

90 MILES

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Joaquin Carmona tried to close his eyes. He knew it was a bad idea. Everything he'd been told said to do otherwise. Keep your eyes open. Don't lose sight of the horizon. Marta had said these things before they set off, knowing her husband, unlike her and their son, Angel, was not a water person.

Had the circumstances been better, he would have laughed at the memory—of beaches, uncomfortable dips in Cuba's crisp, blue waters; of his son's bubbly laughter as Joaquin picked him up and tossed him into the air, the sun casting half his small, olive-skinned face in shadow. But laughter was for another time.

Now they were in hell.

Rigoberto, the older man, was at the front of the small, rickety boat. He was the captain of their doomed vessel. A raft, really. A tiny flotation device of his creation that was supposed to carry the four of them to freedom. Actually, freedom didn't matter anymore. It was about safety. It was about land and feeling their toes in the sand or concrete. Anything, really. Joaquin didn't care anymore. He wanted off this maldito boat and to be anywhere else.

Joaquin felt the raft lurch left, and his stomach turned right. His empty stomach. There'd been some tostadas before boarding but he couldn't bring himself to eat. Couldn't bring himself to do anything even mildly celebratory before they reached the other side.

Freedom. Miami. Or so they were told.

Manolito was nestled next to Marta, his tiny, toddler face buried in her armpit like a tiny bird waiting for food. His mood was a blend of fear, anger, and sadness. They'd woken him up suddenly, rushed him outside of their tiny house, rushed him down the empty streets—sliding into alleys and dark corners if they caught wind of anyone. He was a smart boy. He caught on quick. He knew something was wrong. They weren't leaving de vacaciones. There were no bags. Plus, he knew—had known for years—that vacations and trips and adventures like that were for other families. Families with more.

Joaquin felt a sharp jolt of regret as he met his son's eyes—for a moment, before Manolito's dark brown pupils turned back to his mother. This was on *him*. He'd made this decision. He, in a fit of anger at their lot in life, had reached out to Rigoberto.

The bar—La Bodeguita del Medio, on Empedrado—had been dark and empty when Joaquin stepped in and met Rigoberto in the back. A cold beer was waiting for him. It was a tourist spot, that bar. The checkered floor, the writing on the wall, photos of American celebrities hanging everywhere. Joaquin didn't belong here. Would get kicked out if he stuck around too long. But this beer. This frigid dream materialized in front of him. He felt the dirt on his palms mix with the condensation on the bottle and he could almost taste the Presidente before he brought the bottle to his chapped, peeling lips. Desperate for the cold liquid to help fend off the tropical heat that had coated his body for what felt like a century.

He slurped it down with gusto. Barely savoring the refreshment. Barely feeling the alcohol pulse through his brain. Joaquin hadn't had a drink in at least a year. Not since Marta told him it was her—and Manolo—or the bottle. Bottles, rather. As life got worse, as their lives became more about scrounging and scavenging just to survive, Joaquin found himself turning more and more to release. Sipping his friend Osvaldito's gualfarina—the homemade, illegal liquor—with a frequency that bordered on obsession. It had gotten bad. Well, worse. He barely remembered those days. Stumbling into his tiny house, reeking of sex, sweat, drink, blood. He didn't know what he had done. Who he had met. How he had survived. Marta was having none of it. She knew they were in hell. She felt it, too. But she hadn't forgotten their son. She would not allow Joaquin to forget him, either. So the line was drawn: drink again, and we leave. No middle ground. So, Joaquin listened. And for a year, up until that moment in the bar, with the cold beer coming alive in his hands, he'd listened. He'd done what he was told. He went to work as a janitor, cleaning office buildings and government spaces when there was work to be done, sitting at home feeling his world fade into red when there wasn't. He bid adios to Osvaldito. He taught his son about baseball. He had sex with his wife once a month. He tried to remember the sound of his mother's voice, and a time when Cuba was a place where he wanted to be.

