



**PART
FOUR**

ROUGH AIR

FINAL APPROACH

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ZAFFRE

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by
ZAFFRE
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd

Zaffre is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

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, who carries vital intelligence data; but when the aircraft is hijacked by Garza's ex-employers, only Marc's ability to adapt and improvise will keep him alive . . .

Lorenze had his co-pilot's corpse halfway out of the cramped flight deck when the warning alert chimed from the Airbus's instrument panel.

Still wearing that dumb baseball cap of his, Axel – if that was his real name – struggled with the dead man's legs. He shot Lorenze an angry look over his oxygen mask, like it was the pilot's fault this was happening.

Lorenze swore under his breath and dropped Augusto's body where it lay, vaulting back into his chair. He was careful not to put his hand on Augusto's empty seat. The chubby man's blood had soaked into the cushions and material, and he didn't want to get any more of it on him than he already had.

'I can't move him on my own!' called Axel. 'What's that noise?'

Lorenze ignored the other man and adjusted his air mask. It was chafing his face where he hadn't shaved, and he wanted very badly to discard it, but doing so at this altitude would plunge him into unconsciousness in seconds.

He scanned the status screens on the panel in front of him, and a cold ball of dread formed in the pilot's gut. The flight deck's control software registered a disconnection from a computer in the avionics bay, a vital device that managed the movement of fuel around the tanks in the airliner's wings in order to keep it stable in flight. Lorenze's concern grew as his attempts to reactivate the linkage failed.

He called up the fuel tank levels on another screen. The figures were lower than they should be. Before his eyes, they dropped a few more increments.

The pilot twisted sharply in his chair and leaned toward the port-side cockpit window. Looking out into the darkness, he could see the tip of one of the wings. A steady gush of ejected Jet A-1 fuel issued out from the trim tank, the trailing pennant of vapour visible in the airliner's wake in the blinks of the navigation lights.

Lorenze let out long stream of curses. This situation was complex enough without the added complication of some mechanical failure.

'What is going on?' demanded Axel, growing annoyed as his questions went unanswered. He shoved the dead man to one side and tried to press forward into the flight deck, glowering at the instrument screens.

'We're losing fuel,' Lorenze snapped, waving him away. The last thing he wanted was this brute interfering with what he didn't understand. He ran through the commands on the fuel control and monitoring system, trying and failing to deselect the "jettison" option.

Axel glared. 'Why?'

'I don't know . . . This should not be happening.' A new possibility occurred to Lorenze. 'Where's your friend? If he's screwed around with something below—'

'Diego's not an idiot,' Axel retorted, but he didn't seem sure of his own answer. 'Why would he?'

'Go down to the galley and check on him,' snapped Lorenze. 'Do it now!'

'You don't tell me what to do,' said Axel, gesturing with his ballistic knife. 'You fly the plane, that's all.'

'I can't fly anything if we don't have any fuel!' he shot back.

'Then fix it!' Axel gave him a murderous glare and stalked away.

Lorenze went back to the controls and worked through a restart program in a vain attempt to find the problem, but nothing seemed

to work. He sat back in his chair and fiddled with his oxygen mask again, thinking it through.

Had Augusto done something in those last seconds before he died, something the pilot hadn't seen? Lorenze rejected the idea. Augusto was a dullard; such an act would have been beyond him.

Augusto had always been an over-bearing, over-talkative man. Always getting in the way, never knowing when to shut his big mouth. Always complaining that he was stuck as first officer on these passenger runs, always trying to angle for a captaincy of his own. Every time he spoke, he said something that irritated Lorenze, gabbing on and on like a gossiping housewife in that high-pitched voice of his.

So it hadn't been much of a chore for Lorenze to stab his co-pilot through his throat when the opportunity came. He glanced at the crimson-stained seat next to his. The fool had bled out with a cowed look of disbelief on his face while Lorenze masked up and set about decompressing the passenger cabin.

Good riddance, the pilot told himself. *Nobody is going to miss the sound of his whining.*

Augusto had been one of the people who tried to get Lorenze fired after that incident with the flight attendant from Rio, he was certain of it. But Lorenze had friends in high places. Powerful friends. They made sure he kept his job, in return for certain favours. It worked out well for all parties, as the pilot had expensive and less-than-legal tastes.

