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The Summer of Secrets

Written by Alison Lucy

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Alison Lucy

The Summer of Secrets

Sometimes you have to unlock your past before you can step into your future . . .



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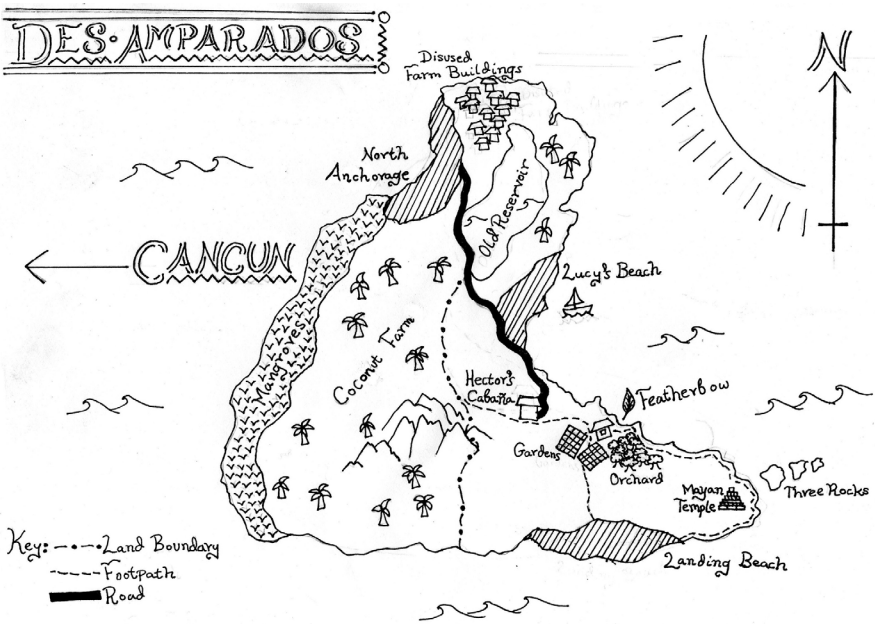
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DES·AMPARADOS
Disused Farm Buildings
North Anchorage
Old Reservoir
CANCUN
Lucy's Beach
Coconut Farm
Mangroves
Hector's Cabaña
Featherbow
Gardens
Orchard
Mayan Temple
Three Rocks
Landing Beach
Key: Land Boundary
Footpath
Road

1

Cancún, Mexico, 1989

Mexico was Danny's idea. Harriet was unsure at first – they had bought a house and were trying to make it beautiful – but she came around. 'It's the Caribbean,' she told everyone. 'Totally unspoilt.' It was expensive, but they saved money on their wedding where they could because they wanted to have tales to tell of their exotic honeymoon and to have memories to carry them through the trials of married life ahead.

The look on Harriet's face when she caught her first glimpse of Mexico made Danny's gamble worthwhile. The sun was setting and the Caribbean sea took on the pinks and purples of the sky above, the islands dotted in the endless ocean like buttonholes, the towering hotels of Cancún glinting with the promise of modern luxury in the timeless blue. A delighted gasp escaped from her cupid's bow mouth and her sharp eyes melted at the edges, softening the angles of her face so that she looked more radiant than ever. Danny wondered once more how he had persuaded such a beauty to marry him.

'It's gorgeous,' she said.

'You're gorgeous.'

She rewarded him with the kind of smile he lived for, the kind of smile that made other people suppose that although Danny might be a little bit rough around the edges – his grey eyes were too serious for his boyish face and his thick sandy hair refused to conform to anything approaching a style – he could still make Harriet happy. He had asked her to marry him so that he could spend the rest of his life conjuring more smiles just like that.

The plane came in with a fierce bump and the roar of heavy brakes. The force of the landing pinned them back in their seats. His heart beat a rapid tattoo until they came to a complete stop. Harriet was shaken, her smile had faded, but the cabin crew seemed unfazed as they prepared the doors for opening and they disembarked.

The newlyweds shrank away from the armed police who patrolled Cancún Airport smiling and chain smoking Delicados, their AR-15s hoisted under their arms. They were bombarded by offers of taxis and hotels and stood firm at the official taxi rank, accepting a price only slightly above what they felt was fair.