"Osvaldito told me you wanted...help," Rigoberto had said, his sun-crackled skin giving his appearance a wraith-like quality. He was a skinny, old man, his body frail and rigid. But his face had an unexpected expressiveness that alarmed Joaquin. A serpentine smile and tiny, obsidian eyes that seemed to pulse to their own rhythm. His hands were mangled, claw-like, from decades of working the fields and little medical attention. His teeth—what few Joaquin could see—were a dull yellow, the incisors sharp and vampiric.

"Yes, yes," Joaquin said, swallowing down the last bit of the beer. He tried not to look around the bar, not out of worry, but out of a need for another drink. He was not the type to have just one. To sip a rum and take a nap. No, Joaquin drank hard and long, like his father and his abuelo before him. He didn't know any other way. He didn't want to.

"Bueno, then tell me, hermano," Rigoberto said. "We are only briefly outside the eyes of the people who frown upon these kind of conversation."

“I understand.”

“Do you, Joaquin Carmona, hijo de Salvador? I knew your father. He was a hard worker. Loved to sing and dance and drink. I have fond memories of him,” Rigoberto said, his eyes glazing over slightly, the deep blackness now a cloudy, murky gray. “So when your friend called me, I came. I want to help the son of my friend, you see? I am a helper. I can get you where you need. But it’s not free.”

Joaquin felt the boat—the raft—lurch again. He felt Rigoberto’s stare before he dared meet it. The dark, sludgy eyes on his, then trailing over to Marta, and settling on Manolo.

“It’s just you and your wife?” he’d asked Joaquin as they walked back toward el Centro, where Joaquin lived. The first beer had blended into six more, and Joaquin felt wobbly. There’d been a time, not long ago, when six beers was an appetizer. A primer for the night. A necessity. But that was long ago. His tolerance was gone. He felt the rough edges of a brownout creeping into his vision.

“Just me and Marta, yeah, just two,” he’d said, nodding fast. Why was he lying? Was it the cost? Was it habit—to lie, to deflect, to dance around the truth? The alcoholic habits came back fast, like sliding into comfortable slippers found in the back of the closet. It should’ve scared him, the ease with which the lies spread. But something inside him wanted these words, wanted this to be the truth— and that shook him to his core. Or, it would. Later.

“Está bien,” Rigoberto said, slapping Joaquin’s face softly as they parted. “Anything more and we’d barely make it off the island, mijo. My boats are strong, but not that strong. They have to be fast, too, you know? To get past them.”

“Them?”

Rigoberto laughed, a dry, crusty laugh that sounded like sandpaper on asphalt.

“Los tiburones, Joaquin,” Rigoberto said. “The sharks.”

Joaquin had heard the stories—of what men and women traversing the waters between Cuba and Florida had seen. The deep blue waters masking a deadly darkness. Sharks were fearless, and Joaquin had heard many a story of the giant, predatory fish snatching balseros from their rafts. He’d heard stories of blood-stained waters, arms and legs floating past. But that was just the sharks, Joaquin knew.

He’d stopped outside the rickety front door to his home and felt a jolt of clarity electrify his body. If the sharks didn’t get them, there were many other paths that lead to a painful, brutal death. If they were captured—if they didn’t make it past the twelve-mile area surrounding Cuba that preceded international waters, they’d be arrested. At best. Joaquin had also heard stories of balseros not making it back home, shot point-blank on the boats ferrying them back to the island. If they did manage to get past Cuban waters, and if they did manage to avoid a deadly encounter with a shark, they’d still have to navigate the waters—the massive

Caribbean waves, some clocking in higher than fifteen feet—that could easily flip and destroy the kind of boat he envisioned Rigoberto captaining.

“What have I done?” Joaquin asked himself as his hand wrapped around the chipped and rusty doorknob, careful to not make any noises that could wake Marta. He cursed softly, remembering the drinks. Sure she’d sniff the alcohol on his breath as he slid into bed.

“What have I done?”

He made a beeline for their mildew-infested and cramped bathroom, sloshing water from the sink into his hungry mouth, rinsing and gargling in a vain attempt to clean up the stains of his behavior.

