

# A RELUCTANT WARRIOR

# CHAPTER ONE

*Las Delicias, San Juan River, Colombia*

A heavysset bulldog of a man, who appeared to be the leader, held in his hands what she knew must be the death list. Whoever was on that list would be killed, and these animals liked to make their victims suffer. He smiled as he looked around the football field. The people of Las Delicias huddled together. They were surrounded by more than thirty men in jungle fatigues, machetes strapped to their backs, carrying assault rifles. Luzma put her arm protectively around her younger brother, Jair, and glanced at her grandparents who stood beside them. Would she and her family be on that list?

There had been signs that this was coming. Rumors had traveled downriver of a paramilitary takeover of the area. A week ago a dismembered body had washed ashore. People had begun to flee. But many refused to leave. This land was all they had, all they had ever known.

‘Good afternoon, Las Delicias,’ the leader said. ‘We are the Black Eagles.’

Luzma stared at the men before her. A similar paramilitary group had taken her mother ten years earlier. Some of the same men may have been involved.

‘We are fighting the guerrilla scum destroying our beautiful country. The only way Colombia can be great again is if we kill

every last one of those parasites and all of their friends. If you are an ally of the guerrilla or if you have helped them in any way, you are our enemy.

Luzma felt her face flush with anger. Nobody in Las Delicias had helped the guerrilla. The people here were simple farmers and fishermen, not part of this godforsaken war.

The leader held up the list again, scanning the crowd. 'We want the following people: Roberto Gonzalez, Enrique Pena, Federico Rojas, Manuel Martinez.' The sound of wailing women and sobbing men drowned out his voice, causing him to pause.

Luzma's heart broke seeing Manuel, her friend, being dragged away by two of the paramilitaries. His mother clung to his hand, refusing to let go despite being kicked and punched by the men. Old Dona Rojas fell to her knees, pleading for her husband to be let go.

'Where are you taking my Papa?' Doctor Pena's son cried, running after his father.

She had to stop this. These people were innocent. They were friends, neighbors.

'These people have done nothing wrong,' Luzma said. Silence settled as everyone stared at her. Luzma swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. 'If these people gave the guerrilla food or shelter when they were here, it is because a gun was held to their heads. They have nothing to do with this stupid conflict. All we want is to be left in peace.'

'What would your name be, princess?' the bulldog asked as he walked towards her.

'Luz-Marina Cuesta.' She stepped in front of Jair and felt her grandparents flanking her on either side.

The leader stood so close that she could smell the rum and tobacco on his breath. He turned to his men and said with a lecherous smile,

'Well, boys, I think Las Delicias is going to be delicious.'

Luzma felt naked in her little shorts and singlet top as the men's eyes moved over her. It was that sickly feeling of vulnerability she

knew all too well. She clenched her hands at her sides to stop them from shaking. She would not let them see her fear.

‘These people have done nothing wrong,’ she repeated slowly, hoping they couldn’t hear the tremble in her voice. ‘There is no-one in this community who has supported the guerrilla.’

‘Mmm, I love little troublemakers like you; it’s so sexy. Boys,’ the bulldog said, turning to his men, ‘we’re going to have a wild one tonight.’

The men jeered, making lewd gestures.

‘José,’ he said, addressing one of his men, ‘take my new girlfriend and her family back to their house and make sure they don’t leave. I want her well rested for tonight.’

## CHAPTER TWO

The paramilitary officer guarding them burst through the front door.

‘Give me a drink. I’m thirsty.’

‘What would you like?’ Grandpa asked.

The man walked straight across to Luzma. ‘What’s that aphrodisiac you all drink in Choco? I hear it keeps you very hot.’

Luzma stared at him defiantly.

‘I’m speaking to you.’

Scenes from ten years ago flashed through her mind, sending a chill down her spine.

‘You mean *borjoa* juice?’ Grandma said, moving towards him.

‘Yes, bring me one of those, gorgeous.’ He winked at Luzma and returned to the balcony.

Luzma exhaled slowly. She had to do something before the other soldiers arrived. She had to escape, as she knew all too well what would happen to her and her family.

‘Grandma do we still have the *dormilona* mixture?’ Luzma whispered.

Her grandmother looked at her a long moment, the lines around her weathered forehead deepening. She went to her special cupboard and pulled out dried herbs and little jars of liquids. Her ‘magic potions’ Jair called them. She was famous as the best *curandera* in the area and Luzma was her trainee. People

from all over River San Juan would travel to Las Delicias so she could heal them with her herbs.

‘Are you going to poison him?’ Grandpa asked, his eyes darting between Luzma and the door.

‘He asked for a drink. I’m going to give him a special one. He’ll be fast asleep in no time.’

Luzma helped her grandmother mix ground herbs of the *garde* and *dormilona* plants and clear liquid together with juice of the *borojoa* fruit. They were the same herbs they had mixed up for a client who had come to see them several weeks ago with severe insomnia. The man had been at the point of insanity and had insisted on trying the potion straightaway in their living room. It had only taken him five minutes and he’d been fast asleep on the sofa, the first time he’d slept properly in months.

‘I can go with you,’ Jair said, his big eyes looking up at Luzma.

‘No, it’s best I go alone.’ She walked to the door.

The man was fidgeting with his assault rifle and as Luzma stepped onto the balcony he swung around and aimed the rifle at her chest. She almost let the glass slip from her hand. There was a deadly silence broken only by her sharp, shallow breaths. She stood, staring at the dark grey muzzle of the rifle that was only a few centimeters away.

‘Can I have my drink?’

She handed him the glass and the bottle of rum, her hands shaking.

