

# Prologue

Bacunayagua, Cuba, ~ 1991

The stake-bed truck rattled down the dirt road in the early morning darkness. The fifteen passengers braced themselves against the cab and rail, and the jungle sped away in the red glow of the taillights. Twelve-year-old Galán Betances sat over the rear axle, his younger sister's head in his lap. Gabriela clutched her Winnie the Pooh stuffed animal to her chest in her sleep.

The truck groaned to a stop, and dust settled over the passengers. Some began to whisper, while others rubbed their eyes or craned their necks to get a better view. They had departed from the underpass just outside of Ciego de Ávila six hours earlier.

"Gabi," said Galán, no longer sleepy. "Wake up. We're here."

Gabriela blinked and wiped the saliva from the corner of her mouth. She smiled at Galán, the birthmark on her upper lip barely visible in the darkness.

Galán stood and pulled Gabriela up with him. They waited, hand-in-hand, for their parents.

Gustavo, their father, peeled away from the rail and leaned down. His face, greasy from the diesel fumes, shone in the faint moonlight. "Are you ready, Galán? Remember, I need you."

"Sí, Papá," said Galán, crinkling his nose to avoid his father's stale breath. At least it didn't reek of cane liquor and vomit.

"Good." Gustavo squeezed Galán's shoulder with his calloused hand. He slung his olive green backpack from his Angola deployment over his shoulder and stepped off the tailgate.

Galán looked up at his mother, Josefina, who wore a red bandanna around her normally unkempt hair. She didn't return his smile. In fact, she hadn't said anything since they had passed the exit for Cienfuegos just after sunset.

Galán passed Gabriela to his mother and jumped off the tailgate. The dirt here was softer than the dirt in Ciego de Ávila. Or maybe it was sand? It was too dark to tell.

As the group proceeded single-file into the jungle, Galán thought about how he would never play catch again with his father in front of their sagging bungalow. Indeed, he would never be a center fielder for los Tigres de Ciego de Ávila. But then he thought about the evenings he'd spent behind the house holding Gabriela, waiting for the alcohol to put his father to sleep, waiting for his mother to stop crying. Maybe life could change in other ways, too?

A flashlight broke through the darkness from the head of the line. The group stopped, the only noise coming from the frogs and crickets. The beam strafed back and forth across the jungle floor before stopping on a large pile of branches and palm fronds.

"There," said Ramón, the overweight carpenter doubling as captain. "Just where he said it would be. Thanks be to God."

Josefina pulled Gabi closer.

Gustavo's fingers dug into Galán's shoulder.

Ramón, wearing a ball cap emblazoned with the American flag and the word BICENTENNIAL, scrambled through the brush toward the pile. Two younger men followed. As the threesome removed branches and palm fronds, a blue tarp came into view. The skinniest man grabbed a loose corner.

"No, wait, wait," said Ramón, stepping between the skinny man and the tarp. "I'll do it." He raised his jean shorts up under his ample belly and pulled on the tarp. It snagged. "Damn," he muttered, getting a better grip. He pulled again. There was a ripping noise, but the tarp came off.

Galán swallowed. The raft looked like something he and his friend Juani would have built to fly to Mars. Rebar and sheets of corrugated metal held together a collection of large Styrofoam blocks.

In the center, a tractor engine sat in a shallow depression, somehow connected to a homemade propeller. The whole thing was no bigger than the back of the stake-bed truck.

“She may not be pretty,” said Ramón, wiping his face with the bottom of his shirt. “But we don’t need pretty.”

With the raft sitting not more than ten feet from him, Galán could no longer ignore that the trip was really happening. He remembered his nightmare, the black water closing in over his head, the last air he would ever breathe trapped in his lungs. He reached for his mother’s hand and could feel her fingers trembling.

“What is that thing?” asked Gabi, her voice still sleepy.

“A boat,” said Josefina.

“Oh.”

Galán took a deep breath and reminded himself that Ramón knew what he was doing. Ramón was the finest carpenter in all of Ciego de Ávila. He had almost single-handedly rebuilt the neighborhood after the hurricane. Putting together a raft was nothing for him.