Like the others, Augusto had done a poor job of hiding his real feelings about Lorenze. Few people at Avileña Air liked the pilot's company, but no one was going to say that to his face, not when they knew that he had contacts in the cartel.

Lorenze could have let Augusto pass out, of course, but killing him was quicker. And it showed those two thugs La Noche put on the plane that the pilot wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty.

The knife he'd used to stab Augusto had been smuggled on board the Airbus along with Axel and Diego's weapons and air tank rigs.

Lorenze's first job had been to secret the gear bags where the two men could find them. He carried them on board without raising suspicion, just as he had in the past with other packages, other sensitive items that La Noche used him to ferry to the United States. Lorenze knew all the weak points of Avileña's security process like it was second nature. He could have carried a suitcase packed with bricks of raw cocaine all the way to Texas, and no one would ever have known it.

But he was bored with being a small-time courier, and that was why he leapt at this chance when *el jefe's* men offered it. Hijacking his own airliner would be an explosive end to his career as a commercial aviator, but Lorenze didn't care. Such a showy act appealed to his arrogance, and he was sick of the civilian life. He wanted to be a *narcotraficante*, living like a prince. The cartel could always use a good pilot for their clandestine fleet of drug smuggling planes, he reasoned, and this operation would be his passport into their world.

A new indicator icon flashed into life on a small screen near the manual flight control joystick, an automated query from Avileña Air's control centre over the change in fuel status.

Lorenze dismissed the message with an all-clear, but he knew that lie wouldn't hold for long. If too much fuel was dumped, he would have to deactivate the autopilot and take the jet down to a lower altitude sooner than planned. The moment that happened, Bogotá Air Traffic Control would know that something was wrong.

'Hurry up, idiot,' he growled, glaring out of the cockpit at the deep blue-black of the night sky and chewing on his dilemma.

What reason did Axel's cohort have to interfere with the avionics? He doubted the man was intelligent enough to do such a thing. That notion set off a whole raft of other, unpalatable prospects.

The intercom light blinked and Lorenze tapped a button, keying it to his headset. 'What?'

'Diego is out cold!' Axel's words came machine-gun fast, and he answered the obvious question before Lorenze could ask it. *'He didn't lose his air, someone took it from him!'*

‘Are you sure?’

‘He’s tied up down here like an animal! And that’s not all, the door to the front of the plane? It’s jammed shut. The lock’s all messed up!’

Lorenze set the headset aside and swung around, hauling himself out of the chair, dropping to a crouch over a panel in the floor of the flight deck.

Punching in a key code to unlock it, the pilot grabbed the latch and pulled, but it refused to slide open. Something was blocking the mechanism from underneath, stopping him from accessing the avionics bay.

‘What could do that?’ Lorenze’s throat tightened. Something strong and thin. *‘A knife blade, maybe. A knife like the ones he had brought on board.’*

He grabbed the headset again. ‘The hatch here has been jammed as well,’ he said. ‘We have a problem! Someone else must be up and walking around.’

‘Yeah, I figured,’ said Axel. *‘There’s a big orange waterproof bag on the floor in the galley, all the stuff inside is scattered everywhere.’*

‘The survival kit,’ said Lorenze, recognizing the description. The heavyweight canvas holdall contained emergency gear for use in the event of the aircraft coming down on water, or in some remote area. ‘Forget about Diego! Find whoever is out there and deal with them. We don’t have time for this!’

‘Don’t tell me my job,’ growled the other man, and the intercom went dead.

‘Damn it!’ Lorenze turned to grab his knife, still lodged in the back of Augusto’s chair where he had left it. Then he noticed the shadow in the open doorway behind him, and froze.

‘Careful there, mate,’ said the man. He had a British accent muffled by one of the aircrew’s breather masks, a narrow-eyed expression on his face framed by a mess of dirty blond hair. He was pointing the wrong end of an emergency flare at Lorenze’s chest, one finger holding the taut pull-string that would ignite it. ‘No sudden moves.’

