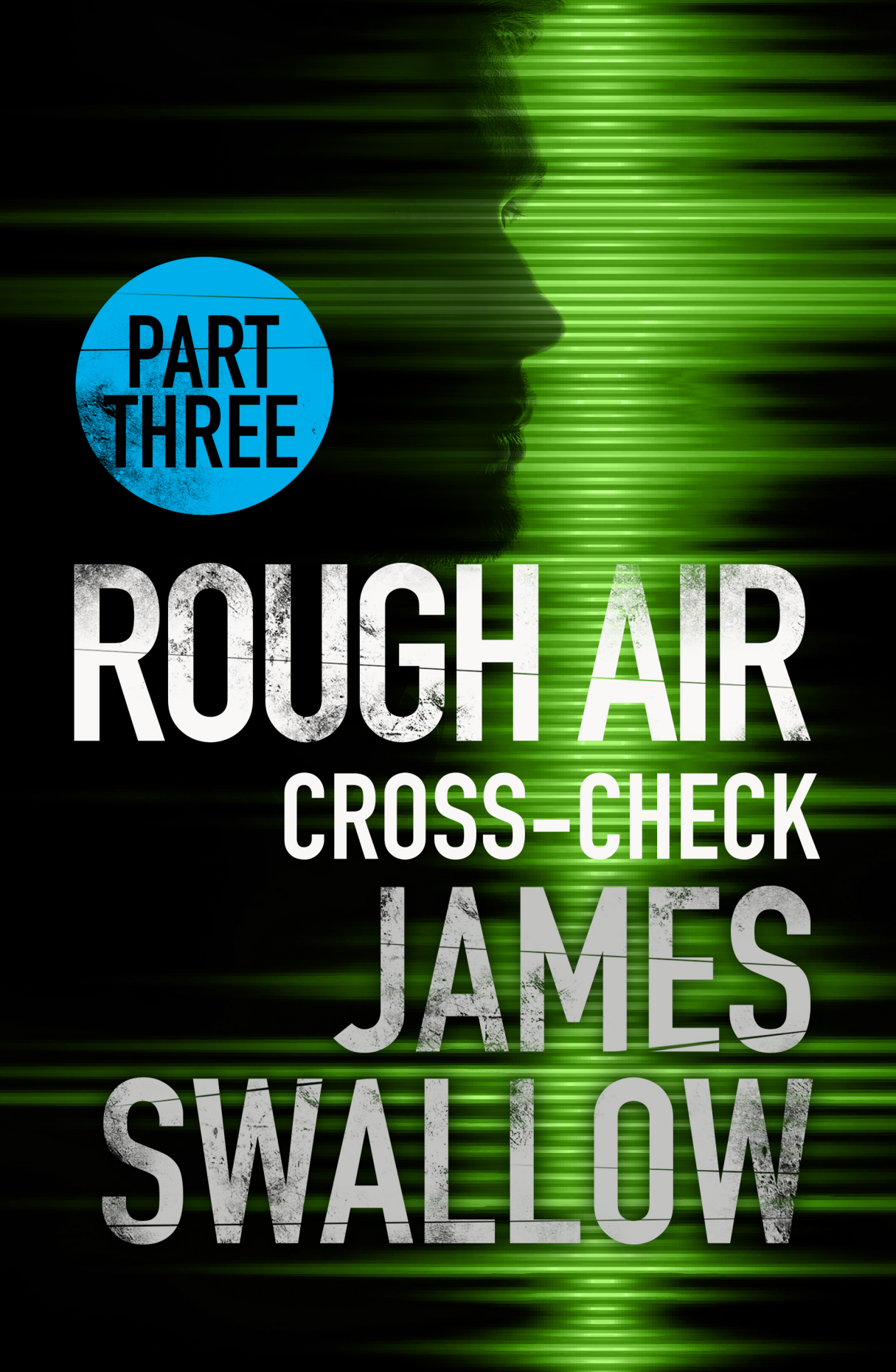




**PART  
THREE**



**ROUGH AIR**  
**CROSS-CHECK**  
**JAMES**  
**SWALLOW**

**PART THREE**

**ROUGH AIR**  
**CROSS-CHECK**

**JAMES**  
**SWALLOW**

**ZAFFRE**

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*Previously: Private security operative Marc Dane is aboard an airliner from Bogotá to Dallas tracking Mateo Garza, a former money man for a vicious Colombian drug cartel. Garza is carrying vital intelligence data, but when the aircraft is hijacked by his ex-employers, only Marc's ability to adapt and improvise will keep him alive . . .*

Diego hated flying.

It went against everything he held sacred. It was unnatural, being forced to sit in a winged tube for hours at a time, among chattering women and screaming children, giving up control of your destiny to some mouthy fly-boy who was probably half-drunk to begin with. Why anyone would willingly agree to get on an airliner was beyond him.

He nervously scratched at the pale skin of his thin neck and glowered at the metal walls and low ceiling. Open air and feet on the ground, that was what he preferred. If it wasn't because *el jefe* had insisted on Diego being on this job, he would have palmed it off on another of La Noche's enforcers. But the cartel's masters were not the kind of men you said no to. Not if you still wanted to be drawing breath by the end of the conversation.

The deck of the airliner shuddered beneath his feet, and he made his way through the narrow gaps between the cargo containers in the ventral bay of the Airbus. Angular plastic boxes built on movable metal frames sat in two rows that ran the length of the jet's lower deck, strapped down with tethers to stop them shifting around during flight.

Through the clear walls of the containers, Diego could see the piles of luggage within. He had a small flashlight that he used to sweep the contents, looking for an elusive dirt-brown leather

shoulder bag. That fool Garza up in the passenger cabin hadn't had it with him, which meant it had to be here.