Rigoberto had laid out the plan as Joaquin worked on his fourth beer. He, unlike many on the island, owned a fishing boat, he said. And while he worked in the fields to this day, he earned a healthy income as a smuggler—ferrying people like Joaquin from Cuba to Miami. But the journey wasn’t over once they hit international waters, explained Rigoberto. No. They needed to dodge nature’s traps and man himself—notably, the Coast Guard. The U.S. had enacted a “wet foot, dry foot” policy specifically designed to prevent another mass exodus along the lines of the Mariel swarm that hit Miami in the early 80s. Now, if balseros were caught on their way to Miami, they could be sent back. And a trip back to Cuba was certain death. No, they had to reach land. Their feet had to touch the ground. That made the Coast Guard the enemy, and it made international waters just as dangerous as the twelve miles surrounding Cuba.

Joaquin blinked, and he was back on the raft. Laying down now, his eyes staring up into the bright, Caribbean sky—the sun bearing down on them, roasting his tan skin. His mouth was dry. His body limp. He heard Manolo whimpering behind him somewhere. He wanted to get up, but he couldn’t.

“Halfway there,” Rigoberto said, his voice a ragged croak.

How long had he been out? Joaquin had no idea. It couldn’t have been that long. His mind drifted back to the morning—boarding Rigoberto’s boat, just a few bottles of water, a bag of food, and nothing else. They were going fishing. At least that’s what they wanted anyone who saw them to believe. There was nothing wrong here. Just a family paying an experienced fisherman to show them the waters.

Rigoberto’s entire expression morphed once he set eyes on Manolo. The kid was pudgy, big for his age. But enough to create a problem on the old man’s boat? Joaquin had tried not to worry, had tried to ignore the lie he’d drunkenly spat out at Rigoberto the night before—but now it all came back, and he saw the older man’s eyes flicker with a flame that could only be pure hatred.

But they were out, in the open, and the old man couldn't deviate now. The plan had been set. People were watching. They'd boarded, and he felt Rigoberto's hot, angry breath on his face as he helped Joaquin onto the raft, the last crew member aboard.

"Pendejo mentiroso," he hissed. "Now we all die together."

Joaquin tried to ignore Rigoberto. Now, his back flat on the boat, the entire vessel bobbing up and down with a ferocity that he'd never imagined, he could care less about the old man's petty concerns. He was worried, too, but it had little to do with a fat toddler. It had to do with *survival*.

Then they sprung the first leak. A small tear near the front of the raft—near where Rigoberto was seated, his makeshift captain's seat really just a cooler at the front of cheap, man-made raft. *Owned a boat*, Joaquin had thought when he and Marta caught a glimpse of Rigoberto's vessel. Who was the real mentiroso?

The water came into the boat slowly, but Rigoberto danced to his feet like a child stung by a bee, stepping back from the leak as if singed by flame.

"No, no, no!" he said, his voice an octave higher than Joaquin thought possible. "Now we die! Now it's over!"

Joaquin felt blood pump through his body. Felt life come back to his limbs. He saw—felt—himself sit up, yank his shirt off and stuff the tattered white cloth into the tear, trying to stop the flow. It seemed to work for a second, and his heart slowed, and he almost sighed in relief, but then he felt his shirt soaking in his hands and he knew it was over.

"Papi, no!"

Manolo's scream, shrill and desperate, didn't come soon enough to prevent what happened next. Joaquin felt the blade slide into his back, long and fat, the hilt touching his sunburnt skin. Then another scream—Marta—followed by a scuffle. Marta was strong. Forceful. She would not die quietly. And she would not die at the hands of some pendejo viejo as she'd described Rigoberto that last night, as she angrily poured Joaquin a glass of water to sober him up.

"What have you done, Joaquin? To us? To our family?"

The raft bobbed up again, a larger, more powerful wave tossing the tiny boat up and off the water for a few seconds—and Joaquin felt like they were gliding on air. He fell backward, his face now watching the struggle: Rigoberto standing over Marta, his hands wrapped around her throat, Manolo cowering behind the old man.