‘You set that off in here, you’ll kill us both!’ said the pilot, raising his hands out at shoulder level. ‘We’ll burn to death!’

Marc made a jabbing motion with the flare and the other man flinched. ‘You better do what I tell you then, yeah? Start off by sitting your arse in the chair and taking us down.’ The pilot slowly climbed back into his seat, still holding up his hands. ‘You’re going to put this aircraft in a steady descent down to ten thousand feet, Captain Lorenze. Do it nice and slow.’

‘All right . . .’ The man seemed surprised to hear Marc say his name. He switched off the autopilot and put one hand on the sidestick control at his right, the other settling on to the throttles. ‘Just take it easy.’

With the darkness outside, it was impossible to see the horizon line move, but Marc felt the motion in the soles of his feet and saw the instruments react.

‘Who are you?’ said Lorenze. ‘You know me?’ He didn’t wait for an answer. ‘Are you DEA?’

Marc decided to keep the pilot guessing. ‘How many have the cartel got on board? Just you and those two meat-heads?’

‘*Si*, they made me do it,’ insisted Lorenze. ‘I didn’t have a choice, it was this or die!’

‘You’re a bad liar,’ Marc told him, watching the altitude numbers drop. He nodded towards the body of the dead co-pilot slumped against the flight deck storage locker. ‘Looks like he fell for it, though. Poor sod.’

The pilot’s eyes flicked toward the empty chair next to his, and Marc saw the knife embedded in the headrest.

‘Oh no you don’t.’ Marc reached for the hilt of the blade before the pilot could think about making a grab for it. The weapon was still slick with blood and wedged in hard.

In that moment, when Marc’s attention was off him, Lorenze wrenched the control stick hard over. The Airbus’s powerful Rolls-Royce engines howled as the jet banked sharply and Marc

lost his balance before he could dislodge the knife, unable to stop himself falling toward the pilot's side of the cabin.

They slammed into one another and Marc lost the flare as Lorenze planted a heavy punch to his shoulder, knocking it from his grasp. He returned the favour with two fast hits that cracked the pilot across the temple. Lorenze gave a strangled howl and pulled the sidestick the other way.

The airliner pulled level and then pitched over in the opposite direction, causing Marc to stumble back against the starboard side of the tiny cockpit. He fell hard, winded, and clutched at the mask over his face to hold it in place. His breaths were getting short and he was afraid to look at the gauge on his O2 tank.

'*Qué mierda . . . ?*' With an angry grunt, the second cartel killer appeared in the doorway, struggling to stay on his feet. Somewhere along the way, he had lost his baseball cap, and he took in the sight of Marc with a savage sneer. '*Tourista . . .*' Axel's face twisted behind his air mask in sudden recognition.

'*Mátalo!*' shouted Lorenze. Marc's Spanish was good enough to know a kill order when he heard it.

Axel tore his pilum knife from beneath his jacket, and Marc felt the cabin move around him once more. Lorenze gave the flight stick another fierce pull, enough to set off an automated warning that trilled through the cockpit.

Marc was ready this time, grabbing the blood-soaked seat cover on the co-pilot's chair to steady himself. The emergency flare he had lost only moments before rolled out from under the seat and wedged itself near his feet.

He ducked and snatched at it as Axel came storming in, leading with the long blade of the ballistic knife. Lorenze put the jet into a shallow turn once again and Marc's fingers grabbed at empty air as the flare rolled back out of reach. He ducked reflexively, and Axel's knife whispered past his head.

Backed into a corner, the only place for Marc to go was forward. He fought against every instinct to shrink back and pushed up inside Axel's reach, fighting to block his arm, fighting to force the other man away and gain a little room.

Axel landed a glancing punch on the side of Marc's head that knocked his air mask off-kilter. The plastic breather slipped off his nose and he gasped, instinctively clapping a hand to his face to re-seat it. The cartel thug seized on the opening and up came the blade at a high angle, the razor-sharp tip aimed down at the bare flesh of Marc's throat.

