



PURA VIDA



SARA ALVÀ

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

PURA VIDA

By Sara Alva

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A young man lies on his stomach at the beach, sand all over his chest, neck and face. From the slight glare he's giving, it seems as if he's just fallen and is now looking up at the person responsible.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I was on the beach, running through the cold waves that licked at my feet. I thought I was alone as I began heading back. Of course, he would have to show up right then, right where I didn't expect him. I tripped over my own damn feet, ending up sprawled into the fine white sand. It work its way everywhere, sticking to the sweat coating my body. My chest heaved as I stared up at him.

So, I set a scene in the story. Where will you take it from here? What is the back story? Is the "he" showing up a friend, enemy, or love interest? Acquaintances or is he a stranger lusted after from afar? What is about to happen? Who is the main character in the story? Why is he running alone and why did the other character's appearance shock him so much?

Author's choice on genre, as long as there is a new romance involved and you don't have to use first person. I don't care if the characters are friends before or strangers before the romance begins (not insta-love unless you're doing paranormal please).

Sincerely,

Alicia

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: new adult, summer love, travel, vacation, family, turtle preservation

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Madison (again) for the fabulous cover art

And to the LHNB team for working tirelessly to make this event a success!

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CHAPTER ONE

Number five looked German... or at least European. No one else wore swim trunks that short or that tight. Bleach-blond hair, wide, chiseled jaw, shoulders and arms that saw plenty of heavy lifting to be so thick, and steel-gray eyes. He strode across the beach as if he owned it.

Simon scratched near his left temple and tilted his head so he could continue observing as number five crossed in front of them and then headed away.

“Right here is fine.” Alyssa stood by while the service staff dragged out a couple of lounge chairs. The men left with polite nods, and she quickly stripped off her sundress.

Simon tossed off his shirt, too. He still had that exam-time paleness going on, but a day in this sun would fix things quickly enough. He settled into the chair beside Alyssa and scanned the beach again. It was a bit of a stretch for his eyes, but that was probably number six out there, bobbing in the ocean. He was dark-haired and had that rugged, couple-days-old stubble defining his cheekbones. The man kept diving under the waves and jumping up again, then throwing back his head and letting the water fly off. The glistening droplets shot out in all directions.

Wading in to get a closer look would've been nice, but the guy's bikini-clad girlfriend beat Simon to it. She slung herself over his shoulders and blocked the view.

No matter. They were only an hour into their first official day of vacation, and Simon was already up to six worth-a-second-look guys. There'd have to be more.

He sent a silent wish toward the graceful white bird arching across the sky.
At least let me have that.

“Something for you, *señorita*?”

Simon turned to find another shirtless man had approached, though this time it was a local, peddling his wares to the vacationers. He’d set his sights on Alyssa.

“Not today, thanks.” She waved him past.

“For you, *señor*?” He angled his body toward Simon.

Sure, he could be number seven. Young. Probably twenty at the most. On the short side—but then a lot of Costa Ricans were—and muscled enough that the sweat-on-tan sheen made his abs hard to resist. Dark brown eyes blinked on in a hopeful face, waiting for Simon to pull the waterproof money pouch from his swim trunks and shell out for whatever touristy crap he had to offer.

“A hat, maybe? Good for the sun, no? I have bracelets, too. Maybe a nice souvenir for the lady?”

Simon huffed a short laugh. “The lady is my sister.”

“Another lady, then?”

This time it was Alyssa who snorted. She pulled down her sunglasses to watch the exchange.

“Uh, some other time,” Simon mumbled, aware of his sister’s judging eyes. He’d already let himself get too wrapped up in the sales pitch. Everyone knew you were supposed to avoid eye contact if you wanted to be left alone... and he’d gone and eye-contacted every bit of the guy’s torso.

He deliberately sent his gaze toward the cliffs that bordered the peaceful little cove. In the distance, the branches of the green trees that covered them bent and swayed, and the brutish call of the howler monkeys could be heard.

Whispering footsteps in sand told Simon the local had moved on, and Alyssa burst out laughing. “God, Simon. Why don’t you just take a picture?”

“What?”

“Pretend you’re texting someone or something and snap a photo. Then when we get back home, you can make a collage. Cover it with glitter and

everything. Write the title in bubble letters: ‘Hot Guys I Saw While I Was on Vacation’.”

He grabbed a handful of sand and flung it at her.

“Dumbass!” She fought a losing battle to wipe it off her skin, as the fine grains remained stuck to her suntan lotion.

Simon crossed his arms to glare, but got distracted by numbers eight and nine. They looked like brothers, and they were kicking a soccer ball around a few feet to his right. Tall and lean. Normal-looking swimsuits, so they were probably either American or Canadian. He strained his ears to see if he could catch an *eh*.

“Seriously, though. You want some sisterly advice?” Alyssa relaxed back in her chair again, angling her chin up to catch even more of the sun’s rays. “Put on your sunglasses. Trust me, it makes the ogling much easier.”

“Whatever.” Still, he yanked his out of their beach bag and shoved them on. She had a point.

Another local—a woman—walked by selling brightly colored cover-ups. This time both he and Alyssa kept their eyes averted, and she quickly passed them.

“Hope we’re not getting bugged the whole time,” Alyssa remarked.

Simon shrugged and began scratching at one of the mosquito bites on his arm. Damn pests. They really should’ve eliminated them from fancy resorts like this. “Dad coming out?”

“Speak of the devil.” She jerked her head to the side.

Their father approached, in khaki shorts and his typical white vacation shirt, drink in hand. “There are the two beach bums. Already enjoying the sun?”

Even with the sunglasses on, Simon made sure to keep his eyes away from the possibly-Canadian soccer players. No need to start the vacation on a tense note.

“You gonna lay out, Dad? You could use some color,” Alyssa said.

“No, I’ll meet up with you at the pool later. I have a meeting with the contractor in a few.”

“Mom?” Simon asked.

“Spa.”

Perfect. Simon gave his father a nod and returned to his beach-scanning as they were left alone again. This style of to-each-their-own family vacation suited him just fine. Now, if only he could get rid of Alyssa, he could...

Do what? Find himself a little action?

Right. Because he was such an expert at that. Up to this point, his idea of vacation action involved creepily staring at strangers and using his imagination. And imagination probably wasn’t going to be enough to come back to Leo with. Not if he valued his pride.

“If you keep picking at that, it’s gonna leave a scar,” Alyssa said.

“So what.” He scratched harder, though he did try to keep his fingers from actually ripping the swollen flesh off his arm. “I’d rather have a scar than deal with this insane itching.”

“So you’ll ruin your good looks and end up a lonely leper.”

The clouds parted, allowing the full heat of the sun to pour down on the canvas chairs that dotted the beach. But just as the temperature rose, a breeze passed by to even things out again. The waves crashed a little louder in response.

“Besides...” Alyssa closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Simon couldn’t help doing the same. “It’s a small price to pay for paradise.”

Sunglasses didn’t help at night. But hopefully the haze of odd lighting and general drunkenness of the crowd at the resort’s club did something to mask Simon’s staring. Blues and purples swept across the dance floor, illuminating all the bouncing bodies and making them look like the ocean waves. A few feet away, Alyssa swayed with typical side-to-side footsteps in the arms of some tall blond she’d met at the pool.

It was always just that easy for her. Simon yanked the little paper umbrella out of his drink and snapped the wooden handle, then used the jagged edge to scratch at the infernally itching bite on his arm.

Alyssa broke away and twirled up toward the bar, her still-wet hair flinging beads of water at his face. “Any luck yet, little brother?”

He rolled his eyes and took another swallow of his drink—something green and way too sweet and not nearly strong enough. “Sure. Because all gay guys wear a secret society ring that lights up when another one is near. I’ll just look for the glowing pink beacon.”

She laughed and tried to ruffle his hair, but he quickly ducked out of reach. “Then how ’bout getting off your ass and joining the party?”

“No thanks.” He dug into his pockets to offer a tip to the bartender, even though the drinks were included at the resort. He couldn’t really think of a worse job than catering to drunken vacationers every evening. “I’m gonna call it a night.”

“Seriously?” Alyssa tugged his arm. “Are you nineteen or ninety?”

He pulled free. “I didn’t say I was going to sleep. I might go for a walk or something. Maybe I’ll find one of those cool-looking frogs this country is always pimping on all their T-shirts.”

“Oh, Simon, Simon.” Alyssa shook her head. “What’re we gonna do with you?”

He took off his sandals and walked over to the beach. The moon wasn’t out that night, but the stars shone down on the cresting waves. No beach he’d been to back in the States had ever been this dark. The resort was far enough inland that very little of its light made its way to the ocean, and the embracing arms of the mighty bluffs kept any other man-made constructions completely out of sight.

The sand was emptied of all the human activity it saw during the day. Even the chairs had been dragged back onto the resort grounds, so that nothing marred the white dunes. It wasn’t a *beach resort* anymore. It was just a place on earth where land met water.

The Costa Ricans had a saying for it. *Pura vida*—pure life. Sounded so nice and simple. Maybe if he meditated out here in the darkness, he'd cool off a bit. And not just in the physical sense. A few weeks without a warm body to press up against wasn't that terrible. He was perfectly fine with Leo's *let's-just-see-how-we-feel-next-year* stance. Or in other words, *let's screw whoever we want over the summer*. It made sense, anyway. Even if he'd gotten out of this family vacation, they'd still have been separated over the break.

And now he was nearly half the earth away.

A tiny crab scuttled by his feet. Or a shadow, or a wisp of blowing sand. It was hard to tell in the darkness. The light was brightest by the water, where the waves, tamed by the bottleneck of the cove, provided a reflective surface. Drawn to the calming crash, he shuffled forward until he collided with a large rock and landed on his knees in the sand.

Except, this rock was moving.

He backed up a few inches as his shaking hand flew to his phone. No cell service here, but the flashlight function worked well enough. He turned it on and swept the light in front of him.

“Holy shit.” His words came out in a whisper, carried away by the wind.

The rock was a turtle. A giant, dark brown—or black, perhaps—sea turtle, struggling to pull its massive body through the sand.

Simon held himself completely still, muscles tensed somewhere between fear and excitement. Not that turtles were particularly fearsome creatures—he'd just never been so close to something so wild. The turtle's flippers pushed through the sand and wet clumps flew at his body, but he didn't move until it had managed to get about a foot away.

Maybe he wouldn't be spending the evening alone, after all.

He quickly switched over to the camera and started to snap photos. Let Alyssa have her clubs and her hot blond men. And Leo his... whoevers. How many people could say they sat alone on the beach and watched a sea turtle continue the circle of life?

The flash of the camera lit up the space around him, allowing him to make out more details of his friend's shell. A few rough gouges ran through it, and the back right edge was cracked and jagged. This turtle had seen some life.

More than he had, at any rate.

“Stop!”

A shout rang out in the silent night. Simon turned his phone back into a flashlight and waved it around in the direction of rapidly approaching footsteps.

“The light! Stop the light!”

For some reason, his brain did not cooperate, so even though it was clear what the voice was telling him to do, Simon sat there frozen with the phone still in his hands. He could make out the white shorts coming toward him, but the rest of the man's skin was bare, and dark.

Before the man could reach him, the turtle made a sudden move and a glob of sand landed in Simon's mouth. The creature was turning around, heading back to the ocean.

“¡Idiota!”

The owner of the angry voice was near now, hissing instead of shouting, but Simon was too busy watching the turtle leave to notice he was close enough to snatch his phone. The light winked off.

“It scares them away. *Mierda*. Now she is leaving.”

The turtle became a rock-like lump again in the distance. Eventually a strong enough wave came and picked her up, and she disappeared into the ocean.

“I... I didn't know. I wasn't trying to bother her. I only wanted some pictures to show—”

Simon's cellphone was slammed back into his hands, and he finally looked up to meet the person—obviously a local—whose country's wildlife he'd just unknowingly tortured. The shame burned from the pit of his stomach and up into his chest.

And worse, Simon recognized him. He'd gotten a good enough look earlier in the day. Except now the boy wasn't smiling, and he didn't look hopeful. His eyes smoldered with a quiet fierceness, like they'd been the things to light the fire in Simon's insides, and his teeth were clenched so tightly that his temples bulged forward beneath dark, wind-tossed hair.

Number seven. The shirtless local.

"I'm really sorry."

He didn't look over. The ocean waves must've been more interesting. "If you see a turtle again, do not shine lights."

Then he walked off, leaving Simon to stare after his faint shadow, cast by the stars.

CHAPTER TWO

“Are you having a good time, honey?”

“Hm?” Simon’s sunglasses were firmly planted this time, so he didn’t think his mother could see his brooding eyes. “Sure.”

A waiter came by and dropped off two margaritas. Simon dug his into the sand so it wouldn’t topple over. The bar-to-beach service had been a thrill his first day out, but now he found himself keeping track of just how long it took a drink to arrive. Twenty minutes this time, the ice all but completely melted, when he could’ve walked back over to the resort and gotten his own in five.

“I’m a little surprised you came out with us this year.” His mother signaled for another member of the staff to drag the large umbrella a little closer to her chair, now that the sun was shifting in the sky. Lathered with sunscreen and under a large floppy hat as she was, Simon wondered why she even bothered coming out at all.

But the roll of his eyes was cut short by the sad look in hers. That *my-boy’s-growing-up-and-I-can’t-stop-it* thing that always made him feel just a little sorry for her.

