

EVA

By Sebastian Roberts

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Chapter One

The Summer of 1960

It was dark, cool, and raining gently when Eva pushed the edge of the tarpaulin up just an inch so that she could see out over the gunnel of the skiff. She had floated alone for nineteen days at the whim of the currents and winds of the Gulf of Mexico. She wasn't certain what had awakened her and she didn't really care. Twenty-one days ago, her husband, Franco, had been murdered. She wasn't sure why she'd counted the days, but she had. Drifting alone in the skiff she'd thought of nothing else for the first week: nothing but Franco, their all too brief time together, and the struggle to be free that had killed him and would most certainly kill her. They'd been married only three years but they were marvelous years. Franco was tall, strong, and caring. He had a quick smile and a determined attitude towards life. He was dedicated to her forever, but forever had come all too soon. Everything that had been important to her was gone: their home on that small farm in Cuba, their love for each other, and the hope for a long, happy, life, filled with children and grandchildren. These were all gone. These memories of happier times became the memories that brought her grief. These memories were no longer enjoyable, and Eva found herself suppressing them. Slowly, her own needs drove her grief for Franco from her mind and, by the end of that first week at sea alone, Eva hadn't cared about much at all: only her own survival.

Off in the distance, she thought she could see stars. As her head cleared, she realized that these flickers of white and red were not stars at all, but lights. They were lights along a coastline. Eva had no idea what coast it was, but she was keenly aware that any coast, any dry land, would be better than being in the skiff. Surprisingly, the sight of land did not excite Eva the way she'd thought it would. She'd already spent her emotions on her grief and had nothing left for hope.

Her food had run out four days ago. The rain from the day before had been the first fresh water that she had tasted in almost two days. She had caught the rain in the tarp that now protected her from the cool winds. Focused completely on surviving, Eva began calculating the odds. She guessed that the coast was about three miles away. The wind was behind her, pushing the skiff towards it. That was good, she told herself. She thought about her physical condition. Before she had left on her journey, she had been in excellent physical condition; she was a swimmer. Now she was undernourished, tired, and still recovering from her previous dehydration. Reaching over the gunwale, she tested the water

with her hand. Eva guessed that the water temperature was about eighty degrees which was actually good. If she swam for shore in the cool water, her own body heat would keep her warm. If the water was much warmer, she might succumb to heat exhaustion. But if she tried to swim for shore and her energy gave out, she would cool quickly and give in to exposure.

Almost in a trance, Eva stared at the lights on the shore and considered her options. The sea was almost flat and the wind was light, but it was pushing her in the right direction. Unsure of what to do, she stared at the lights. It was a slight gust in the wind that gave her the answer she sought. As long as the wind was pushing her skiff towards the shore, she would stay where she was.

Still, Eva felt as though she was at the mercy of nature and not in control of her own destiny. Such a feeling ran contrary to her character and, rather than leave her fate to chance, Eva stood up and pulled the tarp over her back like a blanket. Then she faced the shore, putting the wind at her back, and stretched her arms out to the sides as far as they could go. She would be her own sail. Slowly, the movement of the skiff in the water created enough force on the small keel to align the bow towards the shore. Her arms screamed with pain as she held the tarp outstretched for almost twenty minutes. At last, she collapsed and rested, but only for a while. After all she had been through, she told herself, she had to be strong. She had to be strong for Franco: to honor his memory. He'd saved her and it was now time for her to save herself. She needed to save herself if for no other reason than to make certain that Franco's death would not have been meaningless. Holding out her arms, she made her sail again. She was not going to let a little muscle burn be the thing that killed her.

An hour later, the first rays of light snuck over the horizon. She had sailed and rested, on and off, pushing herself to the limit. The light of dawn revealed the low dark grey line that was dry land. Suddenly, but mechanically, she realized that she was smiling. It was a short-lived smile. Slowly, but unmistakably, the wind died and then rose again. This time, it was coming from the land and would push her back out into the Gulf. It was time to swim. Kneeling in the skiff, Eva crossed herself and said a short prayer. She did not pray for survival. She did not pray for a new wind, supporting currents, or distracted sharks. She simply prayed that her actions were the ones God wished her to take and that she was clear-headed and clear-hearted enough to know what she was to do.

After praying, Eva slipped off her shoes and her trousers. She then slid over the side and into the water. At first, the water was cold, but, as she knew that she would, she warmed with each stroke. In the water, as always, her mind was free to go wherever it wished as her well-trained body went through the endless routine of repeating one stroke after another.

As she swam, she recalled the events of the past month. These were events she wanted to forget, but knew that she must not. Her ordeal had begun twenty-six days ago in their home on their small farm outside the little village of Las Cajas in the southwestern region of Cuba. Neither she nor her husband, Franco, had thought that the stupid war between Batista and the rebels led by Castro and Guevara would end the way it had. The same night that Castro declared victory, Eva and Franco Fernandez had decided to leave Cuba and go to the United States. Wealthy Cubans had been leaving for months, but the poor, like Franco and Eva, had been unable to get visas.

Franco had said that he knew someone who could get them out of Cuba, but it would be dangerous and illegal. Eva knew that it didn't matter. What was coming was worse than being in a jail in the United States. Being jailed under Castro would be but a brief burden to bear. Death would release them quickly.

They would leave all their relatives and their belongings. The fare would cost them all of their money, but they would have each other and they would be free from the nonsense that had been put upon the people of Cuba by these two selfish men. It took a week, but Franco finally came up with the money by selling what they had to their friends and neighbors. The next morning, they got on their bicycles and headed west to the small coastal town of La Bajada.

They were expected and as soon as they rode into town, a man with no name approached them. "You are looking for someone?" he asked in English.