Diego re-adjusted the oxygen mask over his mouth and nose. The small pressure bottle connected to it dangled from his belt, clanking against the metal panels as he moved. Each breath of the canned air tasted oily and unpleasant, and he longed to take off the breather. But the hard, aching sensation in his skull reminded him how foolish that would be. At this altitude, with the jet's cabin depressurized and everyone else aboard unconscious, he would pass out in seconds without the vital oxygen flowing to him.

*El jefe's* orders were unequivocal: find Garza, find what he stole, but keep him alive. The cartel wanted the traitor in one piece, so that they could personally exercise La Noche's displeasure on the errant fool.

Diego had witnessed the results of that displeasure on more than one occasion. He'd seen terrible things done to the disloyal and the disobedient in the cartel's name, things that gave even the most seasoned killer a moment's pause. Diego had no desire to have that murderous wrath directed toward him.

The beam of his torch flickered off a set of distinctive brass buckles on a carry strap, and he found what he was looking for. Diego drew the long-handled, thin-bladed knife that had been secreted aboard the plane for him, and used it to pry open the cargo container's lid. In a few moments, he had Garza's shoulder bag in his hand, and he sliced open its supple, expensive leather with jagged cutting motions.

The bag's contents spilled out and Diego pawed through them, tossing away anything unnecessary, until his fingers closed around a heavy plastic box the side of a cigarette case. The device had sockets on one side for cables to connect it to a computer, and Diego smiled behind his mask as he pocketed it. *Bueno.*

The constant rumble of the jet engines made it difficult to hear things clearly down on the cramped lower deck, so Diego felt the

movement behind him more than he heard it. He spun as one of the angular containers shifted abruptly on its castors and came rolling right at him.

Diego registered the loose tethers on the deck and someone shoving the container forward – he glimpsed a tall Anglo with an air mask over his face and a determined look in his eyes. The jetliner shuddered through a patch of choppy air and Diego half-leapt, half-fell out of the container’s way as it slammed into the hull. A moment slower, and it would have crushed him into the inner wall of the fuselage.

