



**PART  
FIVE**

**ROUGH AIR**

**HARD LANDING**

**JAMES**

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**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 . . .*

‘This is Avileña Air eight-one-five, broadcasting on guard.’ Marc Dane spoke as calmly and as clearly as he could into the headset, scanning the digital screens across the instrument panel in front of him. ‘Declaring an emergency.’ He read out the airliner’s fast-diminishing fuel status, then its heading and altitude.

His throat was dry and his chest felt raw, hollowed out. For the first time in what seemed like hours, Marc was breathing without an air mask clamped over his face. He’d managed to ease the Airbus A330-200 down to just below ten thousand feet without any serious issues, low enough that the unconscious passengers and crew in the cabin behind him were no longer in danger of oxygen starvation, but they were still a long way from safety.

He knew with grim certainty that some of the civilians back there would not have survived the rapid-onset hypoxia that had affected them, after the jet’s pilot had deliberately depressurized the cabin to render them all insensible. Marc had barely survived it himself. Luck and a portable air tank had been all that stopped him from joining the others in oblivion. Whomever was left alive needed medical attention as soon as possible.

‘*Avileña eight-one-five, we copy.*’ The heavily-accented air traffic controller identified himself as a representative of the Aeronautica Civil, Colombia’s aviation authority, and he asked to speak to Captain Lorenze or First Officer Augusto.

‘Not gonna happen.’ Marc shot a look at the empty chair next to his, the sheepskin cover over it brown with the copper of drying blood, the ballistic knife Lorenze had used to murder Augusto still stuck in the headrest. He hesitated over giving the controller the full truth, then decided it would be better to hold nothing back. ‘They’re both dead.’

*‘Say again, over?’*

‘Lorenze killed Augusto.’ Marc sounded out the words so there would be no misunderstanding. ‘Lorenze was working with two armed men on board to hijack this aircraft.’

There was a long silence before the ATC voice returned. ‘*Where are those men now?*’

‘One dead, one secured.’ Marc blew out a breath and rubbed his eyes. Fatigue was dragging on him. ‘Look, mate, can we cut to the chase? I need to land this thing, and soon.’

*‘Identify yourself.’*

He shook his head. ‘I’m someone with flying experience on helicopters and light aircraft. That’s all I’m willing to say right now.’ Marc’s patience was thinning. ‘We can have a nice chat about who the hell I am when we’re all down and safe, yeah?’

*‘Stand by. Do not deviate from your current course. Be advised that Air Force interceptors are vectoring to your position at this time.’*

‘Listen to me!’ Marc snarled. ‘I’m not the bloody hijacker, I need a runway, not an escort!’

*‘Maintain your current course and heading,’* insisted the ATC officer, and he dropped off the channel.

‘Bollocks.’ Marc pushed back the radio headset and re-inserted a wireless bud into his ear, the tiny device linked to his Rubicon-issue satellite phone. ‘Assim, you heard all that?’

*‘A predictable reaction,’* said the Saudi hacker, his cut-glass English public school accent hazed with static. ‘*The Colombians have no reason to believe a word you say. Ever since 9/11 they’ve been terrified of somebody doing the same thing in South America.*’

‘Yeah, yeah . . .’ Marc reached into the storage bin beside the chair and rooted through the contents of the late Captain Lorenze’s chart bag. ‘Meanwhile, every minute we’re airborne, my little act of sabotage is shortening our flight time.’ He glanced at the fuel status. The central tanks were already low, and the ones in the wings were steadily emptying. ‘I don’t have time for waiting, or go-arounds. I need a coastal airfield on a north-westerly heading, big enough to accommodate this plane, and I need it before I run out of dirt.’ He sighed. The map screen showed them approaching the Bay of Manaure, following the line of the Colombian coast toward the Uribia region. Past that was nothing but open sea until Puerto Rico.

*‘I’m running a search now,’* said Assim. *‘Do you think you could make it to Aruba?’*

‘Oh, rum and cocktails, nice.’ Marc gave a low chuckle. ‘I don’t think we can chance it. Find me something closer. It doesn’t have to be fancy, just long and flat.’ He pored over Lorenze’s maps and something caught his eye. The rogue pilot had plotted a modified route based in the airliner’s original course to Dallas. Marc described what he was looking at to Assim. ‘Seems like he was going to divert well short of American airspace. There’s map reference data here for an airstrip in the Panama wilds, but it doesn’t look like a commercial or military runway.’