"Yes," Franco replied. "We wish to see the Frenchman."

The little man with no name motioned for them to follow him down to the waterfront. There was a small fishing boat pulled up on the beach and he told them to get in. The man had not explained anything at the time and Eva had wondered if they would go to the United States in this small boat. But an hour later as they approached an 82-foot long ketch, Eva and Franco had figured out their scheme. The little man with no name was just a local fisherman. On occasion, he took passengers out to sea. Just past the three-mile limit, they were transferred to a larger and more seaworthy vessel. The sailboat, a ketch, was to be their transport to the United States.

The Frenchman greeted them as they climbed the ladder up the side of the ketch. "Bon soir." He grinned.

"Buenas noches," Franco replied as he paid the fare. Both Franco and Eva had learned English, but they often reverted to speaking Spanish when addressed in neither English nor Spanish.

Eva took several more strokes before she could allow herself to think of what had happened next.

There were at least thirty other people on the deck of the ketch. She could hear voices below and knew that there were more refugees than those whom she could see. Happily, the money her husband had raised was enough to get them accommodations inside, and Franco and Eva were escorted below into a large room with many bunks. The people on deck would bake in the sun for their poverty.

An hour after the sun went down the Frenchman gave each person a glass of water and a glass of rum, promising that a good breakfast would be prepared in the morning. The trip to Florida would take five or six days depending on the weather. He explained that he had to take a long detour around the western tip of Cuba in order to stay in international waters before he could head north. Later that night, Eva awoke to the sound of a young woman crying. She dismissed it as being a normal reaction to the upheaval they were all experiencing. She was wrong.

In the morning, after a small breakfast of sausages and biscuits, the Frenchman wandered about the deck examining his passengers. Eva and Franco had come topside to enjoy the morning air and they watched him as he made his rounds. It was then that the Frenchman stopped and asked a young woman to come with him. She was hesitant and said she wished to stay with her family. The Frenchman leaned down over her and looking at her brother, he said. "Vous n'avez pas le choix." The woman saw the revolver at his side and, despite the objections of her brother, she rose and went below to his cabin.

That evening, the Frenchman made his rounds in the cabin below decks, selecting a woman traveling alone as his companion for the night. Even though she was in the water swimming, Eva could tell that she cried as she remembered this part of her journey. During the day, she and Franco had come to realize that part of the fare extracted by the Frenchman was the pleasures of certain of the passengers. When the Frenchman selected his woman for the evening Franco objected and grabbed the Frenchman's arm. The shot echoed eerily in the cabin and Franco fell to the deck. It was only moments later that two of the crew took Franco and tossed his body overboard. The woman, and the next three, all went quietly into the Frenchman's stateroom.

Two days later, the Frenchman looked at Eva. "Votre tour," he said.

Eva swam hard as these next memories went through her mind. During her time adrift in the skiff, she had coped with the death of Franco, but she was still angry. Fighting against forgetting, though, she knew she must remember these things if she was to conquer them. For two days after Franco had been shot, Eva had silently mourned the death of her husband. Her days and nights were filled with sorrow mixed with hatred and fear: hatred for the Frenchman, hatred for the men on board who did not oppose him, and fear for the women he chose to go below. She even hated herself for not doing anything, for not following Franco into the sea. But above all, was an all-consuming sense of loss that she found immobilizing. In her grief, Eva was seemingly resigned to her fate whatever it might be. Without Franco, what was she to do? And now, it was 'her turn.' She could have fought the man, but she knew that he would beat her into submission. There was no one there to help. No one to save her. No one to save the others.

In the Frenchman's stateroom, everything that she had expected would happen did happen. It was the unexpected that eventually put her in her current predicament. When the Frenchman threw her onto the bed, Eva spotted his marlinspike hanging from his belt in its leather pocket. For the next ten minutes she tried to reach for it, but failed time after time. It wasn't until he collapsed on top of her that she was able to slip it out of the case. Placing the point of the spike between his ribs, she aimed for his heart and shoved with all her might. What confused her now, as she stroked her way towards the shore, was that while she felt victimized by her rape, she also felt victimized by the murder she had committed. She had been raised as a good Catholic and killing the Frenchman was not done in self-defense. It was done out of rage. Eva blamed the Frenchman for both.

After pushing the Frenchman off of her, Eva went up on deck, covered in his blood and still holding the spike. She expected to be killed by his crew, but soon learned that they hated him as much as she had.

Unfortunately, they were also little better than him and did not want to risk keeping her around. One of the crew suggested that she be put into the skiff and set adrift. Looking to the crowd on the deck, she hoped that someone would help her. Instead, the only reaction was from the girl who had spent time with the Frenchman the day before.

"Why didn't you just take it like the rest of us?" she cried. "Now we are lost. I know the men on this crew. They are farmers, not sailors. We will never make it to shore."

The girl turned to the people on the deck. "Can anyone sail this boat in the right direction to reach the United States?"

The answer was no. Even among the crew, no one spoke up.

Eva realized that she had never even learned the girl's name. As she swam, she wanted to pray for her. Not because she too had been forced to spend the night with the Frenchman, but because of what she said next.

"We should kill you with that spike! What you've done has certainly killed all of us!"

The others had talked the girl out of killing Eva, but they still could not stand to let her stay. They reached a compromise and, as the crewman had suggested, they threw Eva's fate to her guardian angels. Eva was abandoned in the skiff without paddles or sail. At the last minute someone had tossed in some food and water. Later on, she had found the tarpaulin stuffed into a storage bin beneath a seat.

Eva's feet touched American soil in the sands beneath the flat surf a hundred feet off the coast of South Padre Island, Texas, just as the sun rose over the horizon. Moments later, she collapsed on the beach and waited for the rising sun to warm her.