

# BREAKING CAGES

---

*The Quest to Find Freedom, Meaning and Love*

*Chapter One*

## Planting Seeds

---

DANA ALMO KRUŠINOVÀ

FREE CHAPTER PREVIEW

*For the ones who are quietly wondering  
if there is more.*

# Planting Seeds

April 2015

*Four years before setting off on the one-way journey*

\* \* \*

I have no time to think.

The moment it arrives, I must harness the momentum, synchronize with the erupting force as I become one with it.

I hear a voice calling "Jump!" and I obey, rising to my feet, bending my knees.

Now, it's just me and the wave.

I surrender to my body and, for a fleeting moment, I become just another little drop among billions, merging into a uniform motion—the wave.

Together, we reach as far as we can, stopping just before we touch the shore.

I'm so used to my own rhythm, deciding when to push and let go, that the whole idea of partnering with an external movement shakes me. But, heck, I'm fascinated with the idea.

Once again, it's just me and the surfboard on a mission to take on the white foam, while in the background, the shouts go on like a broken record, "Paddle, Paddle!"

I paddle as the powerful foam pushes me and, in one quick motion, I jump to my feet but lose balance and fall. This time, I forget the essential rule that Carlo introduced to me just an hour ago, when I was still pretending to paddle on the safety of the sand. "When you pop up, look ahead," he said. "Focus on where you want to go; that's your ticket to keeping your balance."

Yet, as I pull myself up, my gaze immediately falls to my feet—the one thing I []{dir="rtl"} should avoid if I want to get far.

*Splash.* I hit the shallow water again.

*I can do this,* I convince myself as I get up to my feet and pull the surfboard back into the depths. *It's just like life, I have to look ahead, aim for my goal, and I have a real chance of getting there.*

Lying on the board, I look over my shoulder and notice a breaking wave rushing towards me while I hear Carlo's voice in the background. "Paddle, Paddle, Paddle...Jump!"

This time, something magical is happening.

Following instructions, I lift my upper body and find that elusive balance as I look up at the white sandy beach: my destination.

My body is carried on top of the foam, and I hover with it until its power runs out and we stop a little before hitting the hard sand.

Endorphins surge throughout my body as a wide smile spreads across my face. I am thrilled, and I'm not sure whether it comes from the success of standing on a wave, the exciting spin of the sea's speed and power, or the precise and wondrous momentary connection to something other than myself.

My first surfing lesson ends just as I run out of strength, even though I feel like a little girl at the amusement park, craving to go on my favorite ride again and again. But the real challenge begins when I start to carry the oversized surfboard from the beach back to the surf shop, which is only a five-minute walk away but seems to take an eternity.

Balancing the board on my head, I hold its sides with my hands, attempting to balance its long, wide body on my comparatively small one. With deliberate steps, I walk down the path, recalling the vision of sun-kissed girls in bikinis, effortlessly and gracefully carrying their surfboards, that just yesterday captivated me. Back then, it had painted a blissful picture in my mind. But now, as my vision is manifesting, it doesn't feel quite as I expected. My graceful walk is replaced by a covert struggle between my overly tired muscles and the large, uncomfortable-to-grip surfboard. It's not exactly a pretty sight, but despite that, and I'm not sure why, those longing glances I aimed at the girls—are now aimed at me.

I use all my remaining strength to cover the final few paces to the surf store and I place the board on the sidewalk outside, in line with the others. It is back to being just another item for rent on the hot pavement and our bond is broken at once.

I thank Carlo for the guidance and arrange a lesson for the same time the following day.

\* \* \*

It's been almost a year since I quit my job as a flight attendant, a role that allowed me to enjoy the life I'd dreamt of for as long I can remember. But after five years of taking to the skies, I felt something needed to shift. From being someone who just did what she loved—travelling the world, enjoying fancy hotels, treating herself each month to her favorite muffin on Eighth Avenue in New York City, meeting her masseuse in Khaosan Road in Bangkok, and going to regular yoga sessions in her neighborhood in Tel Aviv—I became someone who knew they needed to grow up and move on.