He took a swig of the rum and then stared at the purple juice.

‘So this is the famous *borojoa* drink.’ He brought the glass to his lips, studying her intently. ‘Why are you so nervous, princess?’

‘The gun makes me nervous,’ she said, forcing away the images from the past.

He drew the point of the gun away from her chest, moving it up the inside of her thigh, all the way up. ‘Would you like some rum to loosen you up for tonight?’

She resisted the urge to spit on him, remaining silent instead.

He smiled as he looked up the road. The sun was sinking into the jungle, throwing long shadows over the town. 'They'll be coming soon. Maybe I should have my drink.' He took the glass, watching her as he drank it all and then slowly licked his lips.

'So, princess, do you have a boyfriend?'

She ignored him, waiting for the drink to take effect.

'Don't worry, princess, you'll have lots of boyfriends tonight,' he said, slurring his words. 'Mmm, this rum has a kick to it. Are you sure you don't want some?' He shook his head, as if trying to rid himself of whatever was taking over his body. He slumped against the wall.

The music from the football field stopped.

He grinned. 'It seems the party is moving down here.' His body sagged and his eyes closed.

She gingerly shook his arm. It was limp. She stood staring at him for a moment before the door opened and Grandpa came out.

'Let's go,' she said. 'We have to make it to the jungle before they get here.'

The men up the hill were laughing and shouting, their voices moving closer. Luzma grabbed Jair's hand and ran down the side of the house. She peered around the corner. The paramilitaries were stumbling down the hill, rum in hand, dragging some women with them.

'Keep low and hide in the shadows,' Luzma whispered to her grandparents who were crouched behind her.

'Don't wait, Luzma,' Grandma said. 'Whatever happens, you and Jair just keep on going.'

The thought of the bulldog's eyes propelled her forward and she ran, crouching to keep out of sight.

Luzma's heart pounded. The jungle was about 100 meters away but the area in front of them was exposed. The paramilitaries would be at the house any second and would find the unconscious guard. They would hunt them down. Luzma sprinted, dragging Jair's tiny body along with her.

They reached the jungle's edge, stopping for just a moment to see if their grandparents were behind them.

'Don't stop and don't look back,' Luzma said, taking the lead. The jungle was her sanctuary where she had spent hours every week exploring.

'I'll stay at the back and will distract them if they catch up to us,' Grandma said, panting.

And then they were off, running through the thick maze of foliage. Behind them, an eruption of angry voices.

Luzma went faster, dragging Jair behind her. Exposed branches and prickly plants slashed at her naked legs. A stump caught her feet. She lurched forward, grabbing a tree to regain her balance. She couldn't stop.

'Find that bitch!' the leader screamed from somewhere behind her.

*God, please help us escape.*

Her legs and chest were burning, but she could not stop. She would prefer to be killed than captured. She ran and ran, leaving Las Delicias behind as a memory.

'No more,' Grandma said between heaving breaths. 'I can't run any further.'

Luzma could just make out her grandma in the darkness that was enveloping them. She sounded as if she was drowning, desperately gasping for air. How had she managed to get this far? They had run for what felt like hours, too afraid to stop. They were now between Las Delicias and the next community, Pereas.

Luzma fanned her grandmother and gently rubbed her back.

'We can't go to Pereas as they'll probably send people there to look for us,' Luzma said. 'Grandpa, do you think your friend Luis Jorge would help us?'

Luis Jorge was an eccentric old fisherman who lived by himself in a cabin between the two communities. He had a motorized canoe that he used to travel upriver to sell his fish.

‘I’m sure he will,’ Grandpa replied.

‘What if the paramilitaries go to Luis Jorge’s place as well?’ Jair asked, still gripping Luzma’s hand.

‘Let’s hope they don’t.’

‘Let’s go,’ Luis Jorge said. ‘We don’t have long before the sun comes up and makes this more difficult.’

He set off into the jungle, his long legs moving briskly. They walked in silence, struggling to make out the path ahead of them in the near total darkness. The sounds of the jungle were magnified; the rustling of animals moving through the bushes, the owl’s whistle, the melancholy song of the Guaco bird and a myriad of other mysterious noises.

They walked down the valley into the mangroves, wading through the muddy water. Luis Jorge turned on his flashlight, revealing the motorized canoe tied to the mangroves alongside a narrow tributary. As they got in, the water rose up, almost spilling into the canoe. The chances of a quick escape if they ran into the paramilitaries were slim.

Grandpa and Luis Jorge paddled so as not to draw attention with the sound of the engine. Luzma wrapped her arms around Jair and tried to avoid the branches that jutted out across the narrow waterway. It would take hours to get to San Juan River, according to Luis Jorge. But he probably wasn’t the only one to know these waterways. Both the guerrilla and the paramilitaries used them to move coca leaves to their jungle laboratories and to transport the goods out to the Pacific Ocean. Hopefully they would not come this way tonight.

As they emerged from the jungle into the main river, the skies burst and rain cascaded down like a waterfall. The sun was rising on the horizon. Luzma had no idea what the day would bring. She had been so focused on escaping that it was only now that she thought about what they had left behind, the community where she’d spent the past ten years of her life and her friends, the only people outside

her family she could trust. Remembering those screams she had heard from the football field, she did not even know if her friends were alive.

Jair was obviously thinking the same thing, asking, 'When can we go back home?'

'I'm not sure,' Grandma replied.

It was the first time Luzma had ever heard her grandmother without an answer. Tears formed, merging with the pelting rain. She watched the water as it rushed past the canoe, taking them further and further into the unknown.

Her life would never be the same – of that she was certain.