

YOSELY PEREIRA AND BILLY IVEY

A SEA

THE TRUE STORY OF A MAN WHO RISKED

BETWEEN

EVERYTHING FOR FAMILY AND FREEDOM

US



ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *A SEA BETWEEN US*

I have always been drawn to true stories. There is simply nothing more compelling than real life. *A Sea between Us* is not only true, but it is an exciting, heart-wrenching, hopeful, and wonderfully told story that is as important as it is beautiful.

DR. MARTY MAKARY, *New York Times* bestselling author, surgeon, and professor at Johns Hopkins University

I'm excited about this book, and I can't wait to see how Yosely's story impacts people throughout the world. Ivey captured something really special in *A Sea between Us*.

TONY HALE, Emmy award-winning actor, writer

I've been waiting for more than twenty years for this book. That's not an endorsement exaggeration. In 1998, I got my first real job at an advertising agency in Birmingham, Alabama, and learned how to write from a guy named Billy Ivey. I'm thrilled this book is finally here, and when you read this wonderful story of human triumph, you'll be thrilled too.

JON ACUFF, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Soundtracks: The Surprising Solution to Overthinking*

Gripping. Billy Ivey captures the trauma of human tragedy and the inherent loyalty in true love. This is *the* American story. It sheds light on dreams that persevere in imposed darkness and helps keep hope in our sight.

TRACY FRIST, teacher, writer, farmer, preservationist, and conservationist



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A Sea between Us: The True Story of a Man Who Risked Everything for Family and Freedom

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This book is dedicated to our families and our many thousands of Cuban brothers and sisters—especially those who have lost their lives seeking freedom. To those who are still looking forward to a better life: No pierdas la esperanza.

YOSELY AND TAIRE PEREIRA

This book is dedicated to my family and my hermano. Thank you all for believing that I could tell this story.

BILLY IVEY



AUTHOR'S NOTE

YEARS AGO, my lifelong friends, Chet and Mary Virginia Frist, called me from Nashville. I could hear the excitement in their voices as they told me about a man they had recently met: a carpenter named Yosely.

I was intrigued. I didn't know any carpenters.

Yosely had spent a few weeks building and installing kitchen cabinets for the Frists, but it only took a few days for a friendship to be formed. "You need to know this man," they said. "You need to hear his story. Everyone needs to hear his story."

Over the next two months, I met with Yosely several times, and he shared fascinating details about his life, his family, his friends, and his eventual escape from communist Cuba.

I started taking notes when we talked and found myself falling in love with the tone of his voice as he shared his heart and expressed so many of his passions, heartaches, and joys.

After a weeklong trip to Cuba with Yosely to see the places and meet some of the people I had come to know through

our conversations, I agreed with my friends in Nashville: Everyone needs to hear his story.

I asked Yosely if he would allow me to tell it, and he agreed wholeheartedly that the world needed to know.

I am not a historian or an expert on communism or US-Cuba relations. I am just a storyteller who has been given the gift of a great one to tell.

Yosely's journey is remarkable. It is exciting, adventurous, gut-wrenching, profoundly sad, and exceedingly joyful at times.

It is not, however, unique.

His is the story of an entire generation, an entire country of individuals, families, and friends sharing the same reality.

Yosely Pereira and I have spent countless hours discussing the details of his life. Like any one of us, he's had trouble remembering various specifics as well as the people he has met along the way. With the best intentions, I have recast certain moments in order to tell his story in an inspiring, educational, and compelling way. Although the events actually happened, many characters are composites of different real people in his life. Some of the names in this book have been changed to protect certain individuals who may or may not still be living in Cuba. Yosely has read several drafts of the manuscript and has confirmed that the story we tell together reflects as closely as possible the major milestones of his life.

This book is my attempt at communicating the harsh realities that this man, this family, and their home country

AUTHOR'S NOTE

have endured and sometimes, by the grace of God, overcome throughout several decades.

This is an important story.

I'm forever grateful that Yosely allowed me to tell it.

Billy Ivey
March 2022



*Our hearts were always united—even
when we were apart. We had faith and
love and dreams we knew could come true.
The only thing that separated us was a sea
between home and hope. And how wonderful
that this great nightmare of ocean was the
same beautiful water that connected us
and allowed us to believe in a better life,
a better story. Once upon a time . . .*



INTO THE BLACK

MY NAME IS YOSELY PEREIRA.