Danny liked that his new wife held his hand for the entire journey to their honeymoon hotel. 'It's an adventure,' he said.

She stared out of the window as the sleek new taxi carried them down the main boulevard. 'An adventure?'

'A few years ago there was nothing here,' he said, 'not even an indigenous community to resettle, just bugs and dunes, and now look. Don't you think it's amazing they could build a whole resort, a whole city, in the boring

part of nowhere?' The sky was gathering darkness, and the dust from the construction outside the arrivals hall coated the back of his mouth.

'It'd better not be boring, Danny,' she said, and pinched the soft flesh of his thigh.

'Look!' He pointed out of the window to where the aqua Caribbean Sea fluffed over grey rocks to dance on the pale sand and her spirits were once more revived.

Cancún was a Mexican success story. Within a decade it had an airport, a handful of top-class hotels with planning granted for many more, a highway, and mile upon mile of beaches to rival the very best in the world. Within twenty years it was as if it had always been there and people started to forget that less than a lifetime ago it was a dangerous swamp called *Kan-Kun*, or 'nest of snakes', and that danger was still everywhere.

'Welcome to paradise,' said Harriet. 'Watch you don't trip over the locals.'

Danny started to wind down the car window but their driver tapped the air-conditioning vents on the dashboard of the taxi and Danny stopped fiddling. They raced past slender palm trees in the centre of the road, planted in earth that was pristine and free of weeds. The white-painted concrete bollards, the very road beneath their wheels was shiny and new. Above them a frigate circled and Danny wondered if the lonely bird was confused by all this change.

Their hotel had made a small effort to blend in with the natural surroundings, but it was a monster of concrete and steel and no amount of tropical planting could disguise that. They were checked in without too much

ceremony. Harriet told the reception staff that they were on their honeymoon. 'Why did you do that?' he said as he unlocked the door to their third-floor lagoon-view room. The night had closed in and he could barely make out the dark outline of the inky water.

'It makes it less bizarre. Can you believe that we're married?' she said. 'It doesn't feel real.'

Their room was simple and clean, pretty tiles covered the floor and continued halfway up the wall. He was gripped by the odd sensation that it should be the middle of the night.

'It feels real to me,' he said. 'Come here, Mrs Featherbow.' He locked the door behind them and pulled her onto the bed.

Later that same night they emerged with jet-lagged hunger and walked down to the beach, hoping to find some authentic Mexican food but settling for a burger and fries from the hotel bar. They talked about finding a nightclub. In the corner a group of Mexicans were gathered watching a televised poker game from Las Vegas. She saw him staring at them.

'Gambling is illegal in Mexico, Danny.' There were no casinos in Cancún. It was one of the reasons she had agreed to come. She put a hand on his arm and willed him to turn back to her. If they could make it through a fortnight without having an argument about gambling, then it could still be the honeymoon of her dreams.

'I know it is,' he said. 'But they play cards everywhere.'

'No, *you* play cards everywhere.'

'They're watching a bit of sport on telly, Harry, don't get so tetchy.'

'Don't call me Harry.' She finished off her burger in silence and didn't suggest another drink. The possibility of going to a nightclub was not mentioned again.

He came back downstairs after she had fallen asleep. Just as he crept from their bed back home if there was late-night sport on the television. She was a deep sleeper, his new wife, and would sleep anywhere. It was the most laid-back thing about her.

He spoke to the men with his schoolboy Spanish and got invited to a card game by pretending he was richer and more drunk than he was. He returned to the hotel room several hours later, up three hundred dollars, and when Harriet asked him why he was exhausted the following day he spent most of the money on distracting her by buying a solid gold necklace with a small pendant; a star of gold and a creamy, iridescent opal in the shape of a crescent moon.

And so their honeymoon continued. By day Danny was an attentive new husband: they stayed in bed late and went to bed early; spent the time in between on the beach, eating in the restaurant, drinking cocktails at sunset. But at night Danny crept downstairs to seek out the illegal card games that ran the length of the Hotel Zone until at last it was 4 a.m. and he was sitting around a table with seven high rollers and a straight flush in his poker hand.