I possessed ambition and a drive to succeed, and I wanted to prove I could be a successful businesswoman. I studied for my MBA while working as a flight attendant, so, at 30, I was ready to make the leap into the adult world and joined a global firm as a business-development and marketing specialist.

Now, I have one last reminder of my past life—a ticket to anywhere in the world, no matter how far and exotic. However, with only one week off from work, I need to choose the destination wisely.

Since all my friends are busy with their lives, I have to go on that trip alone, which I actually find more exciting. However, not every exotic faraway place feels safe. So, I've been contemplating where to go and how to travel for some time now.

My brother recently moved to Australia and started to surf, and this has sparked my curiosity about the sport. More specifically, it was a recent blog post from him that vividly detailed his surfing experience that really caught my attention. The exhilaration of successfully getting up and catching a

wave radiated through his words and, as I read them, his excitement became contagious. Then the idea struck me: Why not use my last free trip to learn how to surf?

Costa Rica, a destination I've longed to visit but never found time to due to my busy schedule, quickly becomes my number-one option, somewhere I can spend a week dedicating myself to surfing and immersing myself in the country's natural, adventurous, and serene atmosphere.

Only a couple of days into my trip, I find myself experiencing the profound emotions my brother vividly described in the post that led me here in the first place.

\* \* \*

So, as my first lesson comes to an end, my feet carry me to a supermarket near the surf shop, and everything I need right now is here. I go through the slightly dusty shelves, find a bottle of water and a ripe banana, and head to the checkout with my purchases.

In the queue, my attention is drawn to a local woman ahead of me. She's black-haired with almond eyes, and she wears a ring on her finger that captivates me more than anything else. The ring is not just pretty—it's the flower of life: circles that meet and blend harmoniously within each other to form the shape of a flower. It's a design that enthralled me back when I first encountered it as a painting on a Jerusalem sidewalk just a month ago.

I was curious about the design when I saw it then, so I turned to Google and my research made me appreciate it even more. It turns out it's one of the earliest drawn symbols in human history, carrying spiritual significance

across various religions. Formed of circles, it creates all the geometric shapes when you put them together. I've been on the hunt for a ring just like it for myself ever since.

The ring perfectly matches the woman who wears it in its simplicity and authenticity, and now I long for everything the woman symbolizes. I am starting to think there's a good chance I'll find it right here in Santa Teresa—this small town in Costa Rica, away from anything I know. And as soon as I wear it, I'll become the woman who reaches beyond her limits and merges with the circles.

The woman notices me and, before she leaves, she turns and says in Spanish, "You are very pretty."

Her words hit me right in the stomach, sending warmth throughout my entire body. *I was noticed, too.*

I leave the store, but my thoughts still linger on that last interaction. Luckily, my feet know the way to my destination: the beach.

\* \* \*

Sunset is approaching, the time when tourists and locals alike find their way to the beach for their last glimpses of sunlight and to watch the day's final show. I stroll through the palm trees, following a path that leads to the bustling shoreline. Once on the soft sand, I continue until I discover a relatively secluded spot and settle down.

As I fixate on the horizon, the large orange sun begins its descent.

"Hey, Dana, can I join you?" The words are in English, but in a familiar Spanish accent.

I lift my head, and there before me is Rafael—a redheaded guy with meticulously maintained dreadlocks whom I'd encountered at the hostel just yesterday. Back then, he stood on the opposite side of the bar, serving me a refreshing pineapple-banana smoothie.

During our brief interaction, Rafael had shared his story. He used to be a project manager in Madrid, living the corporate dream. But now, at just 27, he's mixing drinks at the hotel bar here. I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. He had it all—great job, fat paycheck, easy life—and I was left scratching my head. *How does anyone hit the pause button when the trade-off is serving drinks at a bar on the other side of the world?*

"Hi, Rafael. Sure!" I reply. "Are you here for the show, too?"

"Yeah, and what a show," he replies.

