INTRODUCTION

JAVIER

I knew something was very wrong when I picked up the phone at my new apartment in Bogotá.

"Javier?"

I recognized the voice of my group supervisor, Bruce Stock, on the other end, but there was a slight tremor, a hint of uncertainty in the way he pronounced my name.

Bruce was in his early fifties and had worked as a Drug Enforcement Administration agent around the world for most of his career. He was a big man, about six foot four, and just about one of the nicest people I had ever met—a gentle giant. He was also unflappable. He had to be; he was heading up one of the most dangerous missions in the history of the DEA. Bruce's priority was capturing Pablo Escobar, the billionaire Medellín Cartel chief who was responsible for the myriad car bombs that were going off around Colombia, not to mention smuggling tons of cocaine to North America and Europe. Escobar and his brutal sicarios—most of them teenage assassins plucked from the shantytowns that surround the city of Medellín—were killing anyone who stood in their way. They had already gunned down Colombia's minister of justice, massacred most of the country's Supreme Court judges, and killed a prominent newspaper editor who dared denounce the power of the cartel. All these assassinations took place before I arrived in Colombia, but you could feel the tension everywhere. There were tanks at the airport and fierce-looking soldiers armed with machine guns on the streets.

At the beginning of 1989 when Bruce called me at home, I had already been in Colombia for eight months, and, like everyone else at DEA headquarters in the U.S. embassy, I was totally obsessed with my new assignment—getting Escobar. It was my job to help capture and put him on a plane to the United States, where he would stand trial for all his crimes. It was the threat of extradition that led to Escobar's war—his reign of terror—against the Colombian government and us American law enforcement agents.

I arrived in Bogotá from my first DEA posting in Austin, Texas, where I focused on small-time Mexican meth and coke dealers. I knew Colombia would be the biggest challenge of my career, and I thought I was ready. I had already inserted myself into the Bloque de Búsqueda—the so-called Search Bloc made up of elite Colombian cops and intelligence agents who had six hundred men searching for Escobar pretty much twenty-four hours a day. The Search Bloc worked from a police garrison in Medellín, and I spent a good part of every week there, with the Colombian National Police as they hunted for the murderous drug kingpin in his hometown. I had been told that some members of the force were corrupt and on Escobar's payroll, so I was pretty cautious about who I hung out with, who I spoke to.

On weekends, if I wasn't working, I sat for hours in my Bogotá pad. I loved my sprawling four-thousand-square-foot home on a busy intersection in the center of town. I had breathtaking views of the city below and the towering Andes on one side. From my living room window, which was about forty feet wide, I felt I could reach out and touch those majestic mountains. For the truth is, I felt on top of the world in that four-bedroom palace with its separate maids' quarters in the heart of Bogotá nightlife. It was all too big and too grand for a bachelor from Texas, but it was a great place to bring my dates. They were always stunned by the view, which frankly made seduction all that much easier. It was a far cry from my boxy one-bedroom in Austin, which impressed no one—least of all me.

Little did I know that my life of luxury was about to end that Saturday afternoon when I heard Bruce's tremulous voice on the phone.

He didn't say much, and I could tell from his breathing that he was trying to steady his voice, to remain as calm as possible. At that moment, I knew my life was in grave danger.

"Javier, listen to me: Go get your gun, leave everything else behind, and get the hell out of there," he said. "Sorry, but there's no time to explain. It's Escobar. He knows where you are."

It's Escobar. He knows where you are.

I searched for my weapon—a 9 mm semiautomatic pistol—and headed to the elevator, scanning the hallways like a frightened fugitive, watching to see if anyone was lurking in the corners or behind a door. My hands shook as I pressed the elevator button, and every few seconds, I felt for my waist holster to make sure that my gun was in place. Somehow, it was reassuring to graze the cold metal with my fingertips.

Calma, calma, Javier! Tranquilo, hombre.

I heard the voice of my abuela, the toughest person I knew. She'd once stood up to would-be burglars in our home in Laredo and also got me out of countless difficult situations.

Tranquilo, tranquilo!