'Your wife doesn't mind you playing cards on your honeymoon?' asked one man.

‘If she did, I wouldn’t have married her,’ said Danny, instead of admitting that he was scared of the very thought of what his wife would do if she found out that he was unable to control his addiction.

Over the course of his week, Danny had amassed almost two thousand dollars. When his grandmother taught him to play poker, she had pronounced that Danny was born lucky. He played cards whenever he could for the rest of his life and soon realized that luck had nothing to do with it.

His straight flush came at a pivotal moment in the game. The two biggest spenders were still in the hand: a Mexican hotel guy and a Canadian builder. The Canadian dropped out as soon as the amounts became dizzying, which left Danny and the hotel guy, whose name was Paco.

‘Raise,’ he said, and pushed his cash into the centre of the circle.

Danny was fairly certain by now that Paco had a full house. He would lose. The question was: how much? Danny needed to draw him in. He needed to use the skills that he could never use back home in his regular Friday night game because the guys he played against knew him too well. They had all been in the same school, found jobs in the same town, and lived with the same small disappointments and vast dreams. They knew who he was. Here he could be anyone. There was only one person in Cancún who thought that he would never make much of himself and she was sleeping in the hotel room upstairs.

He stared directly into Paco’s eyes almost like a dare.

‘Call,’ said Paco.

The tension in their corner of the bar stepped up a notch. A few of the hotel waiters had gathered, watching, and he prayed that the game would not be noticed and shut down just when it was getting interesting. He flipped over his straight flush and Paco made a sound as if he had been punched. 'Fucking gringo,' he said. But there wasn't any menace behind his words. Danny smiled and raised his eyebrows, pulling all the money in the pot towards him and calculating there must be close to four thousand American dollars. In addition to the fifteen hundred he still had rolled up in the pocket of his trousers. And the traveller's cheques.

Maybe his grandmother had been right. Perhaps he was lucky after all.

'Another hand?' said Paco, riffling through the cards and being gracious in defeat. Paco had been working on a coconut farm offshore when they started to construct Cancún. He had set himself up as a human resources hotshot and found people from all over to work in the bars and hotels. He was rich man on the Yucatán Peninsula; he could afford the chance to win his money back.

'One more hand,' said Danny. He had never had so much cash on him in his life. He could feel the burn in his pocket. He wanted to get it back upstairs before he did something stupid.

But it was too late. The euphoria of his last win clouded his judgement and he went in for too much too soon and before he knew it he was facing up in the final round of betting and there was nothing he could do except bluff his way to a possible recovery. His pair of sevens probably wouldn't beat whatever Paco was holding.

The Mexican went along with it for a while and the amounts started to climb.

Danny's better judgement begged him not to throw good money after bad, but he did anyway, as if in a fever dream, listening only to the surge of endorphins that made him take illogical risks. Win, lose, it barely mattered – it was the rush of the gamble itself that he couldn't live without.

'Raise,' he said, putting everything that he had won back on the table again to join the enormous pot there. Real money. His money. Their money. For richer or poorer. 'All in.'

Paco leant back in his chair, studying Danny's face. 'You don't have anything,' he said. 'I want to call. But you've cleaned me out.' He pulled some keys out of his pocket. 'You want my car?'

'I fly home to England in three days. Why would I want a car?'

Please fold, he willed. *Put down your cards, go home, have sex with your wife. We should all go home.* England shone brightly in his mind, more brightly than he remembered, and suddenly he wanted nothing more than his own bed, his own job, and all the safe, solid things he had built his life around.

'Maybe you don't go back,' suggested Paco. 'Maybe you stay here in Cancún and drive around in my car.'

'If you want to call me, call me. If you don't, then fold.'

'You take a – what is the word? – an IOU?'

Danny laughed. 'You take the Mick?' It was lost in translation. 'No, *amigo*. Cash is king.'

'You seem very confident,' said Paco. He tapped his

cards on the surface of the table. 'I have an idea. I own a house, a little beach house, on Des Amparados. The island with the big coconut farm?'