On February 7, 2002, I escaped Cuba.

Under the cover of darkness and with the determination of a runaway prisoner, I left my home. I left my family. And—quite simply—disappeared.

Why?

Because I had to.

For her.

For them.

This is our story.

* * *

There is an indefinable magic to my home country.

Valleys rich with farmland, ideal for growing sugarcane, corn, fruit trees, and bananas; fields low and wet enough to grow rice; and towering palms sprinkled throughout the landscape—a deep palette of greens dotted with flowering trees of oranges, yellows, reds, purples, and whites.

Cuba is a land of abundant forests leading to mountain ranges housing coffee and tobacco plantations, outlined by

waterfalls, cascades, and crocodile-infested swamps. The Island's iridescent coasts are traced by bright white beaches or black coral—as mysterious as the waters that meet them.

The Island is a natural wonderland so especially breathtaking that even Christopher Columbus was astonished when he saw it for the first time in 1492, remarking that it was “the goodliest land that eye ever saw, the sweetest thing in the world.”

So why would anyone ever want to leave?

I once heard Cuba described as the most ironic place on earth. I imagine the person who said that was referring to the beauty of the Island matched by its bewildered population—friendly, proud, and passionate; downtrodden, desperate, and lost.

But it hasn't always been that way.

My grandfather was the administrator of a sugarcane factory in the 1950s. He came to Cuba from A Coruña, Spain, when he was just a teenager. Cuba was once known the world over as a place of unmatched beauty and opportunity, so he set his sights on the tiny Island and set sail toward a brighter future for him and his family.

He worked hard, went to school in Havana, and was promoted up the ranks at the factory just before Fidel Castro came into power.

* * *

In 1959, when he arrived in Havana with his band of *revolucionarios*, Fidel Castro installed a provisional government.

For a time, the lower classes prospered, but this was only a ruse to buy time until he built up the armed forces and security services—including a powerful, politically tied police force. Then, everything changed.

Castro signed into law the First Agrarian Reform, setting a cap for landholdings and prohibiting foreigners from owning Cuban land. Suddenly, my grandfather—along with hundreds of thousands of Cubans—became displaced, having to learn new skills and embrace a much simpler way of life. Almost overnight, his aspirations changed from wealth and success to mere survival.

Before the *Revolución* was even a year old, the bourgeois element in Cuba's government were removed or forced to resign. Then one by one over the next several months, media outlets were silenced. And within a few years, all private property—down to even the smallest corner shops—was taken and solely owned by Fidel.

This calculated degradation of humanity left an indelible mark of bitterness on an entire generation, a sadness marked by hopelessness and melancholy.

Cuba became a prison.

But we were about to be free.

* * *

JANUARY 13, 2002

It had been just three weeks since I approached my lifelong friend, Enier, with my idea to leave the only home I had ever known. The notion was something we had whispered about

since childhood and dreamed about as young men, drinking beers at night in the dark alleyways of our neighborhood. But this time was going to be different.

I had never thought about building a boat. I was a furniture maker; not a sailor. But something had to be done, and this was the only answer that made sense. As it turned out, Enier had already thought the idea through and echoed my excitement.

“You are the best carpenter I have ever known,” he said. “How hard can it be? If you can build a table and chairs, surely you can build a boat! I can get the materials. You just have to build it.” He had already saved more than enough money to purchase the wood we would need.

Enier worked at the gas station in town and would, from time to time, siphon extra fuel to sell on *el mercado negro*. The black market. The government controlled all fuel consumption at the time, so Enier was able to make pretty good money selling a gallon here and there.

“We will buy the wood—piece by piece—and store it in your shed. When you are ready, we’ll move it, and you can get to work. You can do this, Yosely. You must.”

But how can I?

How can I leave Taire?

She will never forgive me.

The children won’t understand.

What if I am arrested, or killed?

What if it doesn’t work?

What if saving myself puts my family in danger?

What if I can’t save them?

* * *

Over the next few weeks, I cut, shaped, sanded, and pieced together a twelve-foot glorified rowboat in the darkness of night, just outside of town. Enier and I found a ravine at the edge of an orange orchard to hide our materials during the day. We would cover the pieces with palm branches, sugarcane husks from neighboring fields, and windswept trash from town. At night, we would go to the orchard, and I would work until daybreak.