*‘Rubicon has intelligence from the Drug Enforcement Agency about La Noche facilities all over that region,’* noted Assim. *‘Landing an airliner, even hiding it, wouldn’t be beyond their ability.’*

‘No doubt,’ agreed Marc. ‘My skin crawls when I think about what they were going to do with two hundred unconscious people. That’s a lot of bodies to dispose of.’

*‘The cartel engage in human trafficking . . . And black-market sales of transplant organs.’* Assim shivered at his own suggestion. *‘All that would be a bonus, though. Mateo Garza was the primary target. It’s looking more and more like this whole operation was a play to get the information he has on them, and clean house.’*

While Marc had been out of contact, Assim had learned from the Rubicon Group's contacts of an incident in Dallas, the original destination for the Avileña flight. An agent with the DEA named Camilo had been executed gangland-style just an hour after the flight had left Bogotá. There was little doubt that La Noche were behind the murder.

'The cartel wanted Garza to feel safe, get complacent, so they let him set up his deal.' Marc thought it through. 'But they have to make an example of him, of course. They want him alive. Bad enough to hijack a plane just to get to him.' He grimaced as he considered what horrors would have awaited Garza at that isolated airstrip in the Panamanian jungle. He shook off the grim thought. 'Too late to worry about that now, though.'

'Marc . . .' He could hear the frown on Assim's face. *'I have to say this. You've got no flight time on jets like that one. Are you sure you can do this?'*

'No, thanks for reminding me,' he said flatly. 'But some dickhead killed the pilot, so I don't have a lot of options.'

Marc's military service and his time with the British security services had sharpened his skills on anything with rotor-blades, and he knew his way around single- and twin-engine prop planes. But big jets were a different story. Rubicon's top pilot, a steely-eyed former Israeli Air Force fighter jock named Ari Silber, would have handled this situation with characteristic aplomb. But the veteran aviator was a world away, so Marc concentrated on remembering what Ari had shown him in the few times he had joined him in the cockpit, on long flights between assignments.

He sighed. 'I've got a bloody pounding headache, I'm covered in bruises and my self-confidence has taken some knocks. I don't really want to dwell on the negatives, yeah?'

*'Understood. So with that in mind, I have something for you.'*

'A landing strip?'

*‘A private industrial airfield on the Bay of Portete. Puerto Bolívar. It’s next to the Cerrejón coal terminal, it seems to be used only for cargo and worker transportation. But the good news is, it’s long enough to handle an Airbus A330 . . . If you don’t make any mistakes.’*

Marc found the location on the digital map and keyed in details of the runway beacons, plotting a new heading. ‘Yeah, all right. This could work. Let’s go for it.’

*‘All right. I’ll talk you through the commands you need to input into the Airbus’s control computer. The A330 has an automatic landing system that will do most of the work for you, you just need to follow along. Ready?’*

Marc found the autopilot keypad and nodded to himself. ‘Green for go.’

Over the next few minutes, he doggedly punched in one command after another as Assim read them out. It reminded him of inputting the program lines for some old, primitive first-generation computer, the kind that Marc had played with as a schoolkid. But here the stakes were life and death.

The process seemed to take forever, and it was done Marc took a shaky breath, putting one hand on the sidestick, and the other on the central panel where the jet’s trim wheel and throttles were located.

The complexity of the airliner’s controls was daunting, but Marc ignored everything that wasn’t vital to the process of landing. He fixed the locations of the critical switches and dials in his mind – the flaps and the brakes, the undercarriage, the engine telemetry.

*‘You’re ready,’* said Assim. *‘Good luck, Marc.’*

‘Thanks, mate. Talk to you when I’m done.’ Marc pulled the earbud and secured the satellite phone, then centred himself.

He checked to be certain that both of the airliner’s autopilot computers were running, one covering the other in the event of a failure, and set the program running.



