

Chapter 1

Costa Rica:

Alma checked a turtle location on the dark beach when three men came into view, moonlight gleaming off assault rifles. She turned but her bare feet had no traction on the sand. Her heart raced, every inch of her screaming danger. Heavy breaths trailed too close behind. A fist struck her temple, white spots dotting the sky as she landed face-first in the sand, the barrel of a gun shoved into her back.

“Don’t move.”

Raising her hands she gave up her struggle. The man grabbed her by the hair with one hand and stuffed an oily tasting cloth into her mouth with the other. Before she could register what was happening, her hands were tied behind her back and her face pushed into the sand again. On her knees with her bottom more up than down, her shorts were pulled from her and she felt the weight of a heavy man force himself onto her.

With her neck held to the ground, Alma couldn’t fight, she couldn’t move. Sand burned into her knees as she gasped for air. The smell of the cloth made her ill. The only noise was a squeak coming from her gag as she tried to scream. *Why did I come alone?* she thought. Pushing her over when he was through with her, he threatened, “If I see you on this beach again, you’re dead. Tell everyone to go home. No one will be safe here.”

In a fetal position, she saw he had a ski mask over his face, dark eyes, and clothes to match. She lay stunned and in pain for several minutes, her body shivering in fright. She managed to wiggle her way out of the bindings and back into her shorts. She was just beyond the Playa Soledad turtle hatchery.

When she was able to get up, she moved toward the hatchery for help. Once there, she saw the other volunteers had been tied and gagged as well. Coolers and boxes that held turtle eggs from their explorations that night were on their side and empty. No one at the hatchery had been able to move. She removed their gags and untied them, but no one had phones to make an emergency call. The men had taken them. She wasn’t sure how many men had done this, but they were now long gone. They walked as a group to the street trying to flag down a motorist who would help.

She would call Gabriel, make a report and promised herself she would never come back to Playa Soledad again. She would pray for peace and security to return to the beach.

San Francisco:

Laura heard a choking noise somewhere near her. Slowing her pace from a jog to a walk, she looked around and discovered a baby sea lion hiding in some brush off to the side of her running trail. “Hey little guy, what are you doing way over here? Are you lost?” She scanned the area to see if the mother might be nearby. There was a parking lot beyond the trail, brush, and then a busy street. No one was around who would hear her yell, and she didn’t want the little guy to go beyond the brush fearing he would be hurt.

There had been several news reports of sea lions being spotted in residential areas of San Francisco. They were having a hard time finding food and this seemed to be the reason for the sightings. Keeping her distance, she grabbed her phone and dialed the local marine mammal rescue center. *It's a good thing I decided to take a jog along the shore following that long meeting today.* Laura hated to see an animal in need and felt compelled to help by keeping an eye on the little one until the rescue crew arrived.

Once the pup was picked up and on his way to the rescue center, Laura walked to her car for the drive back to her condo. She felt satisfied helping the pup which strengthened her enthusiasm for her upcoming sustainable tourism trip.