“*Vamos*,” said Ramón, waving the rest of the men towards him. “It’s not like it has wheels.”

The call to action broke the stillness. The men half-pulled and half-lifted Ramón’s the raft down the trail. Galán, Josefina, and Gabriela followed.

“You’re telling me this heavy bitch is going to float?” said a straining voice Galán didn’t recognize.

“It’s called physics,” said Ramón. “And to think our country leads the world in education.”

“Physics. Gravity. Same shit.”

The group plodded along for several more minutes until the trail spilled onto a small, secluded beach. The ocean was blacker than the sky, but a streak of moonlight shimmered on the surface. Galán strained his eyes toward the horizon to see if he could make out Florida, but there was only darkness.

Ramón inspected the engine while a few of the men, Gustavo included, watched over his shoulder. They spoke in hushed tones

until there was a loud backfire followed by the steady hum. The engine accelerated for a moment and then went silent.

“Good,” said Ramón, satisfied with the test. “Let’s go.”

The men pushed the raft into the gentle surf. Gustavo turned, the water up to his waist, and waved for his family to join him.

Galán hoisted his and Gabriela’s backpacks over his head and waded into the warm water. His sandaled feet dug into the squishy, shapeless mud. Gustavo helped him aboard the raft, which shifted beneath the weight of the embarking Cubans.

As Galán crouched into a tight space between his parents, goosebumps formed on his wet legs. He tried to rub himself dry. Rivulets of seawater ran through the dead leaves and dirt that coated the Styrofoam.

Galán looked up to force a smile at Gabriela, but she was asleep in Josefina’s arms. He couldn’t understand how she could sleep at a moment like this, but then again Gabriela was different.

Ramón handed out four oars. “We’re not firing up the engine until this damned island is just a memory. You know how sound travels on water. If the Border Guard hear us, we’re screwed.”

“You’re worrying too much, Ramón,” said a voice from the other end of the raft. “The third time’s the charm.”

Gustavo laughed, but Josefina didn’t. She just wiped a wet streak from her cheek.

As the four oars dipped rhythmically into the gentle swells, Galán tried to distract himself by thinking about his cousins in Miami. He had only ever seen them in photographs, but they were waiting for him, for Gabriela, for his parents. Yankiel, the oldest, played on a baseball team with blindingly white pinstriped pants and royal-blue stirrups. And then there was the field at Yankiel’s school. Straight while foul lines, perfect rows of cut grass . . .

Galán felt rapid breaths close to his ear. His mother was looking over his head at Gustavo.

“What?” said Gustavo.

“I can’t,” she said. “I can’t. Tell him to turn it back.”

“What? Are you crazy?” said Gustavo. “Take a deep breath and calm yourself down.”

“I can’t, Gustavo. I won’t. Tell him to turn it back.”

“No,” said Gustavo through gritted teeth. “You have to calm down.”

“Ramón,” said Josefina loudly. “Turn it back.”

“Be quiet!” said Gustavo. “Have you lost your mind?”

Galán’s heart pounded.

“Turn the raft back, Ramón,” said Josefina, even louder. The other migrants murmured. “Ramón, I said turn it back!”

“For the love of Christ, Gustavo,” said Ramón. “Control her! We can’t have this noise.”

Josefina shifted her weight, bumping her hip into Galán. There was a splash as she dropped her foot into the water. Gabriela, who was still in Josefina’s lap, started to cry.

“Come on, Galán,” said Josefina, grabbing his arm. “Let’s go.”

Gustavo grabbed Galán’s other arm.

“What are you doing, Josefina?” said Gustavo. “Get back on this boat!”

“Let’s go, Galán,” said Josefina. “We’re going home. Let’s go. Now!” She tugged Galán toward her but he didn’t budge.

Gustavo held Galán’s arm so tightly that the boy’s eyes watered.

“Let go of my son,” yelled Josefina to Gustavo. “That’s my son. Get your hands off my son!”

“Get back in the goddamned boat!” said Gustavo. He reached for Josefina and Gabriela with his free hand.

Galán didn’t know what to do.

Ramón appeared in the darkness above and put his wet sneaker against Josefina’s back. He kicked her and Gabriela into the black water.