'That's not a beach house,' the Canadian chipped in, amused. 'Don't listen to him. It's a shack, and if the land was good for growing anything it would be part of the farm and it isn't.'

'It's a valuable piece of real estate, Danny. I'm serious. It may not be worth much right now but in a few years . . . There's only way one this city is going and that's up and up.'

'Okay,' said Danny.

'Okay?'

'Yeah, why not?'

Danny's heart was pounding and the bitter taste of adrenalin flooded his mouth. He was about to bet four thousand dollars on a hunch he had that Paco was trying too hard to win. He recognized the trace of a confident desperation that he was trying so hard to hide. It was a mirror. They were playing the same game, both trying to scare the other off the pot, which likely meant they both had the same hand. He just wanted to get on with it. Suddenly his pair of sevens didn't look so bad. Everybody in the bar knew what was going on by now. The amounts being counted in thousands, the talk of cars and farms and houses. He felt like a gangster. He had to see what Paco had. He had to play until the very end.

'Call,' said Paco.

What would they do, Danny wondered, if he grabbed the money, more than ten thousand dollars in non-sequential bills, and ran? He breathed.

‘A pair of sevens,’ he said.

The men watching each beat of the game unfold with undisguised intrigue swivelled their heads towards Paco.

‘Shit,’ said Paco. ‘I thought you had nothing.’

Danny shrugged. ‘A pair of sevens, that’s nothing.’

Paco turned over his hand. Some random cards. The highest was a queen.

‘Nope,’ said the Canadian cheerfully. ‘A pair of sevens wins the night.’

Danny exhaled with a puff of air strong enough to lift some of the notes on the table, ruffling the money that now belonged to him.

And a shack on a beach somewhere. He couldn’t roll it up and stuff it in the pocket of his trousers. How would he explain that one to Harriet?

He would take a look.

A beautiful house. Just like she always wanted.

The shallow metal hull of the small fishing boat trembled as the engine opened up, taking the thud of each rolling wave as the prow lifted and fell, splattering them all with spray.

‘You still haven’t told me where we’re going,’ said Harriet.

‘It’s a surprise,’ said Danny. ‘Relax.’

At first the island was no more than a dark green mass on the horizon, but as they drew nearer it became more clearly defined, an expanse of palm trees stretching across for five miles or more. A thin line of rocks was obscured by the hazy rainbows above the curling surf and

so the waves appeared to roll directly onto the trunks of the palms as if the trees were growing out of the ocean. To the south of the vast island the same limestone rock bed swept upwards to become cliffs, and then broke into three jagged rock formations, each progressively smaller, thrusting out into the distant sea.

Paco seemed prepared to honour his end of the deal and considered it to be a deal between men. He said nothing of cards in front of Harriet. He had taken Danny aside as Harriet boarded. 'We'll cruise over to Des Amparados, you see what you think. If you feel cheated then we can talk,' he promised. 'I am not a cheat.'

Their boat pulled past another headland and then drew into a deeper cove, sheltered by the currents so that the water was as still as glass and the silvery sand was clean and soft. The boat lulled in the shallows and Danny jumped out, his first steps ungainly and waterlogged, jarred by the feel of solid ground after forty minutes at sea. His senses were filled with a feeling of space, the air was clear and fresh, the light that tumbled through the palms and onto the sand was sharp and crystalline. Two white butterflies collided above him.

Harriet clambered from the boat and looked around in confused wonder.

'This way,' said Paco, leading them off the beach and into the trees, brushing invisible flakes of sand from the shoulders of his white suit, and felt profoundly glad that he no longer worked picking coconuts.

They walked for a long time, through the trees and ferns at the edge of the beach, the sound of insects humming loudly in Danny's ears, and the heat pressing down

on them with an almost physical heft; then they climbed, until at last they emerged into a clearing where a small wooden shed was built on a bluff overlooking the vast ocean that stretched out to the east without end.

'That's it?' said Danny.

'That's it,' said Paco.

Extruding from the modest home were two dramatically unfinished wings of painted concrete block, dazzling white in the hot afternoon sun. Behind them was the view back towards the city of Cancún and its ever-changing skyline.

'Parts of the house need to be completed, as you see,' said Paco, with a shrug towards the beautiful dancing waves, 'but, you know . . .'