Cursing violently, he recovered fast and threw himself toward the unknown man, leading with the long blade in his fighting hand. He slashed wild shapes through the air between them, and it had the desired effect, making the other man back off.

The Anglo didn’t have a weapon, no blade, no gun, which meant he wasn’t a sky marshal or anything like that. How was he up and around? Maybe he was another bodyguard working for Garza?

None of that mattered; he had to be dealt with. Diego decided to do it quick. He didn’t want any complications.

Bringing up the knife until it was level with his head, he aimed the tip of the blade at the Anglo’s chest and sighted down it.

‘*Adios, cabrón,*’ he said, his thumb moving to a switch on the side of the knife’s long metal handle.

Marc’s plan to trap the skinny guy between the cargo crates had been a good plan, but in the execution it had come apart. Now he found himself facing an armed and angry cartel thug with a six-inch long blade and the will to use it.

Marc backed off as far as he could, trying to put things on his terms, but there was scarce room to manoeuvre on the cramped cargo deck. He had some experience of knife-fight drills, the benefit of dozens of training sessions with a spirited Krav Maga instructor, and he knew a few disarm moves off by heart. But to make those

work, the attacker had to close the distance and this guy wasn't doing it. Chicken-neck here was balancing on the balls of his feet, trying to get a good angle.

*An angle on what?*

And then Marc saw the reason. The dagger with its narrow, slotted blade and over-long handle. The dagger with the slide-switch toggle on the side, beneath the killer's thumb.

With a snap-click, the cartel thug flicked the switch and the entire blade's length shot toward Marc, propelled by the compression of a heavy spring in the weapon's hilt.

Marc twisted away, feeling the cut of the air as it hummed past his ear and buried itself in another of the cargo containers. A couple of centimetres to the left and the dagger would have gone through his cheek.

*A pilum blade*, he told himself. *Ballistic knife, KGB design, named after the ancient Roman javelin*. His subconscious had a knee-jerk tech-geek reaction to being confronted by a weapon, the instant recall of every point of data he knew about it coming to the fore – as if that might make it easier to deal with the notion of someone trying to kill him. It didn't.

His first reaction was to grab the knife head embedded in the container and yank it out, but the titanium blade was oily, and it was lodged deep in the flank of some heavyweight rigid-side suitcase.

The other man was fumbling a second blade into the spring-loaded hilt, re-arming himself, so instead Marc went on the offence.

He tore a small emergency fire extinguisher from a nearby mount on the wall, the device little bigger than the O2 cylinder slung over his shoulder, and came at the man with the knife. Marc swung the extinguisher back and forth like a club, making clumsy passes that went too wide to connect with the other man's head.

The thug ducked away, skidding into the middle of the cargo bay, where a narrow track led from one end of the compartment to

the other. He was nimble, dodging each one of Marc's telegraphed swipes, but every time he twisted to avoid a hit, gravity made the air tank on his belt swing out on the end of its carabiner loop.

Marc feinted with another wide, swooping motion and the skinny guy side-stepped it. But the extinguisher was already falling out of Marc's hands as he bolted forward, slapping one open palm into the man's chest, grabbing at the green air tank with the other.

The man's dark eyes went wide as he realized what Marc was trying to do and he scrambled to block him. Marc's own O2 cylinder was on his back, out of reach, but that didn't stop the skinny killer from trying to crane around and grab it. Marc snatched at his attacker's air tank and the two of them went into an awkward, violent spin, fighting to stay clear and stay close all at the same time.

Marc's fingers grasped the neck of the tank and he grabbed blindly at the nozzle. The thug punched him hard in the gut, the handle of the pilum knife still in his hand, adding force to the blow. Marc staggered back, winded, but the air tank came away in his hand.

The skinny man recoiled in shock, grabbing at the disconnected mask on his face in open panic. Marc tossed the air tank away down the cargo bay, and the other man went hurtling after it as it bounced toward the front of the plane.

Desperation in his every motion, the thug fell to his hands and knees, but the tank was out of his reach, and he was already struggling for breath. Marc stood back, sucking in ragged gasps of air from his own supply, and watched the man collapse on the deck and fall still as he lost consciousness.

