



**PART
ONE**

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TURBULENCE
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ZAFFRE

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Their contact told them that the weather in Bogotá was unseasonably humid for the time of year, and Marc Dane felt it, as if every last percentage point of the moisture in the air was gathering at the small of his back.

His shirt stuck to his skin and the driver's seat of the SUV, and the cool monoxide-laden air of the highway through the open window did nothing to ease his discomfort. He ran a hand through his unkempt dirty-blond hair, pushing it out of his eyes. Marc's expression had a wolfish cast to it, and beneath the plain denim shirt he was whipcord-thin, wound tight with tension.

The road rumbled beneath the wheels of the big Chinese-made Landwind SUV as he kept the vehicle at a steady pace. Marc had expected the temperature to drop once the sun had set, but the cowl of low, dense cloud over the city acted like a dome, locking in the humidity for the duration.

He flicked a glance upward. The sky threatened rain, but he'd been in Colombia for over seventy-two hours and nothing more than a thin drizzle had fallen. His gaze dropped back to the road, and the river of crimson tail lights along the Avenida El Dorado. Traffic was busy, but it moved swiftly. Cars and motorcycles flowed around long, segmented busses. Everything was heading steadily northwest, along the wide road that bisected the city from the foot of Monserrate to the Bogotá River.

Marc shifted in his seat and glanced at the man in the back of the Landwind. Assim Kader's youthful, unblemished Middle Eastern features were under-lit by the greenish glow of the tablet computer in his hands. The flat-screen device sat in a cradle with two contoured grips on either side, giving it the look of an expensive hand-held videogame console. The Saudi was lost in the images on the display. The pictures he was seeing were coming back in real-time from a camera mounted on the quadrotor drone, flying a few

hundred meters ahead of the moving SUV. Kader guided the tiny machine along at rooftop altitude, keeping it in position above a white C-Class Mercedes coupe. They had been following the car all the way from the upmarket Rosales neighbourhood uptown.

‘The power-pack is dropping out,’ he said, sensing Marc’s attention on him. ‘I’d say we have five more minutes before I have to reel the drone back in.’ Assim spoke with the cut-glass precision of someone with an expensive British public school education. ‘There’s a bit of a breeze. Its making props work hard.’

‘How long to swap in a fresh battery?’ Marc’s accent, by contrast, was all Estuary English. Both of them were a very long way from home in the close heat of Colombia’s biggest city.

‘Two minutes, tops,’ said Assim.

Marc made a quick decision and flicked his fingers at the air. ‘Get it back. We’re running a risk having it up in the first place . . . I’ll move us up a couple of car-lengths to keep the target in sight.’ He let the Landwind drift over into the right lane and in the middle distance, the white Merc crossed his line of sight.

‘Where is he even going?’ muttered Assim, as he slid open the SUV’s sunroof.

‘We’ll find out soon enough.’

The target of their surveillance mission was Mateo Garza, a man who – on paper at least – appeared to be a successful financial advisor, with little about him to raise suspicions. All that was the legend, however. Garza *was* a money guy, the only bit of the story that was true. It was just that the cash he handled belonged to senior members of a South American criminal cartel known as La Noche.

Marc had crossed paths with the cartel’s people on a couple of occasions. The last time had been at an auction for a stolen nuclear device on an oil rig off the coast of Somalia, and that fact alone spoke volumes as to what kind of aspirations La Noche had.

Not content with making obscene amounts of money from the drug trade, arms dealing and human trafficking, the cartel were

working their way toward an end goal of gaining a clandestine kind of nationhood. They wanted to buy their way into the big leagues, to share the rarefied air of mega-rich corporations and national governments.

La Noche were a way off that yet, but the moves they were making had drawn the attention of the organization Marc worked for. A group whose mission was, in the simplest terms, to put a spanner in the works of injustice wherever they could.

Dane and Kader were both 'consultants' for the Special Conditions Division, a team that operated on the fringes of legality, and quite often, beyond it. The SCD was a subset of a multinational called the Rubicon Group, and the duo's job descriptions within it were nicely nebulous. Enough to conceal that Assim was a genius-level grey-hat hacker, and Marc was an ex-Royal Navy officer and former field technician for MI6. Both of them had come to Rubicon for their own reasons, but both stayed because something in the SCD's ethos resonated with them. Here, they had the chance to push back against all the darkness in the world, in the places where the law couldn't reach.