‘Moment of truth,’ Marc said quietly, then keyed the radio. ‘Puerto Bolívar ATC, if you copy this transmission, please respond. This is Avileña Air eight-one-five transmitting on guard frequency, descending from ten thousand feet, heading toward runway zero-nine from the east. Have declared an emergency, coming in for a hot approach. Do you read, over?’

The radio hissed back at him, and when the reply finally came, it was with clipped, military diction. ‘*Avileña eight-one-five, you have changed course. Climb to angels one-five and return to your previous heading, over.*’ Marc knew a fighter pilot when he heard one. The man’s terse Aviator English was being spoken through a helmet oxygen mask. ‘*Divert immediately or we will consider you hostile, understood?*’

He dialled out the radius of the radar screen and found two fast-moving blips coming in from around the Uribia headland, vectoring toward the Airbus’s position. They could only be Israeli-made Kfir fighters from the Fuerza Aérea Colombiana, streaking in to intercept the errant airliner and whatever terrorists they suspected had hijacked it. Looking out through the cockpit, Marc thought he saw the distant flash of sunrise off delta wings in the dawn sky.

‘Negative, FAC,’ he replied, keeping his voice steady. ‘I have two hundred souls on board in medical distress. We have to land. It’s not open to negotiation! You want to do something? Alert the locals, get doctors and ambulances out to the runway.’

Were they already locking air-to-air missiles on the Airbus? There was no way to tell. Marc could only hope that the two Kfir pilots would balk at the notion of shooting down an aircraft full of civilians, and that Puerto Bolívar’s air traffic controllers were monitoring the conversation. One way or another, Avileña eight-one-five was coming down at the remote industrial airstrip.

The Airbus shuddered into a shallow turn as Marc lined up the nose with the runway in the distance. He could make out the lines

of highways and railroads leading to the dark smudge of the giant coal terminal on the coastline, where cargo ships made port to take on the ore from the local mine. The runway itself was a long, faded strip of black asphalt on a flat zone of sparse, rust-orange terrain. With every passing second, it grew larger.

Marc saw the two FAC interceptors streak by, one of them coming so close that he got a good look at the aircraft's dart-like profile. Through the open cockpit door behind him, Marc heard someone call out in panic. He heard a fearful scream as the Kfir's close pass rattled through the airliner's slipstream. That could only mean that the surviving passengers and crew had stirred from their hypoxia-induced blackouts.

Marc found and flipped the switch that activated the FASTEN SEATBELTS signs in the main cabin, and the mundanity of the action drew a brittle chuckle from him.

He activated the intercom's public address setting. 'This is the, uh, captain speaking . . . More or less. Assume the brace position and stand by for an emergency landing.' His throat went dry as he contemplated the gravity of his statement. 'Listen, when the aircraft comes to a stop, just get clear as fast as you can.' He struggled to dredge up the right words in Spanish. '*Dejar el avión . . .* and, ah, *entonces corre!*'

The ripple of panic returned, and Marc silenced the intercom. There was nothing more to be said.

Ahead, the runway was centred directly below the nose of the Airbus and the altitude meter was slowly ticking down, the auto-land system performing as hoped. He felt a surge of self-assurance as the undercarriage dropped and locked into position.

It was working. 'I can do this', he told himself. 'I *will* do this.'

As the nose continued to drop, Marc became aware of something loose rattling around near the rudder pedals. It was the emergency flare from the survival kit, the one he'd used to threaten Lorenze. He kicked it out of the way and it rolled under his seat.

*'Avileña eight-one-five.'* The FAC pilot's voice broke through his thoughts. *'We are following you in.'* Marc looked up and glimpsed the two Kfirs pulling in alongside, each a few hundred metres off the Airbus's wing-tips. The unspoken warning in the pilot's words was as clear as bell.

*'Eight-one-five copies—'*

Marc didn't get to finish the sentence. A shadow moved behind him, the blurry shape of a man reflected in a digital screen on the instrument panel. He twisted in the pilot's chair just as a loop of heavy nylon, one of the cargo tethers from the lower deck, flipped over him and went tight around his throat.

