

Chapter 1

Costa Rica:

The volunteer 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. The volunteers 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, some brush, and then a busy street. No one was around who would hear her yell, and she didn't want the animal to go beyond the brush, fearing he would get 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.



Chapter 2

Costa Rica:

On the plane, Laura imagined walking along a sandy beach, cool water from the Caribbean lapping onshore, and the sun's blanket of warmth enveloping her. *Bing bing* went off overhead. She jumped in her seat, now awake, eyes wide open. The anticipation of landing in a tropical country and being alone for several weeks wasn't the only thing keeping her from sleeping on the long flight from California.

The captain made an announcement. "...If you look to your right..." Through the window, she spotted Lake Nicaragua below and escaped back into self-reflection and memories.

"What do you think you're doing? Why can't you just go for two or three weeks like a normal traveler?" her mother had asked as she put the final preparations on dinner.

"Mom, I need to get away. I'm tired of doing what everyone else wants me to do. I need time to think. I want to explore new interests."

"You don't even speak the language!"

"I know enough Spanish to get by. Many residents speak English anyway. I'll improve my Spanish through immersion. I need a change. I need to find *me* again."

"It just seems like such a long time."

"You know I've been stressed out from work and the divorce. I can't find joy in anything anymore, everything's a chore. I just want to have some fun and enjoy life again."

“What’s so important about these sea turtles anyway, why can’t you just find your fun here?” her mother sighed.

“We’ve been over this. It’s a chance to study a new interest and enjoy a beautiful country. Remember that baby sea lion I helped? I want to do more of that. I’m over the grind of corporate America. Besides, it’s not forever. It’s just a couple of months, you won’t even miss me.”

The in-flight announcement brought her back to reality. Three months after the conversation with her mom, the plane was about to land at San José’s Aeropuerto Internacional Juan Santamaría.

Laura made her way through the sterile corridor of sunlit glass walls and white marble tiles. She searched out the signs for Leatherback Sea Turtle Conservancy.

She spotted the representative and smiled. “Hi. Laura Humphreys. Are you Daniela Segura?”

“Welcome to Costa Rica. I hope you’re as excited to be here as we are to have you join our group.” They shook hands and Laura thought they were about the same age. Daniela’s golden-brown skin appeared luminous and Laura wondered if genetics or humidity were at play.

“Thank you. I’m very excited to be here. I’ve been dreaming of this opportunity.”

They headed for the auto park, and as the doors slid sideways the intense heat hit her like a furnace blast. In the distance, darkening grey clouds were accumulating.

Laura threw her backpack onto the backseat of Daniela’s Hyundai Santa Fe and climbed in the passenger seat. “We’ll be heading southeast to Puerto Limón to the home of your host family, the Valverdes. It’s about a three-hour drive. You’ll meet our biologist Gabriel Montenegro and some other volunteers tomorrow morning.”

The Braulio Carrillo highway carved a narrow strip through the rainforest with cliffs dropping on one side. Lush tropical vegetation raced by as Laura took in the new sights “That sounds perfect. I’ve never seen so many different

shades of green in one area. When I was in Tamarindo a couple of years ago at the end of the dry season, everything was brown and, well, dead looking.”

“It’s very wet on this side of the country. It gets more rain on an annual basis, plus the rainy season starts soon,” Daniela looked up at the darkening sky, “It looks like we’re getting an early start this year.”

They arrived at the Valverdes home and Daniela introduced Laura to Clemente and Maria. Clemente was a tall brawny guy who reminded her of a giant teddy bear. He reached out his hand, “Welcome to our home.” She felt protected in his presence right away.

Laura moved toward the hand-carved Guanacaste-wood barstools and viewed banana trees through the large picture window at the back of the house. “Your home is very beautiful. Thank you for letting me stay here,” she said. “How far are we from the beach?”

“We’re a couple of miles from Playa Soledad where you will be spending most of your time. I’ll drive you there in the morning so you can get your bearings,” Maria said.

Laura thought to herself *solitude beach, sounds perfect*. Daniela said her goodbyes and encouraged Laura to get to know the Valverdes, settle in and get a good night’s sleep. Her new adventure in sea turtle conservation would begin in the morning.