“Why wouldn’t I?” He smiled and squeezed her hand. “This place is pretty sweet.”

She patted his fingers before slipping away to grip her book again. “I just meant, if you’d had some reason to stay home, we would have understood. What about that thing with that boy?”

“He went home to Oregon for the summer.” Simon dragged his arm back through the sand and shifted to reclaim the ocean view.

“Simon, you know if it were anything... important, your father and I would like to meet him.”

Important? Screwing when they were together and *screw you* when they weren’t? Not that Simon had ever been promised anything more. But it obviously couldn’t be too important, unless they decided to pick up where they left off next year. Until the next summer, of course.

He tried to picture a nice family dinner with Alyssa, some newly-hooked tall blond, his beside-herself-with-excitement mother, his father wearing an *I'll-force-myself-to-bear-it* face, and Leo. Sarcastic, sexy, and just a little bit cruel Leo.

Shit. He really did need to screw someone else to get Leo off his mind.

“Hats! Bracelets! T-shirts!”

Simon’s gaze flew up to the sound, and he recognized the sudden forceful thump of his heart. Hope that he’d lay eyes on the boy from the night before. Even if it was only to see that burning anger, because God, on him it was *hot*.

No luck, though. It was a different man—older, with weathered skin and tobacco-stained teeth.

Simon worked his fingers into the sand and wondered how many turtles had dragged their awkward bodies through it when night came and the wild claimed this stretch of land once again.

He’d probably have better luck meeting another turtle here than another man.

He left his mother and Alyssa at a karaoke night to comb the beaches again, either out of hope or guilt. Maybe guilt should’ve made him leave nature alone, but now he felt like he had to show someone... himself, maybe, that he wasn’t just a dumb American tourist, messing with the ecosystem of another country.

This time, he’d only watch. From a respectful distance.

He walked left, toward the closer of the two bluffs that bordered the cove. There wasn’t much of a breeze, and after about ten minutes he waded into the ocean, letting the touch of water provide some relief from the humid night air. He took off his shirt, too, and used it to sop up the beads of sweat on his neck before tying it to the belt of his shorts.

Laughter caught his attention. He strained his eyes to peer ahead, but didn’t dare turn on his phone. Not even when he caught more shouting—in

Spanish—and a stream of bright light emerged from just on the other side of the bluff.

He picked up his speed. What if it were more tourists, bothering marine life? He'd seen some drunken Argentinians at the beach earlier. As he got closer, he was able to make out at least five different bodies. They were crouching over something, and one man had a large gray sack thrown over his shoulder.

That didn't look good.

Sand gave way to rocks, and Simon's feet slipped against them as the waves lapped into the crevices. "Hey! You guys, the lights are bad for—"

Someone grabbed his shoulder and yanked him toward the bluff. He fell back against the rocks, colliding with something sharp on his left side.

"What the—" A strong hand landed on his mouth, and he found himself staring into almost-familiar eyes.

"Quiet," the boy commanded.

Not that Simon had much of a choice, with fingers jamming his lips into his teeth. He shook his head to free himself. "But those men—"

"Are poachers."

"So what're you standing around here for?" He started edging along the bluff. "Yesterday you looked almost mad enough to punch me in the face for scaring that turtle, and now you're just gonna let them get away with... what are they doing?"

The boy gritted his teeth and leaned against the rocks beside Simon. "They take the eggs. And probably the mother, too. For the shell."

"Then let's stop them." Simon started forward again.

In another flash of movement, the boy's dark arms came to rest on either side of Simon, preventing him from leaving. "You care?" His tanned chest, bare yet again, pressed in close.

Simon's heart reacted immediately, the space between beats getting shorter and shorter, like some kind of alarm. *A collision is impending.* "Yes."

With a huff the local moved away, though he switched to Simon's other side so that he was still blocking him. "There are six of them and one of you."

"There's two of us," Simon corrected.

"Two of us, and six of them with machetes, maybe. I already called the police." He pulled out a walkie-talkie from his pocket.

"And they'll come?"

Ocean-smoothed pebbles plunked into the surf as the boy flipped them over with bare toes. "No." Before the next wave could crash, a hideous crack erupted in the night air, and his body tightened in on itself with a shudder. "It's over."

Simon folded his arms to give his skin some warmth. When had the night become so cold? As he stifled the chill, his hand grazed the sore spot where he'd hit the rocks earlier. The contact stung, and he pulled his fingers away to peer at the sticky substance on them—his blood.

"You're hurt?" the boy asked, bending over to see in the poor light. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean—" He turned abruptly. "Come, we can clean it up here."

"It's all right. I can just go back to the resort..."

But his companion was already walking away by then, so Simon shut his mouth and hurried after him. They traveled silently for several paces before the blanket of awkwardness on the still night forced Simon into small-talk. "I'm Simon, by the way."

"Juan."

Good. Now he could stop referring to him as *boy* or *shirtless local* in his thoughts. It seemed a little disrespectful.

He hadn't seen any houses around this isolated beach, and he was sort of wondering if they were about to venture into the rainforest and wind up at a little shack. So he felt like even more of a disrespectful ass when they arrived at a white concrete building just over a large sand dune. A sign out front read "Sea Turtle and Marine Animal Conservation" and what was probably the same thing in Spanish.

“This isn’t your house,” Simon pointed out. Genius, really. Pure genius.

Juan raised a brow. “This is where I work.”

“I thought you, uh, sold stuff for a living.”

“That I do for money. This I do for—” he squinted like he was searching for the word. “For heart.”

Simon grinned, and some further stupidity took hold of his tongue. “Oh yeah? Like the short Planeteer?”

Juan gave him a scowl that clearly said he had no idea what Simon was talking about, but still figured he was being insulted.

“It’s not a bad thing,” Simon mumbled as Juan shoved his keys into the lock and led them inside.

The space was small, with a cot lying to the right and a desk with a computer on the left. Posters of anatomically labeled sea turtles lined the walls, along with a few underwater photos.

Juan walked him to the bathroom and yanked out a first aid kit from under the sink. He watched as Simon rinsed out the gash.

“The water’s clean here, right?” Simon scooped another handful into his palm and gingerly let it fall against his side.

Juan’s eyes narrowed—still accompanying that scowl—and Simon bit his tongue. He wasn’t trying to be offensive, but his American first-aid-trained mind wouldn’t let him get away without double-checking.

“All of Costa Rica’s water is safe for tourists. You have my promise.”

He’d heard that already, but it didn’t hurt to ask again, now that his innards were exposed to whatever was trickling out of the building’s faucet. “So much for not scarring myself while on vacation.”

Now Juan grinned at him—for the first time. The left side of his lip curled up further than the right, and he tilted his head, almost as if to compensate, but somehow it seemed fitting for his dark oval face. “Scars are the body’s way of telling stories.”

Simon stuck on a large Band-Aid to cover up his wound. “Is that Costa Rican poetry?”

Juan’s grin disappeared, and a frown replaced it.

Shit. It really wasn’t Simon’s intention to come off as an ass every other moment.

“Uh, so what is this place? You study sea turtles or something?”

“We... save them. Preserve,” Juan added as an afterthought, like he’d just remembered the correct term. “They are endangered.”

“Yeah, I know. Pretty sad.”

Juan shuffled his feet against the tiled floor. Some dried sand dropped off and he flicked at it with his big toe. “You... want to see?”

“See?”

Juan turned and started walking toward the back of the building, so Simon followed. He stepped out a rear door and found himself back on the beach, but in an enclosed area. The ground was dotted with fences that surrounded piles of sand. And one of the piles was moving.

“It’s a good time,” Juan said, waving Simon forward. His eyes sparkled to life with a brighter look than seemed possible for such dark irises. “The babies hatch.”

Simon peered over his shoulder and noticed a little track of dried saltwater on Juan’s back. It must’ve dripped down from his hair, and maybe gotten mixed in with some sand and sweat on its way down. Luckily, the first signs of life within the fence below captured his attention before he could follow the trail all the way to its end.

A tiny green flipper burst out of the sand, and the white of a broken egg could be seen. An even smaller face poked out a second later, before more flippers, faces, and shells joined the fray.

“Oh my God,” Simon whispered, right beside Juan’s neck, which caused a waft of the salt-and-sweat smell of his skin to be blown into the air. He stepped back so he could think clearly instead of just inhaling the scent. “They’re so adorable.”

Juan chuckled. “Yes. Beautiful.” He walked into the building again and emerged a second later with a plastic bin and some pairs of latex gloves. “Would you like to help?”

“Help? Help do what?”

“We release them now,” Juan said, gesturing to the baby turtles. “To the ocean.”

“Oh. Sure.” Maybe Simon would be getting his chance to make things up to Mother Nature after all.

They scooped up the wriggling things one at a time and placed them in the plastic bin. Neither of them spoke, and Simon managed to keep his eyes off Juan for once, as the turtles squirmed under his gloved fingertips. A couple of times he glanced at Juan’s hands, though, to watch the way he lovingly cupped each hatchling before gently putting them into their temporary home. It was pretty sweet, actually.

Once all of the turtles had been gathered, the two of them took off toward the ocean.

“Do you do this every night?” Simon asked. Juan still didn’t seem eager to make conversation, but that could’ve just been the language barrier. Too bad Simon barely spoke a word of Spanish.

“Every night there are babies. It’s safer to release them at night. Not so many predators. Or people.”

“Sure, makes sense.” They reached the water’s edge, and Juan waded in up to his ankles. Then he switched on a light.

He must have seen Simon’s mouth open to object, and he flashed that crooked grin again. “This time, it’s okay. The babies go toward the light on the water. Like it was the moon.”

“Oh, gotcha.”

“Now you stand back and put them in the sand. They will find their way.”

Simon followed Juan’s directions, taking a turtle and placing it down by his feet. Juan waved the flashlight in front of him a few times, and the

hatchling started wriggling toward the water. An explosion of frothy ocean foam carried it out to sea.

“They’re so small.” Simon began putting the rest of them down in the sand. “Do they really stand a chance?” He’d seen those National Geographic programs when he was a kid. Tiny things in the ocean usually had a hard and short life ahead of them.

Juan shrugged. “Not all of them. But more now that we preserve them.”

A few hatchlings toppled over each other in their race to the water, and Simon bent down to set them straight again. “This has to be one of the top ten most awesome jobs. I mean, even if you only do it for *heart*, and not for pay.”

The last turtle disappeared in a wave, and Juan switched off his light. In the sudden darkness, Simon could only make out his lopsided smile.

CHAPTER THREE

“Again?” Alyssa stared at him like he’d broken out in pink polka dots. He could’ve, of course, if those damn mosquitoes had started biting any higher up on his body.

“Look, the beach is really... cool at night.” It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her just what *cool* meant, because even Alyssa would’ve squealed at the chance to play with baby sea turtles. But for some reason, he didn’t. “I’m just going for an evening run. You’re welcome to join me.”

And he’d said *that* because he knew damn well she never would.

“Right.” Alyssa spritzed on some bug repellent. “See ya.”

He doused himself thoroughly in the stuff, too, because the five bites on his leg from the previous night were enough to make him want to tear off a layer of skin. The fumes he inhaled from the spray were pretty toxic smelling, and the next few moments were spent coughing them out.

By then Alyssa had departed for one of her nightlife jaunts, so he wandered into the main room of the suite to find his parents curled up on the love seat, watching some foreign film.

“Oh, Simon, come and join us.” His mother waved him over.

“I’m kinda going out.”

His father’s eyes flicked up for a moment and then back down.

“To the beach,” Simon added, just so the ridge between his father’s brows would smooth out again. “Can I borrow your Taser?”

Now it was his mother’s turn to crease her forehead, though only for a moment. She didn’t like to make *worry expressions* for too long because they gave her wrinkles. “What for?”

“I dunno. I was just gonna go out for a walk. I can get to the other beach if I cross some rocks at the end of the cove, but I don’t really know who lives over there, and well, you know.”

“Well... all right. It’s in my purse.”

His dad made an uneasy *real-men-fight-with-fists* face, but didn't comment.

Simon secured his mother's self-protection weapon, then fixed his hair—stupidly, because the wind out there this evening would mess it up again—and left through the back entrance of his room.

The thought occurred to him that he might come across as a stalker, returning to find Juan for yet another night in a row. But he figured it'd be easy enough to tell him he was only interested in the turtles. He was thinking of majoring in bio, after all.

And it *was* the turtles he was interested in. Mostly.

He went to the little turtle preservation building first, but all the lights were out, and the door was locked. From the way the beach curved, it was difficult to do a full scan, so he backed up a ways and stood on a hill to look around. The only thing he could really make out was a faint flash of red, blinking on and off again, all the way at the other side of the cove.

With nothing better to do, he walked toward the light.

He saw Juan first this time, because of that red flashlight. As Simon got closer he could make out his dark form sitting cross-legged in the sand and examining something at regular intervals.

Juan shined the light at his face when he was a few feet away. "Oh. Simon."

He liked the way Juan said his name. There was an extra emphasis on the *o* that made it sound a little more exotic, and a little less like he was named after a children's game.

"Hey. I was out for a walk and I saw the red light. Is it a special thing for the turtles or something?"

Juan's grin made him feel like he'd passed some kind of test. "Yes. It doesn't bother them. If you want to watch them, this is what you should use."

The wind died down for a moment, letting soft scraping sounds echo louder in the night. Knowing already what it would be, Simon remained exactly where he was and just craned his neck around Juan to catch a glimpse

of another giant sea turtle, already over a foot deep into digging a nest in the soft sand.