Mateo Garza was a person of interest to Rubicon. He was a vector, a lightning rod. The financier had made some bad choices in the last few months that had seen him draw the ire of his masters in the cartel, and now he was on the move, trying to find a way out before La Noche decided he had outlived his usefulness.

Penetrating Garza's personal communications had netted some useful but time-sensitive intelligence. The man was going to meet someone, and he was offering this contact 'material' worth enough to command an asking price of five million US dollars.

But as to the identity of the interested party, and what the nature of the material actually was, they could only speculate. Marc was guessing records of La Noche's off-shore bank transactions, and the most likely buyer for that kind of data was either the Drug Enforcement Agency, or one of the cartel's rivals in Bolivia.

If Rubicon could get hold of that information, it could be turned against one of the largest organized crime groups on the planet; but Garza had already rejected a pass from one of the company's other operatives. So the focus had shifted to surveillance and digital interception.

Marc had taken the assignment to put some distance between himself and Rubicon's offices in Monaco. He was still feeling the after-burn of a situation that had played out in South Korea, stemming from a betrayal by one of his own team that had ended with too many unresolved issues.

A high-pitched buzz sounded above him and he flinched as the camera drone dropped out of the night air and clattered in through the SUV's open sun roof.

Assim caught the thing awkwardly and set it down in the foot well. 'We've been driving around in circles for hours. Do you think Garza suspects something?'

'Bloke's just being careful,' said Marc. 'Considering who he works for, wouldn't you be?'

Garza's driver – one of two Russian bodyguards – had gone half-way around the city before committing to the highway, clearly in the process of "washing" his route to shake off any possible tails. The drone had kept the SCD operatives out of sight, which meant that Garza probably thought he was in the clear.

Assim studied a digital map, the same one Marc had up on the Landwind's dashboard display. 'We just passed the turn off to Los Monjes.'

'Yeah.' Marc kept his eyes on the white Mercedes. From this point onward, the Avenida El Dorado was a straight run that ended at Bogotá International Airport, a few miles up ahead. 'What's he up to?'

'Maybe the meeting is *at* the airport,' offered Assim. 'Garza is there for someone flying in. And once he's inside the terminal building, not only has he got his own people to look out for him, but the airport security are there too.'

‘And the military,’ Marc noted, catching on. El Dorado Airport was also the site of a small base for the Fuerza Aérea Colombiana, the Colombian air force. There would be a lot of watchers in place all around the terminals. ‘Clever,’ he added. ‘Even the cartels would think twice about kicking off around there.’

‘If we go in, he could make us,’ said Assim. ‘How do we play this?’ ‘By ear,’ Marc said, with a crooked smile. ‘Like I always do.’

Assim jumped out of the SUV in front of the main terminal, and did his best to look casual as he followed Garza and one of the bodyguards inside. Marc put the Landwind in the parking area a short distance away from where the other bodyguard left the Mercedes, and trailed her in.

He kept his battered daypack over one shoulder, pretending to be engrossed in his phone, but maintained a careful pace behind the woman.

Rubicon had no information on the Russians in Garza’s employ, so Assim had christened them ‘Janet’ and ‘John,’ like the titular characters from the old learn-to-read books that had taught him English as a child. At a guess, Marc would have said that they were both ex-military, and neither looked uncomfortable in the muggy South American climate, which suggested a familiarity with the region.

Janet’s light jacket sported no tell-tale bulges where a pistol might be concealed, lending credence to Assim’s theory about the airport as the ideal meet site.

Anyone foolish enough to bring a weapon into the terminal was taking a serious risk. There were metal detectors everywhere, and the Colombian Policía Nacional were likely to shoot first and not ask any questions.

Marc’s own Glock semi-automatic was secure in the SUV’s glovebox, but he had a military-spec laptop and few other bits of kit in the backpack that could cause trouble, if it came to it. He donned

a set of wireless earbuds and switched the sat-phone in his hand to an encrypted channel. The phone resembled a high-end smart handset, but it was a custom unit made by a Rubicon subsidiary, packed with cutting-edge black ops tech that was far more illegal than any firearm.

