



**PART  
TWO**

**ROUGH AIR  
PRESSURE DROP  
JAMES  
SWALLOW**

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**ZAFFRE**

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*Previously: Private security operative Marc Dane and his hacker colleague Assim Kader are shadowing Mateo Garza, a former money man for a vicious Colombian drug cartel; but when Garza unexpectedly boards an international flight from Bogotá to Dallas, Marc has no choice but to follow this quarry . . .*

The lights in the economy class cabin of the Airbus A330-200 dimmed as the night flight settled into its cruising altitude, but the gloom did little for the upset toddler a couple of rows ahead of Marc Dane. The baby had big lungs for kid so small, and she continued to serenade the rest of her fellow passengers with an ululating wail, even as her mother tried fruitlessly to soothe her.

The other people in the cabin seemed to be tuning it out. Almost all the seats in the back third of the airliner were filled, and the people in them were mostly Colombian nationals or American tourists taking the cheap option home to the USA. The seat next to Marc was filled by an angular elderly gentleman with a leathery, wrinkled face who fidgeted constantly. Despite his thin, bony form, the old guy had elbows that were sharp and jabby, and he kept putting them in Marc's ribs as he tried to colonise all the space around him.

Marc, of course, was far too British to do anything more than return a tight smile and shift in his seat. Fishing his smartphone from an inner pocket of his jacket, Marc went to the device's file store and tabbed across the data.

Uploaded into a secure partition of the phone's memory were some of the mission intelligence documents for the surveillance operation deployed after Mateo Garza; a dossier containing a

briefing on the man, his personal history and long-lens observation photos.

Marc studied Garza's face carefully, re-committing it to his memory. The target was somewhere on the plane, but Marc had lost sight of him during the boarding process. Garza liked his luxuries, so it was highly unlikely the financier was back here in the cattle-car section. He had to be up front in Business Executive class, sandwiched between the cold-eyed bodyguards he'd hired, the ones Marc's hacker colleague Assim had nicknamed Janet and John.

A soft chime sounded and the seat belt light went out, quickly followed by a chorus of metallic clicking as dozens of passengers immediately unfastened themselves, and made for the toilets at the rear of the cabin. Marc released his own belt, eyeing the curtain that partitioned off economy class from the rest of the airliner's interior.

Garza had boarded this flight because he was going to meet someone, and Marc's assumption was that the meeting would take place at the end of the flight, maybe at the airport in Dallas or somewhere nearby. The intelligence the financier had on the criminal cartel known as La Noche had to be secured, or else this entire operation would be for nothing.

Marc swallowed hard and worked his jaw, trying to equalize the pressure in his head. Usually, it would settle down for him by the time a plane was cruising, but tonight it would not go away. There was a dull, heavy block of lead behind his sinuses, and his eyes ached like they were a size too big for their sockets. The constant screaming of the baby didn't help.

Rolling his neck in a vain attempt to ease the pain, Marc let his gaze rake over the people in the seats around him, and he saw a distinctive red and black AXEL baseball cap two rows back. The surly man he had bumped into at the airport check-in desk didn't notice Marc's attention as he rose, and he pushed aside his neighbouring passengers, ignoring their complaints.

Axel – which was how Marc was now thinking of him – continued to show a complete lack of concern for his fellow travellers and barged past the ones in the aisle to get to the rear galley. He had a sling bag with him, but he hadn't been carrying anything back in the airport.

As the man vanished out of sight, the partition curtain near Marc's seat swished open and shut to let a female flight attendant come through. In the brief instant it was pulled back, he caught a glimpse of people in the next cabin, up and moving around. There was no sign of Garza or the Russians.

*Time to take a walk, Marc told himself. I'm just another bored passenger, stretching his legs, nothing more than that . . .*

He was half out of his seat when the old guy slumped over on to Marc's shoulder and one of his spidery, long-fingered hands flopped into his lap. Wincing at a new wave of nausea from the pressure in his head, Marc gently pushed the man back toward the window.

The elderly man sagged, a rag doll figure only held in place by the seat belt across his lap. Marc gasped as the pain in his skull gathered, spiking through his ears like twin ice-picks, but still he tried to gently nudge the old man upright.

That was when he saw the darkening blue tone gathering in the other passenger's lips. He snatched at the man's thin wrist and felt a weakening pulse there.

'Hey,' Marc's whole head hurt when he spoke, ringing like a struck bell. 'I need some . . . Some help . . .' The invisible vice tightening on him cranked in a few more notches, and it took a real effort to pull himself out of his seat. All of a sudden, it was hard to catch a breath. He felt dizzy and sick. Without thinking, Marc's hand went to his face, touching his upper lip. His fingers came away marked with blood.