“You’re watching over her?”

Juan nodded. “And when she’s done, I take the eggs to keep them safe.”

Simon crossed his legs and sank down into the sand beside him. “Cool. How long does it take, usually?”

“Hours.” Juan flicked the red flashlight on again so he could see black-brown flippers thrusting through sand.

“Shit, really?”

“If she likes this nest. If she doesn’t, she may go to another and take more hours.”

“Wow. And you just sit out here the whole time?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t bother me to spend my summer on the beach.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Simon agreed, and then felt kind of shitty because his summer at the beach and Juan’s summer at the beach were two completely different worlds. He got to stay in a fancy hotel suite at an all-inclusive resort with his own room, his own TV, and their own private hot tub on the patio. Juan walked the beaches every night and lived... where?

“Hey, do you stay at that place? The turtle center?”

“I stay there now. A married couple runs it, but they are on vacation. During the year I live back in town with my grandmother.”

“Oh.” It’d never occurred to him that people who lived by a beach would take summer vacations. Where did they go? To a ski resort?

He almost opened his mouth to ask, but talk of resorts seemed out of place here, with only sand and sky and sea anywhere within eyesight. Better to keep the discussion to territory he knew Juan was comfortable with. “See any poachers out here today?”

“They are always here. Not so much this beach, because of the tourists.”

“Isn’t it illegal? I mean, aren’t you guys all about eco-tourism and stuff?”

“Yes.” An ant crawled across Juan’s knee, and he watched it go about its way. “Some people simply continue with what they know. But less now than what it was.”

Continue with what they know. Like Simon had done, even after Leo had proposed their little hiatus. Why give up on good sex?

He flicked an ant off his own leg, accidentally brushing against one of the mosquito bites and biting the inside of his cheek as the pain flared and then subsided. “So what do they do with the eggs?”

“Sell them.”

He grimaced. “To make omelets?”

Juan laughed, the sound both deep and still partially a giggle. “It’s considered a... delicacy. Especially to increase...” He squinted. “Sex?”

“You mean like, an aphrodisiac? Or to increase libido or something?”

“Yes. That.”

“Idiots.” Simon swiped his hand over a patch of sand as if to clear away the image of dirty old men swallowing turtle fetuses. “Are turtles even known for their sexual prowess? Why don’t they eat bunnies or something?”

Juan laughed again, locking onto Simon’s gaze. “You would be surprised. They actually have big, powerful penises, when the time calls for it.”

A rush of internal heat most likely colored Simon’s skin, and he ducked his head down to avoid Juan’s still-laughing eyes. “You, uh, wanna do something about it? The poachers, I mean.” He jerked to pull the Taser out of his pocket. He wanted to show Juan what it did, but not at the risk of disturbing the nesting turtle.

Juan’s expression changed. Still a smile, but a patronizing one. “Not a good idea, Simon.”

“Hey, I’m not saying we go after a gang. Maybe just pick off one or two? Just to rescue the eggs? I’ve seen this thing in action... it will incapacitate someone for sure.”

Juan sighed, then stretched toward him. Simon licked his lips and swallowed sand, which didn't help provide any moisture for his throat.

"Here." Juan pointed to a spot right above his hip. Simon followed his finger to a slightly puckered area of skin, a few shades darker than the rest of his body. "Before I worked at the turtle center, I tried to stop someone. I was thirteen only. I don't think he meant to hurt me. Just... teach me a lesson."

"And give your body a story to tell," Simon added. Juan narrowed his eyes, but from the twitch of his lips, it was only mock-irritation.

"The story is, the best way to make a change is with education and preservation. Not fists."

Simon's face burned again, warmer than the air around him. It had been a pretty stupid idea. He wasn't sure how he'd even gotten it in his head. Maybe he'd imagined he and Juan would startle some would-be criminal, save the day for a sea turtle in need, and then celebrate with a fueled-by-adrenaline...

"But it was a... nice thought." Juan leaned back in the sand and rested his head on his arms.

Imagination, 1, Reality, 0.

For a long time, Simon couldn't think of anything else to say. Juan hadn't exactly invited him to stay and stand watch, but he hadn't said goodbye, either.

The red light flicked on again, and Simon took advantage of the moment to study Juan's body. In all the times they'd run into each other, he'd yet to see him in a shirt or shoes. Not that either of those things were necessary out here—and not that Simon would have wanted him to put on a shirt, anyway.

Apparently, he had a thing for small, compact guys. For guys whose ab muscles he could make out rippling just a tiny bit every time they breathed. Or for dark skin, or for lopsided grins.

Lopsided grins that were aimed straight at him, catching him in the act of stupidly staring.

He quickly turned so he was facing the turtle instead, but he could still feel Juan's eyes on him. Shit. Maybe sunglasses at night wasn't such a bad idea.

He chewed on his lip, his tongue taking in tiny grains of sand, and started brainstorming clever turtle-related questions to divert Juan's attention from his lapse in judgment. Should he ask how many eggs were laid in a... what's-it-called... clutch? Or maybe, what species this turtle was? How many came ashore in the summer...

"Simon?"

"Hm?" He didn't look over.

"You like... men?"

Oh, fuck. His stomach muscles clenched and a mouthful of sandy saliva stopped midway down his throat. According to the Internet, Costa Ricans were supposed to be fairly tolerant... in a don't-ask, don't-tell, don't-flaunt-it kind of way. But now that Juan *had* asked, was he supposed to say yes? No? Sorry?

Of course, he could just say nothing, since that made things obvious enough.

By the sounds of shifting sand, Juan was moving behind him. "We could... pass the time," Juan said.

Waves crashed with new intensity, the roar echoing in Simon's head. It wasn't until several seconds had passed that he realized it was really the crash of his own blood within his ears. Had he missed cues? Or maybe he didn't even need to look for them at all. Maybe he just needed to go around making himself obvious enough that someone else could find *him*. Hell, it could be his go-to strategy for the rest of the summer... as long as his dad wasn't around.

He turned to face Juan. The crooked grin was much more tentative this time, but even with the language issue between them, he knew damn well what it meant.

He drew toward Juan slowly. "That sounds... good."

They kept their hands firmly planted in the sand, so it was only Juan's lips he touched at first. Rough, and with a few cracks running through them, but still full and warm. Salty breath slipped in with the kiss, drawing out the tip of Simon's tongue as it searched for the accompanying taste. He met only a wall of teeth, until he stretched his arm up to grip the back of Juan's head and

deepen the connection. The wall finally parted, and just as Simon reached the start of a hot mouth... Juan pulled away with a grimace.

He spit in the sand and Simon had never felt as sick as he did then. Like his stomach was going to turn backward and empty all the shrimp and plantains and tiny balls of melon from the buffet along with anything else he'd ever eaten on the sand below. And Juan's laughter only made it worse, made him feel like running into the ocean and vanishing with a wave.

"You taste like poison," Juan said, still giggling.

Oh. "Shit! It's the bug spray. I kept getting bug bites, so I put on too much... um, I can run back to my room and wash it off, it'll only take a few—"

Juan grabbed his arm. There was sand on his fingers, and it scraped against Simon's skin as he started to pull him up. "We have water right here."

"Uh... you mean the ocean?" Juan's hand slipped away as Simon got to his feet. "But couldn't there be... sharks in there at night?"

"Yes," Juan replied.

Simon stopped walking, the tips of his toes touching the water line on the beach.

"There are sharks in the day, too," Juan continued, his lopsided grin growing into a full, teasing smile.

"How comforting." An enthusiastic wave crashed into Simon's ankles, and he retreated a few inches.

"Simon." Juan laughed his name, walking backward into the water and continuing to tease with the playful glint in his eyes. "You are a scaredy-cat?"

"Scaredy-cat?" He snorted. "Who taught you English? No one says that."

"Coward, then?"

"I'll show you coward." He lunged forward and pushed Juan into the surf. Juan emerged spluttering something in Spanish a few seconds later, and even though Simon was expecting the counter-attack, he let Juan drag him into the

waves anyway. He stayed under for a while, scrubbing his skin to rid it of that *poison* taste.

When he came up for air, a shot of burning salt water slammed into his mouth. He choked on it and rubbed frantically at his eyes so he'd at least stand a better chance of avoiding the next attack.

But it wasn't a wave that hit him next. It was Juan's lips. This time, he was sure all Juan tasted was salt. He caught a hint of sweet mango on Juan's tongue, and he clung to it, drawing out the last moments of flavor before the sea completely overwhelmed his senses.

The waves continued to rock them, and they started to drift apart. Simon wrapped his arms around Juan to draw him close again. He wasn't sure if that was too much *touching* for a hook-up, but there didn't seem to be another option. And it wasn't like he didn't want to lay his hands on Juan's skin, which still radiated heat as though it was holding onto some of the sun it had soaked up earlier.

Another big wave came for them, and as Simon was taller, he jumped and carried Juan with him to avoid being hit in the face. The undertow pulled them into deeper waters, where Juan couldn't stand. His legs tangled around Simon's, searching for a grip. Eventually he wrapped them around Simon's hips, allowing the bulge at his crotch to press into Simon's stomach.

"This how you pass the time with all the American tourists?" Simon asked.

Juan leaned in to nibble on his lip. "Some."

It may only have been more teasing, but it served the purpose to remind Simon he was supposed to be lusting here, not talking.

He dove into Juan's mouth, stopping to sputter whenever the ocean also forced its way in. After a few minutes, the kissing wasn't enough, and the rocking of the waves was making him crave more control over their movements.

"Should we go—"

A necessary leap above a cresting wave and the clink of Juan's teeth against his shut him up. Go where, at this point, really? The beach? Way too

fucking sandy. And any other place would require time and awkward shuffling. The moment was now.

Juan let out a small gasp and then shoved his hips forward, creating pressure between their bodies. He was a little too high up on Simon's torso for it to be the *right* kind of pressure, though.

Something Juan easily remedied by unwrapping one arm and one leg from Simon's body so he could reach down, his nimble fingers slipping under the band of Simon's shorts and gripping him firmly. His skin still burned so much hotter than the water that his touch made Simon throw back his head and nearly fall away. Simon's eyes rolled upward, toward the sky. Toward a thousand stars, much brighter than they ever shone at home. Pinpricks of light mimicking the goose bumps rising out of his skin as the pleasure washed through him.

Juan kept hold of him with his other tightly wound leg, and a clench of his muscles brought Simon back to earth—or ocean—long enough to remember his part in this. They untangled briefly for his frantic hands to lower Juan's shorts, and then reconnected so he could latch onto Juan's erection as well. As the waves rocked them, they both pumped in sync.

Flashes of hot breath, the slap of the water against their skin, and the occasional bite of Juan's teeth on his lower lip drove Simon toward release. The friction wasn't as much as he would have liked, but the foreignness of what he was doing—of who he was doing it with, of where they were, of how the whole world seemed empty of everyone except them—gave him all the added fire needed. He thrust his tongue into Juan's mouth the way he wished he could thrust something else and spilled out into the ocean, where the traces would never be seen again.

Juan took a few seconds longer, bouncing up against him, before his hips jerked forward and his muscles hardened, and the throbbing in Simon's hand pulsed to a stop.

Simon unwrapped his fingers and stepped back, leaving Juan adrift for a moment. Juan kicked his legs into a lazy, spent treading motion. Even his grin looked more lopsided than normal.

Still adorable, though.

The move to pull him in for another kiss was cut short as something slipped through the water beside them, and instead Simon wound up practically jumping into Juan's arms.

"It's the turtle," Juan whispered, right next to his ear. It tickled and Simon nuzzled into Juan's shoulder to get rid of the feeling.

"Is she gone?" He clung to Juan a little too tightly—he couldn't remember if sea turtles bit people, but didn't want to chance it.

"Yes. She moves much faster in the water."

Simon finally eased up on his hold, reluctantly, and Juan pulled away. He sloshed out of the ocean and left Simon standing there, not quite sure if his legs were ready to function on dry land. "Time for work."

They put on gloves to gather the eggs and then walked back to the Preservation building together. Juan stood at the door, though, and blocked Simon's way in.

"Thank you, Simon," he said, glancing at him from beneath his dark lashes. He stretched up to kiss him quickly.

Clearly, the evening had come to a close. That chaste a kiss was meant to be *The End*. The point where Simon walked away and reveled in the glory that was a one-night-stand with an exotic foreigner.

His tongue shot out over his lips and he tasted salt. Probably just the salt dried on his own skin now, but it still reminded him of Juan's mouth. "Can I see you tomorrow?"

Juan froze with his keys in the lock. "Tomorrow?"

"Yeah." Simon dug a foot into the sand. "I just thought it might be... fun... to, uh, pass the time."

And maybe jerking each other off in the ocean, as exotic as it sounded, wasn't quite enough. He'd found a gay guy in the middle of the wilderness in another country. He had to take full advantage, didn't he?

Juan blinked several times, his brow crinkling. It wasn't exactly a scowl, but it wasn't the crooked grin, either. "Tomorrow I'll be here," he said quietly. He pushed his way inside and gave Simon one last glance before shutting the door behind him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tomorrow I'll be here was not an invitation. Then again, it wasn't a ban, either. So Simon drank a margarita with Alyssa at the bar, played a few rounds of poker with his dad and his business partner, and even watched a Simpsons episode in Spanish with his mother. But at midnight, when everyone started to turn in and bedroom doors began closing, he knew he'd be going out to the beach again.