“Mami!” screamed Galán, sticking out his arm. It was no use—his father now had him in a bear hug.

As the raft slipped away, Josefina and Gabriela popped above the surface, coughing and choking.

“What the hell, Ramón?” yelled Gustavo, not taking his eyes off his wife and daughter.

“You have a problem?” said Ramón. “Then go with them! I don’t care. But we’re not having this!”

“Turn this thing around and pick them up,” said Gustavo. “Josefina! Get back here!”

Ramón clambered to his spot next to the engine. “*Pa’ norte*,” he said to the rowers.

Galán tried to struggle out of his father’s arms. “Let me go, Papá!” he yelled, no longer afraid of the deep black water. “Let me go!”

Gustavo only tightened his grip. “Josefina! Josefina! Get back here! Get back here now!”

The only response was Josefina and Gabriela’s frantic splashing toward shore, a splashing that grew quieter until all Galán could hear was the dipping of oars. He tried once more to lunge away from his father, but Gustavo was too strong. Galán fell back against his father’s broad chest and began to sob.



As the sun crept overhead, Cuba receded toward the horizon until only its green mountains protruded from the sea. The tractor engine hummed, and the men took shifts using a milk carton to scoop seawater into the coolant system—all the men except Gustavo, who sat silent, his face twitching.

Galán remained next to his father, his stillness masking his frantic thoughts. Were his mother and Gabi alive, hitching a ride back to Ciego de Ávila to move in with Aunt Teresa? Or were they floating face down just beyond the break? And if they had somehow survived, would he ever see them again?

Even though the seas were kind, Galán had to focus on what was happening around him to keep from vomiting.

Those migrants not on coolant duty slept. Despite the heat, they covered themselves with loose clothing to avoid the pounding sun. Ramón, however, periodically glanced upward and adjusted the

aluminum pipe that served as a tiller. "I'll be damned if we end up in the Bahamas," he said to himself.

Galán swallowed the bile lurking in the back of his throat. Bahamas? United States? What difference did it make? Gabi and his mother wouldn't be there.

Around noon, Gustavo's face finally broke. He blinked and furrowed his brow. Pointing toward the horizon, he nudged Ramón with his foot. It took several seconds before Galán noticed the dark speck.

"It's okay," said Ramón, squinting. "Probably just an American fishing boat." He removed his ball cap and wiped the sweat from his brow with the bottom of his shirt. The fabric had become stretched.

Those who had been sleeping stirred. They watched Ramón. Their captain glanced back and forth between his watch and the sun and appeared to be performing some kind of calculation. He grabbed the tiller and altered course away from the other boat, but the raft was moving too slowly to open the distance.

As the minutes inched by, the other boat grew larger until Galán could make out a high green bow, a white pilothouse, and a trailing ribbon of black smoke.

"Yup, fishermen," said Ramón, nodding. "Still, we have to be smart. I don't want these bastards radioing the Coast Guard."

White waves rolled off the fishing vessel's bow. A name was written in white paint across the starboard side, but Galán couldn't read it. Still, the fishermen had to be able to see the raft by now. God willing they would call the Coast Guard, and Galán would be reunited with his mother and Gabriela. After a few days, the whole ordeal would be nothing more than a bizarre, fading nightmare.

"That's close enough," said Ramón, killing the engine. "Get the tarp."

Two men pulled the large sheet from the space in front of the engine and began unfolding. Others took the loose ends and spread the tarp over themselves and the raft.

"Jesus Christ," said Ramón. "Not the white side up! Put the blue side up! *Coño!* You think these Americans are expecting to see a goddamned iceberg out here?"

The migrants flipped the tarp. Once they had it secured to the edges of the raft, they waited underneath. They were silent but for the occasional whisper. Ramón, who had kept a corner of the tarp folded back, was the only one who could see out.

The temperature rose. Not only did the sun cook from the outside, but the tractor engine radiated heat from within. Sweat dripped from Galán's face onto the gouged Styrofoam. He thought about shouting to the fishermen until he noticed the hilt of a knife protruding from Ramón's waistband. Galán had never seen Ramón truly angry.

