

P A R T O N E

Behind every great fortune lies a great crime.

—HONORÉ DE BALZAC

P R O L O G U E

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 scariest 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.”

2.

WASHINGTON

I think I saw her eyelids move.”

A woman’s voice, distant and echoing, which worked itself into the fevered illogic of a dream.

Everything deep orange, the color of sunset. Murmured voices; a steady high-pitched beep.

Her eyelids wouldn’t open. It felt as if her eyelashes had been glued together.

Against the blood orange sky, stars rushed at her. She was falling headlong through a sky crowded with stars. They dazzled and clotted into odd-shaped white clouds, and then the light became harsh and far too strong and needles of pain jabbed the backs of her eyeballs.

Her eyelashes came unstuck and fluttered like a bird’s wings.

More high-pitched electronic beeps. Not regular anymore, but jumbled, a cacophony.

A man’s voice: “Let’s check an ionized calcium.”

A clattering of something—dishes? Footsteps receding.

The man again: “Nurse, did that gas come back?”

The husky voice of the first woman: “Janet, can you page Yurovsky now, please?”

Lauren said, “You don’t have to shout.”

“She made a sound. Janet, would you please page Yurovsky *now*?”

She tried again to speak, but then gave up the effort, let her eyelids close, the lashes gumming back together. The needles receded. She became aware of another kind of pain, deep and throbbing, at the back of her head. It pulsed in time to her heartbeat, rhythmically sending jagged waves of pain to a little spot just behind her forehead and above her eyes.

“Ms. Heller,” said the man, “if you can hear me, say something, will you?”

“What do you want, I’m shouting!” Lauren said at the top of her voice.

“Now I see it,” one of the female voices said. “Like she’s trying to talk. I don’t know what she said.”

“I think she said ‘Ow.’”

“The doctor’s on rounds right now,” one of the women said.

“I don’t care *what* he’s doing.” The husky-voiced woman. “I don’t care if he’s in the medical supply closet screwing a nurse. If you don’t page him right this second, I will.”

Lauren smiled, or at least she thought she did.

SHE FELT a hard pinch on her neck.

“Hey!” she protested.

Her eyelids flew open. The light was unbearably bright, just as painful, but everything was gauzy and indistinct, like a white scrim over everything. She wondered whether she’d fallen back asleep for several hours.

A hulking silhouette loomed, came close, then pulled back.

A male voice: “Well, she’s responding to painful stimuli.”

Yeah, I’ll show you a painful stimulus, Lauren thought but couldn’t say.

Actually, two silhouettes, she realized. She couldn’t focus, though. Everything was strangely hazy, like every time you saw Lucille Ball in that dreadful movie version of *Mame*. Lauren had played the snooty Gloria Upson in the Charlottesville High School production of *Auntie Mame*, and she’d seen the Rosalind Russell movie countless times, but couldn’t stand the Lucy one.

“Mrs. Heller, I’m Dr. Yurovsky. Can you hear me?”

Lauren considered replying, then decided not to bother. Too much effort. The words weren’t coming out the way she wanted.

“Mrs. Heller, if you can hear me, I’d like you to wiggle your right thumb.”

That she definitely didn’t feel like doing. She blinked a few times, which cleared her vision a little.

Finally, she was able to see a man with a tall forehead and long chin, elongated like the man in the moon. Or like a horse. The face came slowly

into focus, as if someone were turning a knob. A hooked nose, receding hair. His face was tipped in toward hers. He wore a look of intent concern.

She wiggled her right thumb.

“Mrs. Heller, do you know where you are?”

She tried to swallow, but her tongue was a big woolen sock. No saliva. *My breath must reek*, she thought.

“I’m guessing it’s a hospital.” Her voice was croaky.

She looked up. A white dropped ceiling with a rust stain on one of the panels, which didn’t inspire confidence. Blue privacy curtains hung from a U-shaped rail. She wasn’t in a private room. Some kind of larger unit, with a lot of beds: an ICU, maybe. A bag of clear liquid sagged on a metal stand, connected by a tube to her arm.