And even if he wasn't *expecting* anything, he tucked a condom and a small bottle of lube into his pocket. Couldn't hurt to be prepared.

This time, he walked around for almost an hour and found nothing. No turtles and no Juan. He eventually reached the edge of the beach where they'd been the second time they'd met, and he headed up to the Preserve. The blinds were drawn, but a faint light could still be seen inside.

He knocked quietly at first, and got no response. Deciding that meant no one was there, he had no reason to feel embarrassed about how much louder he pounded a minute later.

The door swung open and he stumbled back a few inches. Juan looked up at him, eyes half-lidded and unfocused with the heaviness of sleep still on them. "Simon?"

"Oh, shit. You were sleeping? I thought since you worked nights..."

Juan rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"Well, shit, sorry I bothered you."

He started to turn away, but sand-coated fingers stopped him. Juan's touch always felt gritty, since that very first time he'd had his hand over Simon's mouth. Even in the water he'd still had a layer of sand stuck to him, like he was part-sand himself.

"You can come in, if you want."

"Oh, uh, okay."

He stepped inside and looked over at the cot, where the blankets were clearly jumbled from a hasty departure.

“Uh, so, no turtle action today?”

Juan shook his head. “I walked the beach for a while, but nothing. There are less turtles coming here every year. I will go back out in a while.”

“Oh. Guess you don’t get a lot of rest, usually.” And here he’d gone and interrupted Juan’s brief nap because he was a horny American teenager.

But the momentary shame wasn’t quite enough to distract him from the look of sleepy-innocence on Juan’s face. Because Juan wasn’t as innocent as he appeared, and that just made Simon’s blood pump even faster.

Juan sat on the edge of the cot and patted the spot beside him, so Simon took it. Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Simon considered revving up the small talk—even remembered some of the questions he’d come up with yesterday about marine life—but he stopped himself. *Talk* wasn’t what this was supposed to be about. Besides, he’d let Juan make the first move yesterday. Now it was his turn.

He placed his hand on Juan’s face. There wasn’t so much stubble there, but the sand served as almost the same texture. Leo had always been clean-shaven, and the different sensation made Simon smile.

Maybe Leo was right. Maybe they really had needed to get out there and see what else the world had to offer.

When Juan stared up into his eyes, Simon took that as acceptance and moved in for the kiss.

Juan lay back on the bed and Simon moved to hover above him, still attached to his lips. Inches from Juan’s torso, it finally registered that for the first time since they’d met, Juan had on a T-shirt. It was one of the kinds they sold at all the souvenir shops, with a toucan and a frog and that *Pura Vida* slogan written across it. And even if it would’ve been natural to be peeling off that shirt at a time like this, the novelty of Juan fully-clothed had Simon’s breath rushing out in uneven bursts of air. His hands roamed above the fabric, searching for the indentations of the muscles he knew lay beneath.

Their lips broke apart, and Juan gave him a studying look. Whatever he was expecting to find escaped Simon, though, and his impatient brain kicked into babbling to try to force things forward.

“I brought stuff. I didn’t know if you had, or if you wanted to...”

Juan bit his lip and nodded. “We can.”

Then Juan began undressing himself, and Simon fumed silently, because maybe if he hadn’t opened his mouth he could’ve been the one doing that. He could’ve been the one to slip his hand beneath that colorful shirt and coast his way up Juan’s skin as he took it off. He could’ve been the one to sneak a finger into the band of his shorts and yank them down, tracing his lower abs and groin along the way.

Instead, he just took off his own clothes and waited until they were both naked on the cot.

Juan flipped onto his stomach, which at least solved their next problem without requiring Simon to talk. Dark-skinned and dusty with that ever-present fine layer of sand, Juan’s body lay spread out before him. Simon dragged his hands along Juan’s back, the grains of sand grating under his fingertips.

No need for further discussion... and maybe too much foreplay wasn’t a good idea, either. Simon retrieved the lube and condom from his shorts at the side of the bed. He prepared and slipped in as gently as possible, grabbing hold of Juan’s torso to help control the thrusts.

Juan groaned something wordless into the sheets of the cot.

Simon closed his eyes, but they kept opening again without his permission. Kept skirting over Juan’s back, over his dark hair, clumped into little dreads by saltwater and sand. He focused in on Juan’s skin so deeply he could make out the tiny hairs rising from it, fine and golden, somehow... maybe bleached blond by the sun.

Juan arched up into him and came against the sheets in long streaks that only narrowly missed a lumpy gray pillow. Simon wasn’t quite there yet, so he finally shut his eyes completely and concentrated on himself. He drove in

harder and ran his fingers over Juan's tensing muscles, breathing in the thickening scent of sweat that rose off his body.

With one final thrust, Simon released, his eyes shooting open as a drop of his own sweat landed on Juan's now-slick skin. It followed a zigzag trail between grains of sand before pooling at Juan's spine.

The last pleasurable shudders left Simon's body, and for a brief moment, he wanted to lay a line of kisses at Juan's shoulders. But instead he just slipped out to clean himself off.

Juan scrambled up so he could pull the sheets off the thin mattress. He tossed them in a heap on the floor, pulled up his trunks, and crawled back onto the cot.

"Sorry about the sheets." Simon offered a half-smirk as he put on his shorts.

"It's okay."

Silence followed. Juan pulled his knees up to his chest and gave him a smile, but his Adam's apple slid down his neck a little too rapidly.

"Um, everything okay?" Simon found his voice oddly tight, his own throat closing on swallows of air.

He'd done what he'd set out to do. What Leo had practically *pushed* him into doing. So where was the promised reward? Coming? He could do that on his own, really. Why did he feel so damn guilty all of a sudden?

Juan looked up quickly. "Of course. It's nice to spend time with someone who can... share your interests."

Share your interests? It could've been that whole language thing again, but Simon didn't think he meant his casual interest in marine life. He was pretty sure it meant *because we both like to fuck guys*.

Which was the entire point of a hook-up.

Simon shifted to dangle his legs over the side of the cot. "Do you want me to leave now? Or, um, we could..."

Juan chuckled softly. “If you want to go again tonight, I need a moment. Long day, and it’s been very hot outside.”

“Yeah.” It had been a scorcher, but then again, Simon had been lying by a poolside with a drink in his hand, while Juan had been walking the beach under the blazing sun with a heavy bag full of souvenirs to sell. “Lie down and rest a while, then,” Simon found himself saying. “I’ll keep you company.”

Were those hook-up words? Probably not. But they were human words, and Simon wasn’t just going to *use* Juan. Not like Leo had *used* him as a warm place to lie the whole freaking year, only to write him off...

Juan squinted at him with a new kind of a smile, pulling him from the negative thoughts. Still crooked with his lips, but it came with those narrowed eyes and raised brows and it meant *I’m not really sure what to make of that...* or maybe he just wasn’t sure what to make of Simon.

But he did what Simon had suggested. Simon lay next to him, squished up against his side because there wasn’t room for anything else.

The rest didn’t last long. In the quiet there were only noisy voices in Simon’s brain, repeating Juan’s words. *Share your interests*. Because even if this was all about the sex, that didn’t mean Simon had to be a shallow jackass who didn’t give a damn about who Juan was, or what his real interests were.

“So, uh...” He placed his fingers on Juan’s arm and scattered away a few grains of sand. “You in school?”

Simon didn’t look at his eyes, because there wasn’t really a whole lot of room to turn his head, and because he just knew Juan would be making another one of those confused expressions. It was taking him too long to answer.

“Yes. I go to school.” Then Juan paused again. “Many tourists think because I sell cheap things to them in the summer that I live in a rainforest hut.”

He laughed, and Simon chuckled along with him. And no, Simon wasn’t going to dwell on the fact that for a split second, he’d maybe thought that, too.

“I study business. I could open a store one day... or maybe a place like this”—he gestured at the walls around them—“that can make money from the tourists and use it to help do more for the wildlife.”

This time Simon did shoot his eyes over to Juan’s face, and caught him blinking rapidly. Blinking through surprise, like he hadn’t expected to divulge so much information.

“Like a non-profit place. That’d be awesome.” He squeezed Juan’s arm to let him know it was okay to have opened up. “I’m in school, too. Penn State.”

He couldn’t offer more information than that, because he didn’t have the whole life-plan as of yet.

Juan shifted onto his side, which Simon didn’t like, because it took away the point of contact between their bodies. But a second later he laid his arm across Simon’s chest and grinned down at him. “Tell me, are all American parties like the ones on the TV? Like the... *Beverly Hills 90210*?”

Simon choked on a snort of laughter. “Um, I dunno. I’ve only been to Beverly Hills once and I wasn’t invited to any parties. It’s all the way on the other side of the country for me.”

Juan nodded. “But you live in a mansion, like they do.”

“No, I don’t live in a mansion.” Simon rolled over, too, so he could tickle Juan’s ribs. Juan squirmed back against the wall, but there wasn’t room for him to escape Simon’s touch. “I live in a house.”

“Okay, okay.” Juan laughed and pushed his hands away. “But it is a big house.”

Simon frowned. Sure, it was large enough. Real estate developers didn’t usually live in studio apartments. “It’s family-sized. For me, my parents, and my sister. And a dog. Why, what kind of house do you live in?”

“A rainforest hut,” Juan responded, straight-faced.

Simon rolled his eyes and moved in to tickle him again until he had Juan’s dark skin stained red with laughter.

They didn't go at it again that night. Just talked until Juan got too sleepy, and then Simon kissed him goodnight and crossed the beach back to the resort, the taste of salt and sand still on his lips.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Seriously.” Alyssa had him cornered at the deep end. “Where have you been running off to every night? Even Mom and Dad are starting to notice.”

“Nowhere.” Simon searched for a route of escape, but the pool was so crowded his only option was to climb up the water-fountain feature he was leaning against.

“In the last week I think you’ve spent all of... an hour with us after dinner. I’d say you were just acting like a retiree, but I checked your room a couple times and I know you weren’t in there.”

Busted.

He sighed and flicked the surface of the pool to get some water in her face. Before she could hit him with a bigger splash, he held his hands up to signal defeat. “All right, I’ll tell you... but just, keep it to yourself, okay?”

She crossed her heart and mimed sticking a needle in her eye. He splashed her again.

“I sorta... hooked up with someone.”

“I knew it!” Her clap created a mini spurt of water between her hands. “You’ve just been too damn happy at breakfast. I mean even Dad’s gonna know you’re getting some if you keep smiling so big at all his corny jokes.”

Simon used his whole arm against the pool this time to hit her with a sheet of water. “Shut up.”

She ducked under the surface and came back up again, still grinning like an idiot. “So, where’s he from? He staying here? Why don’t you invite him to dinner with us? You know Mom’s dying for that day, and I so wanna see Dad there because you know how he gets that stupid look when—”

“Alyssa!” He gripped her shoulders. “It’s nothing like that, okay? It’s just... a hook-up. I’m not inviting him to meet Mom and Dad, or you, for that matter. It’s totally casual.”

“Oh.” She ruffled his hair before he could stop her. “Well, that’s kinda a bummer, but I get where you’re coming from.”

“So then lay off.” Simon dropped his arms back to his side before his nervous fingers could start to twitch.

Of course she got where he was coming from. There wasn’t any other place from which to come.

Simon turned a spherical white egg over in his hands. He could tell it would be soft to the touch, but he wouldn’t take off the gloves to test the theory. Juan would probably have his head.

“Big clutch,” Juan said, scribbling something down in a little notebook now that they’d finished clearing out the nest.

“Maybe it’ll make up for the one I scared away.” Simon chewed on the corner of his lip before sticking it out in a mock-pout.

Juan rolled his eyes and recovered the egg from Simon to place with the rest in his sack. “She found somewhere else, later that night or another day. Don’t worry.”

“Yeah, but somewhere else could’ve been a not-so-great place, right? Like on that other beach where the jackasses are.”

“If you feel so bad, you can come out tomorrow while I sleep,” Juan suggested, crooked smile teasing him, as always.

As always. The thought snuck up on Simon and wiped his own smile away. Could there be an *as always* with someone you’d only known for a little over a week?

No. Definitely not.

They began the trek back to the preserve, strong waves riding up to their ankles, as walking on the wet sand was easier than trudging through the dry stuff. The same ritual Simon had come to know over the past several days awaited them—secure the turtle eggs in a new nest, strip off all their clothes, dive into the cot... or the floor, or that one and only time on the sand behind the building—and enjoy each other’s company. Then a little conversation—

not too much, though—and he'd return to his resort to start a new day in paradise.

Juan cast a sidelong glance at him before returning his gaze to the ocean. "You are staying in Costa Rica for many weeks?"

It was the first time either of them had brought up the topic, and it almost made Simon wonder if Juan could read his thoughts. "Three. My dad builds condos for ex-pats, so he's kinda here on business."

"Oh." Juan jogged a few steps forward to splash into an oncoming wave. "It's a lot of time. You should travel to other parts of Costa Rica while you are here."

Simon tripped a little as his foot came down on a jagged piece of shell. Was Juan trying to get rid of him? Maybe he had overstayed the hook-up welcome. "We, uh, yeah. We might."

Juan reached an arm back to steady him and he was still smiling, easing some of Simon's fears. "There are many beautiful places in the country. Not that here isn't beautiful." He dropped his hand, and his eyes trailed down Simon's body before focusing on the sand.