Enier stood watch while we devised our escape through whispers.

There were many nights when my wife would startle awake and find I wasn't in bed. More often than not, her panic would turn to deep relief when she would find me curled up next to my son in the early morning before sunrise.

She only questioned me once about my absence during those few weeks. My eyes pooled with tears as I asked her to please trust me.

"You know I would never do anything to hurt you. I would never do anything that doesn't honor you. Everything is for you and for them."

But I couldn't do it alone.

"We need more people," Enier said. "The two of us will never be able to get to freedom alone. I know others, Yosely. People who can help us."

"Oh, yeah? Who? Who is crazy enough to get in a boat that we built in an orange grove and paddle to America? If you know these people, you need new friends, Enier, because they are crazy."

"Rafael, Alberto, Javier. They all want to leave. They are all ready."

“You told them? What’s the matter with you!”

I was furious. I simply couldn’t believe he had shared our secret. Three weeks of sneaky, sleepless, scary nights; three weeks of wondering *when*, not *if*, I would get caught creeping out of the house or we would be arrested for wandering the moonlit streets of our town. Now I knew. It was tonight. We were done for.

“Take it easy, Yosely.” He tried to calm me down, but I was enraged and erupted out of the ravine and ran toward him, ready to tackle him to the ground.

“They are ready to leave, Yosely. They can help us get out of here!”

The three men Enier mentioned were all friends of ours and often joined us in the dark alleyways—to drink and dream.

“And what about Neo?” he asked. “That would make six of us. An even number.”

“No. Not Neo,” I said, now thinking of each of the men named.

“Why not? Neo would dog-paddle to America backward if you told him to,” Enier said, almost pleading for affirmation.

“My wife is stronger than Neo,” I snapped back, my eyes wide as the full moon above us.

“But he is loyal to you, Yosely. He will help us. We need him.” Enier took a deep breath and waited for me to speak.

I climbed back into the ravine and started sanding the sides of the boat.

“Well?” I said, after a few minutes. “What are you waiting for? Go get our crew.”

A new routine began with this unlikely band of brothers. Night after night, different men would join me at the boat to help sand and waterproof the sides. We were never all in the same place at the same time because we didn't want to create any suspicion, but I was there every night. After my family fell asleep, I would make the hour-long trek on foot to the orchard, never taking the same route, but always arriving in time to work for a few hours before slipping home.

The project took a lot less time than I had anticipated. Using only the light of the moon and a myriad of materials collected by my friends, I built our boat in just thirty-nine days.

When it was finally finished, I looked at the boat and started to cry. Slowly, everyone gathered behind me and put their hands on my shoulders.

Enier spoke for all of them. "Well done, Yosely. She's beautiful."

Then, the weight of our entire lives—our families' lives—fell on us all. We stood there for what seemed like an hour and silently thought of what might be.

"Tomorrow, then?" Javier finally grunted.

I shot a quick glance at their faces, and my sense of accomplishment suddenly turned to panic.

Tomorrow?

That's too soon.

How can we be ready tomorrow?

What about our families?

What about our supplies?

What if the boat isn't ready?

The others waited for me to take a deep breath and answer. I nodded my head and then, “Tomorrow,” we all agreed.

I returned to my tiny home to find my family curled together in a half-lit room, asleep on my son’s mattress on the floor. I stood in the doorway to his room and watched them sleeping, breathing, dreaming. Suddenly, Taire awoke, startled.

“¿Qué te pasa, mi amor?”

I wiped my eyes and smiled. “*Nada, mi corazón. Todo es perfecto.*” Nothing, my heart. Everything is perfect.

To tell Taire my plan would be opening her up to indefensible interrogation after I was gone. The *policia* would no doubt question where I had gone. The less she knew, the safer she and the children would be without me.

I turned out the light and climbed onto the mattress with them. Four of us, about to be three.

* * *

FEBRUARY 7, 2002

The next night, I met my friends in the orchard and hid near the embankment with the boat until we saw a truck’s lights break the dark horizon.

Neo jumped up immediately and started waving to the driver. “Over here!” he screamed.