When he was sure the cartel assassin wasn't faking, Marc dragged the man back down the cargo bay and propped him up against one of the containers. He used the tethers to secure him in place, and left the skinny killer slumped there.

Searching him turned up a portable solid-state hard drive and a replacement blade for the ballistic knife, both of which Marc



pocketed. The hard drive had to be Garza's prize, and Marc considered what the contents might be. If La Noche wanted the man dead this much, it had to be a rich bounty of information in there.

*Not the time to dwell on that*, he told himself, looking down at the gauge on his oxygen cylinder. His exertions in this thin, barely breathable atmosphere had drained the tank more than he wanted. The needle was dangerously close to the gauge's warning line.

In the tiny neighbouring space of the underfloor galley, there was a folding chair bolted to the bulkhead, and Marc sank on to it, pulling out his Rubicon issue smartphone. The satellite-enabled 'spyPhone' went active, running through encrypted communications protocols to connect him to Assim Kader, back on the ground in Bogotá.

As he waited, Marc reached up to close the hatch leading to the upper cabin. If the skinny guy didn't report back to his pal Axel, sooner or later the other man would come looking. A few seconds warning might be crucial.

After a long minute, the spyPhone vibrated in Marc's hand and the screen illuminated with green icons and the words SIGNAL ACTIVE. He pulled a wireless communications bud from a slot in phone's shell and pressed it into his ear.

'*Marc?*' Assim's voice seemed to be coming to him down a steel tube.

'Hey, man.' He felt weary just speaking out loud. It was a constant effort to breathe evenly.

*'You're not supposed to use your phone mid-flight . . .'*

'They can sue me,' he snorted.

*'Things have turned very dicey here,'* said the hacker, the words spilling out of him in haste. *'A group of cartel men arrived at the airport just after you took off. I think they were here to make sure Garza had left. I had to fall back to the vehicle in case they spotted me.'*

'Yeah, about that . . .'

Assim didn't seem to hear him, and continued without losing pace. *'I looped in Monaco on everything that happened,'* he went on, referring to the Rubicon Group's crisis centre on the Mediterranean coast. *'Intel is stacking up and it doesn't paint a pretty picture. So I think—'*

'Mate, shut up,' Marc insisted. 'I've got a situation here.'

Assim finally caught up to the tone in Marc's voice and paused. *'Oh. Sorry. Go ahead.'*

He gave the hacker the high points, starting with the deliberate depressurization and knock-out of the passengers, the thugs and their work on Garza, and all the grave possibilities those things represented. Assim was quiet when he was done, to the point that Marc wondered if the sat-phone connection had dropped.

*'Shit.'* The polite young Saudi didn't often swear. *'Marc, I'm in the airport's computer network right now and there are no alerts of any kind going off, not from Air Traffic Control or the airline's own data hub. No one on the ground has any inkling that something is wrong up there.'*

Marc examined the stolen pilum knife. 'That confirms what I suspected. One or more of the crew are in on this. They'd have their own oxygen up on the flight deck. The pilot and co-pilot are the only ones who'd be able to depressurize the cabin. And they could have messed with the automatic reporting systems too.'

*'That tracks with something I've learned,'* came the reply. *'I got into Avileña Air's manifest for your flight and had Monaco run a sweep over the names. Something rather alarming popped up against the pilot, a gentleman by the name of Lorenze. I've sent you a still.'* Marc's phone buzzed, and he saw a scanned image from a Colombian passport on the screen. The broad, blank face of a Hispanic man in his early forties glared back up at him. *'The pilot assigned to this flight didn't report for work this morning. According to Avileña, he called in sick, so Lorenze was bumped up the roster to take that man's place.'*

‘Convenient,’ muttered Marc. ‘Let me guess. This Lorenze bloke has some kind of connection to La Noche, yeah?’

