

Short description

Borderline - a thrilling journey from the sunny beaches of San Diego to the deepest, darkest Mexico.

Always at it: Claire, investigator with the US Coast Guard, and Diego, ruthless leader of a Mexican drug cartel. Together, though with different motives, they are searching for Dave, Claire's ex-lover and diamond thief. Diamonds worth 15 million dollars that belong to Diego – a man willing to risk everything to get them back.

Claire is dragged deeper and deeper into a vortex of lies, violence and betrayal, and only starts to figure things out late in the game.

Too late?

A breathtaking novel about the hunt for money, power and revenge.

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Prologue

or:

And all that for a few cans

“Just cut it off!”

“What the...?” Carlos shot a confused glance at the Columbian sitting just opposite him in the stern of the yacht. *Perhaps I just misunderstood him*, he thought. Their boat was cruising smoothly through the night at more than twenty knots, and in concert with the thunder of the heavy diesel engines, the airstream produced quite a noise. But Antonio gave a broad grin and nodded. All the while continuing to play with the barrel of his impressive automatic assault rifle.

“Tell them you’re going to chop their heads off! Believe me, they *will* talk. First thing you do, when they’re tied up and kneeling in front of you: show them the gleaming chainsaw and that old knife. They’ll spill the beans just to avoid the rusty blade.” Antonio chuckled.

Had the Colombian gone crazy? Carlos pushed a strand of hair from his forehead and gave a disapproving grunt at Antonio's suggestion.

But Antonio went on. "I've done it myself! To begin with, they won't say a word. They know that this show won't end well. Somehow that gums their tongues up. But when they realize they can choose between *quick or dirty*, there's no stopping them. They'll tell you *everything*. About their safe houses, bosses, routes, whatever. And why? Just to avoid that jagged knife. When they've finished, you take the saw to the lucky one who sang a little more. You'll be done with him quickly. And the second guy, the one who gets the knife? Well, he'll take a little longer..."

Carlos scrutinized his counterpart suspiciously and emptied his Dr. Pepper can in two gulps. Why was Antonio telling him this? To scare him? To stop him snatching the diamonds? *Well, you'll need more than your little horror story for that*, Carlos thought. Nevertheless, Antonio's casual description stabbed through his stomach and constricted his throat. He needed to swallow, but not just because of Antonio's tale. Carlos ran his tongue over dry gums and realized that he badly needed a drink. To ease his parched mouth, sure, but especially to calm his nerves. The brisk westerly wind had freshened and Carlos zipped up his windbreaker. Then he clumsily got to his feet and wobbled from the open lounge to the sheltered cabin. He wasn't a sailor. Never had been.

Closing the glass door behind him, Carlos crossed the big cabin and gave Manuel a wink. The skipper didn't react. Too focused on steering the *Sunseeker* at average speed in a northerly direction. Carlos stepped up beside him.

"Position?"

Manuel glanced at him, before directing his attention back to the radar screen. "Point Loma, San Diego. Another three or four hours max to Newport."

"Sounds good." Carlos's mouth curled in contentment. *Sounded really good*. San Diego meant that they had left the border with all its Coast Guard vessels behind. A good sign.

"Don't speed up too much."

"Sure."

Although the US Coast Guard had already paid them a visit south of Ensenada, Carlos didn't want to take any risks. He peered through the panoramic glass panel at the darkness outside. The moon and the stars had become veiled in clouds.

Everything was going according to plan.

He turned and descended the narrow staircase to the lower deck, quietly humming a Mexican ballad on his way. After he got to the small pantry, he bent to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of whiskey.

Then, fingers already poised around the cap, he hesitated. *Actually, not a good idea*, flashed through his mind. Although desperate for a drink, good reflexes were more important at present. He would need them soon, that was for sure. Sighing, he put the bottle back into the fridge and instead fished out a sachet of cocaine from his pocket. A moment later he had arranged a neat double line on the countertop. Quickly he bent down and snorted the powder with a rolled fifty dollar bill. As he took the second line, the boat hit a bigger wave and his head was knocked against the countertop. The remaining cocaine scattered widely across the table. Carlos suppressed a curse, rubbed his hurting face and wiped the flecks to the floor with the back of his hand.