An immense bouquet of white lilies in a glass florist’s vase on the narrow table next to her bed. She craned her neck just enough to see they were calla lilies, her favorites. A lightning bolt of pain shot through her eyes. She groaned as she smiled.

“From Roger?”

A long pause. Someone whispered something. “From your boss.”

Leland, she thought, smiling inwardly. *That’s just like him*. She wondered who had ordered the flowers for him.

And how he knew what had happened to her.

She adjusted the thin blanket. “My head hurts,” she said. She felt something lumpy under the blanket, on top of her belly. Pulled it out. A child’s Beanie Baby: a yellow giraffe with orange spots and ugly Day-Glo green feet. It was tattered and soiled. Tears welled in her eyes.

“Your son dropped that off this morning,” a woman said in a soft, sweet voice.

She turned. A nurse. She thought: *This morning?* That meant it wasn’t morning anymore. She was confused; she’d lost all track of time.

Gabe’s beloved Jaffee—as a toddler, he couldn’t say “Giraffiti,” the name printed on the label. Actually, neither could she. Too cute by half.

“Where is he?”

“Your son is fine, Mrs. Heller.”

“Where is he?”

“I’m sure he’s at home in bed. It’s late.”

“What—time is it?”

“It’s two in the morning.”

She tried to look at the nurse, but turning her head escalated the pain to a level nearly unendurable. How long had she been out? She remembered glancing at her watch just before Roger got back to the car, seeing 10:28. Almost ten thirty at night on Friday. The attack came not long after that. She tried to do the math. Four hours? Less: three and a half?

Lauren drew breath. “Wait—when did Gabe come by? You said—you said, ‘this morning’—but what time is it—?”

“As I said, just after two in the morning.”

“On Saturday?”

“Sunday. Sunday *morning*, actually. Or Saturday night, depending on how you look at it.”

Her brain felt like sludge, but she knew the nurse had to be wrong. “*Saturday* morning, you mean.”

The nurse shook her head, then looked at the horse-faced doctor, who said, “You’ve been unconscious for more than twenty-four hours. Maybe longer. It would help us if you knew approximately what time the attack took place.”

“Twenty-four . . . hours? Where’s—where’s Roger?”

“Looks like you got a nasty blow to the back of the head,” the doctor said. “From everything we’ve seen, you haven’t sustained any injuries beyond a small spiral fracture at the base of the skull. The CT scan doesn’t show any hematomas or blood clots. You were extremely lucky.”

I guess it depends on your definition of luck. She recalled Roger’s panicked face. The arms grabbing her from behind. His scream: “Why *her*?”

“Is Roger okay?”

Silence.

“Where’s Roger?”

No reply.

She felt the cold tendrils of fear in her stomach.

“Where *is* he? Is Roger okay or not?”

“A couple of policemen came by to talk to you,” he said. “But you don’t have to talk to anyone until you feel up to it.”

“The police?” Tears welled in her eyes. “Oh, dear God, what happened to him?”

A long pause.

“Oh, God, no,” Lauren said. “Tell me he’s okay.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Heller,” the doctor said.

“What? Please, God, tell me he’s alive!”

“I wish I could, Ms. Heller. But we don’t know where your husband is.”

3.

LOS ANGELES

Woody Sawyer ran after me, his boots clanging on the steel air stairs. “What are you saying?” he yelled over the clamor of the K-loader and the roar of a jet engine starting up nearby. “This isn’t our plane?”

I didn’t answer him. I was too busy looking around. A minute or so later I found what I was looking for.

It was the plane I’d seen being refueled earlier. A white Boeing 727 parked on the far side of the Argon jet that was being loaded. It looked identical to the two Argon jets—they could have been triplets—only it had the name VALU CHARTERS on its fuselage.

“Let’s take a look inside,” I said.

“That’s not our plane!”

“Can you get a couple of your guys to roll one of those air stairs over here?”

“You out of your mind? That’s not our plane!”

“Have you ever seen a Valu Charters jet around here before?”

“The hell do I know? These dinky little companies come and go, and they lease space from other companies—”

“I didn’t see any Valu Charters listed on the airport directory, did you?”