Alberto grabbed Neo by the collar and pulled him down. “Are you crazy! You idiot! What if that’s not him? You could get us killed!”

But it *was* him.

Neo pushed Alberto away. “You can stay in this hole if you want. Me? I’m going to America.”

The five of us each grabbed hold of a section of the boat and dragged it up the embankment. It was heavy. Very heavy. Even though it was only about twelve feet long, the weight surprised us all.

“What is this made of, Yosely?” Rafael asked, straining to keep from losing his grip. “Concrete?”

The driver of the truck was a local drunk we called Conejo, which means *rabbit*—he was always anxious, jittery, and in a hurry. This night was no different.

“Get in! Get in! Get in!” he whispered over and over.

I could smell the rum on his breath from ten feet away. “Have you been drinking, Conejo? Really?” I demanded.

“Don’t judge me, *imbécil*,” he shot back. “I’m risking everything here. And I don’t even get to leave this hellhole.”

He was right. At least we had the hope of escape to get us through. Conejo had to stay. However, he was going to make about three months’ salary just for driving his truck 130 kilometers to the northern edge of the island. Perhaps he was entitled to a little celebration.

Rafael handed him a fistful of pesos, which Conejo quickly shoved down the front of his pants, then smiled. “Now, get in and shut up before I change my mind!”

We lifted the boat and pushed it into the back of the refrigerated milk truck. Enier got in the cab while the rest of us huddled on either side of the boat, securing it in place so the bumpy ride would not damage its hull, bow, or stern.

Conejo slammed shut the heavy, metal back doors of the

truck and secured them with a lock. We were in complete darkness, all of us afraid to speak or move.

As the truck rumbled down the path scarred with canyon-like divots and grooves created by rain and tires, the boat shifted furiously and loudly from side to side. We were already being abused by the journey and we'd only traveled fifty meters.

At the bottom of the hill, Conejo stopped, got out of the truck, and began yelling and hitting its sides. "Find a way to keep quiet back there or the deal is off! You sound like you're having a party. Shut up or get out!"

It was not lost on any of us that our driver was both correct and crazy. We needed to secure the boat better so it wouldn't shift and bang against the sides of the truck. But Conejo wasn't following his own demand, screaming at us to be quiet.

"Kind of defeats the purpose of sneaking away, doesn't it?" Rafael whispered. "He is going to get us captured before we even get to the road!"

I put my finger to my lips and shushed him, then lay down on the floor of the truck, wedged between the boat and the wall. The others followed my lead and lowered themselves to the floor.

The first hour of our trip was uneventful, but we were all freezing. The air seemed to thicken the faster we went—a mixture of diesel fumes and frost. The roads to Playa Nazabal were only partly paved, so the boat violently shifted throughout the entire journey. Our arms and backs and legs were tensed and cramping throughout the drive as we fought to secure our cargo. This was supposed to be the simple part of

our trip to America, but we were finding out in real time that nothing was going to come easy.

I don't remember much about the truck ride other than the cold. I do remember thinking about my family:

How will they react when they wake up and discover I'm gone?

Will the children think I deserted them?

Will they think I've been arrested?

Will Taire be sad or angry?

What will they do without me?

Did I leave them enough money?

What will they eat tomorrow?

What have I done . . .

Finally, the trucked stopped. We heard three short, loud knocks on the back door. Time to go. When the doors opened and I heard the ocean, I felt paralyzed. A hot flood of adrenaline coursed through my arms and chest, and I was overcome with fear.

I was not afraid for me; I was afraid for them. All of them. My family. My friends. The only confidence I could muster was through Enier. He was going to be fine.

No matter what, Enier Santos was going to survive.

* * *

I can't remember a time in my life before Enier and I were best friends. He grew up just a few houses from mine near the center of Cumanayagua. We had almost everything in common. His father, like mine, was a carpenter, and we shared the turmoil of younger siblings.

I called him *hermanito*—little brother—both because he was always small for his age, but also because I really did view him that way. He was family.

Even as we grew into adulthood, Enier's stature remained like that of a prepubescent teenager. He hated when I referred to him as little, but he never denied it. How could he? But what he lacked in height and weight, he made up for with intelligence—and he was street-smart, too. No matter what the situation, Enier was always confident with a certain sort of *knowing*, like he'd been there before.