The minutes dragged on, and the steady rumbling of the fishing boat's engines became audible. Gustavo murmured something that sounded vaguely familiar to Galán. Was his father, the same man who laughed at Josefina when she went to Sunday mass, praying the Padre Nuestro?

"What does it look like, Ramón?" a frightened voice asked.

"*Cállate*," said Ramón.

"Ramón—"

"I said shut up!"

The approaching engines grew louder. Galán waited for an American fisherman to reach down and snatch the tarp away, or worse, for the snub-nosed green vessel to plow over the flimsy raft. He dug his fingernails into the Styrofoam.

Ramón laughed.

"What, Ramón?" asked the same scared voice.

"There's nobody on the bridge," he said. "Autopilot. Those Americans have that thing going on autopilot. They're probably taking a damned nap. I should have known. Lazy bastards."

The other migrants laughed, but Galán closed his eyes and buried his forehead into the Styrofoam. He bit his lip to keep from crying out.



Galán awoke disoriented beneath a dark sky. He lay still until he recognized his father snoring beside him. The wind had picked up, and the raft rose and fell with the waves. On the port side, a silhouette



defecated into the water. Ramón, hunched but still awake, poured water into the engine.

Galán, afraid of standing and being pitched into the sea, slid on his backside across the Styrofoam toward the captain. “How much farther is it, Don Ramón?” His voice cracked from dryness.

“I don’t know, kid,” said Ramón, reaching the milk jug into the salt water. “Depends on the currents, the winds. But I’d say we’re more than halfway.”

“Halfway” would’ve been more helpful if Galán hadn’t lost track of the hours that had passed. He scratched his head before giving up on the uncertain math.

“You want me to pour for a little bit?” Galán asked. He wanted to do something, anything, even if it meant helping the man who had kicked his mother and sister into the sea.

Ramón looked him up and down. “Sure,” he finally said, handing Galán the jug.

By focusing on the scooping and pouring, Galán managed to briefly forget that his mother and sister were gone. But the trick only lasted so long. When the memory of their wild splashing inevitably exploded into his consciousness, his breath caught, and his pulse quickened.

Galán was about to start crying again when he noticed the oldest man in the group staring at him from beneath the wide brim of a straw hat. Galán looked away. He didn’t like how the man stared so intently, how he didn’t blink. But with each passing minute of pretending to be engrossed in coolant duty, the more Galán felt like an animal in a zoo. He finally stole another glance.

The old man seemed to have been waiting. He smiled and pointed a long finger towards the black sky. “Olokun will bring her back.” With that, he pulled his hat down over his face and laid back onto the Styrofoam.

Galán didn’t know much about Olokun—his mother always said that the orishas were “sacrilegious”—but something about the man and his strange, knowing statement made Galán’s heart race even faster. And why did the old man say *her* and not *them*?

Trembling, Galán spilled the water onto the hot engine block. The water hissed into steam, scalding him back into the moment.



When Galán woke again, the sky was still dark, but the winds had calmed. The other migrants appeared to be sleeping—all except Ramón. The hefty carpenter, his shirt wrapped around his head, fussed over the sputtering engine. A disconnected hose hung uselessly.

Galán turned away and tried not to think about what would happen if the engine failed. His stomach grumbled and his mouth felt like sandpaper. He retrieved a water bottle and a package of crackers from his backpack. He drank slowly, letting the water soak into his parched tongue before swallowing. Then he ate one of the crackers in small bites. It did little to satisfy his hunger, and its saltiness made him thirstier.

As Galán stowed his bag, he noticed Gabriela's pink backpack jammed between two blocks of Styrofoam. He pulled it out, its familiar texture and heft bringing back memories of carrying it for her on the way home from school. Wherever Gabriela went, so did the backpack, along with Winnie the Pooh and the plastic horse that was missing a hoof and the tip of its tail. Galán had hated being the one boy with a pink backpack, but now he would do anything to walk his sister home again from la Escuela Primaria Vargas Hernández.

The raft lurched. Galán looked to his left and right but saw nothing unusual—only the shapes of several other migrants sitting up. The bump had felt like a wave hitting the raft broadside, but the seas were calm.