Shaking his head in hopes of ridding it from the blush, Simon took a larger step to stand by Juan's side again. He stared out at the moon's wavering reflection on the surface of the water. "Yeah. I mean, I look at this place sometimes and it's like... shit. There're no words for how stunning the view is. I feel like I could stare at it for ages."

Juan tipped his head in agreement.

"I wonder if people always feel like that about nature-filled places when they're from the city," Simon continued. "One of those... grass is always greener things." He returned his gaze to Juan. "I mean, you ever get bored of it? You see this same sight day after day, year after year. Does it get old?"

"Same?" Juan furrowed his brow. "Not the same. The tide is always different. The waves make different marks on the sand. The animals are different. The stars and moon and planets move in the sky."

Simon felt his cheeks widening in a smile, but he managed to bite back the laughter. “God, do you know how to *not* be poetic?”

Juan shoved him, hard, and it took several splashing steps before he regained his balance.

“That was not poetry. That was facts.”

“The planets moving in the sky?” Some of the laughter rippled out of Simon’s throat this time.

Juan glared. “Venus. You can see Venus, right there.” He shoved an angry finger up to the sky.

Simon caught it and brought it to his lips. He almost kissed Juan’s fingertip, but then realized that would be far too... *romantic*. So he drew it into his mouth and sucked it slowly instead.

The annoyance slipped from Juan’s face. “If you are impatient, we can—”

“No. Not in the sand again, please.” Simon grimaced. Some things were better left in cheesy romance movies. “Why don’t you come over instead?”

The words surprised both of them. And really, why hadn’t Simon thought of this before? Instead of doing it on a rickety twin-size cot, or the gritty floor, or in the shark-infested ocean... he could invite Juan back to his suite, where he had an entire queen size bed and a room to himself.

But maybe he hadn’t thought of it before because it was a *bad* idea.

On the other hand, this wasn’t his house, or his dorm room, with posters slung haphazardly on the walls and memories of Leo’s sleep-tousled hair lying against his pillow. It was an impersonal hotel room.

Juan blinked and stared. “Over... where?”

“To my room at the resort.”

With a shake of his head, Juan turned away and started to walk faster, leaving the ocean behind as they headed toward the building. “You stay with your family, no?”

“We have a suite. I got my own room... even have my own back entrance onto the beach. My door locks, and besides, my parents know not to mess in my business.”

Alyssa might not have, but he had faith in the lock.

“A suite?” Juan arched a brow. “So you *are* rich like *Beverly Hills 90210*.”

“We’re not—” He sighed. “Fine, we’re a little rich. Whatever. Do you wanna come?”

“No.” The answer was brisk and seemed final. But a few steps later, Juan glanced back over his shoulder with a softening look. “I have work to do.”

“Well, after we put the eggs away. With me helping, doesn’t it go twice as fast?”

Juan stopped walking and rubbed at his forehead. “But... there are guards. You need the special bracelet.” He pointed to the yellow one bearing the hotel’s name on Simon’s wrist.

“It’s late. They probably won’t be watching. Besides, I bet you could be sneaky about it.”

By the frown on Juan’s face, he was looking to object again, so Simon pressed on before he had the chance. “I have a big bed. A really nice big bed.”

Juan passed his hand over his face again and licked his lips. Thrown by his own actions, Simon concentrated on the space behind Juan’s shoulder for most of the ensuing silence, until a small huff of breath dragged his gaze up long enough to catch a glimpse of the struggle in Juan’s eyes.

“Okay,” Juan finally said. “We can try.”

“C’mon, now!” Simon whispered into the darkness. Juan shot out from behind some pink flowers and scrambled up the concrete walkway to the room.

The few guards still walking around the pool area didn’t seem to notice anything, and probably wouldn’t have cared even if they had.

“Now, that wasn’t so hard, was it.” Simon slammed the glass door shut before any mosquitos could make their way in.

“No.” Juan peered around the room for a moment. “It’s nice here.” He eyed the freshly made bed. White sheets and white comforter, to go with the stark white look of the whole room. “And clean. I’ll get it dirty.”

“Yes, because you’re made of sand, aren’t you. I knew it.” Simon reached out and tickled him. He really couldn’t get enough of the way it made Juan laugh in that low, rumbling giggle as his skin changed from brown to maroon.

Juan batted his hands away. “But the sheets!”

“So why don’t you take a shower?”

“Shower?” The blink-and-stare was back. And Simon knew damn well Juan understood the word *shower*, so he was really starting to wonder what was going on in his head behind that look.

“Yeah. It’s right over there.” He pointed to the glass enclosure inside the room, with backlit frosted panes probably meant to make the place look more modern. “It’s pretty cool, actually. Has jets along the side and everything. Here.” He grabbed a towel. “Go on. I’ll wait.”

At those words, Juan’s lost look only deepened. Had anyone ever looked so confused about a shower before?

Simon gave him a pat on the butt. “Go!”

Juan stumbled away.

It wasn’t until the shower was on and Simon could make out the outline of Juan’s body behind the opaque glass that he had some clue about his behavior.

The invitation, the flirting, the tickling. And now the offer of a nice shower... alone... instead of hot, steamy shower sex. Was Juan in there now, wondering if these moments of theirs were meant to be something more?

Because that would be a mistake. And Simon wouldn’t mislead him. Not like Leo had done to him.

He’d just have to make sure things were clear.

Juan emerged about five minutes later, bright white towel wrapped around his dark skin. And all thoughts of *making things clear* went flying right out the sliding glass door. Because Simon had never felt that skin completely clean and his hands twitched at his side, eager to touch.

He threw back the blankets on the bed and gestured for Juan to get under the covers. Juan slipped in, and the towel fell from his waist to the floor.

“Well, Simon?” Juan prompted as Simon stood over him, staring.

Simon collided with Juan’s lips in a kiss, his fingers gliding over every reachable point of warm, exposed skin. He only stopped when he felt the rumble of Juan’s laughter against his chest.

“You are still wearing your clothes.”

“Oh. Right.” Too aroused to be embarrassed, Simon stripped off the last barrier between them. Juan braced himself against the headboard in the meantime, apparently intending to keep to the pace of their last two occasions together.

Except this time, Simon couldn’t resist kissing along Juan’s shoulders, or down his smooth back. Juan smelled of the hotel’s soap—a light green tea scent—but somehow there was still a hint of salt on his skin. Simon let his tongue play around on the contours of Juan’s body, leaving a long, wet trail in his wake.

Juan shuddered under him with a mixture of laughter and panting breaths. “It tickles.”

“Sorry,” Simon responded. But he wasn’t, and he could’ve kept on going, if Juan hadn’t reached around to stroke him until he had no more control over the shapes his mouth was making. He readied himself and Juan rocked back into him, wholly consuming him in the tight embrace.

It was nice that Juan was nothing like Leo. Not in build, in skin color, in hair color, in scent, in words, in actions. It was nice that Juan was just *Juan*.

No expectations. No responsibilities. Just fun.

Mindful of the sheets this time, Juan yanked up the towel before he came. He tossed it aside as Simon got up to dispose of the condom.

By the time Simon returned, Juan was already pulling on his shorts.

Maybe there was no need to have a talk. Juan knew what was up. Hell, he'd even admitted to doing this kind of stuff with tourists before. He never tried to drag out anything after sex. He was always ready to pack up and move on.

So he'd leave, and Simon could lie there wondering whether or not he was going to go back to Leo when the summer ended. Whether they'd compare conquests and decide they'd sowed enough wild oats. Whether they were ready to settle into a relationship again. At least for the next year.

Except he didn't want to think about it. Not now, anyway. It was nicer to think about lusty, crooked smirks and dark eyes and salty lips.

"Uh, you wanna stay for a bit?"

Juan stopped dressing. Blinked. Confused again.

"I mean, you could hang out for a while if you wanted. We could watch a movie or whatever. And there are some beers in the minifridge."

All the things Simon wasn't supposed to do. But it didn't seem to matter so much in the next minute. He was expecting a rejection, or at least an awkward acceptance, and was caught off guard by the eruption of Juan's lopsided grin. "Okay."

He grabbed the beers and some plantain chips and they both settled on the bed. The air conditioning was blasting at full force to combat the humid night, so eventually they yanked up the comforter and lay underneath it. They watched part of *Die Hard* in Spanish, as the dubbing provided enough entertainment that Simon didn't have to understand the dialogue.

A few beers later, Simon's eyes started to droop. He yawned and stretched out on the bed, knocking the blanket off his chest.

Juan's fingers flew to his side and landed on the drying scab at his rib cage. "Sorry," he murmured.

"Please. It's just a scratch. And it'll give me a story, right?"

Juan grinned and touched his lips to the edge of the wound. "What story will you tell?"

A wave of heat followed by cold passed through Simon. He tucked himself under the blankets again, blocking his chest from Juan's view as a shaky breath passed through it.

What would he say, when all this was just a memory?

He wasn't sure what story he even *wanted* to tell.

"Hey." He turned to Juan. "You got a boyfriend?"

Juan drew back. Probably because that question was way too personal, and he knew the rules of this summer fling far better than Simon seemed to. He searched Simon's face and then seemed to find something that both relaxed the tension in his shoulders and made his mouth twitch into a quick frown.

"No. You do?"

Simon shook his head, but it took his traitorous lips a little too long to answer. "No."

"You have something," Juan responded. There was no anger or annoyance in his voice. Just thoughtful certainty. He must've seen it in Simon's eyes from the beginning.

For a moment, Simon considered lying. It might spare Juan's feelings, or make sure they could keep *passing the time* together. But the whole point of this... whatever-it-was... was to not deal with all the complicated parts of a relationship. To just be himself. *Pura vida*, without any of the shit people liked to throw in the mix. And that would include lying.

"Yeah, I have a something." He sighed and thrust his fingers into his hair. "But not a boyfriend, really. He and I decided to... keep it open during the summer. See where we stand again next semester."

Juan tipped his head and quirked a brow. "You will go back to him, then?"

"I dunno."

"Do you want to?"

Well, damn. That question definitely wasn't in the rules. And Simon didn't have an answer, either. He shrugged and avoided Juan's eyes.

After a moment, Juan spoke again. “I should go. My grandmother picks me up in the mornings and we go back to town for breakfast.”

Simon nodded. “Yeah. Well, I, uh, had a good time.”

When Juan left, Simon thought it best to go straight to bed. But that didn't stop him from pressing his hand up to the warm spot where Juan's body had been, or keep him from finding a single brown hair lying on his pillow that he rubbed between his fingertips before falling asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

“Something for you, *señores*?”

Simon heard the voice before he saw him, still several sprawled beachgoers away, and his heart reacted in a way that was starting to become familiar. *Beat, beat, beat beat beat beatbeatbeatbeat.*

Juan approached them a minute later. Only a small right-left flicker of his eyes betrayed any emotion. Simon was counting on the dark frames of his sunglasses to shield his.

“Something for you?”

“No thanks,” Simon’s mother responded with practiced ease, not even a slight glance in Juan’s direction.

Simon’s heart returned to a normal pace, but he kept watching the black backpack as Juan strolled away. And as happy as he was that they’d both played it cool, it was clear something had shifted between them. They’d gotten too personal the night before—sharing a bed, watching a movie together... very nearly cuddling as they talked about relationships. But whatever Juan had taken from the night wasn’t something that made him happy. There’d been no crooked grin, no lifted brows, not even a hint of a teasing spark in his eyes.

And the further his black backpack went into the distance, the worse that made Simon feel.

“Be right back, Mom.”

It only took him a few running footsteps to catch up to Juan, who turned toward him with wary eyes.

“Hey.” It was then Simon realized he didn’t have a reason for chasing after him. Wasn’t like they could hook up now, in broad daylight, with his mother a few feet away waiting to spend *quality time* with her son.

“Hi.” Juan kept walking. “You want to buy something?”

“What? No, no. I uh, I just wanted to ask if... you were coming over again tonight.”

Juan drew to a stop. There was a little bit of stray white sand on his lip, and Simon had to clutch a handful of his shorts to keep himself from brushing it off.

“I don’t know if that is a good idea.”

Right. There were a lot of reasons why it’d be better for them both to spend a night apart. But when the number of potential nights was so finite...

“Just think about it. ’Cause, I mean, I like spending time with you. And not just... you know.”

Heat traveled to Simon’s face and forced him to drop his head. At least shielding it from the sun would provide some relief, if he couldn’t get his internal functions under control. What was he even saying?

“*Esto es lo que temo,*” Juan muttered.

“Hey, no fair answering in a language I don’t understand.” The laughter in Simon’s voice quavered a little too close to nervousness. “What does that mean?”

“It means...” Juan took a long, deep breath. “I can come. Maybe at eight, so I can leave afterwards to check the beaches? I’ve been... missing some work there, since we... you know.”

Relief finally cooled Simon’s blush. “Great. I can, um, still keep you company on that, too, if you want.”

Juan’s grin spread slowly, and a rush of air left his nostrils. “Okay, Simon.”

Simon waited out behind the suite. Eight was a little early... he didn’t know why he’d agreed to that. He’d just barely escaped his parents and a trip to the hot fudge sundae bar. Luckily, someone his father worked with had come and snagged them for a drink.

Juan dashed in a couple minutes past the hour, the faint smell of some exotic fruits clinging to his skin. By the light, fluffed up texture of his hair, he’d already showered, or at least washed up.

Simon stepped toward him immediately and drew him into a kiss, then whirled him around and backed him up to the bed.