*‘Very likely. He was arrested on drug possession and domestic violence charges a couple of years ago, but the case was thrown out and he walked. Lack of evidence, and possible witness intimidation. Details are sketchy, but it fits a pattern.’*

‘The cartel did him a solid, and from then on he works for them.’

Assim was silent for another long moment. ‘*Marc . . . What are we going to do here? You can’t have much air left. Maybe I can arrange something from this end? I could call in an anonymous hijack threat for that flight, and put the cat amongst the pigeons . . .*’

Marc shook his head. ‘That’s not gonna help. It could make things worse and alert these pricks that we’re on to them. No, first priority is to get this plane down, get it safe. Every minute we’re flying high, the passengers are dying.’

*‘Lorenze isn’t just going to turn it around because you ask nicely. You can be certain he’s more afraid of the cartel than he will be of you.’*

The airframe trembled as the jet passed through another pocket of turbulence, drawing Marc’s attention away down the cargo bay, past the creaking lines of containers. He grimaced. It was getting hard to think straight. ‘Listen, I need you to pull up the specs for this plane, an Airbus A330-200. Specifically, I want data on the avionics, the fuel management system.’

*‘I don’t like the sound of that.’*

‘Don’t care,’ said Marc, moving up past the containers toward the forward bulkhead. ‘I have to get this thing to descend. If I can’t do that, then nothing else matters.’

At the far end of the cargo compartment, a narrow hatch in the bulkhead was decorated with signs in English and Spanish warning not to proceed without authorization. The pilum knife was all the authority Marc needed to force open the lock and get through.

Beyond the hatch lay a cramped space that narrowed toward the nose of the airliner. The walls were dense with layers of foamy pink

insulating material that did little to cut down the deep cold, clumps of it gathered around support frames and thick tubes of cabling. Every available square metre of space was given over to shock-resistant racks of electronic gear, with just enough room between them for a human to squeeze through. Inside, the aircraft noise was constant, a low roar like distant waves. The chill was crisp, and Marc shivered, feeling it through the sleeves of his shirt.

He studied the closest of the computer modules, taking in webs of blinking status lights, a push-button keypad and small LCD display. The hardware was labelled in a kind of truncated tech-dialect, everything cut down to three- and four-letter acronyms that Marc could barely parse. With the training from his younger years as Royal Navy helicopter crew and some experience with smaller fixed-wing aircraft, Marc knew just enough to know he was out of his depth with this gear. But he understood computers, and modern airliners like the Airbus were largely digitally controlled by on-board mainframes.

*Think of it as just another hack, he told himself. Don't dwell on what could go wrong if you screw it up.*

A low thud sounded through the deck above his head, and Marc flinched at the noise. Here in the A330's forward avionics bay, he was directly below the airliner's cockpit. There was ladder leading to a hatch in the roof that would take him right up there, but it was impossible to open it from below, a countermeasure put in place against potential hijackers.

He couldn't make out the words, but Marc caught the dull murmur of voices in the compartment above. More heavy, slow foot-falls echoed down to him, and he had the sudden mental image of someone moving a body.

Marc picked his way along the lines of the control modules and Assim's tinny voice buzzed in his ear. *'I have what I think you need,'* he said, directing Marc to a particular computer stack. *'The fuel control and monitoring system. This is a critical component,'* he insisted, *'if you mess around with it, it could backfire spectacularly!'*

‘Noted.’ Marc traced the incoming cluster of wires carrying commands down from the pilot’s controls, and sawed through them with the knife, killing any possibility of undoing the sabotage he was about to perform. He gave the control module’s keypad an experimental tap. ‘What’s the command string to open the fuel dump nozzles?’

*‘Once you start, they’ll know up in the cockpit. Jettisoning the fuel will set off alarms.’*

Marc gave a grim nod. ‘That’s the idea.’

*‘It won’t take long for them to figure out where you are.’*

‘I know.’

He heard Assim swallow hard. *‘All right then. Here we go. Type this in exactly as I say . . .’*

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