The baby wasn't crying any more. Other passengers were lolling against one another or slumped in their seats, many with nosebleeds

just like Marc's. He turned to see a heavy-set man drop in the aisle, slamming hard into the carpeted decking.

At last, a realization came to him, as slow and ponderous as an iceberg drifting out of sea-fog. Marc *knew* this feeling. He had been trained for it, back in his navy service.

*Hypoxia.* The word floated through his thick, sluggish thoughts. He staggered forward a few steps, his head swimming.

The last time had felt like this, there had been a fair few bottles of vodka involved. *Remember that? The bar near Wong Kei's restaurant in Chinatown—?*

'Focus!' He bit out the word, forcing himself to concentrate.

The jet's cabin was depressurizing, robbing all the passengers of precious oxygen their bodies needed to keep functioning. At cruising altitude, thousands of feet up, the air was way too thin for an unprotected person to remain conscious for more than a few moments.

*Those yellow mask thingies, where are they? Marc slapped at a panel above the seats. Why aren't they falling out? In the event of a loss of cabin pressure . . .*

The words of the flight safety video played back in his head, echoing down a tunnel of fading awareness. Again, it took a massive effort to clear the haze from his thoughts for a few seconds. It was a fight to keep his attention on what was important.

Marc could feel himself succumbing, his consciousness crumbling as his brain was starved of vital oxygen. Grey mist clouded the edges of his vision, blurring everything into incoherence. He only had seconds left, and he would be unconscious before he hit the floor.

He fell more than he staggered, over the insensate man, tripping, down to his knees. In front of him, the flight attendant he had seen moments before was already slumped in a heap, her hands caught in the material of a bright yellow emergency pack stowed under a bulkhead. She'd managed to get it half out of its locker before she lost consciousness.

Dimly, Marc registered the pack's contents spilt across the deck. A slim green cylinder trailing a clear pipe to a breather mask. The woman had passed out trying to put it on.

The screaming, sickening pressure in Marc's head forced him down, his legs turning to water. He grabbed at the air tank, dragging it toward him.

*Secure your own mask before helping others*, he remembered.

Marc jammed the stale plastic cup over his nose and mouth, and managed to take a single breath before, at last, the darkness engulfed him.

It could have been minutes. It might have been hours.

Eventually, the black tide that had swallowed him up retreated, and Marc's awareness came back to him in sickly fits and starts. He felt like a collection of pieces, uncoordinated and broken. Limbs were rubbery and heavy. Hands moved slow and felt numb. Vision was cloudy, making it hard to see.

He was lying on his front, arms wrapped about his chest like he was hugging himself, and that was what had kept the mask from the portable O2 tank from falling away from his face. With care, Marc pressed the breather firmly in place and greedily sucked in gulps of oxygen. After a while, he felt well enough to move.

Marc rolled over and sat up in the exit row. He secured the mask's elastic straps tightly in place, then slung the cylinder over his shoulder. The tank's pressure gauge was already reading a quarter down.

'How long was I out?' Marc asked himself, the words coming out in an arid rasp. His lips and nostrils felt dry.

Everywhere he looked, the cabin was a jumble of silent, unmoving bodies. He reached for the flight attendant and reluctantly touched a finger to the carotid artery in her neck. As before with the old man, he felt a weak pulse.

These people were still alive, but they wouldn't stay that way for long. Slowly suffocating, the hypoxia would end with brain death



for each and every one of them. Unless the cabin pressurization was restored or the airliner descended to a lower altitude, two hundred innocent people would perish.

A series of bleak scenarios, each more chilling than the last, went through Marc's mind. If this was some kind of mechanical malfunction, if everyone on board including the flight crew was unconscious, they were doomed. The Airbus would keep flying out over the ocean until it ran out of fuel and fell from the sky.

If the cartel had uncovered the same intelligence as Rubicon, and guessed Mateo Garza's intentions to reveal their secrets, it was right out of La Noche's playbook to cause an atrocity on such a scale. The cartel was run by men who were not satisfied unless they spilled blood over everything they did. The suggestion that they would kill a plane-load of innocent civilians in order to destroy one traitor was all too likely a possibility. La Noche's masters believed very strongly in sending a message to those who defied them, as graveyards full of assassinated police officers, federal agents, politicians and journalists could attest to.

Marc secured the air tank and made his way up the cabin, picking his way over the bodies of unconscious passengers. His first port of call had to be the flight deck, and he tried not to think about what might happen if the pilot and co-pilot had succumbed along with the passengers. If they were out cold, and the cockpit's security door was locked from the inside, he would be trapped back here until he ran out of air.