“I should rinse my feet,” Juan mumbled into his lips. “There is still some sand...”

“Don’t care.” Simon pushed Juan’s shoulders so that he fell onto the bed.

“You say that now, but when you try to sleep tonight and there are little pieces rubbing you everywhere...”

“Rubbing me everywhere? And you think I’m gonna let you make me wait after *that*?”

And shit, that grin of Juan’s was adorable. Except Simon probably needed to get control over his mouth. It had had a mind of its own lately.

The best solution seemed to be a kiss, so he dove into Juan’s lips for a second time.

“Simon?” Juan tilted his face so he could speak without Simon’s tongue in the way.

“Mm?” Simon went after his mouth again.

“I think we should...”

Simon drew away rapidly. “What?”

Juan blinked—almost a twitch—and shook his head. “Never mind.”

For half a second, Simon thought about respecting the *never mind*. But honestly, when in the history of those two words had they ever worked in getting someone off a train of thought?

“What?” he demanded again.

Juan licked his lips, and his eyes grew troubled. “I think—”

Alyssa’s quick, clipped knocks interrupted. “Simon. Get your butt out here.”

Juan scrambled up and went for the other door.

“No, wait,” Simon hissed under his breath. “Just go stand over in the corner by the shower. I’ll... be right back.”

Juan didn't look too pleased with the suggestion, so Simon had to grab him and shove him where he wanted him. They weren't done with their conversation, and Simon would be damned if they were going to leave things like *that*.

He stepped out into the hallway and quickly shut the door behind him. "What?"

"Geez." Alyssa had to step back as he'd crowded into her space. "Suspicious much? What're you hiding in your room?"

"Nothing. What do you want?"

"Dad's friend Frank and his wife are going on a night boat tour of some... saltwater river or something. There's space and he wants us to come."

"No thanks. Tell them sorry, okay? I'm... going out." He turned back to the door, but Alyssa latched onto his arm.

"Don't be a jerk. It actually sounds like it'd be kinda cool. Lots of crocodiles, apparently."

"I already have plans." And even though he didn't really feel like sharing, he gave her a look he knew she could interpret. *Those* kinds of plans.

She huffed and released him, shaking her head as he ducked back inside and closed the door on her once again.

Juan walked over to meet him, his hands in his pockets. "You should go."

"What? Why?" Stinging cold—too cold to be from the air conditioning—hit Simon. Maybe this was what Juan had wanted to talk about. That they shouldn't *pass the time* together anymore.

"You're here to be with family, yes? And your sister is right. It is amazing. Besides the ocean, I love the mangroves best."

"But I have less than two weeks left, and I—" he cut himself off.

Fuck. He'd said the words. All the careful tiptoeing around to make sure neither of them got the wrong idea, and he'd had to be the one to start talking about the impending separation. Like they were really *together* right now.

Juan bit his lip. "I could... come back later, maybe."

“Yeah, that’d be great.” Simon blew out a tense breath.

“What time?”

“Um, I have no idea. I’m guessing this is a private tour with someone Frank knows, so I’m not really sure when it’d be over.”

Juan shuffled his feet. “Maybe another night, then.”

Damn it. Another night? Another night when there were so few left?

And shit, there he went again...

“Here, take my key card.”

Juan’s eyes flew to his, wider than he’d ever seen them. “What?”

Shit! But the words were out, and as was his tendency, more stupid ones followed. “My key card. So you can, uh, do your thing, and then come back, and in case I’m not here yet, you can, um, wait here.”

He reached into his wallet and pulled out the card. He’d already sunk himself in this deep. No turning back now.

Juan took it from his hands and gingerly held it between two fingers. And very quietly, almost in a whisper, he said, “Okay, Simon.”

The boat cut through still waters, with immense trees and impressive roots lining either side of the river. Rustles and croaks on the shore promised glimpses of elusive forest life, but Simon’s eyes didn’t stray from the water’s placid surface.

“Searching for crocs?” his father murmured. No one had spoken above a whisper since they’d departed, for fear of scaring all the sights away.

“Sure,” Simon murmured back.

At any moment, he was going to double over the side of the boat and vomit from the sheer insanity of what he’d done.

He’d given away the key to his room. To his parent’s entire *suite*. To the place where his laptop was charging, and his mother’s jewelry lay tucked in little velvet pouches, and their passports sat with their flight information—

though hopefully those were locked in the safe. His summer clothes, his Kindle, his phone...

All in the hands of a near-complete stranger. Some guy he'd met on the beach a little over a week ago.

If his parents or Alyssa found out, they'd kill him.

But that wasn't what was making him so sick. It was the fact he was completely confident Juan wouldn't touch a thing. That if he got done before Simon did, he'd simply lie there and wait... not clean them out and make some quick cash off the "rich Americans".

How could he have that much faith in someone he barely knew? In someone he was just passing the time with?

"There!" Alyssa gasped, hand extending and then rapidly drawing back as an enormous crocodile rose up from the water.

Their mother let out a little shriek, and though she quickly stifled it, it was enough to knock a few bats off the tree to their right. They swooped down at the boat to the sounds of more screaming, and the crocodile took his leave.

The laughter and the rocking boat was enough to pry Simon from his turmoil. His father clapped him on the back as he let out loud guffaws, probably alerting any other crocodiles within earshot to steer clear of the obnoxious intruders.

But at least when his father laughed like that there was no tension in his face, and no guarded look in his eyes. It was nice to know they could still have moments like these.

Simon let his worry settle in the background as he joined in.

It wasn't until he was standing on the other side of his door that the fear flooded his senses again. He gripped the handle but waited several seconds, only turning the knob when he heard Alyssa's footsteps behind him.

"Simon? Everything okay?"

“Sure.” He forced himself forward before she could get a good look at his shaking fist.

Breath trapped in his chest, he swept his eyes over the room

Laptop. Phone. Clothes. All exactly where he’d left them.

And something else where he’d left it, too. Well, almost where he’d left it. Instead of standing and staring at him, Juan was curled up in the bed, his arm slung around a pillow while his face rested flat on the mattress. His eyes were closed and from the even rise and fall of his chest, he was fast asleep.

Simon released his breath slowly. Juan looked irresistible there, tucked into the blankets, dark lashes resting against the bright white sheets.

He climbed in next to him. “Hey.”

“Hm?” Juan rolled over, brows lifting even though his eyes remained closed.

“It’s me. Sorry it’s so late. The place was kinda far away. But you were right, it was completely amazing. I’ve never been so close to a crocodile. We actually could’ve touched it! And some kind of weird anteater thing, and the bats—”

“S good,” Juan mumbled. Then he gave opening his eyes another try. Lids still partly closed, he stretched up to kiss Simon. “I was just... resting for a moment.”

Something in Simon’s chest tightened as he watched Juan struggle to come back to full consciousness for him. *For him.*

“No you weren’t. You’re fast asleep.”

“Maybe.” Even Juan’s grin was tired.

“It’s okay.” He nuzzled into Juan’s neck. The skin there was warm and smelled of the hotel’s soap, so Juan must’ve washed up after his walk on the beach. Simon moved his head down and kissed his shoulder. “Go back to bed.”

Like he’d been waiting for Simon’s blessing, Juan’s lids fell shut again, and his body slackened into peaceful sleep.

Simon wrapped his arms around him, still in his clothes, and still uncertain about why he wanted to hold on so tightly.

Why his vacation hook-up was sleeping in his arms with a total of zero orgasms in the count today... and why that suddenly made him happy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

White light hit Simon's face, piercing through his closed eyelids. He groaned and sought out darkness again, burrowing into the pillow, but that wasn't enough to beat out the Costa Rican sun.

"We forgot to pull the blinds yesterday," Juan mumbled from beside him.

The last traces of sleep left Simon as he forced his eyes open. He still had one arm wrapped around Juan, who was resting a few inches below him, mouth pressed into Simon's chest. Same way he'd woken up for the past five days. Apparently, Juan didn't care for pillows.

Leo was the only other person he'd ever woken up to on so many consecutive mornings. But those memories were fading now, and something warm and real was in their place.

"Good morning." He brushed his lips through Juan's hair.

"Good morning."

Scooting down a few inches, Simon pressed in for a quick kiss. He tightened his hold on Juan's body. "Do you have to go? To meet your grandmother?"

Juan shook his head, a lazy smile spreading across his lips. "No. Today is Sunday. She goes to church." His hand traveled up Simon's torso, sun-warmed fingers searing into his skin.

"You, uh, you don't go with her?" Words were a little more difficult to form as Juan had reached his chest and was pinching at his nipple.

"No. There are some things she knows I won't be saved from."

From the lustful smirk, that was probably meant as a joke. But as Simon paused to double check his interpretation, Juan's confidence faltered into a blush. "It's okay. She may not understand, but she accepts."

"Yeah. Guess that's something." Juan's hand slipped away but Simon caught it, pulling it toward him so that Juan was forced closer. "Kinda like my dad. He's... you know, not thrilled. But... I guess he's trying."

“That makes him a stronger person than most,” Juan said. “To be open to change.”

Simon let the words roll around in his head for a moment, and his mouth eventually curved up in a smile. “I guess you’re right. Guess we’re both lucky, then.” Simon bent down for another kiss.

“He has met your... boyfriend?” Juan asked before their mouths could connect, and it was Simon’s turn to blush.

“Well, no. I mean, he would have, probably. I just... never introduced them. Maybe because I...” He faltered and chewed on his lip. Some skin sloughed off in his mouth and he turned away from Juan to spit it out.

“Because of what?” Juan pressed.

“Because I was... never completely sure of where I stood with Leo.” Simon let out a sigh, and Juan’s hand was on his chest again, though this time it was gently patting. “Leo wasn’t into... defining things.”

Juan tipped his head thoughtfully, his hand continuing its gentle massage. “You both decided to be apart this summer? Or he decided?”

Simon chuckled softly. “Am I that obvious?”

“Know as many people from as many places as I have, and you get better at reading them,” Juan said, and though his smile was full, the comment only darkened Simon’s thoughts. How many people had Juan *known*?

“So what about you?” He shifted to get Juan on his back, allowing him to lay a few kisses along his neck. If they were going to talk about *serious* things, the least he could do was keep up the foreplay. Then the escape of pure, carnal release was only a gripped-erection away. “Ever had any serious relationships?”

“No. Not serious.” Juan snatched at Simon’s mouth with his own when it hovered near.

“Mm.” Simon mumbled into his lips. “Why not?”

Juan’s eyes were closed as they separated for only a moment mid-kiss. “All things have their end.”

A quick breath left Simon's lungs, but he refused to give Juan's comment any deep thought. They weren't beginning anything, so there didn't need to be concern about an *end*.

"Yeah, you seem like the independent type, huh." He placed a few more kisses on Juan's waiting lips. "Walking the beaches alone, saving all those turtles by yourself. So stoic."

Juan scoffed, and the burst of air made Simon scrunch up his nose. "I know how to have my fun."

"Obviously." He puffed back, just to see Juan's face do the same thing. Cute, as he'd predicted. "So... what made you decide to have fun with me?"

Juan relaxed back on the bed, his head falling out of reach from Simon's mouth. He squinted and looked up to meet Simon's eyes. "You are... open."

"Open? You mean like, obvious in the way I kept gawking at you?" Simon laughed and dipped down for another kiss. Juan returned it but then broke away.

"No. I mean... open as a person. You care to learn about things you don't know. And you understand we are different, but you don't judge or try to change. You just... let things be as they are."

"That's kinda your whole country's motto, isn't it? *Pura vida*?"

Juan chuckled, possibly at Simon's clumsy accent. "I guess you could understand it like that."

Simon nodded and pushed off of Juan's body with a loud, deliberate sigh. "So it had nothing to do with how hot I am, huh."

In a flash of white and brown, both Juan and the sheets were suddenly on top of him, cocooning him in a warm, bright tent. "Vain American," Juan whispered, then slid down to grind against his crotch.

Simon laughed, making the trapped air even warmer, and Juan's fingers curled into the band of his boxers.

A series of loud knocks interrupted. His father's. "Simon, we're heading out to get some brunch in a few. Then maybe white water rafting, if your mother is feeling brave. Get dressed."

Simon groaned, pulling Juan close and failing to stifle another upward thrust of his hips.

Juan kissed the corner of his lips. "Go. I will see you later."

"More scars." Juan chuckled later that night, smoothing a small amount of aloe onto the scraped-red portion of Simon's calf.

"Shut up. It won't scar. And it's not my fault Alyssa doesn't know how to keep a raft afloat."

Juan held a finger up to Simon's lips, signaling for lower voices. The nesting turtle was only a few feet away, still shell-above-sand in her efforts.

"Sorry."

"I forgive you. This time."

The teasing glimmer in Juan's eyes couldn't be ignored, and Simon snaked an arm up to encircle his body and flop him over onto the sand for a kiss.

"You will scare her!" Juan hissed. "Stop moving so suddenly."

"Stop driving me crazy then." Simon crashed hard into Juan's lips, and any real objection Juan had died in a few seconds as he reached up to grip Simon's neck and draw him in even closer.

There was already sand in more places than Simon could count, and if they hadn't been so close to the resort with this turtle, he would have considered ending his ban on beach *activity*. But he was a little sore from the rafting, and there was still the possibility of some couple out for a late night romantic walk stumbling upon them. A few other resort guests had appeared on their nightly excursions, but thankfully they'd only been talking or recovering eggs then.

