

CHAPTER ONE

A jolt of airplane turbulence abruptly woke me from a deep sleep. I rubbed my eyes and checked the time. Finally, the longest plane trip ever would soon be over. We had left Sri Lanka and were on our way to Mexico.

Mi país. Our papá was born in Mexico City. I had spent some of my younger years there, too. When Mr. Savage had told us we would be heading back home, our family was ecstatic. It had been years since we had been able to see our *familia* there. He was even letting us fly in a day early to spend some time with them and celebrate *Día de los Muertos!* And I had overheard *Mamá* say we would get to meet up with our old family friends

Tío Esteban and Titi Diana and our “*primo*” Mateo. Mateo wasn’t really our cousin, just like Tío Esteban and Tía Diana weren’t our real uncle and aunt—we were just super close to them.

Suddenly, Mr. Savage loomed over us in the aisle, not dressed in his usual attire but instead wearing an expensive-looking sweatsuit.

“Good morning . . . afternoon . . . whatever. I know that today is for pleasure, but I wanted to go over again why we are here,” he said in a gruff voice.

“A JAGUAR!” an Australian accent said behind us. Our camera and sound crew were behind us. Mark and Alice, in charge of cameras, looked at our sound producer with amusement dancing in their eyes. Connor was the third youngest of the crew (after Feye and me), and he loved big cats just as much as we did—he even had one tattooed on his arm! But he had a lion, not a jaguar like the one we had been called on to help rescue.

“Yes, Connor, a jaguar,” Mr. Savage said without any enthusiasm. He was clearly in a mood . . . Maybe he hadn’t slept well?

Probably the guilt, I thought, and I quickly looked Mr. Savage over to see if his clothes had the telltale logo that I knew by heart now. When we were in Sri Lanka, I had found sunglasses in Mr. Savage's belongings with a logo that matched the ones that the poachers we'd seen there and in Cuba had been wearing. In Cuba, the poachers had attempted to steal crocodile eggs, and in Sri Lanka, I'd caught them in the act of trying to "fin nap" an extremely rare Pondicherry shark. They were mixed up with Mr. Savage; I just wasn't sure how. Otherwise, it would have been an unbelievable coincidence for them to have shown up at all our shooting locations wearing gear that matched Mr. Savage's. But I couldn't say anything about it until I had more proof.

Mr. Savage cleared his throat and whipped out his tablet to show us footage of a jaguar limping by a camera, with a trap still around one of its back paws. He had received the video from the scientist Daniela Corrales Gutiérrez, who had dedicated her life to studying these big cats. She had reached out

to Mr. Savage in the hopes that our family could help find and rehabilitate this animal. She also was hoping that we could help her improve the relationship between conservationists and the locals, who weren't too fond of the predators lurking around their livestock.

"As I mentioned earlier, Ms. Gutiérrez says the locals largely want the animals to be relocated, but some want to kill any jaguars they see in retaliation for their killed livestock." Mr. Savage gestured to the frozen picture of the injured cat on his iPad. "Exhibit A."

He turned off the screen and tucked it under his arm as he produced our trip pamphlets. Each trip we took as part of the *Wild Survival!* crew, we got a small booklet that gave us all the information we needed to know about the country and the animals we would be encountering.

"It's a bit on the light side," my dad laughed, looking at the few pieces of paper stapled together.

Mr. Savage shrugged. "You're from here. What

could you possibly not know?" he said, and then turned to my mom. "I'm sure you know more than what I found on the internet."

Mom laughed at that. She wasn't from Mexico (she had been born in Puerto Rico, like me), but she lived there for a while and knew pretty much just as much as Dad.

"Anyway, read up on the rancheros if you get a chance before you go meet your friends. I won't be able to go with you since I've got a meeting," he said. "But, crew, you are welcome to go if Julio and Evelyn don't mind," Mr. Savage said, nodding toward our parents. They turned around and gave Alice, Connor, and Mark a big thumbs-up. With that, Mr. Savage walked back down the aisle to his own seat.

I looked outside the window. *A meeting that didn't involve Mom and Dad? That wasn't that unusual . . . right?* I wondered if it had anything to do with the poachers . . .

I glanced at the thin pamphlet and opened it



JAGUAR (*PANTHERA ONCA*)

- Third-largest cat species on our planet. It can weigh up to 250 pounds!
- Looks like a leopard but usually smaller and sturdier.
- They face multiple threats in the wild: poaching, habitat loss, and depletion of prey.