"I know. It's amazing to see how this fireball dives into the deep water over and over without getting wet, right?" I say, laughing.

"That's one way of looking at it." His blue eyes smile at me.

"I've always had a weakness for sunsets," said Rafael, "but here something different happens. The sun's angle creates a unique reflection on the sea, and it's as if the sun in the sky has split and both suns are trying to reunite."

He continues after a short pause. "The truth is that I've always liked sunsets. Though, because I was so busy racing through life, I didn't get to see them as much as I wanted. That's one of the reasons I left everything behind. One day, I woke up like on any other day and tried to take a moment

of peace while drinking coffee with the usual slice of toast and jam. But then I really woke up."

I turn my head his way. He's now got my full attention.

"I had a eureka moment," he continues, "and I realized I didn't want to have to steal moments anymore; it was time to take control."

"That was pretty brave," I say. "So you decided to follow your heart?"

"To me, courage wasn't the issue—it was a necessity," he says. "And, yes, you could say I decided to follow my heart. Though, to be more accurate, I simply listened to my inner voice. And now I'm here, without a steady job, with no real boss, but with time that's truly mine to enjoy the peaceful mornings and the beautiful sunsets."

Now his words have broken through the walls of my pre-judgmental perception, I get it. I no longer tag him with the frivolity I had associated with him earlier. I nod in silence and we both turn our gaze to the sea, where the sun has shrunk to the size of a marble yet still shines spectacularly, leaving us with a desire for more. It's as though it is inviting us to return tomorrow, then the next day.

Once the sun has gone down, the air becomes cold, and a shiver goes through my body. Rafael is wearing a loose sweatshirt with two side pockets, while I am wearing a thin white dress adorned with purple flowers, layered over a not-quite-dry swimsuit. "Mind if I borrow your pockets for a bit?" I ask, hoping that warming my hands will radiate warmth throughout my entire body.

"Yeah, sure," he replies, leaning in to give me access to the snug pockets in his sweater. "Put your hands in here," he says.

Suddenly I feel like a baby kangaroo, being protected by its mother.

"That happened to me too, at the first sunset," he says, smiling. "Since then, I've come prepared. I stay here long after the sun goes down—it's one of the few times my thoughts become clear. The sea takes on a different hue and its messages can get through; unlike any other time when the sun is high in the sky and the people are loud."

I, too, am waiting to hear the messages.

I lay my head on his shoulder and take a deep breath, and as I do, I'm suddenly aware of Rafael's scent: a salty but pleasant smell, like a blend of a man who works in the sun and a child playing with his fruit salad. At the same time, I become acquainted with the heat that emanates from him, and one thought climbs into my head. "I want to be close."

When the thoughts in my head go quiet, we both notice the rumbling coming from my stomach.

"Let's go and make you something to eat," he says, standing up.

He holds out his hand and, as I take it, we are both surprised by my body weight, which now rests entirely on him.

"Thank you," I say. "I didn't realize how stiff I would be."

"No worries," he says. "That's just your muscles letting you know they've had a serious workout. You know it's going to be even worse tomorrow, right? Your first couple of days of surfing shock your body because you're working muscles you've probably never used before. So, you've got to take a break for a bit now."

"Are you serious?" I say. "I was so looking forward to tomorrow's session."

"Oh yeah, you'll struggle to make the tiniest movement. Give it a day, take some time to rest, and enjoy some peace and quiet," he suggests.

*I didn't come here just to rest, I think. Though, maybe it's not such a bad idea...It could be my chance to immerse myself in the "Pura Vida" way of living that is so popular here.*

Since I've arrived, I've seen it everywhere—on carved wooden signs in local restaurants and bold, colorful letters on maps. The people here claim it's the Costa Rican way—a calm, joyful and peaceful life. Aside from wanting to learn to surf, I've also begun to wonder how it feels, this thing that everyone here is proud of.

"It's quite inspiring," I say, sharing my thoughts with Rafael.