Woody shrugged.

“Let’s take a look,” I said.

“Look, I could get in some serious deep trouble for boarding someone else’s plane. That’s illegal, man.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I’ll take the fall.”

He hesitated a long time, shrugged again, then walked back to where the crew was loading. A minute or so later he came back, rolling a set of

air stairs up to the Valu Charters plane. He climbed up to the cockpit door with visible reluctance.

Just as I suspected, underneath the Valu Charters logo—which also peeled right off—was the orange Argon Express Cargo logo. Painted on. Remnants of tamper-resistant tape adhered like old confetti to the door-frame of the cargo hatch.

When the door came open, I could see that it was fully loaded with row after row of cargo containers. Each one had a different set of numbers affixed to its sides—really, stick-on letters and numbers of random sizes, sort of like the cutout newsprint letters in a ransom note.

“Do the numbers match your manifest?” I said. I knew they would.

There was a long silence.

“I don’t get it,” Woody finally said. “How’d they switch planes?”

“Easy,” I said. “It was a whole lot easier than off-loading and driving it out of the airport, and it only takes two guys—a pilot and a copilot.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Didn’t you just say you can buy one of these old junkers cheap? All they had to do was paint it white and fly it in here in the middle of the night after the control tower’s closed. Park it nearby and slap on a couple of vinyl decals. Probably took two guys ten minutes, and no one was around to see them because everyone had gone home. But then, they were already on the airfield, so they were *supposed* to be here. No one probably gave them a second look. Honest-man security, right?”

“My God. Jesus. That’s . . . *brilliant*.”

“Well, almost. By the time they flew in last night, the fuel-service guys had gone home, too, I bet.”

“So?”

“So that’s why the plane’s still here. They couldn’t fly it out without filling the tank. Which they just finished doing. I’m guessing they were going to wait to take off until everyone went home.”

“But . . . who could have done it?”

“I really don’t care who. I wasn’t hired to find out who.”

“But—whoever did it—they must be around here somewhere.”

“No doubt.”

“Look, Mr.—can I call you Nick?”

“Sure.”

“Nick, we both want the same thing. We agree on that.”

“Okay.”

“We’re basically playing on the same team.”

“Right.”

“See, I really don’t think Traverse Development needs to hear the little details, you get me? Just tell them we found the missing cargo. Or you did—I don’t care. No harm, no foul. Some kind of mix-up at the airport. Happens from time to time. They’re going to be mighty relieved, and they’re not going to ask a lot of questions.”

“Works for me.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“But first, would you mind opening this can right here?” I approached one of the big containers. Most of the igloos were stuffed with hundreds of packages for a lot of different customers, but the routing label on this one indicated that it had originated in Bahrain. All of its contents were destined for the Arlington, Virginia, office of Traverse Development. Through a Plexiglas window, I could see tightly packed rows of cardboard boxes, all the same size and shape, all with Traverse Development’s logo printed on them.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that,” he said.

“You have the keys, Woody.”

“Customs hasn’t even inspected it yet. I could get in some deep kimchi.”

“You could get in some even deeper kimchi if you don’t.”

“That supposed to be a threat?”

“Yeah, basically,” I said. “See, my mind keeps going back to the parking-space thing.”

“Parking space? What about it?”

“Well, so, whenever one of your planes lands and parks for the night or whatever, your crew has to record the number of the space it’s parked in. Standard operating procedure, right?”

He shrugged. “What’s this about?”

“Your Argon jet flies in from Brussels yesterday and parks in space 36, right? That’s in your computer records. Then our bad guys do this big switcheroo with the decals, so what *looks* like your plane ends up in the wrong space. Number 34, right? Only the problem is, someone already

entered 36 in the computer log, couple minutes after it landed. Which isn't so easy to backdate. And which could be a problem when the guy from Customs comes to check things out, and he's going to go, 'Huh, how'd that plane get moved overnight, like by magic?' So someone wrote the *new* space, number 34, on the whiteboard in your office. That would be . . . you. Woody."

Woody began to sputter, indignant. "You don't know the first thing about how our operations work."