"Put a maldita," Rigoberto spat, his body shaking from the effort of trying to keep Marta down. Joaquin felt the knife dig deeper into him, and he knew if he was going to act, it had to be now.

He was dying.

He stood, the lurch and lunge of the waves underneath them balancing out his own dizziness, giving his blood-drained body a brief moment of control as he grabbed Rigoberto's shoulders and pulled the skinny, jagged old man back and toward the edge of the raft—the raft that was now filling with water, the crystal blue ocean no longer something that surrounded them —now something that would consume them.

Joaquin felt his hands wrap around Rigoberto's scaly, tan throat, felt his fingers tighten around it, his thumbs pressuring the bones and muscle and life that took up space in there. He saw Rigoberto's eyes bulge open, a look of surprise and hate steaming off his eyes, like the exhaust from an old Ford.

"Estas muerto, cabrón," Rigoberto said, the words a sizzling whisper, a last gasp.

Joaquin felt the burning now. His back. The blood coating him. His hands hurt. His body was buckling. He couldn't hold on. He just felt so...so alone. So empty. So tired.

He'd tried, Martica, he really had. Even after everything—after prison, after that first failed attempt, she'd stayed with him. She'd cared for him even when the work disappeared. He'd tried this to save her, to save them, their life...their son. And now what?

He felt the crack in Rigoberto's neck before he heard it, a soft, wet *krrk* sound that he might have just imagined. But then the old man stopped fighting, though his eyes—red, the vessels burst and spreading—remained awake, as if looking for a final corner to cut, a last deal to make to ensure their survival.

Joaquin stumbled back. That's when the shark popped up, its sleek, gray-blue form sidling up to the raft, its mouth hooking onto Rigoberto's head and dragging him into the water, almost silent in its execution—a predator accustomed to scavenging for meals between an island and a peninsula.

Joaquin wanted to gasp, but found it hard to breathe. He felt a hand on his shoulder as he dropped down onto the floor, the water sloshing as he fell back, Marta next to him. She was crying. Manolo was crying. He could still hear them, but he found it hard to make words, to respond.

"Perdóname, Dios," he muttered. God, forgive me. Forgive me for what I've done.

He didn't mean Rigoberto.

"Think we got something, Lieutenant," the ensign said as he approached the edge of the small Coast Guard cutter and peered into the calm, teal waters of the Florida Straits. He felt his commanding officer, Lieutenant Osman, approach from behind.

"Already? Shit, we just left dock," she said, under her breath. She stood to the ensign's left and followed his gaze.

"You sure?" she asked. "Just looks like a bunch of wood...and some clothes?"

They'd anchored the cutter at the first sign of something. They'd expected a small craft, or boat in need of assistance. But this? This looked more like someone's overturned laundry bin.

Then they saw the red.

The kind of red that could only mean one thing. The kind of dark maroon that wasn't meant to be seen on the outside. At least not in these quantities.

"Shit, shit, shit," Osman said, more out of annoyance than genuine fear or concern. This wasn't her first trip off land. But as the image she was recording in her brain lingered over the next few months, it would, for all intents and purposes, be her last. "What the hell happened here?"

"Usual shit," the ensign—a good 'ol boy from Pensacola named Gilbert—spat. "Nother bunch of dead spic rafters, trying to swim 'cross these shark waters to get a taste of American freedom, y'know? Maybe next time, kids. Stupid."

Osman blinked, trying to reject the words slithering into her ears. She turned to face Gulbert, her expression immediately telling the junior officer he'd fucked up. Big time.

"Call it in," she said, straining to keep her tone calm and aligned with her job as a commanding officer, not shrill and enraged, which is how she actually felt. "People died here, ensign. Do you understand? *People*."

Gulbert nodded nervously, and seemed relieved to be heading back to the comm station.

Osman looked down at the wreckage, at the bobbing debris that had once been something else—a ship, a construct. But not just that. It had been something more important. Something primal. Something good.

It had been hope.