worked in that unhurried, efficient manner of a team that had done this a thousand times before. A couple of guys were pushing an immense container, eight or ten feet high and shaped like a child’s drawing of a house, from the back of a truck onto the steel elevator platform of a K-loader. I counted seven guys. Two to push the igloo off the truck, two more to roll it onto the plane, another one to operate the K-loader. Two more guys whose main job seemed to be holding aluminum clipboards and shouting orders. The next jet down, another white Boeing but not one of theirs, was being refueled.

“No way you could get twelve containers off this plane without a crew of at least five,” I said. “Tell me something. This plane got in yesterday, right? What took you so long to unload it?”

He sighed exasperatedly. “International cargo has to be inspected by U.S. Customs before we do anything. It’s the law.”

“That takes an hour or two at most.”

“Yeah, normally. Weekends, Customs doesn’t have the manpower. So they just cleared the crew to get off and go home. Sealed it up. Let it sit there until they had time to do an inspection.”

“So while the plane was sitting here, anyone could have gotten inside. Looks like all the planes just sit here unattended all night. Anyone could climb into one.”

“That’s the way it works in airports around the

world, buddy. If you're cleared to get onto the airfield, they figure you're supposed to be here. It's called the 'honest-man' system of security."

I chuckled. "That's a good one. I gotta use it sometime."

Woody gave me a look.

I paced along the plane's interior. There was a surprising amount of rust in the places where there was no liner or white paint. "How old is this thing?" I called out. My voice echoed. It seemed even colder in here than it was outside. The rain was pattering hypnotically on the plane's exterior.

"Thirty years easy. They stopped making the Boeing seven-twos in 1984, but most of them were made in the sixties and seventies. They're workhorses, I'm telling you. Long as you do the upkeep, they last forever."

"You guys buy 'em used or new?"

"Used. Everyone does. FedEx, DHL, UPS—we all buy used planes. It's a lot cheaper to buy an old passenger plane and have it converted into a cargo freighter."

"What does one of these cost?"

"Why? You thinking of going into the business?"

"Everyone has a dream."

He looked at me. It took him a few seconds to get that I was being sarcastic. "You can get one of these babies for three hundred thousand bucks. There's hundreds of them sitting in airplane boneyards in the desert. Like used-car lots."

I walked to the front of the plane. Mounted to the doorframe was the data plate, a small stainless-steel square the size of a cigarette pack. Every plane has one. They're riveted on by the manufacturer, and they're sort of like birth certificates. This one said THE BOEING COMPANY—COMMERCIAL AIRPLANE DIVISION—RENTON, WASHINGTON, and it listed the year of manufacture

(1974) and a bunch of other numbers: the model and the serial number and so on.

I pulled out a little Maglite and looked closer and saw just what I expected to see.

I stepped back out onto the air stairs, the cold rain spritzing my face, and I reached out and felt the slick painted fuselage. I ran my hand over the Argon Express logo, felt something. A ridge. The paint seemed unusually thick.

Woody was watching me from a few feet away. My fingers located the lower left corner of the two-foot-tall letter A.

“You don’t paint your logo on?” I asked.

“Of course it’s painted on. What the hell—?”

It peeled right up. I tugged some more, and the entire logo—some kind of adhesive vinyl sticker—began to lift off.

“Check out the data plate,” I said. “It doesn’t match the tail number.”

“That’s—that’s *impossible!*”

“They didn’t just steal the cargo, Woody. They stole the whole plane.”