*"If I want to get a sense of this worldview, then perhaps this is just what I need. A day to relax, to breathe in the fresh air, preferably in front of the blue sea, and, if possible, on a hammock,"* That actually might be doable. Now I start to wonder, *why do I chase so many other things and generally forget to enjoy the "now"?*

"You're right, I should take a day off tomorrow," I say finally.

Meanwhile, Rafael and I find ourselves in the grocery store, beginning to plan dinner.

At the shop, we pick through various ingredients that could become meals, and our job now is to select and craft the best choice for our own best meal tonight.

We decide to make a meal inspired by the local cuisine of flour tortillas, fried eggs, peppers, and guacamole and sprinkle local cheese on top, which will melt and link all the textures and colors together.

My mouth waters in anticipation.

With the groceries in hand, I walk briskly toward the hostel until I reach an unfamiliar turn. My orientation is constantly challenged in new spaces—though it's not much better in familiar ones—and it's got to a stage where I've realized that, when it comes to navigating, I should listen to my gut feeling, then do the exact opposite of what it's telling me.

Luckily, in the other areas of life, my inner compass is tuned as expected and rarely suffers from deviations, leading me to my goals even when I am unsure of how to reach them.

But I am not alone this time. Or, at least, so I think.

I might have walked too quickly, and, suddenly, I find myself on a dark, narrow street with only a plastic bag in my hand and a thumping heartbeat for company.

"I don't want to be alone," I say in a language that no one around understands.

No one responds, and I lose my balance in the dark and fall over a rock.

"Hey, are you okay?" I hear Rafael calling from a short distance away.

"Yes, I've just stumbled over a rock," I reply, confused.

Rafael comes close and gets on his knee. "You've got some blood here," he says. "Can you walk?"

"Yes, I can," I say and try to stand on my feet without being too dramatic. With his arm around me, we keep walking slowly until we reach the entrance to the hostel. We walk down the long, narrow corridor, trying not to wake the two sleepy brown-and-white dogs enjoying their evening nap on the cool floor.

Rafael helps me to reach the wooden bench near the kitchen and steps away for a moment to fetch a bottle of alcohol. With care, he elevates my legs gently on the bench and instructs me to take a deep breath. Then, he dabs the cut with a cotton-wool ball soaked in the liquid.

"Ouch!" I yell.

"I'm sorry," he says, trying to calm me down. "Now the cut is clean, it may hurt a little more, but soon you won't remember it's there."

I thank him for the treatment. "I'm really fine already," I say, looking into his eyes. "And I'm ready for dinner."

I start to prepare the meal, turning on the gas and letting the oil heat in a pan. Meanwhile, I crack four eggs in a deep bowl and, using a fork, I allow the yolks to trickle out and blend them together. To create a uniform texture, I whip the eggs in a quick motion, working up a froth. *Those bubbles: they were me in a way, without knowing yet. They're under pressure, desperate to rise, to break free and get back out there where they belong.*

The pan has now warmed up properly, and with a wave of my hand, it's the turn of the vegetables to be thrown into it. As the eggs meet them on the hot surface, everything begins to coalesce into an omelet.

But a bland, flat omelet is not what I want.

After a quick search of the kitchen, I find a wooden spoon and go back to the pan to separate the egg into small pieces. I have always preferred scrambled eggs over an omelet: it never suffers from the existential threat that always hangs over the poor omelet, ready to fall apart in any moment.

For the final touch, I sprinkled pieces of cheese on top, letting them melt into my new creation.

Finally, we sit down to eat without saying much more than "Bon Appetit." *It's strange that there is no such phrase in English*, I think as I pile large amounts of everything onto my tortilla until I can barely fit it into the roll.

We eat without saying a word and I'm glad Rafael has read my thoughts and doesn't disturb me while I'm busy with the vital task of chewing. Or maybe I simply left him no choice.

At the end of the meal, I wish Rafael a good night and make my way to my bed, one of three bunkbeds in a shared room. I still haven't met my roommates, as they're never there at the same time as me, which is a bit different from how I'd pictured things when I booked the dormitory room. Back then, I'd been lying on my sofa at home, imagining moments of shared experiences and eagerly anticipating the opportunity to meet fellow travelers.