I rushed through the garage, furtively looking around to make sure no one was following me. I felt for my gun and unlocked the door of my OGV—official government vehicle—which in my case was a bulletproof Ford Bronco. As I started the engine with a roar, I immediately realized that I hadn't bothered to check under the chassis for explosives. Thankfully, the truck didn't blow up, and I screeched out of the underground garage and gunned it to the U.S. embassy, which was only a few miles away.

I thought of my grandmother and willed myself to breathe deeply as I sat in what seemed like endless Bogotá traffic. I chose to go through the most congested route to the embassy because I figured that I could easily blend into a traffic jam and become anonymous. I breathed a long sigh of relief when I saw the steel gates of the embassy, which was built like a fortress. Bruce met me at the DEA offices, which were next to the embassy garage, when I arrived.

I never found out if Escobar had planned to kill me or just kidnap me—an important American pawn in his battle against extradition. Our intel was that he had ordered his sicarios to find "the Mexican" DEA guy, which could only be me, since I was the only American of Mexican origin on staff. Escobar's men didn't have the exact address, but they knew that I lived at the corner of Seventh and Seventy-second, and it would be a matter of a few days or even a few hours before they traced me to my building, where I was one of the only gringos in residence. Between the CNP and the DEA intelligence experts, we tried our best to get to the bottom of the threat but couldn't find anything.

That night, I moved into a safe house that the embassy had set aside for emergencies like mine. After a few weeks passed with no new threats from Escobar's people, Bruce found me an apartment in Los Rosales, close to where the U.S. ambassador lived. It was a much fancier part of the city, cut with manicured hedges, lavish mansions, and beefy private security dressed in black, heavily armed, and carrying walkie-talkies. I missed my downtown aerie.

But I didn't miss it that much. Knowing that the world's biggest drug dealer is actively looking for you is unnerving, to say the least. For weeks after the threat and my flight from my beloved apartment, I couldn't relax. Sleep was elusive.

But if you want to know the truth, my biggest fear was that the DEA was going to send me home. For my own protection.

So I downplayed the threat, brushed it off whenever I went out for drinks with my fellow agents. But I repeatedly checked our intel to find out if the cartel was still looking for me. I pretended I was okay with everything. I can admit it now: I was scared to death.

But you know what? I was damned if I was going to let Escobar win. And I was damned if I was going to go back home when I was working on the case of a lifetime.

I thought again of my abuelita and forged ahead.

STEVE

The blue Renault cut in front of us, forcing us off the road, ushering Connie and me into our worst nightmare.

I was driving one of the older-model embassy-issued g-cars. It was a large SUV with huge, West Coast–style mirrors sticking out from the sides. If we were in California, it might look like we were surfers on our way to a deserted beach. But this was Colombia, and the SUV was outfitted like a tank for a reason. I joked to Connie that it could survive a shoot-out and even the apocalypse. Still, its ballast made me feel safe. There were steel plates in all the doors, under the vehicle, and built into the roof. All the windows were bulletproof with extremely thick glass that made them impossible to open. The front and rear were equipped with chrome-plated steel bars known as cattle guards. With all these security devices built in, it weighed about twice as much as a normal vehicle.

Connie and I were headed home from the embassy and had decided to take some of the back roads, next to a military base, to avoid the snarling traffic and to stop by our favorite restaurant for some take-out roast chicken for dinner. We had both put in a long day and were looking forward to unwinding in front of the TV with spicy chicken, roasted potatoes, and a

glass of merlot. With me in Medellín most weeks, we rarely had a night to ourselves, and we were really looking forward to being together in our apartment in the northern part of the city.

When the Renault suddenly cut in front of me, I pumped the brake and pushed in the clutch, trying to stop before I hit the tiny car. With all the weight of the SUV, it wasn't very difficult to lose control, and I knew if I hit the Renault, there would be serious injury to the passengers. Maybe even death. I managed to slide the vehicle to a stop just a few inches from the smaller car.

After checking to see if Connie was okay, I was furious and prepared to get out of the car and give them a piece of my mind. Except when I looked up, I saw that the three occupants of the car were walking menacingly toward us. They were dressed in light jackets and jeans, and as they drew closer, I could see that each of them had a pistol tucked into the waistband of his pants.