Even when we were children, Enier would conjure up impossibly intricate practical jokes or schemes to trick someone out of a piece of chewing gum, a cigarette, or even a shoelace. Yes, a shoelace.

One afternoon after school, Enier and I stopped to swim in a narrow irrigation ditch just outside of town, something we did most days before we headed home. The ribbon of water ran beneath an overpass that connected the paved roads with dirt and gravel ones of a neighboring town not far from where we lived. After a refreshing swim, we hopped on our bikes to hurry home. It was nearing sunset and we had strict instructions from Enier's mother not to ride after dark.

Señora Santos was a kind, soft-spoken, gracious lady. She always had fresh fruit or sweet bread, which she happily handed out to her son's friends whenever we were in her home. Their family had no more money or food than anyone else in our city, but she always seemed to have snacks. She was as strict as she was pleasant, though, and perhaps the only person in the world Enier was afraid of.

As we pedaled, Enier was suddenly jerked from his seat and catapulted over the handlebars. He landed in a ditch, the bicycle tumbling behind him like a dog being dragged by a leash. His shoelace had gotten caught and wrapped around the crankset near the pedal and sent him flying. It was hard for me not to laugh.

But this was a disaster. Not only were we going to be late getting home, but Enier had just broken his brand-new shoelace! No doubt, his mother had to wash the laundry for several households just to pay for proper laces for her son's hand-me-down shoes.

I helped Enier to his feet and made sure he was okay, and then I started laughing.

"Shut up, Yosely." He started to cry. "Now, I am going to have to wash Señor Gordo's underwear!"

Let me explain.

Enier's mother would sometimes punish her son by making him help her wash the neighbor's clothes. We called the man who lived at the bottom of our street "Señor Gordo." He weighed more than four hundred pounds, and I could not even begin to imagine the horror of handling his undergarments.

Then, Enier saw a boy from our school named Leon walking toward us. Enier quickly turned to me and said, "Just stand here and be quiet, okay?"

"What do you mean? What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Trust me, *hermano*." Enier quickly turned and greeted Leon.

"*Hola, León. ¿Cómo estás?*"

"Shut up, Enier." Leon was as smug as he was ugly.

“Yosely,” he continued, “you should teach your little friend how to ride a bicycle. He could get hurt out here.”

Enier gave me a look as if to say, “Watch this.”

“You’re right, Leon. I’m not a very good rider,” he said. “But Yosely is. He’s the best rider in Cumanayagua *and* Cienfuegos. Even better than you, my friend.”

Leon seemed puzzled. He was a few years older than we were and was known to be somewhat of a bully.

“You think Yosely is better than me?” he asked.

“I *know* he is,” Enier said confidently. “And if I am right, you have to give me your shoelaces. If I am wrong, Yosely will give you his bicycle.”

“What?” I shouted. “Hermanito! What are you talking about?”

“You heard me. You’re the best cyclist in all of Cuba. Leon, I bet that Yosely can race you to the top of that hill and get back here before you even reach the top.”

I glared at Enier and shook my head. “No.”

“Trust me, Yosely. You can do this. You can beat him. And you owe me.”

I *was* a very good cyclist. Our school had a cycling team, and I was the best in my grade. But Leon was older and stronger and a member of the senior team at school. He laughed at Enier as he considered the wager.

“Well? Do we have a bet?” Enier asked.

“Why do you want my shoelaces?” Leon asked, confused about this whole situation.

“*¡No te preocupes por eso!*” Don’t worry about it. Enier smiled. “Are you scared to race Yosely?” He was really pushing it now.

“Of course not. Yes. We have a bet.” Leon was fuming mad.

Enier moved slowly and stood in front of us to recount the agreement. “Your laces if Yosely wins. ¿Listos? *En sus marcas, listos, ¡ya!*” Ready? On your mark, get set, go!

And we were off.

The top of the hill was approximately two kilometers away. I pedaled as fast as I could—each push forward stronger than the last. The wind was at our backs and I pulled ahead, pressing up the hill, never looking behind. At the top of the hill, I made a quick turn and then raced past Leon, who was struggling to stay upright on the incline. I never stopped pedaling, not once, and when I arrived back at the starting point, Enier screamed, “Yosely! You did it!”

Turning, I looked back up the hill. Leon was sitting on the side of the road. He had never reached the top.