'I see you.' Assim's voice sounded in Marc's ear as he entered the terminal. *'I'm at the coffee shop, your three o'clock.'*

From the corner of his eye, Marc saw the other man on a stool, nibbling at a pastry and toying with his tablet computer. To anyone who didn't look twice, Assim could have been just another young tourist waiting for a flight. He'd picked a good spot, from which he could observe most of the terminal's main atrium.

'Copy.' Marc kept walking, pacing Janet as she fell in behind her colleague John, and Garza himself. *'Target in sight.'*

Garza approached the entrance to the arrivals area, one hand tight on the strap of a leather bag on his shoulder, and he showed no signs of slowing down. A nerve in Marc's jaw jumped, and a split second later Assim was in his ear again. *'Where is he going?'*

Their target went straight to an automated check-in kiosk outside the departures area, and Marc had no choice but to do the same or risk drawing attention to himself.

He passed as close as he dared to Garza and the Russians, briefly catching sight of John as the man slid three passports under a scanner on the kiosk. Boarding passes spat out of a slot and Marc saw the same flight number on each of them.

'Oh, shit.' Marc pulled out the Canadian passport that was part of his cover identity and dithered in front of another kiosk. *'We were wrong. Garza's getting on a plane.'*

'Where to?'

'Avileña Air 8090.'

'That's the redeye flight to Dallas. Is he running?' Marc shot a look across the terminal in Assim's direction. *'That's not right, that doesn't fit our profile—'*

‘Sod the bloody profile,’ Marc hissed. ‘The target is on the move.’
‘*Do we abort?*’

They both knew the answer to that should be *yes*. The safe call to make would be to withdraw, contact the SCD crisis centre and get Rubicon to dispatch someone to Dallas, in hopes of re-acquiring the target there.

But none of that lined up with the twist in Marc’s gut, the instinctive sense that shot through him as he watched Garza walk towards the security barriers. It was late in the day and only a few of the gates were open. A slow-moving line of people had formed, but in a few minutes, the financier would be through them and airside. He would be as good as gone.

‘There’s no guarantee we can pick him up at the other end.’ Marc stepped away and looked back toward Assim. ‘Can you get me a seat on the same flight?’

He saw the other man’s head duck down over his tablet. ‘*Uh. Okay. Give me a minute.*’

‘Faster would be better.’

‘*Window or aisle?*’

‘Whatever, mate!’ Marc couldn’t stop himself from snarling the retort as he backed away from the kiosk, and he collided with a thickset, unsmiling Hispanic man. The man glared back at him from under a black and red baseball cap emblazoned with the name AXEL.

‘Scuse me,’ Marc said, with a weak smile.

‘*Pendejo turista,*’ growled the guy in the cap, and he shouldered the Englishman out of the way as he marched toward the gates.

‘*Right, it’s done,*’ reported Assim. ‘*You’re all the way back in cattle class but it’s the best I could get at short notice. The ticket is booked under your cover name.*’

‘Thanks.’ Marc told him, as he scanned the passport and waited for the boarding pass to print off. ‘Get into the airline system, get a manifest for everybody on the flight. And then tell Monaco what

I'm doing.' He snatched the pass from the slot and jogged across to the gates. Up ahead, he could see John going through separately, and caught a glimpse of the back of Garza's head. Their target was already heading for the metal detectors.

'This is way off-book, Marc,' said Assim. *'It is not going to go down well.'*

'I reckon,' he agreed. 'I'll contact you again when I can.' Marc pulled out the earbuds, dumping his phone in his pocket as he pushed through the gates to the detector arches.

Someone jostled him as he slipped his pack off his shoulder, and he half-turned to see the Russian woman – Janet – standing right next to him. She was carrying Garza's leather bag over one arm.

'Pardon,' she said, in thickly-accented English. The bodyguard gave no sign of recognizing him. 'Can I go in front? I am late. I have a flight to catch.'

'Yeah, same here,' Marc said warily, and stepped aside.

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