After a minute of nothing but the normal rocking, Galán returned to inventorying Gabriela's backpack. He had just uncovered the plastic horse beneath a package of cookies when he heard a loud splash behind him. He turned but again didn't see anything.

“Did you hear that?” somebody asked.

“Yeah,” said Ramón, “probably some kind of fish.”

“It must be a big-ass fish.”

The raft lurched again, this time in the opposite direction. By now, all of the migrants were awake, murmuring to each other and staring at the dark ocean. The skinny man who had helped Ramón pull the branches from the raft made the sign of the cross.

The raft jumped a third time, violently enough that Galán dropped Gabriela's bag onto the deck. The only woman aboard sobbed, and the skinny man clasped his hands in prayer.

Galán remembered again his nightmare about the black ocean. His breaths became rapid and shallow. He felt like he was going to suffocate.

"*Cálmate,*" said Gustavo, turning away from the sea towards Galán. "Control yourself. Be a goddamned man."

Galán managed a nod.

A blinding light burst through the darkness. A man on the other side of the raft was wildly scanning the waves with a flashlight.

"Put that shit away," yelled Ramón. "They'll be able to see that from Miami!"

Whoever had the flashlight didn't listen.

"My God!" the solitary woman screamed. There in the beam of light, not ten feet from the raft, a fin cut slowly through the water. The skinny man dropped to his knees in the engine depression, his hands outstretched toward the heavens. More than a few of the other men cursed.

Ramón clambered across the raft and snatched the flashlight. He flung it into the sea, where it sank beneath the waves, the glowing orb dropping into the shadowy depths. The night seemed even darker than before.

Now that he could barely see, Galán couldn't stop himself from imagining sharks circling the raft. They didn't even have to bite anybody to make his nightmare come true. They only needed to thrash the raft into pieces. His hyperventilating worsened, and he felt like he was already drowning.

"For the love of Christ," said Gustavo, grabbing Galán by the shoulders. "Pull yourself together!"

Galán nodded again. He tried to hold his breath, but the effort just made him choke.

Gustavo slapped Galán across the side of the head. Galán's ears rang, but the shock knocked his breathing back to normal. He blinked away the tears and was surprised not to see anger in his father's eyes.

It's going to be okay," said Gustavo, his forehead touching Galán's. "You have to trust me. It's going to be okay."

Galán collapsed into his father's arms. He gave up fighting the sharks and the darkness and the sea. He surrendered.

Once he finally fell asleep, Galán dreamt that he was eating breakfast with Gabriela before school. He could smell the eggs his mother fried on the camp stove and could hear the roosters crowing behind the house. His father's stained fluorescent-yellow work vest hung from the hook on the front door. For some reason, though, the bench he shared with Gabriela kept shifting beneath his weight. The floor was moving.

But Galán didn't mind. They were together.

# Part One



# 1

## Caribbean Sea, ~ 2015

Every time the Coast Guard interceptor slammed into a wave, Lieutenant Pat McAllister felt the midnight coffee slosh in his belly. In the darkness, he couldn't anticipate the jolts that rocked the thirty-foot boat and reverberated up his spine. Smugglers loved moonless nights.

The radio buzzed. Gripping the navigation console, Pat strained to hear the transmission coming from the Customs and Border Protection airplane, but the rushing wind and inboard engine were too loud. It didn't matter. He knew they were within a mile of the suspicious speedboat heading north toward Puerto Rico.

Pat took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He had been making these interddictions for two years. While his knees no longer shook, he still had that unsettled feeling in his stomach.

Pat reached into his pocket and felt the Velcro patch that he brought on every boarding. It was a McAllister nametag in army camouflage, not Coast Guard blue. It had gone to Iraq and back with Pat's older brother, Danny. Upon receiving his discharge and coming home, Danny had jammed his duffel bag full of uniforms under his childhood bed. Pat had taken the nametag one afternoon when Danny was drinking at the American Legion.

"Got 'em!" yelled Petty Officer Wallace, a wiry Texan and one of the other three members of the interceptor crew. "Just off the starboard bow."

Pat turned up the volume on his headset and wiped the salt spray from his goggles. Below the faint horizon, a ghostly rooster

tail of water trailed a barely visible speedboat. Chief Landis, the coxswain and most seasoned crewmember aboard, must have seen it too. He pushed the throttle forward, causing Pat to slide back in his seat.