After arriving in Colombia to work on the Pablo Escobar case more than a year earlier, I had a lot of enemies. The world's most wanted criminal knew my name and the name of my partner, Javier Peña. We knew this because Colombian intelligence had intercepted the drug lord speaking on the phone to one of his thugs and talking about the "two gringos" at the Carlos Holguín base in Medellín. During one conversation, he even referred to "Peña and Murphy."

So when the three men approached the driver's-side door of our vehicle and began yelling in Spanish for us to get out of the car, I worried this was no ordinary case of road rage. This was a trap, and we were outnumbered. Besides that, I had the person I loved most in the world sitting right next to me. I needed to protect Connie no matter what happened to me.

At first, I refused to open the door, and I flashed them my Colombian police identification badge, hoping it would scare them off. But they refused to budge, which is when I frantically tried to radio for backup from the embassy. Each embassy car was equipped with portable emergency radios so that we could call the Marines if we got into any trouble. I was hoping the Marines would simply dispatch a roving patrol and scare off the jokers who were holding us hostage inside the car.

But I called once. I called twice. I called three times. No one answered.

By this time, the three men were kicking at the tires and trying to open the doors. I looked over at Connie, who was trying to remain calm, but I could tell she was really scared. The truth is, so was I.

Shortly after trying to contact the embassy, the wife of a DEA agent called us from her portable radio to make sure we were all right. I told her where we were and asked her to radio for help immediately. A few minutes later, our DEA supervisor was on the radio. I told him to hurry and to bring the "margarita" with him—our code name for the mini Uzi that we kept in the office for just such occasions.

While we waited, helpless as the men continued to taunt us and kick in the doors of the car, my darling wife surprised me as she always did when we faced what seemed like impossible odds.

"They're not that big," she said, pointing to the men. "I can take that one out if you handle the other two."

I might have said yes except that they were all armed, and if I opened the door of the car, I would be exposing Connie to being shot or worse.

Once the DEA supervisor was in place with the margarita behind us, I prepared to walk out of the car and confront the three men. We were both good marksmen, and if they tried anything funny, I knew we could easily kill them. But none of us wanted to kill anyone. We just wanted to get home and have our chicken!

Just as I was opening my door, a Colombian National Police motorcycle patrol approached. I saw they were looking at us but showed no indication of stopping. I began blowing my horn to get their attention, which caused the patrol to turn around to investigate. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw our supervisor, holding tight to the margarita.

Clutching my pistol and then tucking it into my waistband, I walked over to the police and showed them my badge and told them who I was: I was DEA and working on capturing Colombia's most wanted criminal. I told them we had been cut off by the three men in the Renault, and I was worried that they could be sicarios working for Escobar. After all, it was only a few years before that fellow DEA special agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena Salazar was kidnapped by corrupt police officers in Mexico and tortured and killed on the orders of drug

lord Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo. All DEA agents working in Latin America after Kiki's death worried that the same thing could happen to them.

I told the cops the men in the blue Renault were all armed.

At the mention of handguns, the police surrounded the men and pointed their weapons at them.

It took a while to sink in, but when the cops realized who I was and that I had contacts at the highest levels of the Colombian police, they began to apologize to Connie and me. As for the three men who had nearly caused an ugly accident, they were low-ranking members of the Colombian military on a joyride. It turned out to be nothing more than a case of road rage and the three young men wanting to intimidate us. They still don't know how close they came to death that night.

I cursed them out in my best street Spanish and threatened to call their commanding officer. They all became very apologetic and begged me not to call anyone. I believe they knew they would end up in the stockade for their actions, and all they wanted was to get away from us as quickly as possible.

After thanking the police, Connie and I drove home, rattled by the whole experience. As we sat in our living room with our Styrofoam boxes of chicken and potatoes, and Connie poured us each a glass of wine, I worried about the next close call.

And this time, I knew that an armored embassy vehicle wouldn't be able to protect me. Not against the apocalypse, and certainly not against Pablo Escobar.

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