Lorenze's hand jerked the sidestick again and Marc fell, just as Axel flicked the ballistic knife's trigger switch. The spring-loaded blade shot out, drawing a cry of pain from Marc as it cut a shallow line through his denim shirt and deflected over the top of his shoulder.

The ejected blade missed its intended target and found another, burying itself in the pilot's skull. Lorenze died twitching, collapsing across the sidestick and compressing the controls all the way forward.

The jet reacted with a shuddering groan that vibrated through the airframe. It fell into a steep dive, powering downward at over three hundred knots over the Colombian coastline, toward the shimmering, moonlit ranges of the Caribbean.

In the Airbus's cockpit, gravity went away as if someone had turned it off with a switch. Every loose object in the compartment, including the co-pilot's bloodied corpse, floated upward.

Marc and Axel left the deck, briefly thrown into freefall by the sudden descent, and the two men crashed into the ceiling of the cabin, still locked together in their chaotic fistfight.

The cartel assassin went wild, punching and clawing. It was all Marc could do to try and deflect the blows, but Axel was fast, and each hit that landed sent a shock through Marc's head that left him dazed.

Axel snatched at Marc's breather mask and ripped it free before he could stop him.

Marc took gulping breaths of too-thin air and felt his lungs stiffen in his chest. The pain and stress he had experienced when the jet cabin had first depressurized rolled back over him, and he felt the terrifying lurch towards unconsciousness begin all over again.

He struck out with his arms and kicked hard, desperate to fight back before everything went black. But Axel wasn't willing to wait for Marc to pass out, and he grabbed at his neck, choking out what faint gasps of air the other man struggled to draw in.

Marc felt his awareness falling away, and his foot connected with something fleshy as he gave a last panicked kick. He struck Lorenze's body and the dead pilot pitched sideways, finally slipping off the control stick.

With no direct manual input, the aircraft's controls automatically defaulted back to a neutral setting, and the plane's terminal trajectory evened out into level flight. Gravity came back with a vengeance and the brief moment of weightlessness was over.

Marc and the cartel thug dropped, but Axel's haste to kill the other man had put him in the worst of their positions. His head struck the corner of a console and Marc put all his weight into jamming his arm across Axel's throat, leaning in to give his attacker's neck a vicious twist.

Bone and cartilage snapped as they hit the deck, and a wet crackle escaped Axel's lips. Colour was fading from Marc's vision as he seized the thug's air mask and jammed it over his mouth and nose.

Long, dizzying minutes passed as Marc tried to fight the throbbing, echoing headache behind his eyes, clinging to the edge of consciousness.

At length, he hauled himself off the body of the cartel killer and gathered up the other man's air tank and rig. Axel's supply was still in the black, but only barely.

Everything hurt. Marc's chest, his head, his arms. Joints ached and each metallic breath of oxygen he sucked down felt like an iron rasp drawn across the inside of his ribcage. Contusions and cuts from hand-to-hand fighting sang with new pain. All he wanted was to collapse against the wall and let the blackness come. It would be easy to submit.

'*Sod. Off.*' Marc enunciated the words with care, banishing the thought before it could get its claws in him. 'Get up,' he snarled, and with effort, Marc hauled himself to a standing position. Stuck in there with three dead bodies, the flight deck was very small and very cramped.

He peered at the digital displays on the instrument panel. Lorenze's aerobatic antics had sent them way off course, settling into on an easterly heading at fifteen thousand feet, along the coast toward the Gulf of Venezuela. The fuel levels were still dropping rapidly, and Marc could only guess at how much range remained in the Airbus's tanks.

One by one, he dragged the dead men into the galley behind the flight deck, then took the captain's chair and stared out of the cockpit window. The first faint glow of dawn was forming, a line of yellow-pink haze on the far horizon.

With a weary sigh, he used his satellite phone to contact Assim, hoping his colleague on the ground would still be able to hear him. 'This is Dane, on the air.'

'*Marc, are you okay?*' The hacker's worried voice sounded in his earbud.

'Hostiles neutralized. Aircraft is secure,' he told him. 'Now we just have to land this thing before it runs out of fuel.'

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