“Cutter Strickland,” radioed Pat. “We have eyes on the target.” He didn’t bother waiting for a response, as he knew the watch standers in the ship’s pilothouse would only complicate things.

Chief Landis maneuvered the interceptor just outside of the speedboat’s wake. “Going overt,” he said, flipping a switch on his console. A white floodlight and a blue strobe pierced through the darkness. A siren wailed.

The smugglers’ speedboat, which had been nothing but an eerie gray shape, stood out in vibrant detail. It had a high, sharp prow, two outboard Yamaha engines, and the name *el Angelito* written in red cursive along a blue hull. Two men in black rain jackets and ski masks stared momentarily before turning to each other and yelling. The man who was not driving made his way toward the stern.

Petty Officer Martínez, the muscle-bound Puerto Rican engineer seated behind Pat, called out to the smugglers in Spanish over a bullhorn. Pat didn’t understand the words perfectly, but he knew Martínez was telling the smugglers to stop or else they would shoot.

The smugglers turned abruptly, cutting across the bow of the interceptor. Chief Landis reduced speed, careful not to overshoot the smugglers and become a ramming target. A senior chief had been killed that way off the coast of California.

“All right, Martínez,” said Chief Landis. “Let’s go with those warning shots.”

“Roger.” Martínez pressed the pyrotechnic rounds into the shotgun’s tube with his thumb. He slid the pump forward, chambering the first shell.

Chief Landis positioned the interceptor alongside the speedboat. Only twenty feet separated the two bouncing, roaring vessels.

Martínez shouldered the shotgun. “On target.”

“Batteries release,” said Chief Landis.



The warning shots exploded into small fireworks in front of the speedboat. It didn't stop. Pat wasn't surprised. The smugglers had too much to lose.

"Disabling fire, Martínez," said Chief Landis. "And don't fuck it up like Wallace."

The rest of the interceptor crew laughed over the internal communications system except Pat. He didn't know what Wallace had done.

"We got a problem," said Martínez, as he secured the shotgun and loaded a magazine into the M16 rifle. The smuggler who had been crawling aft was now draped across the closest Yamaha outboard, his face turned away from the spraying wake.

"You know what to do," said Chief Landis.

"Roger," said Martínez, raising the rifle. "On target."

"Batteries release."

These two bangs were louder and sharper. The red tracer rounds streaked ten feet behind the engines. The smuggler shielding the Yamaha yelled at his partner with more fervor than before. Pat couldn't hear him, but he could see the man's mouth moving through the hole in the ski mask.

"Two more," said Chief Landis.

This time, the rounds darted only five feet aft of the engines. The smuggler acting as a human shield stopped yelling, but he didn't move, either. He stared at the interceptor, his eyes wide and his exposed belly hanging over the transom.

"Two more," said Chief Landis.

"You sure, Chief?" asked Martínez. "That's going to be close."

"Your call, XO," said Chief Landis to Pat.

The last thing Pat needed was to accidentally kill a smuggler on his first patrol as executive officer of Coast Guard Cutter *Strickland*. He'd learned enough during his tour on his first cutter to know that one unforeseen wave could send a round dangerously off target. But he also couldn't afford a reputation of doubting his new crew. Pat licked the salt water that ran down his face. If Chief Landis trusted Martínez, so did he.

“I’m good with it,” said Pat.

“Aye, sir,” said Martínez. He sighted in and squeezed off two more rounds. They barely danced past the stern of the speedboat. The smuggler released his grip on the Yamaha and scrambled forward, despite the screaming from his partner at the helm. Pat exhaled.

“Finish it, Martínez,” said Chief Landis, his voice still calm.

Martínez fired four rounds in quick succession into the Yamahas. A small orange flame licked its way out of one of the bullet holes, and the speedboat slowed to a stop. Chief Landis turned the interceptor away from the smugglers in an easy loop.

Pat unbuckled his seatbelt, removed his helmet and goggles, and pulled off his headset. He could finally hear the frantic voices of the smugglers. Touching the McAllister nametag one more time, he reminded himself not to become complacent. He didn’t know what the cartel had threatened to do to the smugglers’ families as punishment for a failed delivery. He licked his lips and drew his pistol from his thigh holster.