But no matter. A thin white blanket and a pillow wait for me in a white pillowcase on the bed, and invite a deep sleep.

\* \* \*

In the morning, I decide I'm going to dedicate to clearing my head by doing that one thing I have never been able to do—nothing.

I find myself wanting to savor it in large gulps, wondering if the act of doing nothing might unveil the answer to a question I have yet to discover.

As soon as my eyes open, I feel muscles in places I wasn't aware I had any.

After processing this new sensation, I sit on the bed for a while longer. It embraces my tired body like a caring nurse, promising to stick around until every part of me returns to its cheerful self.

When I get up, I head to the bar, where Rafael is already sitting and talking to the first customer of the morning. "Good morning!" I say enthusiastically, hoping he notices my renewed energy. "You were right. I fell asleep like a baby, though I'd have preferred to chat with you for a bit longer."

"I thought so," he says. "It wasn't hard to see you were already entering another zone. So, are you ready for your day of rest?"

"I hope so," I reply. "I'm already envisioning what 'nothing' will involve. It's a bit of a paradox."

"I suggest you start with the pancakes you love so much and see where the day takes you from there," he says while pouring batter into a hot pan.

"Sounds like a plan," I say, sensing I'm gradually letting Rafael help me become more present in the moment.

"Feed me," I command with a smile.

While the pancake mix creates bubbles in the pan, a bowl of exotic fruit decorated with flax seeds is placed in front of me, and a pleasant Bach melody plays in the background, making the atmosphere timeless, like the melting clock in Salvador Dali's paintings.

*Yep, I think, I could really get used to starting every morning of my life like this.*

While enjoying my pancakes, I realize that, aside from his uncompromising self-loyalty, I know very little about Rafael. "I wonder," I say, "now that you've left your routine at home and journeyed to the other side of the world, do you feel you've reached where you want to be?"

"From the first moment, something here felt right," he replies. "This is the place I envisioned when I dreamt of a routine that would give me peace along with financial independence. So, yes, it was clear from the beginning I'd be comfortable here. But I don't want to commit to one place: when it's time to hit the road again, I'll set out once more until I find a new place that feels right again." He makes it sound simple. "And what about you? Do you enjoy what you do back home?"

"Yes, I love it," I say. "My work challenges me and allows me to contribute value to the 'adult world,' a realm I managed to avoid for a long time until I started to fear missing the train. It might sound ridiculous, but I didn't know if my skills would deliver the goods when I needed to, or if I could manage a life of milestones and meeting the goals of a big firm. After being a flight attendant for five years, I found the kind of job I spent four years studying for at university. And today I work in such a firm and feel like I'm 'one of them.' It feels good to find my place in the business world, even if it is just about self-validation."

"I get where you're coming from," Rafael acknowledges. "But now you've proved to yourself you can do it, do you think it's what you'd like to keep doing? Can you carry on being another piece in the system?"

"I don't see it that way," I respond with certainty. "I feel that I bring something unique and, at the same time, I get to evolve and learn new skills I wouldn't get elsewhere. Right now, I believe I'm exactly where I need to be."

"Okay, I understand. If it works for you—that's what's important," he says. "But I'll repeat what I said before, when we talked about being open to what the day brings. When you approach life with an open mind, you create space for new possibilities that can lead you to a new—perhaps more fulfilling—way of living for you. That might not necessarily be based on the values you were taught in school or those most people live by. As I've discovered, these widely accepted 'adult' values can easily become your way of life, with their traps of pats on the ego, monetary rewards, and golden cages," As Raphael continued, a hint of excitement showed in his eyes. "Reality, though, can be big and special, and can offer much more than you've been conditioned to think."

"I don't want to interrupt," says a man in a buttoned shirt and blue jeans who's sitting close enough to hear our conversation, "but it seems to me that spending your late twenties in a bar in a far-flung corner of the world isn't the most fulfilling way to live. It wouldn't be the lifestyle choice for most people I know." He speaks with a stiff lecturing tone that doesn't quite read the room. "Does it really bring you joy to watch people coming and going, leading their lives, while you 'live in the moment'? Perhaps you should think twice before offering advice on how others should live their lives."