Harriet, who had been struggling in her hugely inappropriate wedges and was breathless and something close to scared, felt an insect on her shoulder; when she turned to flick it away she saw something that made her scream. The sudden noise disturbed a pair of egrets and they flew off in the direction of the sun.

Standing a few feet away was a shirtless man with a long beard and skin like leather. He had a bucket in his hand and looked as if he might have been shipwrecked here a hundred years ago, were it not for the old Sony Walkman that he had strapped to the waistband of his shorts. He ripped the headphones from his ears when he saw Harriet scream. A silver earring in his left ear winked in the sunlight.

'*Lo siento*,' he said. 'I am sorry.'

'This is Hector,' said Paco. 'Hector watches the place for me.' He spoke to Hector in rapid Spanish, their

conversation dragged on, and after a while both men were laughing.

'Where the hell are we?' said Harriet. 'Is your friend thinking of buying this place? What's going on Danny?'

'Do you like it here?' said Danny.

'There's nothing here,' said Harriet.

'But do you like it?'

She shrugged. 'It's okay.'

'It's ours,' he said.

Her brow furrowed as she started to understand. 'Oh, Danny, what have you done?'

'I played poker,' he said, and rushed to apologize as her face fell. 'I know, I know, I said I wouldn't do that any more, not once we were married, but I couldn't sleep.' There was no need to tell her that he had been up every single night. This was Cancún, it was 1989, he wanted to have some fun. 'And I won, Harry, I won big. Ten thousand dollars almost.'

'Ten thousand dollars? Jesus, Danny, what if you'd *lost*?'

'I didn't though. I won. Ten thousand dollars and this.'

'What do you mean: this?'

'The house.'

'Danny, come on. Be serious.'

'I am serious. You're always going on about being bored back home. We could live here . . .'

'Live here? In a shed? Danny, are you mad? What are you talking about, live here?'

'You say you want me to change.'

'I mean get a new job or stop wearing trainers, stop playing cards, not live on the other side of the world.'

'A holiday home, then. Come on, Harriet. Open your mind.'

'Open my mind? Danny, for the love of God, listen to yourself. Can we leave? Can we just leave now please?'

She didn't say a word all the way home and then later, after they had gone to bed incredibly early, he lay awake for a long time and so did she. He wanted to reach out to her but he didn't know how. And she was his *wife*.

Eventually her breathing slowed and he slipped from the bed.

It wasn't very late. Instead of heading straight for the nearest poker game, he approached one of the hopeful old men who lingered across the street from the hotel with their old Ford cars as big as boats. Some had the word 'taxi' crudely painted on the side; most didn't bother.

'Food?' said Danny and made a knife and fork gesture with his hands. The old man smiled but seemed confused. Danny wished that he spoke more Spanish. '*Tacos? Burritos*?' he said, hoping that he had pronounced it right. 'Good food, yes? Not hotel food, Mexican food.'

The old man nodded firmly and heaved open the back door of his car, whisking a spotless handkerchief from his pocket to brush away nonexistent crumbs. He gestured towards the broken window and was embarrassed that it didn't close. Danny jumped in, undaunted.

They drove away from the lights of the Hotel Zone, down a stretch of deserted coast road and into a small

grid of streets that were lined with plain single-storey buildings, identical, one after another. Then he saw signs of life emerging like spring. Children playing in the dark streets, a house that had been painted a brilliant jade green, then another in crimson, another in white, with a border of hand-painted pink flowers; another strung with paper chains as if it was Christmas. More children, so many children, women standing in doorways with babies on their hips, old men sitting on the concrete benches at the side of the road.

He heard the shouts of children and some distant music and his senses sparked. They stopped and the smell of roasting corn hit his nose and his mouth watered instantly. The house, and Harriet's reaction to it, seemed unimportant. What was important was eating that smell, putting that inside him to see if it filled up the emptiness within.

At the side of the road a man stood behind a rattling old cart. He was juggling two pans over a single gas burner. The house behind him seemed to overflow with people, one or more in every window, children running in and out of the front door, circling the taco stand and laughing.