As we climbed the hill, Enier couldn’t stop laughing. His plan had worked! Leon was sheepishly unlacing his shoes.

“Good race, Leon,” Enier said, fighting to hold back his amusement. “I told you he was good.”

“How did you do that? How did you ride so fast?” Leon asked.

“I didn’t have a choice,” I said.

Leon handed Enier his shoestrings, and we made our way home, Enier laughing the entire way.

“You and me. We make a good team, Yosely.”

He was right. And that was the basis of our friendship—Enier’s foolhearted bravery and street smarts, and my ability to power us out of the trouble he created.

And that is precisely why I couldn’t let him go with us to America.

* * *

“Yosely, hurry!” Enier whispered. “This is it. It’s time, my brother.”

I quickly pulled him to the side of the truck, where I grabbed him by his shoulders and crouched to look him in the eye.

“*Hermanito*. You can’t go.” I said, quietly, earnestly.

“Get out of here, Yosely. We don’t have time for games,” he said.

“Enier, look at me.” I shook him slightly and said again, “You can’t go.”

“What’s wrong, Yosely? Of course, I’m going. This is us—you and me. Let’s go to America.” His eyes were pleading for an answer. “What’s wrong?”

I quieted and released my grip. “Enier, you are my best friend. You are my brother. I love you, and I need you to stay.”

He could see that I was deadly serious and he pulled away slightly. With lips trembling and a look of betrayal on his face, he begged, “Yosely. We’re a team.”

“I know, Enier. *We are* a team. That’s why I need for you to stay. You are the only person I trust to take care of my family. You are the only one who can keep them safe. The only one who can help with the police when they find out we’ve gone. Please. I can’t just leave them alone. I need for you to protect them. You’re the only one. I need you. *They* need you.”

I finally had his attention. “You want me to take care of your family? Me?”

“You have to,” I said. “You are the smartest, bravest man I know. And I know they will be safe with you.”

Enier stumbled back as if I had just struck him with my fist.

“You want me to stay,” he whispered again, as if trying to convince himself of what he’d just heard.

Just then, the other passengers pulled the boat from the truck and it slammed to the ground—the weight of it was too much for them to handle alone. Conejo sneered from the front of the truck. “Get out of here! Go to freedom, you idiots. Yosely! You owe me a beer next time I see you.”

Enier looked deeply at me. He took a long, staggered breath, then turned and hugged Alberto, Rafael, Javier, and Neo.

“*Vayan con Dios*,” he whispered.

The other men all looked at each other, unsure of what was happening. But then Enier took a short breath and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Please make it to America,” he whispered. “Please don’t forget me.”

His words pierced my eardrums. “Forget you, *hermano*?” I began to cry. “Never. I could never forget you.”

Enier turned from me and ran to the front of the truck and jumped in the passenger seat. Holding his arm outside the window, he slammed it on the side of the truck, and they were off.

The five of us were alone.

A million miles from home.

Just ninety miles from freedom.

* * *

The water was cool at Playa Nazabal, chilling our shaky legs and feet as we silently waded waist-deep, holding on to the boat and pushing past the first break in the waves. The night was completely dark, except for the white foam of the waves' crests. Dark clouds masked the moon, making this a perfect night to escape.

As we made our way to the rocks at the northern point of the harbor, Alberto, Javier, and Neo climbed into the boat while Rafael and I continued to push.

The water was getting deeper now, and the two of us struggled to keep our footing.

We had to move beyond the inlet landing before we could board; otherwise, the tide's force could easily slam us against the rocks, smashing the boat to pieces. Moving parallel to the shore and the rocks, we guided the boat to deeper water. Once on the other side of the crashing tide, we would be able to rest.

Rafael is taller than I am, so he positioned himself on the left side while I stayed on the right—closer to the shore, pushing as hard as I could against the rocks and waves. My legs ached and my lungs burned with each lunging step. Suddenly, as I brought my right knee forward, I struck a coral snag mid-thigh.

I sank immediately, letting out a scream that was mercifully muted by the water. As I writhed beneath the surface, Rafael lost his grip and the boat began pointing inland, shifting quickly toward the shore. He pulled me above water with his right arm, clutching the side of the boat with his left. I remember thinking, even then, that he had to be the

strongest man I knew. I regained my footing, but I could hardly stand because of the excruciating pain.