The turtle moved abruptly, and Simon froze. She seemed to be turning right and heading away from her nesting spot. "Shit. Shit. I'm sorry." He held his breath, lungs involuntarily constricting and thankfully shutting him up. Maybe if he just kept his mouth closed for a few minutes, she'd reconsider abandoning her endeavor.

Juan moved slowly to pick up his red flashlight. He flicked it onto the nest and shook his head. “There is a rock. She is moving to find a better place.”

“Oh. Good.” And thank God it wasn’t his fault this time.

The turtle traveled only a few more feet to the right before evidently deciding she was ready to begin again. With rough, forceful jerks, her flippers began their tedious cuts into the sand.

Juan lay back, his head resting against Simon’s shoulder. “We don’t have to stay here the whole time. It will be hours still.”

“Yeah, but isn’t it better if we watch out for her? I mean, what if the poachers come?”

“They don’t come here so much. Not so close to the resort.”

“Okay, what about dumb tourists then?”

Juan shifted to look at him as he laughed. “Yes, there are those.” He threaded a hand into Simon’s hair. “You really want to stay? To protect her?”

“Well, yeah. Why wouldn’t I?”

Why wouldn’t he? How about because Juan was clearly offering him a chance to screw him in the next few minutes, instead of four to five hours from now. If they could even stay awake that long.

Juan turned back to stare up at the stars, a quiet smile on his lips. “You are not like the others,” he said softly. Almost to himself.

“Other whats?”

Juan said nothing, so Simon was forced to fill in the blank himself. “Summer fucks?”

He felt Juan’s body stiffen beside him. And the words *had* tasted bad coming out of his mouth. They were so... cold. They didn’t seem to define what it felt like to lie next to Juan, watching over a mother turtle and counting the stars. “Sorry.”

“No, those are the words. I just could not remember them in English so quickly,” Juan responded. He laughed, but the hollow sound didn’t carry on the wind.

“Oh. Right.” Simon breathed out slowly. “So, uh, how many... how many tourists have you, um, spent summers with?”

Juan’s head pulled away from Simon’s frame and settled into the sand. “I always use protection, if that’s what you worry for.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

“Then you ask if I’m a slut?”

“No!” Simon flipped onto his side and propped his head up on his hand so he could see Juan, and hopefully get a better read on the effect his clumsy words were having. “I meant... this.” With his free arm, he pointed to the turtle, then waved generally toward the sky.

A ripple of movement passed through Juan’s face, ending in a clench of his jaws. None of it touched his eyes, though, which continued to stare straight up at the stars.

“Juan?”

“Wear pants tomorrow.”

Simon glanced down at his legs. The red marks from where he’d collided with the rocks during numerous drops into the rapids still stung, but not as much with the cool coating of aloe. “Um, why?”

“And your bug spray.” Juan rolled over—slowly, for the turtle’s sake—and met Simon’s lips. “But not on your face. I want to show you something.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Simon dropped the hotel's fluffy white robe from his shoulders and turned to appraise himself in the mirror. He'd managed a decent tan in the past few weeks, though today there was a little too much redness on his nose and his cheeks... and on his shoulders, which had born the brunt of the hour of pool volleyball he'd played with his family. He winced a little as he pulled on his clothes and the fabric connected with the sensitive skin.

At least Juan had that aloe. Simon's reflection smiled over at him. *Rough hands, gently smoothing the balm over his shoulders before trailing down to his...*

"You have any plans this evening?" Simon's father stood in the doorway. "Thought maybe we could play a few rounds of poker with Frank and his sons. They just flew out to join him."

"Oh." Simon flicked his eyes away from the mirror guiltily, as if there were some way his father might be able to see into his thoughts. "I was... I was gonna go out."

His father nodded slowly, gaze lowering to the floor. "All right. Just, uh, be safe."

Simon felt his lips begin to twitch into a grin. He attempted to bite down on it, rather unsuccessfully, as his father huffed a small chuckle of his own and turned away.

Chuckles were progress, though.

"Hey, Dad?" Simon blurted out before his father could disappear around the corner.

"Yeah?"

"Um, thanks."

Confusion wrinkled his father's brow. "What for?"

"For... for being open... to change."

He got a small shake of the head and a grin from his father, and he finally let his own smile go free.

A trickle of sweat made its way down Simon's leg, sticking to his khakis and gluing them to the inside of his knee. He jerked to yank the fabric away, which only caused more sweat to break out on his skin.

This was not a climate for pants.

"Almost there," Juan said.

Juan wore pants, too, with a brown belt holding them up higher than most people his age would have them back in the States. Still, he was hot enough to pull off the look.

"We've been walking for like two miles. My dad has a rental car, you know. I coulda probably borrowed it and driven."

"Lazy." Juan's smirk softened the insult. "A car would have taken just as long with the roads as they are."

"Yeah, but a car has air-conditioning." Simon took an awkward side-step to unstick his pants from his inner thighs this time. "Why'd you make me wear these?"

"Protection." Juan's stride lengthened as they approached a squat brown building, standing small and unobtrusive against the backdrop of dense, towering trees. "You don't need to add more injuries."

"Hey, I'm not injury-prone." Simon glared, though he was sure Juan couldn't see it in the dark. But then Juan took a sudden step to veer around the office structure, and Simon stopped short. "Wait, are you taking me in there?"

"Yes. You like nature, no?"

"Well yeah, but um... it's dark."

Juan reached back to grab Simon's arm, as though he were afraid Simon might suddenly take off if not pulled forward. "I have a flashlight."

"But what exactly is this place?"

"A small forest preserve. Why, you are a scaredy-cat again?"

The door of the building creaked open, and Juan's fingers slipped away to sheepishly rub at his hair as a young woman appeared in the threshold. "Juan?"

"*Hola, Claudia.*" He looked over at Simon hesitantly. "Ehh, Claudia, this is my friend Simon. Simon, Claudia."

She bounced her gaze to Simon and then back to Juan with a sly grin. "*¿Trayendo uno de tus amiguitos aquí? ¡Qué novedad!*"

Juan rolled his eyes and started walking again, jerking his head to signal that Simon should follow. "*Hasta luego, Claudia. Pura vida.*"

Simon waited until they had traveled a few feet into the forest, where the woman was out of earshot. "You guys use that pura vida thing for goodbye, huh."

Juan nodded, then reached into his pocket and handed over a flashlight. "A good way to send people off."

"Sure." Simon crossed in front of Juan's path and flicked the flashlight onto his face. "So, you gonna tell me what she said?"

"What who said?" Juan stepped around him. "Watch where you put your feet. We must keep to the trail."

"Don't even try that." Simon grabbed Juan's waist and spun him back around. "I may be a gringo, but I'm not stupid. What did she say?"

Juan huffed. "She said... you are not as cute as you think you are. Now be quiet, or you will scare everything away."

Simon released him and obeyed, letting his senses adjust to the silence of the night. Only, it wasn't so silent. They were away from the roar of the ocean—though the smell of salt still carried in the air—but the hum of insects and frogs blanketed the forest in an eerie cloak of hidden life.

He stepped closer to Juan's side.

"There." Juan's voice was almost lost amid the chirps and buzzes filling Simon's ears. "Careful. It is poisonous."

Simon froze and looked down warily, in time to see a black and brown snake slither deeper into the woods, a thin rattle on the end of its tail adding to the night's chorus.

“Cool. Shit. How poisonous is that thing?”

“Very.”

“You won't let me die out here, will you?”

Tipping his head to the side as if deep in thought, Juan drew in a long breath. “Maybe, maybe not.”

“Shut up.” Simon forgot to keep his voice down as he pulled Juan against him.

“So hard to believe?” Juan quirked his lips into his trademark grin. “You don't really know me.”

The croaking of the frogs filled the silence that stretched between them as the drive for playful banter abruptly left Simon's thoughts. “I guess... I guess you're right. Tell me about yourself, then.”

Juan pushed away and started walking again. “If we talk we will—”

“I know, I know. We'll scare the deadly snakes away. I don't care. I wanna know.”

“Know what?”

“I dunno. Anything.” Simon reached out to inspect a white flower, glistening with the moisture from the air. A small green insect lay nestled inside. He wished he'd brought his camera—then he could've gotten a picture of Juan, too. How come he'd never thought to take any pictures of him before? “Like, about your family or something.”

Juan took a few more silent footsteps before speaking. “Five brothers. I am the youngest. They live in San Jose, near my parents.”

“Five brothers? Shit. And now you just live with your grandmother?”

“While I go to school, yes. To save money.”

“You don’t get... lonely? Or maybe you just needed some peace and quiet after growing up with so many siblings. Shit, if there were five of Alyssa, I don’t know what I’d do.”

“I’m... the different one of my family. I fell in love with the beaches here and wanted to stay.” Juan shrugged. “Alyssa, she is your sister?”

“Yeah. You sorta met—” Simon stopped himself. There was little chance of Juan remembering their very first encounter, and beyond that she’d only been a voice in a hallway to him. The raised-brow confusion on Juan’s face confirmed it.

Simon took in a breath of heated air, the moisture making it thick and hard to swallow. “Would...” He licked his lips. “Would you like to meet h—”

Juan’s eyes went wide, and he clapped a hand over Simon’s mouth. “Do not move,” he whispered. Then he began edging away from Simon, toward an outstretched tree branch. He scooped something into his palm and held it out for Simon to see.

A spec of bright blue and red, no bigger than a silver dollar. With little eyes and little legs and little amphibious toes on each limb.

“We are lucky,” Juan said. “They are not so many here.”

“Wow. That is just... amazing. The colors are so intense.” Simon reached out a finger to stroke the frog’s back, but Juan jerked it out of reach.

“Careful. If you have any cuts, you shouldn’t touch.”

Simon pulled his hand back reluctantly. “Let me guess. Poisonous.”

“Beautiful things many times are.”

Pretty as the frog was, it had nothing on Juan’s smile. “Again with the poetry.” Simon leaned in to claim Juan’s lips before he could get annoyed, and the frog croaked in agreement.

Juan broke away to replace the frog on the tree, then pulled out a small cloth from his pocket and wiped his hand clean. Simon waited only long enough for him to complete the task before grabbing him again and moving in for another kiss.

“I don’t think we should do anything in here,” Juan murmured, his eyes closed as he stood on tiptoe to meet Simon’s mouth. “Too many plants and animals.”

“Yeah, that’s okay. I just want to kiss you. Even if you might be poisonous.”

Juan fell back on his heels to laugh. “*You* are the one who sometimes tastes like poison.”

Simon caught Juan’s chin and held it in place so he could keep the lock on his eyes. “So we’re both beautiful, then. But you might be the most beautiful person I’ve ever met... and I don’t just mean on the outside.”

Juan’s eyes widened and his mouth twitched like he wanted to laugh again or say something to deny it. He must’ve come up empty, though, because he said nothing for several seconds.

Then he dragged his hand down Simon’s arm until their fingers met. Met and intertwined.

It was so much less than what they’d already done together, it hardly seemed like it should matter. But as Simon clung to the warm, rough skin, as his thumb moved up and down to caress Juan’s knuckles, he just *knew* it was more.

“Come.” Juan pulled at his fingers, though by the way they’d settled into place within Simon’s, it was clear he wasn’t letting go. “There is much more to see.”

“I have to get out of these clothes. Seriously.” Back on the sands, Simon peeled off his soaked shirt. The sea wind had been absent in the dense growth of the forest, and it now offered the only relief from the sticky perspiration drenching his skin.

“So do it,” Juan said, and within a second he was fumbling with the button of Simon’s pants.

“Hey, what? Here?” But even as the words came out, Simon pulled at Juan’s belt, loosening its grip on his trim waist. Clothes were scattered across

the sand, and the blissful air touched Simon's body for only a moment before he was clutching Juan against his chest, lighting it up with fire once again.

Juan kissed him, hard, fingers already sprinkled with sand pulling at Simon's face to draw him down and deeper into his mouth. His erection rose up against Simon's thigh—one more point of heat between their bodies.

Inside Simon burned, too, as they stood there naked on the pristine beach... completely out in the open, with sea and stars the only witnesses. Sweat coated their skin and the sand flew up to meet it, making each frantic grope grittier than the one before.

Juan broke away, breathless, and pulled at Simon's hand. "Come."

They ran toward the waves together, kicking at the foam and splashing into the midnight-blue depths, fingers still entwined. The current dragged them into calmer waters, where Juan's arms locked around Simon's shoulders for stability as they continued to kiss.

But the kisses were calmer now, too, maybe because they'd been literally cooled by the Pacific. Warm as the water was here by the equator, it still couldn't compete with the summer air.

Simon pulled away from Juan's lips and stared at the brown eyes in front of him. Thoughts bubbled up in his mind, and naked like this in Juan's arms, he no longer had any means to stop them. "Five more days."

A few of Juan's fingernails dug into his back, but all Juan did was try to stop Simon's mouth with more kissing.

"I'm... I'm not going back to Leo."

The decision hadn't been made until the words left him, but as they hung above the constant roar of the surf, Simon couldn't find any regrets.

A relationship—*love*—wasn't supposed to be about settling, or practicality, or putting things on pause while each one hoped for something better. There had to be a risk for the reward, maybe some amount of defying the odds. And if leaving the safety of Leo behind meant he had a chance to fill his heart with *real* passion again, it was the only choice he could make.

Juan's chest shuddered against his.