That grim thought made him stop and check the dial on the pressure gauge again. The gradation on the face of the dial gave no indication of time, but Marc had used O2 tanks on countless scuba dives, and by the size of this one he estimated he had an hour at most. He would need to find any other tanks on board at the first opportunity.

'So, no pressure then.' As soon as the words left his mouth, Marc let out a weak chuckle. '*No pressure!* Huh.' The dull, half-drunk

sensation still clinging to him nearly sent Marc into a fit of laughter, and he forced it away. 'Not the time, mate,' he reminded himself, quickly sobering.

Passing into the next section of the Airbus's cabin, he was greeted with the same scenes as in economy class. Here, the passengers had been settling down to their in-flight meal, and most of them were slumped face-first in their plates of tiny meat cutlets.

Marc squeezed through a gap between a stalled food trolley and a seat row, and something moved up ahead of him. A shadow passed in front of the yellow glow spilling from an overhead light in the business class section. He heard a noise that could have been a voice.

He dropped into a crouch and froze, automatically assuming the worst. Marc strained to listen, but it was impossible to pick out anything distinct over the constant rumble of the airliner's engines.

It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that someone else on the plane had been quick enough to grab another portable air cylinder, but some sixth sense stopped Marc from going forward or calling out.

For a second, he wondered if the oxygen loss had affected him worse than the expected. *Are hallucinations a side effect of hypoxia?* He couldn't remember.

Then the shadow moved again, and a voice cried out in agony.

Marc peered around the side of the food trolley and saw the man in the baseball cap cross from one side of the cabin to the other. He was wiping fresh blood off his hands with a napkin. Axel had a plastic mask over his nose and mouth, more like the kinds that paramedics use to give oxygen to emergency victims than the type clamped to Marc's face. A small O2 cylinder hung from his belt. None of the gear looked like airliner issue.

A flurry of connections clicked together in Marc's thoughts. *If he has that, then he got it on board. If he got it on board, someone helped him get it past security. If someone helped him this isn't an accident. This is a targeted attack.*

Axel disappeared out of sight and Marc heard the agonized wail again. Keeping low, moving in the shadows of the cabin's dimly-lit interior, he got as close as he could to the source of the sound. Sliding into the cover of a vacant chair, Marc mimicked the slump-shouldered appearance of one of the unconscious passengers, covering his face so anyone passing by wouldn't see the mask he wore.

Peeking through the gaps between the wider business class seats, he saw that Axel wasn't alone. The thickset, muscular man was talking to another person in a similar mask. The other guy was pale and skinny, with a thin neck and a nervous, twitchy way about him.

*Chicken or beef*, he thought.

Before them, still belted into his chair and with his wrists secured to the armrests by cable ties, sat Mateo Garza. Either side of him, Garza's Russian bodyguards were out cold, but the accountant had been given an oxygen mask of his own to keep him awake. There were bright red cuts down his chest, slashes that had gone through his jacket, shirt and deep into the flesh beneath. Garza's head lolled forward, bloody spittle dripping from his mouth.

Axel and his skinny mate were discussing Garza with all the professional disinterest of two butchers sizing up a prize pig. The guy with the chicken-neck set to work rifling through Garza's pockets, and whatever he was looking for, he didn't find it. He gave Garza a slap in return.

The conversation between the men grew irritable. Marc knew an interrogation when he saw it, and it wasn't much of a leap to figure out that the thugs were looking for Garza's data on La Noche.

The skinny guy rooted around some more, searching in the overhead storage bins, stopping every couple of seconds to check the luggage he found inside against a snapshot on his phone. Marc remembered the shoulder bag he saw the bodyguard carrying in the airport. It was nowhere to be seen.

Axel appeared to come to a decision, tossing a thick bottle napkin to the other man. And then, to Marc's horror, the two of them

wrapped the heavy cloths around the faces of the unconscious Russians and smothered the life out of the bodyguards.

Marc dropped back out of sight as the grisly execution concluded. He was appalled by the callous killing, but there was no way to intervene without blowing his only advantage. As long as he remained unseen, there was still a chance to stop this – and there were two hundred other lives still hanging in the balance.

He stayed low as the skinny guy called out to his partner, and watched him set off at a quick pace toward the rear of the jet. With the two of them in sight of each other, Marc's odds of survival were poor, but one on one it was a different story.

He drew back, away from Axel and Garza, retreating through the partition curtain. From the mid-deck galley, Marc heard the heavy clank of metal on metal, and he made his way up, sticking close to the bulkhead.

Chancing a look around the panel, Marc saw an open hatch in the floor of the cabin, exposing the narrow galley space below. He caught sight of the other man down there, moving forward along the lower deck.

*Toward the cargo bay, he thought. Garza's bag will be in there with the rest of the luggage.*

He waited until a count of ten, and then followed him down.

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