I tapped on the Plexiglas window of the cargo container. "Why don't you pop this open, then we'll talk. I'm really curious what's in here that would make you and two of your employees risk such a long stretch in prison. Gotta be something totally worth it."

He stared at me for a few seconds, then whined, "Come on, man, I open this, I could get in trouble."

"Kind of a little late for that," I said.

"I can't open this," he said, almost pleading. "I really can't."

"Okay," I said, shrugging. "But you got a phone book I could borrow first? See, I want to call around to some of the aircraft boneyards. There aren't that many of them—what, six or seven airparks in California and Arizona and Nevada? And I'm going to read off the serial number of that old junker over there and find out who sold it. And who they sold it to. Oh, sure, it'll probably be some dummy company, but that'll be easy to trace."

"I thought you don't care who did it," Woody said. His sallow face had turned deep red.

"See, that's my problem. Kind of a personal failing. I get my hooks into something, I can't stop. Sort of an obsessive-compulsive thing."

He cleared his throat. "Come on, man."

I tapped the Plexiglas window of the igloo. "Let's pop the hood here so I can take a quick look, then you can get back to your Sudoku." I tried to peer through the window, but the Plexiglas was scratched and fogged, and all I could see were the boxes. I turned around and gave Woody a smile and found myself looking into the barrel of a SIG-Sauer P229, a nine-millimeter semiautomatic.

"Woody," I said, disappointed, "I thought we were playing on the same team."

Hands up, Heller,” Woody said, “and turn around.”

I didn’t put my hands up. Or turn around. I waited.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Move it.” There was a tic in his right eye.

“Woody, you’re making things worse.”

“You’re on private property here, and I asked you nicely to leave, okay? So move it. Hands up.”

I brought my hands up slowly, then thrust my left hand up quickly and suddenly and grabbed the barrel of the SIG and torqued it downward while I smashed my right fist into his mouth. He yelped. Like most guys who brandish weapons, he wasn’t prepared to defend himself without one. He tried to wrest his gun from my grip, and at the same time he turned his head away, thereby offering up his ear, which my right fist connected with, and he yelped again. Then I levered the pistol’s barrel upward until his index finger, trapped in the trigger guard, snapped like a dry twig.

Woody screamed and sank to his knees. I pointed his SIG-Sauer at him, and said, “Now would you mind unlocking this container, please?”

He struggled to his feet, and I didn’t help him up.

“There’s a seal on it,” he said. “They’re going to know I opened it.”

“I’ll take care of Customs.”

“I’m not talking about Customs.”

“Who are you worried about?”

He shook his head, then shook his right hand, moaned. “You broke my finger.”

“Awful sorry,” I said, not sounding very sorry.

Groaning the whole time, he walked around to the back of the igloo and inserted one of his keys in a padlock, then rolled up a panel.

“You got a box cutter?” I said.

He pulled one out of a holster on his belt and handed it to me. I tucked his gun into the waistband of my pants, sliced open one of the cardboard cartons and pried the flaps apart.

When I realized what was inside, I smiled. “No wonder my client was a little antsy about it.”

“Good God Almighty,” Woody said.

The box was tightly packed with shrink-wrapped packages of brand-new United States currency.

Hundred-dollar bills: the new ones, of course, with the off-center engraving of Ben Franklin looking constipated. Each oblong bundle—“bricks,” they’re officially called—was stamped in black letters, **REPORT ANY DISCREPANCIES TO YOUR LOCAL FEDERAL RESERVE OFFICE** and had a bar code printed at one end.

These were fresh, unopened packs of money from the U.S. Bureau of Engraving that somehow had ended up in Bahrain, in the hands of some company in Arlington, Virginia, I’d never heard of before that morning.

“I had no idea,” Woody said. “I swear.”

“What’s the volume of this thing?” I thumped the side of the igloo.

“I don’t know, like around five hundred cubic feet, maybe? Just shy of that.”

I thought for a moment. I’m pretty good at math—one of the few remaining legacies of my father, who was not only a math whiz but an immensely rich man before he went to prison.