His knees were still shaking when he went into his cabin and carefully locked the door behind him. The room was tiny. It accommodated no more than one narrow bunk and a built-in cabinet with a few shelves. Carlos bent over his bed, lifted the mattress and groped for the three explosive devices hidden below the fabric. For a moment he weighed them in his hands. Tiny little bombs, custom-made and activatable via cell phone. He cautiously put them into his jacket pockets. Then he took the Remington out of its holster and put a silencer on. He closed his eyes, enjoying the pulsing sensation of the cocaine. After two deep breaths he straightened up and opened the door. Ready for action.

Silently he tiptoed forward and knocked on the door of the captain's cabin in the bow. No answer. Carlos knocked again, then opened and peered inside. Alfons and Irene were lying motionless side by side on the wide bed. Carlos trod closer and patted Alfons' right leg with the gun barrel. No response. Then he checked his pulse. Very weak, barely perceptible. Reassured, Carlos circled the bed and looked down at the unconscious woman lying on the sheets in her black dress. *Cute*, he thought, and pushed Irene's skirt a little higher. Slowly he let his fingers wander along her inner thighs, until he felt the cloth of her g-string. *Cute little bitch*, he thought, as he pulled the satin aside. For a moment he stood staring at her shaved crotch, then pushed one of his fingers inside her. He studied her face. No movement at all.

Carlo's gaze wandered further to the half-empty cocktail glasses on a sideboard next to the bed. No wonder they were so out of it. Considering the amount of Rohypnol he had mixed into their drinks, it would be a miracle if they woke up at all.

Even so: *No risks today*. Carlos listened intently for a second, but except for the thrashing of the engine everything was silent. So he crouched at the foot of the bed and roughly thrust the carpet aside. The hatch below was easy to open. Carlos took one of the explosives and activated the detonator. Then he closed the hatch, shoved the carpet back and went to the door. A brief glance at the pantry and up the stairs assured him that he still was alone. He drew his weapon and fired two rounds into each unmoving head. *Just in case*.

Carlos was content. He closed the door and sneaked back to his cabin where he installed a second charge close to the exterior wall. The last he placed under the lowest shelf of the fridge. Once again he glimpsed the whiskey bottle - and once again he resisted the urge.

Easy. Take it easy.

He had already accomplished part two of his mission. All bombs were deposited below the waterline, far enough away from the gas tanks, and primed. After the explosion, the yacht would be swallowed up by the ocean within just a few short minutes. Without bursting into flames, he hoped. The *Alina* should disappear from the surface unobserved.

Carlos glanced at his watch. Just after midnight. In another three hours they were supposed to reach Newport, but in about ninety minutes they would be passing San Clemente. That's where he would check out. With the diamonds.

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Basically, Maria's plan wasn't that bad. Smuggling fifteen million dollars through Northern Mexico to California wasn't exactly a walk in the park. The risk of losing the precious cargo during the overland route was huge: crossing the territory of hostile cartels and managing the heavily guarded border afterwards - quite a challenge. So exchanging their money-laden suitcases for a handy portion of stones had been a clever move.

After that they had only needed a safe hiding place for their expensive charge. Carlos couldn't remember whose idea it was to use cans. Easy, but smart: they had poured the diamonds into a dozen customized Coke cans, which had then been stuffed onto a small pallet with other, ordinary cans. This handy package had been transported down to the Baja, to Cabo, where cargo and crew had boarded the *Alina* and embarked on their journey northward.

When it came to hiring the crew, Carlos had immediately put himself at top of the list.

Why Maria did choose him? Carlos didn't know. Sure, he had been working for her for many years. And before that, for her father Hector. He had also overseen the transaction of Maria's dollars into diamonds. Apparently these were enough reasons to trust him. *The plan wasn't bad*. But Maria didn't know about Carlos' own scheme, which went in a fundamentally different direction.

After so many years with Maria's *familia*, Carlos knew that something had to change in his life. All those years hiding in innumerable mountain villages in the Sierra Madre. Constantly on the run from the police, the armed forces or the warring cartels. Like Maria and all the others, he always had an AK or at least a handgun at hand. Carlos, of all people, a qualified economist. *An intellectual who used to abhor weapons!* The decade before, under Hector's regime, he merely dealt with financial matters; he'd been quite an expert in this field. Something that had later allowed the Locandos to rely on a considerable fortune during their time *on the run*. And everybody knew that only money guaranteed survival.