Danny got out of the car and watched in wonder as his chef twisted a lump of dough down onto a sizzling pan to make a thin wheat tortilla the size of a child's hand and smearing it with dark grey beans which turned into paste at the merest touch of the back of his knife. Then he sizzled strips of ugly chicken thighs with onions and peppers in another pan before daubing it with a muddy sauce, wrapping the whole little tortilla parcel up and starting the process all over again. It took three minutes at the

most. Danny bit down on the sweet, moist chicken and his mouth skittered with excitement. The melting beans were the perfect counterpoint to the yielding meat and the crunch of the well-seasoned vegetables. In a couple of bites it was gone. He heard the scrape of metal behind him and saw an old woman wrestling with a chair for him and immediately he stood to help her but she would not let him. She was embarrassed that he would try.

She stood back and watched as he ate another, like a mother would watch her toddler, and gradually a small crowd started to gather, surrounding him in a respectful, curious circle, smiling and offering the occasional culinary suggestion. Would he like a squeeze of lime? Some roughly torn herbs? Radishes sliced so thin you could see through them? A block of white cheese that could be crumbled like chalk. He took these things with a clumsy '*Gracias*' and felt self-conscious. He resolved to learn proper Spanish if he ever came back to Mexico.

A table was produced, a pile of napkins for his greasy fingers, and he searched for the words or gestures to ask for hot sauce. 'Chilli?' he tried and the chef laughed, producing a small dried chilli and crumbling it into the pan. The next taco was spicy and he wafted his hand in front of his mouth to indicate his approval. '*Picante*,' said the chef and Danny repeated the word – 'Pea-can-tay' – to the obvious approval of the crowd. He enjoyed a good curry back home as much as the next Englishman; he could take more than a little heat. A small boy came running over with a bottle of hot sauce, no lid, a thick crust of dried goop around the neck. He tasted it and his tongue wilted, but seconds later he wanted some more.

His head was spinning and his taste buds danced. He saw his taxi driver sitting down outside the house opposite, talking animatedly with a woman who wore Nike Air on her feet and a baby on her hip. Two teenage girls giggled when he caught their eye. They were both beautiful. Everyone was beautiful. He remembered what his guidebook had said about there being no indigenous community here before the hotels came and, startled, he realized that all of these people were new here just as he was. No wonder the houses looked so uniform and clean – they were little more than a decade old; the very streets they stood on had been built on sand, and everyone here – the old men, the women, the children, the chef who was turning out these delicious morsels faster than he could eat them – were all here searching for something. Tears came into his eyes and the people watching him thought it was the chillies.

After he could eat no more, he pulled the pack of cards from his top pocket and saw the faces of the gathered men spark with interest.

When he got back to the hotel he slipped his key into the door and tried to make as little noise as possible as he pushed open the door.

Harriet was awake. She was packing a bag. She had been crying, he could tell from the way her eyes were swollen and her lips were dry and cracked.

'What is it?' he said. 'What's going on?'

She just looked at him and shook her head. A kitten-lick of fear scraped the back of his neck.

‘Danny,’ she said finally, and her voice was as tender as a recent wound. ‘I’m leaving.’

‘What do you mean?’ His stomach turned. ‘I don’t have to keep the house, Harriet. Don’t let one stupid idea ruin our honeymoon.’

She choked out a strangled half-laugh. ‘It’s not the house, Danny.’

‘The cards? I’m trying babe, I swear to you I’m trying.’

‘Did you win tonight?’

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ he protested. ‘I went out for food.’

‘Did you win tonight?’

He considered lying but she knew him too well. He nodded. ‘I always win,’ he said in a half-whisper. But she looked at him with disgust and he felt like a loser. ‘Give me one more chance,’ he said. ‘Please? Come on.’

‘It’s too late,’ she said. ‘It’s not the house. It’s not even the cards. That’s not it.’

‘Then what?’

‘I’m in love with someone else,’ she said. ‘I’ve been in love with someone else since last summer. I’m leaving you.’

His chest hurt and his vision started to narrow until looking into his wife’s face was like looking down the barrel of a rifle. The silence was unbearable.

And it felt as though he had been shot.