Marc was slammed back into the headrest, choking as the tether cut off his air. He grabbed at the nylon as it sliced into his neck, and the airliner's nose drifted off the runway line as his foot jerked reflexively against a rudder pedal.

The cartel thug Marc had fought in the cargo bay was right behind him, the skinny chicken-neck killer pulling as hard as he could on the tether, intent on throttling the life from him. Dried blood caked the man's nostrils and the capillaries in his wide, furious eyes had burst from the severe pressure changes. Whatever impulse was driving him on could only be pure animal rage, all reason burned away by the need to kill Marc Dane, no matter if that meant the airliner would crash into the ground or be shot out of the sky by the Colombian Air Force.

He was so close that Marc could feel the thug's hot, stale breath blasting out over his face as he jolted the makeshift garrotte. Twice already on this flight, Marc had been to the edge of asphyxiation, and the third time would mean death.

He slumped down, trying to wriggle free, but the skinny guy had all his weight behind the tether.

*'Four hundred.'* A monotone male voice came out of nowhere, startling them both. The autopilot's reporting system began to read off the jet's altitude in descending increments. *'Three hundred.'*

There was a momentary slackening in the tether, not enough to pull free, but enough for Marc to make a move. He clasped at the space beneath the pilot's chair, fingers closing around the slim plastic tube that lay there.

'*Two hundred,*' reported the autopilot, as the white markings at the end of Puerto Bolívar's runway came into view. '*Hundred above. One hundred.*'

Marc jerked the pull-cord dangling from the end of the emergency flare and it ignited with a searing crimson flash, spewing out gushes of chemical smoke. The pressure around his throat went away as the cartel killer screamed.

Blinded by the acrid haze, Marc blindly stabbed backward and jabbed the burning tip of the flare into the thug's chest. He lost his grip on it and the makeshift weapon tumbled away. He heard his would-be murderer collapse behind him, wailing in agony.

The Airbus rocked as the auto-landing program deployed the flaps and reduced speed. '*Fifty,*' called the synthetic voice. '*Forty.*'

Marc hauled the pilot-side sliding window as far open as it would go, in a vain attempt to clear some of the smoke, but it made little difference. Through streaming eyes, he could still see the dark expanse of the airstrip, but the controls were barely readable. *Most pilots fly on guesswork because it's cloudy outside the cockpit,* he thought.

'*Thirty. Minimum.*' The warning told Marc he was passing decision height, the point at which he had to commit to the landing or pull back.

Leaning forward, fighting to stifle a racking cough, Marc gripped the sidestick and throttles as the airliner fell the last few metres to the asphalt.

'*Ten. Five.*'

The jet hit the runway hard, sending a shock up through the undercarriage and out through the fuselage, drawing more terrified yelling from the passengers in the main cabin. Marc floundered,

trying to find the switch to release the autopilot control, and he felt the aircraft slowing and skidding. He cut the throttles and deployed the airbrakes, but the landing was off-true.

Even as speed bled away, Marc was pressed into his chair as the jet rumbled off the centreline, over the edge of the asphalt and into the low, gritty ground that paralleled the runway. The slowing Airbus buried its wheels in sandbanks and finally, it came to a juddering, rattling halt.

Every instinct Marc had told him to unbuckle and run like blazes, but he held that impulse down, and with shaking hands he flipped the switches to make the engines safe. Highly flammable aviation fuel was still leaking from the wing tanks, and it wouldn't take much to turn the airliner into a torch, a process he didn't want to speed along with the live flare that lay spitting and fuming on the floor of the flight deck.

Marc waded into the choking cloud of smoke, feeling with his fingertips until he caught the end of the plastic tube. Half-blinded by the brilliant red glow, he found his way back to the open window and hurled the flare out on to the ground, as far from the jet and whatever fuel it was spilling as possible.

The aircraft rocked as the emergency slides were deployed and passengers scrambled to escape. That meant that someone had retained the presence of mind to open the doors and give them a way out, and hopefully save as many lives as possible.

He staggered into the galley, finding the skinny thug collapsed and unconscious in a corner as a stream of terrified, half-dazed people rushed past him and out down the forward escape slide. The bodies of the first officer, the treacherous pilot and the other cartel killer lay nearby, mute witnesses to the ordeal.