But several months ago, this sparse life had come to an abrupt end: Maria had decided to revive Hector's business and Carlos could finally lay down his weapons. Why did she do it? There were plenty of rumors circling, but nobody knew anything for certain. Was Maria's decision somehow connected to the arrival of the blond guy who had suddenly shown up at the hacienda? Could be, but Carlos wasn't sure. The only thing that mattered to him was to be back in an air-conditioned room with a computer. And it was in this kind of room that Carlos had arranged the diamond deal.

Why had Maria wanted such a big part of her fortune transferred *TO* the States? It had cost him countless sleepless nights, but Carlos could never land on an answer.

Fifteen million! And him? He was fobbed off with a few hundred grand. Much too little for the kind of risks he was taking. It was time to think of himself. No, not just himself, but his own *familia* too. Above all, there was Sylvia. Married for five years, and his love for her hadn't changed since the very first day. Kids were missing and there was nothing they prayed for more. But raising children in the environment they lived in now? For Carlos this was utterly out of question. Far too many fatherless half-orphans grew up in their surroundings. So he had made up his mind: leave Maria and the drug mire far behind. Get some money and start a new life. And this mission was their chance!

Even on the lower deck, Carlos could feel the waves. Legs apart, he leaned against the wall and transferred the number that would activate the detonators to the home button on his smartphone. Then he pulled the pallet with the welded cans out of the fridge. *Fifteen million*, he thought with a smile, and lifted the package on top of the table. He reached for one *real* Coke, pulled the small metal ring and took a big sip of the brown soda. Balancing the Coke in his hand, Carlos went upstairs.

The cocaine had made him jittery and he felt a sudden nerviness. *Not good*. The most difficult part was yet to come, waiting in the back of the yacht. Carlos didn't worry about Manuel, the slightly-built skipper. Antonio, however, was a different matter. Antonio was in charge of the diamonds' safe delivery to the blond guy. He trusted Antonio. And the people he trusted had to be good. But Carlos' concerns didn't only stretch to Antonio's undoubted skills - it was the automatic Heckler & Koch lying next to him. One tiny mistake and its bullets would perforate his organs within a split second. *No room for mistakes today!*

Through the panoramic windowpane, Carlos saw that Antonio was still sitting outside. And glancing in his direction. Much too risky to reach for his weapon, Carlos realized. He took another gulp and invitingly held the Coke up in the air. Antonio nodded and Carlos spun around. Downstairs, he took the gun out of its holster and jammed it into the back of his waistband. He checked that his jacket wouldn't get in the way of pulling it out, then grabbed another can from the fridge.

Accompanied by a murmured *¡Vamos!* he mounted the stairs again, went to the glass door and opened it. A smile crossed his lips as he entered the back and offered Antonio the Coke. He held it in front of his left hand. The one resting on the barrel of the Heckler. Antonio reached for the drink: the moment Carlos had been waiting for. He smashed the can into Antonio's surprised face. The Colombian yelled out in shock and blindly groped for his gun. Too late, as Carlos had already fired two rounds into his chest. *Gotcha!* Droplets of blood splashed onto his face and a moment later the man sank into the pillows.

Carlos had just lifted his weapon for a final shot when an angry scream roared from the cockpit. Startled, Carlos whirled around. He spotted Manuel at the wheel, aiming a signal pistol at him. It fired an instant later.

Carlos threw himself sideways and managed to avoid the blazing flare by a whisker. It bounced off the couch at the back, buzzing in a high arc into the ocean where it vanished, sizzling, in the dark flood.

Carlos turned back to the cockpit. Not a second too soon, because Manuel was aiming the weapon again. But Carlos was faster. He dashed to the door and fired three shots at the skipper. The impact threw Manuel against the steering wheel, which he yanked around. The yacht swerved violently. Carlos rushed forward, shoved the body aside and pulled the helm back to normal. He looked at the skipper's lifeless corpse: *definitely dead*. Quickly he glanced at the stern. No movement. Antonio was still sitting on the pillows. It looked as if he'd been stapled to the covers.

Carlos took a piece of paper out of his pocket and read the coordinates he had written down. After that, a slight adjustment to the autopilot and their route to San Clemente was fixed. Carlos left the control station and hurried downstairs, where he took the pallet and dragged it up on deck. He took the cans over to the dinghy lashed up to the railing. Passing Antonio, he threw a glance at the blood-soaked Columbian. *¡Adiós!* Carlos sneered. He stuffed the cans into the shelf below the pilot's seat, loosened the dinghy's ropes and returned to the wheel. *Part three: done*. Carlos took a relieved breath and slumped into the soft leather armchair.