I unwrapped one brick and counted forty packets of bills. Each packet contained a hundred bills; they always do. That meant that each brick was worth forty thousand dollars. One cubic foot, I figured, was around twenty-four million dollars.

Assuming that each box was packed with bricks of hundred-dollar bills, just like this one, the container held almost a billion dollars. Maybe more.

A billion dollars.

I’d never seen a billion dollars up close and personal. I was impressed by how much space it took up, even in hundred-dollar bills.

“A little spending money, Woody?”

He'd stopped nursing his broken index finger. He was gaping. "My God . . . My God . . . I had no idea."

"What did you think was in here?"

"I . . . I had no idea. Honestly, I didn't! I'm telling you, I had no idea—they didn't . . ."

"No idea at all, Woody?"

He didn't look up. "They didn't give me details."

"But someone knew. A lot of time and money and thought went into this. And the risk of hiring you and a couple other guys in your company."

"I just did my part."

"Which was to make sure the switch went through no problem."

He nodded.

"I'll bet they gave you an emergency contact number. In case something got screwed up."

He nodded.

"I want that number, Woody."

He glanced up at me, then down.

"See, Woody," I said, "this is where the road forks. You can either cooperate with me and make things better. Or not, and make things even worse. A whole lot worse."

He said nothing.

My cell phone started ringing. There was no one I needed to talk to. I let it go to voice mail.

"Woody, you sure as hell didn't pull this off by yourself. No offense. So why don't you give me a phone number?"

"I thought you didn't care who did it," Woody said.

"I do now," I said.

EVERYONE WHO served in the Iraq war knew the stories about the missing American cash. Not long after the U.S. invaded Iraq, the U.S. government secretly flew twelve billion dollars in cash to Baghdad. I know it's hard to believe, and it sounds like it was made up by one of those wacko left-wing conspiracy-obsessed blogs on the Internet. But it's a matter of documented fact. Twelve billion dollars in U.S. banknotes was trucked from the Federal Reserve Bank in East Rutherford, New Jersey, to Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington, where it

was put on pallets and loaded on C-130 military transport planes and flown to Baghdad.

The idea, I guess, was that this was the only way to pay our contractors working in Iraq and run the puppet government: in stacks of Benjamins. Baghdad was awash in crisp new American banknotes. Gunnysacks full of cash sat around, unguarded, in Iraqi ministry offices. Bureaucrats and soldiers played football with bricks of hundred-dollar bills.

And here's the best part: Somehow, nine billion dollars just disappeared. Vanished. Without a trace.

I had an idea where some of it might have gone.

My cell phone started ringing again. Annoyed, I fished it out of my pocket, glanced at the caller ID. It said Lauren Heller—my brother's wife. In Washington, D.C., it was around one in the morning. She wasn't calling to chat.

I answered, "Lauren, what's up?"

"It's me."

Not Lauren. The voice of an adolescent boy. Lauren's fourteen-year-old son, Gabe.

I hadn't spoken to my obnoxious brother in months, but I liked his wife a lot, and her son—Roger's stepson—was a great kid. Gabe and I talked on the phone at least once a week, and I did stuff with him as often as I could. He was the son I didn't have, might not ever have; and I was, I guess, the father he lacked. Having ended up with Roger as his stepfather instead.

"Hey, bud, I'm sorry. I can't really talk now. I'm with a client." I glanced at Woody, pulled his Sig-Sauer from my waistband, and wagged it at the guy. Like some overworked customer-service representative, I said apologetically: "I'll be right with you."

"Uncle Nick," Gabe said. "You need to get over here."

"I'm not in D.C., Gabe. What's wrong?"

"It's Mom. She's in the hospital."

"What happened? Is she okay?"

"I think she's in a coma."

"A *coma*? How—"

"No one's telling me anything. She got mugged or something, but—"

"Where's your dad? Is he out of town on business?"

“I don’t know where he is. *No* one does. *Please*, Uncle Nick. Can you get back here now?”

“Gabe,” I said, “I’m in the middle of something, but as soon as I can—”

“Uncle Nick,” he said. “I need you.”