Even if he is right in a way, I feel Rafael has been unjustly attacked.

"Yes, I'm here every day by choice," Rafael says calmly. "I'm not bound in any way, and the people I get to meet have broadened my outlook more than anyone has in the past. I think it's important to remember that, rather than giving in to the norms, there is another way. Once we realize this fundamental truth, we can challenge this automated way of thinking."

I decide to step in and help Rafael. "I understand the rationale behind his viewpoint, even if it appears radical," I say. "Taking time to reevaluate things you might take for granted makes real sense. If you shake the solid ground and the path you're walking still feels right, then your old routines will survive the test. But we should be open to new possibilities, right?" I take the last bite of my rolled-up pancake.

I hope Rafael isn't hurt. I smile at him and go to rest in the hammock that has begun to call out my name quietly.

Suspended between two towering palm trees, my hammock bears my weight effortlessly. With both hands, I carve out a niche within the hammock's fibers and then I recline, floating between the big blue sky and solid ground.

With a slight push, the hammock and I are dancing in the breeze. *What is it about a hammock that works so well? I wonder. What is it about it that eases worries straight away in a way that lying on the sofa never can? It's probably that the gentle swinging evokes something in the deep subconscious and takes your mind back to the carefree state of being a baby swinging in a crib.*

I allow this new line of thought to evolve. *On the other hand, it wouldn't be as inspiring to swing in the hammock on the porch of my house, I muse. Getting into hammock mode is like stepping into a different dimension,*

*away from all the noise of everyday life. But it works best when combined with pure vacation vibes and a refreshed mental state. That's when the true hammock essence really shines through.*

*And let's not forget the holes in the hammock mesh, I think. They let the breezes in and treat your whole body to a refreshing oxygen bath. Meanwhile, your mind, in cosmic alignment, turns away from any nagging thoughts.*

While I'm thinking, I give my muscles a good stretch, letting the air work its magic as it oxygenates every cell in my body. The same air that ruffles the leaves in the treetops above glides over me like a gentle caress.

But try as I might, the hammock and the idyllic atmosphere cannot erase the words of the man who made me feel so uncomfortable a few moments ago. I find myself wondering what had got under his skin so much. *Could it be that Rafael's words had rubbed him up the wrong way and made him confront the self-denial he was clinging to?* I can't forget that I, too, questioned how anyone could pull off such a carefree life. For the moment, though, I'm not going to pick sides, but instead I'll figure out how I can make my own choices about the way I truly want to live my life. Within this choice lies a whole future for me—I can choose between the neon-lit path, or the yellow brick road, leading to a potentially better future filled with freedom.

I can see Rafael from my hammock, and I watch him as he picks fresh fruits, puts them in a mixer, and whizzes them into a smoothie. They're still bananas, mangoes, and pineapple, but he's transformed them into something else entirely, more slipping down the throat.

*It seems as though transformations come naturally to him, I think.*

I feel an unintentional smile creep across my face as I look at him from my hammock, realizing I am facing someone real, someone who isn't afraid to take himself to the edge and trust his truth. He is changing something in me, even if I don't mean him to. He's inviting me, too, to walk closer to the edge.

On the other hand, I only have left five days here, and I'm sure that, on the plane back, everything I've seen and experienced here will seem like a dream.

---

## *Want to keep reading?*

*Breaking Cages* launches early 2027.  
Be the first to know when it's available.

### **Take the quiz: Which cage is running your life?**

[danaalmo.outgrow.us/breakingcages](https://danaalmo.outgrow.us/breakingcages)

---

[danaalmo.com](https://danaalmo.com)

[@danaalmo](https://twitter.com/danaalmo)

© Dana Almo Krušinová 2026. All rights reserved.  
This chapter is a preview. Please do not distribute without permission.