As he gazed through the wide windowpanes at the approaching coastline, his thoughts wandered to Sylvia. Barely one more hour. Then all he needed to do was launch the tender and leave this dead ship with the diamonds. With fifteen million USD! Sylvia would be waiting for him at the beach. From there, straight to LAX and the red-eye to Atlanta. He had booked several connecting international flights. Not under their real names anymore; they had several passports to choose from.

Another line to solemnize the occasion?, Carlos reflected. But not for long, because all of a sudden he sensed a searing hot gush drilling into his back. Like his upper body had caught fire. And that was when he perceived the noise of the shots.

Desperately, Carlos looked down. Dark red stains were already appearing on his jacket... And holes that hadn't been there before. Carlos tried to turn his head, but someone had seized him by the neck. A second later the distorted voice of Antonio resounded in his ear. "Put a madre..." But the Columbian didn't continue; instead he slumped backwards onto the floor. Slowly Carlos turned and saw him lying twitching on the carpet.

Then Carlos noticed his own blood-smeared hands, reflexively clutching at his burning stomach, and felt the metallic tang of blood crawling up his throat. He was all too well aware of what this meant. *It could have been amazing*, he thought. *Sylvia, children, a new life.*

A new wave of pain made Carlos heave a tortured moan. Stars were dancing in front of his eyes, as he felt his blood and life gradually escaping his body. He knew where this would lead. *If he had to die, then not like this!*

Carlos groped for his cell phone; murmured a brief prayer.

And then he pushed the home button.

Chapter 1

Home, at last.

Claire presses her face against the plexiglass for a better view of the city below. Intrigued she stares at the never-ending sea of lights whirling past her. Approaching LA - almost back home. Finally! *What a trip*, she thinks. A trip that had begun twenty hours previously in the fog-shrouded Cape region, from where she had flown to Cali via New York.

She had been looking out of the small window since the cabin lights had been dimmed for landing. Looking down at the straight, brightly illuminated street lines neatly arranged like a chessboard.

From here, everything seems so clear and well-structured. But she knows how quickly this is going change once her feet touch ground.

Chapter 2

Diego tosses and turns his alert body on the sheets. The first rays of the morning sun are shining right through the floor-to-ceiling windows and onto the bed. Which rather disturbs him. On the other hand, they allow him an excellent view on the naked girl asleep next to him. What was her name again? Angel?

Diego lets his fingers drift over her breast. *¡Qué bonita!* But right now he has other things on his mind. With a sigh he gets up and goes to the bathroom where he straightens his back and regards his posture in the expensive crystal glass mirror. *Not bad for forty-one*, he

thinks, and admiringly strokes his flat belly. Although he is of slender build, he likes his well-trained body. He steps a little closer and touches his blond, longish hair. A *blond* Mexican. Something that never fails to surprise. Like Angel, who didn't believe him when he mentioned it over the course of their pre-coital small talk. Again, her body enters his mind. And the things she has done with it tonight. Silently Diego smirks to himself as his hand moves over the stubble on his chin. *Time for another shave.* Instead he pees, walks into the spacious living room and gazes at the lights of San Diego harbor far below him. The sight of all these ships sends his mind racing back to the *Alina*, to Antonio and Carlos, and most of all to the missing fifteen million. And to Ernesto Avril, the colonel.

It was several weeks ago that he and Avril had met for lunch at the overpriced Mexican restaurant on La Jolla's gold coast. Literally dozens of bored wives of wealthy CEOs, doctors or lawyers were occupying the tables, knocking back their first margaritas of the day. Or *six-zero* Evian. In a booth at the back wall, completely unimpressed by the ambient chitchat, Diego sat face-to-face with Avril. He was a middle-aged, gray-haired man in chinos and a black polo shirt that covered the contours of his wiry body. It was their second meeting and this time it wasn't about *IF*, but *HOW*.

"Thirty million; for what?"

"For thirty men." The colonel gave Diego a cold stare.

"Thirty men..." Diego repeated slowly, as he folded his hands on the table in front of him. His thumbs formed a bridge and knocked slightly on the wooden surface. "I can get those for three *thousand* on every corner between Tijuana and Juarez." He looked Avril in the eyes.

The colonel didn't flinch. "Sure. Guys with rusty revolvers, scratched AKs, jagged knives. The ones who drop like flies the second the action starts." Avril clicked his fingers in front of Diego's face, who decided to stay cool.