“You okay?” Rafael whispered.

“I don’t know.”

The others instinctively grabbed the oars and began paddling, chaotically. Rafael and I stayed in the water, determined to find a better place to launch the boat into the straits.

There was not a satisfactory or safe harbor on the western side of the jetty, just an oblong nook we would have to maneuver in order to avoid being slingshot back into the rocks that seemed to be drawing us ever closer to failure.

For the next hour, Rafael pulled the boat to the calmer side of the rocks. I was no help at all—limping ahead like a three-legged dog trying to retrieve a stick thrown too far. The water was chin-high most of the way. The three others in the boat splashed the oars in and out of the water but never found a synchronized rhythm.

The closer we came to our stopping point, the quieter the winds and water became. The relentless crashing of waves turned to an almost eerie calm. The water was now over our heads, so we had to carefully pull the boat to safety without any real leverage, trying not to gouge the bottom or damage its sides.

Rafael collapsed on the jagged shore. The others surrounded him, offering him water. “No water!” I said, still whispering. “We’ll need it later.”

“It’s only ninety miles, Yosely. We have plenty. He needs water,” Alberto whispered.

“And we need him,” Javier snapped.

They looked at me in disbelief, as if I were doing this to be cruel. But Rafael waved them off. “Yosely is right. We have a long way to go, and tomorrow will be very hot.” He was lying flat on his back, panting and gasping for relief. Then he raised himself up on his elbow and pointed to the dark water. “It looks peaceful now, but soon we will be out there, alone with the sun. Put the water in the boat,” he said.

The others reluctantly returned the water bottle to its position under the makeshift seat at the back of the boat, where we had secured the gasoline container, three milk jugs, and six cola bottles we had managed to collect and fill. Then they turned to me as if to ask, “What now?”

This had been a scheduled stop, but it was not our destination. I wanted to inspect the boat to ensure it hadn’t taken on any water and make sure it could hold up under the weight of five passengers.

Our boat had never been in the water until that night. I didn’t even know if it had been properly balanced. The mahogany and teak had never been exposed to rain, much less the sea’s unrelenting waves thrusting against it with a force we could never have prepared for—not in a ditch in the middle of a field more than a hundred kilometers from the shore.

Our first true landmark sat due north, almost six kilometers away. It was an uninhabited island, and we knew we could get there before daybreak. This was all part of the plan. Enier and I had mapped our course very carefully from the shore at Nazabal to the island. If we could make it to that island, we could keep going—undetected because of the

moonless night and by cover from a jutting range of nearby mountains—until after sunrise.

My leg was bleeding badly. The jagged, V-shaped gash from the coral was not particularly deep, but it was roughly the size of my fist. Alberto took off his shirt and tore it in half, creating a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. Even in the dark, I could see the bandage change from tan to black in the middle, my blood spreading like a slow sunrise. The salt water stung the cut with a dull burn, and my entire leg was throbbing, keeping tempo with my heartbeat.

After about ten minutes on the rocks, we pushed off—Alberto and Javier in front, Rafael in the middle, and Neo and I in back. We had two oars in the water—one in front, one in back, alternating left to right, left to right. Rafael began grunting, acting as a sort of coxswain pressing us toward the island.

I could feel blisters forming on my palms at the base of my fingers. We rowed furiously for close to an hour before the current shifted and began propelling us outward. We all looked around, surprised by the wind at our backs. For a moment, I thought we had been turned around in the struggle, afraid we might be heading inland again. But we made it.

We rowed to the island with time to spare before daybreak.

Relief set in, and we could finally speak without fear of being heard. “Get out! We need to rest,” I said. “We need to breathe.”

Truth be told, I needed to think. *What are we doing? Can I do this? What if the boat fails? What about my family?* The

others all looked at me, wide-eyed and expectant, waiting for me to give the go-ahead.

“You built a good boat, Yosely,” Alberto said, pulling me from my daze. “It’s perfect. We can do this.” I looked around at the others who all nodded as if to affirm their decision to go.

I put my hand on the boat and took a deep breath.

“*Vamanos.*”

I closed my eyes and my breathing slowed. The dizzying rush of adrenaline subsided and gave way to determination—all five of us stared silently northward, into the blackness.