Someone was shouting for help in the forward cabin, and Marc recognized Mateo Garza's voice from Rubicon's surveillance tapes. He pushed his way through, and there among the debris sat La Noche's target, his arms still fixed to his seat by thick cable ties.

‘*Ay dios mio . . .*’ Garza wheezed, as the panicked train of fleeing passengers left him to his fate. ‘Someone, please help me! I am trapped!’ He struggled fruitlessly to free himself, getting knotted up in the mask, tube and air tank slung around his neck.

Marc went back for the pilum knife in the smoke-hazed cockpit and came to Garza’s aid. The financier’s gratitude was mingled with raw fear. He had to know that this was all about him, and his need to get off the plane was overwhelming.

‘I think this is yours.’ Marc croaked, his throat raw from smoke inhalation. From a pocket he produced the small solid-state hard drive that the skinny man had dug out of Garza’s bag. He held it up between them.

Garza’s watery eyes widened, and he shrank back into his seat, horribly aware of the two corpses belted into the chairs either side of him. Garza’s Russian bodyguards had perished at the hands of La Noche’s killers, and he clearly thought that Marc was here to finish the job.

‘Your DEA pal Camilo is dead,’ Marc told him, growling out the words in a half-cough. ‘Cartel did him in.’

‘Then . . . Who are you?’

‘Rubicon. You know that name?’

Garza gave a wary nod. ‘*Si*. Big corporation. Private security.’

‘And other stuff,’ Marc noted, toying with the ballistic knife. ‘My boss had an offer for you, Mr. Garza.’ He started sawing through the cable ties. ‘You refused, but maybe now you want to reconsider? Help us with what’s on that hard drive and Rubicon can make you disappear.’ Marc paused, frowning. ‘We’ll make sure everyone thinks you died on this plane.’

‘If I say no?’ Garza’s eyes never strayed from the blood-stained blade in Marc’s hand.

‘You can go it alone. But how far do you think you’ll get without help?’

‘That is a very good point.’

Marc cut the final ties and helped Garza to his feet. Moving quickly, they followed the last of the fleeing passengers down the escape slide and out on to the dusty ground. Emergency vehicles were already hurtling toward the milling crowds of injured and fearful survivors, as the two FAC interceptors streaked past overhead.

A buzzing sounded from Marc's jacket and he pulled out his satellite phone. *'Are you all right?'* Assim's words came machine-gun fast. *'Hello? Hello? There are medics on the way, help is coming, can you hear me? Are you—?'*

*'Mate,'* said Marc, cutting him off in mid-flow. *'Down and safe. I need an exfiltration package for me and a plus one, yeah? We do it quick, we can get lost before anyone here figures out what's going on.'*

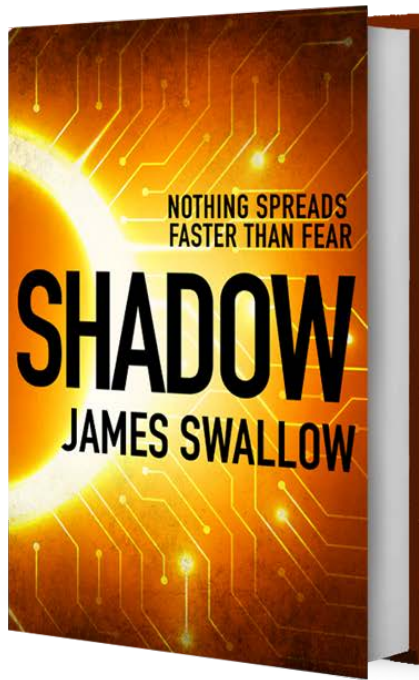
*'Understood,'* said the hacker. *'I had something lined up, just in case.'* He hesitated. *'Good work up there. I have to be honest with you, the odds were not in your favour.'*

*'Just a little rough air, is all.'*

Marc led Garza clear of the jet, and he turned to look back at the grounded Airbus. The airliner had bellied out on the sandbank, clouds of smoke and dust wreathing the white-painted fuselage, but it had survived in one piece.

*'Any landing you can walk away from,'* Marc muttered, *'is a good one.'*

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