"Garbage," the officer added. "Good enough to hang them on bridges or stick their heads on lampposts. But my men..." the colonel paused, fixed his gaze on Diego with unblinking, ice-gray eyes, "... well, you won't find them on every corner. Fifteen of them. Special naval forces, *Fuerzas Especiales*. Extremely skilled and focused. Highly trained in combat techniques, survival, weapons, you name it. Of course with the best equipment money can buy. Perfectly suited to hunting down people like you." A cold smile flashed

over the colonel's otherwise unmoving face. Diego was impressed, but he masked it well. His expression remained blank and emotionless.

"These fifteen men are worth more than a few hundred of your *boys* put together," the colonel continued. A disparaging snort accompanied his last words. "And they are absolutely trustworthy." As he talked, Avril swayed the ice cubes in his glass and downed the drink in one. "In addition to these men, five former navy seals as backup on US territory. Fresh from the frontline. Ex-Iraq, ex-Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen. Tough guys. And to us and the money we can offer them, one hundred percent loyal."

Seals? Diego couldn't hide his amazement any longer. "How much?"

"No figures. But I can guarantee that nobody even comes close to my level." One million to start, then seventy to a hundred thousand *every month*. That was Avril's offer to the US soldiers. "Full package is thirty million. Plus an additional thirty percent of all proceeds from the US border on."

Diego uttered a silent whistle. "Well, they better be loyal."

"Oh, they are! And you'll get an additional five of my men from our units in Tijuana. They will remain in my team, responsible for communication."

"Which would be...?"

"All insights into border reconnaissance on our side and on the US side. In real time. When they send for a helicopter in Fort Bliss, you'll have it on your monitors two minutes later. You'll also get everything on your competitor's activities. If we have a new safe house or one of their trucks packed with cocaine on our screen: help yourself."

Diego gave up his troublesomely controlled poker face and grinned broadly. It seemed as if the colonel was worth every dollar.

"Furthermore, I'll send five men including equipment."

"Equipment?"

"A hybrid drone with the corresponding control unit. Fully equipped and armed. Plus the small boat."

Accompanied by silent laughter, Diego lifted his thumb. *The small boat*: an unmanned mini submarine; range: three thousand miles; bearing load: one and a half tons. Enough to transport the same amount of cocaine from their Columbian base to a harbor in the Gulf of California within ten days.

The colonel had anticipated his thoughts. "You take the goods to your haciendas. From there it'll be shuttled over with the drone. Very simple. You won't need any protecting

armies in Mexico. Plus, no smuggling tactics, no waiting at the border, no frisking and no confiscations."

"And what about Drug Enforcement Administration, Customs, Homeland Security?"

Once again, Avril gave a disparaging snort. "My team will take care of them. We'll always find a tiny gap you can send the cargo through. I assume you made some inquiries about me and my offer."

A slow nod from Diego. *Of course they had!* Two weeks ago Carlos had done a complete background check on the officer. The result? Promising.

Ernesto Avril, fifty-two years of age, single, no children. Colonel in the Mexican Naval Forces, highly decorated, various joint missions with the Northern Command Forces in Colorado, liaison officer with excellent contacts with the DEA and FBI, supervisor of the Marine Special Forces in Veracruz and Manzanillo, most recently promoted as commander of the border control in Tijuana. No affiliation to any political party, no whiff of corruption or involvement in criminal organizations. Women, men, gambling or drugs? Negative! Carlos' report ended with a reassuring *no skeletons in the colonel's closet*. Ergo, Avril was the perfect man for the job.

"Let the other *familias* quarrel with their mercenaries and *boy*-soldiers. Let them earn all the bloody publicity. *You* don't need that. My men and their complete superiority here," he tapped his temple, "is all you need. As we agreed, we will deliver only after we receive the deposit."

"On its way." Diego smiled and lifted his glass of amber-colored mescal. "*¡Salud!*"

Well, it *was* on its way, muses Diego with a bitter grin as he gets back in bed. He furiously clenches his fist and slams it into a pillow.

Angel-*whatever-her-name-is* beside him wakes up startled. "*¿Qué?*"

Diego looks at her angrily. "Go take a shower. I want to be alone!" He pushes her out of his bed.

The girl pouts, but acquiesces. Slowly she gets up and collects her clothes from the parquet. After that she vanishes into the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, when she takes the money agreed on for her services from a sideboard and leaves the penthouse, Diego has already fallen back asleep.