“All right,” said Chief Landis, completing the circle and pointing the bow at the speedboat. “Just like we talked about. You ready, XO?”

“Ready, Chief,” said Pat, wiping salt water and sweat from his face.

“Martínez?”

“Ready.”

Chief Landis slowly brought the interceptor alongside the speedboat, and Pat moved forward to the bow.

“*Manos arriba!*” yelled Martínez. “*No se muevan!*” The smugglers congregated in the middle of their boat with their hands over their heads.

Just as the two boats made contact, Pat jumped. He landed tailbone first on a plastic fuel drum and crawled across several more to the nearest man. Martínez followed and approached the other smuggler. Wallace stood in the bow of the interceptor and provided cover with his pistol.

Pat handcuffed his man, who was muttering under his breath. Pat slid an orange life preserver over the man’s neck, buckled the straps

together, and frisked him. He didn't find anything except pockets soaked with salt water and gasoline. The man smelled about as ripe as Pat would have expected him to smell after a three-day journey from Riohacha, Colombia.

Pat removed the man's soaking ski mask and froze. The smuggler wasn't a man so much as a boy. He looked younger than Pat. Younger by a lot. And he had tears in his eyes.

The boy said something in Spanish that Pat didn't understand. The kid touched his ear to his shoulder as if he were speaking on the telephone.

"*Mi mamá,*" he said. "*Mi mamá.*"

Pat looked away from the boy's pleading eyes. "I'm sorry, brother," he finally mumbled. He tried to think of something calming to say, but he didn't have enough confidence in his Spanish. He patted the handcuffed boy's knee and moved away.

While Martínez searched the bow, Pat climbed aft. Behind the fiberglass center console, Pat found the usual provisions and garbage. Tins of Vienna sausage and pink bottles of Postobón Manzana soda floated on a shallow mixture of salt water, gasoline, and vomit. Two backpacks were strapped to the driver's bench, each stuffed with soaked clothing and a toothbrush.

"Hell yeah," said Martínez from the bow.

Pat pulled his head out of the battery compartment and looked forward. Martínez was bent over a flapping blue tarp, the veins in his arms bulging. When he stood, he held a tightly wrapped bale of pressed cocaine the size of a carry-on suitcase. "I see about twelve, maybe fifteen," said Martínez, grinning. He set the bale down with a thud that rocked the boat. "That's how we do, sir. That's how we fucking do."

"I knew you could shoot," said Pat, sitting down on the driver's bench. He did the math—probably just under a thousand kilos.

"Yup," said Martínez. "Wallace would have jacked it all up, though."

Pat laughed. He leaned over the gunwale to clean his hands in the salt water when he noticed the fat, older detainee signaling to him. The man said something in Spanish.

Pat turned to Martínez.

“He says his teeth,” said Martínez, counting the bales. “He says give him his teeth. They’re in that jacket stuffed into the console.”

Pat pulled out the jacket and opened a pocket. Nothing but a piece of paper covered in latitude and longitude coordinates. Good intelligence. He kept digging until he found a set of dentures. He picked them out carefully and put them into the handcuffed man’s mouth. The man nodded as he seated them with his tongue.

Next to where the jacket had been sat a waterproof bag. Pat picked it up, hoping to find a GPS or a satellite phone. Instead, he found a wooden figure of la Virgen de Altagracia, her eyes downturned and her pale hands clasped in prayer.

Pat took the religious icon out of the bag and turned it between his fingers. He pictured the old man—it was probably the old man and not the kid—taking the statue down from a shelf in his home before setting sail from his fishing village. Or maybe the old man’s wife had given it to him. Maybe they had even said a prayer together.

Pat slid the statue into his pocket next to Danny’s nametag for safe keeping. He noticed the old man watching him. Pat wanted to tell the man that la Virgen would be safer with him than it would be inside a wet evidence bag cooking under the Caribbean sun, but when Pat looked up the man quickly turned toward the coming dawn.

And maybe if Pat looked out for la Virgen, she would look out for Danny.