“Juan, I—”

God, there was so little time left. What could he say? What did he even want to say? That a few of Juan’s poetic words had helped him mend part of the rift with his father? That they’d put to rest the struggle in his mind over a relationship that had really already been over? That he wanted for the two of them to—

Staring straight into Simon’s eyes, Juan shook his head. The movement was small but unmistakable. *No*.

Simon closed his mouth as Juan rested against his shoulder, arms encircling him in a tight embrace. Waves rocked them as they clung to each other, but not enough to pull them apart.

The last of the heat drained away. No more words, no more kisses. Just a quiet hug Simon wished could last forever.

But it couldn’t. “I’m kinda tired,” he murmured.

“Me too. It’s late.”

They separated most of the way, though Simon still held Juan’s hand as they battled the breaking waves close to shore. And even after they’d reached the sands, he couldn’t bring himself to let go.

“I have to be up in a few hours.” Juan said. “Since we are both tired, it would be better if we... went to our beds.”

“Yeah.” The word scratched its way out of Simon’s throat, and as soon as it hit the air he wanted to snatch it back.

Juan smiled and tugged on his hand until Simon leaned down to kiss him. He pecked Juan chastely, but Juan went in for more before he could pull away. His tongue slid in and wound around Simon’s, mouth widening until their teeth scraped against each other.

It didn’t really feel like a goodnight kiss.

CHAPTER NINE

“What?” The cup in Simon’s hands, thankfully empty, slipped from his grasp and bounced on the bar counter before he recovered enough to grab it again. “When... when did you decide this?”

“Last night.” Alyssa frowned and reached out to pluck the glass from his weak grip. She replaced it safely on the bar. “We looked for you to talk about it, but you weren’t there, and well, Mom really wanted to go. We didn’t think it’d be a big deal.”

“But it’s... it’s the last four days of the vacation. Don’t I get a say?”

“I guess you would’ve if you’d been there... but it seems silly to spend our whole time here when there’s other stuff to see in the country. Dad’s done with his business stuff for now, and the hot springs are supposed to be amazing.”

“I... I had plans.” He didn’t, though. He’d had no plans since last night, since he’d kissed Juan until they’d both pulled apart and gone their separate ways to bed.

Alyssa squeezed his shoulder. “Sorry. They already cancelled the room here and booked a place in Arenal. We leave tomorrow morning. Hey, does this have something to do with—”

He moved away. “I gotta go. Pack my stuff if you have any free time.”

She didn’t shout back the expected scathing rejection of that idea, but Simon was too focused on leaving to really care.

An hour of pacing the sands from one bluff to the other left his lips cracked and his throat parched and his exposed skin probably sunburned. His family would be waiting for him to join them for lunch by now.

At long last, the black backpack appeared, threading its way through the sunbathing crowds. Simon fought the sand for traction on every step as he raced toward it. “God, there you are! I’ve been looking all over!”

Juan's eyes met his hesitantly, partially shrouded by his lowered lashes. It was as close to *shy Juan* as Simon had ever seen. "Hello, Simon."

Simon grabbed his wrist, thumb pressing against a rapid pulse—although that could've been his own. "Listen, my parents changed our plans. We're leaving tomorrow for Arenal."

Juan's face betrayed nothing. No movement passed across his dark skin. "It is beautiful there. You will enjoy it."

At a loss for words—at a loss for what he should be feeling, even, Simon didn't respond.

"I should go on now."

"Right." He dropped Juan's arm. "But I still have tonight. Meet me at my place."

He didn't wait for the answer or even look back as he turned and ran away.

At nine, there was nothing. At ten, the same. No knocks, no small figures creeping through the carefully pruned plants outside the suite. At eleven, Simon shut off his TV and went to sit on the concrete path, knees drawn up to his chest.

If he left now and went out searching, there was every chance they'd miss each other. And even if this... thing they'd shared was meant to easily fade away, at the very least he needed to say goodbye.

Goodbye and thanks for the good fucks. Never mind the handholding, the shared smiles. The lazy morning cuddling and the trips into magical forests full of unknown creatures. The turtles and the eggs and the tiny hatchlings they'd given a fighting chance at life. The soft kisses and the hug that had stretched on and on, speaking words Simon couldn't bring himself to say. Or words Juan didn't want to hear.

By midnight, it seemed clear Juan wasn't coming. And maybe that was for the best. Simon could just keep the whole experience tucked in a metaphorical box somewhere in the back of his mind, to be dragged out when he was much older and looked back on with only fond memories.

Something crawled across his foot, and he stared down at it, stifling the immediate urge to slap it away. At first glance he thought it was an insect, but a closer inspection revealed it to be a lizard, no bigger than his thumbnail. It crossed his ankle and then dropped back onto the concrete before scurrying out to the sand.

Simon got up and followed.

The moon hung low and bright in the sky, casting light in new places on the usually dark beach that night. Enough light that Simon was able to make out the staggering figure, heading up from the ocean and in the direction of the turtle preserve... and not toward the resort.

He didn't run this time. As he approached his chest tightened with an emotion foreign to him in Juan's presence—anger. Before there'd only ever been curiosity, lust, and maybe longing. Now he felt the presence of this strangling grip on his heart, and it made his insides cold while his skin burned.

"You weren't coming, were you. After all this, you weren't even gonna say goodbye." He ground the words out through a clenched jaw.

Juan kept his body turned away, one arm wrapped around his stomach as he dragged his feet through the sand.

"Are you even gonna look at me?" Simon's hands tightened into fists, and he slammed them against his thighs.

"I... I was busy," Juan said, but his voice was slightly garbled. He bent over and spit in the sand.

By the grace of the moonlight, Simon could make out the red splatter against the white grains of sand. *Red.*

His anger evaporated in an instant and he gripped Juan's shoulders to spin him around. "Oh my God. What happened?"

"Nothing." Juan spit again, and thankfully this time there was more saliva than blood. "Only another lesson."

Juan's left eye was swollen, and even in the shadows, a deepening red and purple bruise was visible by his temple.

“The poachers?” Another new emotion hit Simon, close to the anger from earlier but tinged with fear. “What the hell! Why would you go after them alone? You’re the one who told me what an idiotic idea that was. It doesn’t make any sense. That... that just isn’t like you!”

Juan yanked himself out of Simon’s grasp and staggered a foot away. “Like me? You don’t know me.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” Simon moved to stand in front of him again. “Come back with me. You need ice.”

“I need to go to sleep. And so do you, for your trip tomorrow. Go home, Simon.”

Home. The resort wasn’t home. Home was thousands of miles away. A place where he’d never see Juan again.

“Juan, come on.”

“No,” Juan mumbled, but the last of the word came out with a small moan. He took a few steps away, doubled over, and threw up.

“Fuck. You probably have a concussion.” Simon hurried to his side and stroked his back. Juan didn’t shirk away from him this time, but he looked like he wanted to as his muscles tensed under Simon’s touch. “You need to see a doctor.”

Juan’s face hardened. “I do not.”

“Uh, yeah, you do. Don’t be an idiot.”

The fire in Juan’s eyes—the same one Simon had seen their very first night together—ignited. It hardly seemed possible that such ordinary brown eyes could contain so much fury. “I am not an *idiot*. And I do not need to see a doctor.”

Simon’s own internal fire rose to match “I don’t give a shit what kind of voodoo medicine you people practice down here. When you think you have a concussion, you see a fucking doctor!”

“Voodoo medicine?” Juan roared back at him. His nostrils flared, and as his lips parted again to hurl out some vicious reply, Simon grabbed his face with both hands and kissed him.

It wasn't a romantic kiss. It was a *shut-up-and-listen-to-me-because-I-care* kiss, and it served its purpose. Juan stood still and gaped at him.

Simon couldn't find his voice, either. His mouth hung open as he tried to process his own reaction. What could possess someone to kiss a person who had literally just thrown up?

Well, he had some idea. But he wasn't going to say it. Or even think it.

"Now come on." He reached out and took Juan's hand, and together they headed back to the resort.

"Simon?" Alyssa yawned and scratched at her hair, peering up at him from her dark room. "What's going on?"

"Juan got hurt. Do you know where that directory thing is? The one with the list of nearby clinics?"

"What? Juan? Who is Juan? What are you talking about?"

"Never mind." He slammed the door shut on her. "I'll find it myself."

"Simon." Juan called out to him in a whisper from his bedroom. "Calm down."

"I am calm," Simon barked back.

Sure, calm. Calm is what had him waking up his sister at one in the morning. Calm had him thrashing through the brochures and binders in the living room of the suite, searching for the one that held the necessary information.

Alyssa emerged from her room in a robe. She'd made the transition from drowsy to fully alert pretty damn quickly. "Okay, start talking. Now."

Simon rolled his eyes and kept tossing aside pieces of paper. "Juan is... he's... you know who he is. These jerks hit him and I think he might have a concussion and I'm trying to find the damn paper that tells me where—"

"Simon!" Alyssa grabbed his hands. "Start at the beginning. Where is he right now?"

"He's here."

Alyssa darted away from him and toward his bedroom before he could stop her. “Here here?”

He’d left the door ajar, so she only had to stand by the entrance to see where Juan sat on the edge of Simon’s bed, a can of beer held against his forehead.

“Oh, uh, hi there.” Alyssa waved.

Juan’s brows flew up and he grimaced, probably from the pain it caused his head. “Hello.”

“Where is the damn thing!” Simon pressed in behind Alyssa, shoving a wad of papers into her arms.

“Simon?” Another groggy voice joined in. His mother, face smeared with night cream and eyes blinking wearily into the light.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered.

“Okay, Simon, you go in your room and take care of... him. Mom and I will find the clinic paper... although, shouldn’t he know? I mean, he is um... local, right?”

“He doesn’t want to go so I’m gonna call the damn place and have *them* tell him that he needs to be checked out.”

“Checked out? Clinic? What’s going on?” His mother’s voice rose.

“Inside, now.” Alyssa shoved him through the door. “I’ll fill Mom in.”

Simon stood still for a moment, eyes fixed on Juan. Then he noticed a trickle of blood by his jawline and scrambled to the sink, where he wet a washcloth. He returned to Juan’s side and unceremoniously scrubbed off the blood with rough strokes.

“You are acting crazy,” Juan mumbled.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t have to if you’d just go to the damn hospital and make sure you’re okay.”

Juan sighed. The fingers on his free hand twitched closer to Simon’s, but didn’t touch. “Simon, I understand you care, but—”

“All right.” Simon’s mother poked her head in. “We spoke to a place. They said the best thing would be to send him in a taxi. Faster than waiting for an ambulance.” Then she flashed a tentative smile in Juan’s direction. “I’m sorry, we haven’t been introduced. I’m Simon’s mother.”

She’d wiped her face clean, Simon realized. He wondered just how much Alyssa had *filled her in*.

“Uh, Mom, this is Juan. He... works at this nature preservation place. Saving sea turtles. And he um, got into this fight with the asshole poachers and well... yeah.”

“That’s just terrible, dear. Is there someone we can call for you?”

“No, thank you, ma’am,” Juan answered quickly. “I don’t want to wake my grandmother for nothing.”

“It’s not nothing if you have a concussion,” Simon grumbled.

Alyssa latched onto his mother’s arm. “C’mon, Mom. Let Simon walk him to the lobby.”

Juan scrambled up, and it was good to see him steadier on his feet now. Of course, the awkwardness of the whole situation was probably a good motivator. “Thank you, sorry to interrupt your night.” He was out the door before Simon gathered his wits enough to follow.

They walked the hallway in silence. When they reached the elevator, Juan finally turned to speak to him. “I’m sorry I didn’t come to say goodbye.”

Simon shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at his shoes. “Yeah, it’s okay. I get it. Goodbyes kinda suck.”

Especially the permanent kind.

The elevator dinged its arrival at the lobby.

“Do... do you want me to...” *Come with you?* But the remainder of the thought wouldn’t come to Simon’s lips. Juan would say no, anyway, and it wasn’t like he could really take off to a clinic in the middle of the night when they had a six a.m. wake up call for their trip to Arenal.

He took a deep breath and hoped the momentary quiet was enough to bury the failed sentence. “Just promise me you’ll actually get checked out. Even if you think I’m being stupid.”

“All right, Simon.” Juan rolled his eyes. “I promise.”

They stepped off into the harsh fluorescents of the lobby, and a small red car with a taxi light affixed on top sat just outside the glass front.

Juan stuck out his hand. “Well, Simon, it was nice... passing the time with you.” His lips ticked up slightly, halfway to his normal grin.

Simon gripped Juan’s sandy fingers—*for the last time*—and could only bring himself to nod.

“*Pura vida*, my friend,” Juan said.

“*Pura vida*,” he echoed back.

Juan’s hand fell away, and he walked out the double doors and into the night.

Simon turned his back on the scene as the taxi drove off. The glass panes at the rear of the hotel showcased an impressive set of fountains and pools, but he set his gaze out further, beyond the concrete and the chlorinated water.

A wave touched the shore and then receded, taking with it a little piece of his heart.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

“Simon. Simon. Earth to Simon.” Alyssa waved a hand in front of his face, her fingers cutting across the view of sun glinting off ocean.

“What?” He tore his gaze from the horizon. Even through the sunglasses, the light had burned its way into his pupils, leaving his vision fuzzy for a moment.

“I was talking to you and you totally zoned out.”

“Sorry.” Simon squeezed his eyes shut and breathed deeply, hoping to clear his head. But the scent only dragged him back into the fog. Memories were harder to fight when they assaulted all his senses at once. “Guess I’m still a little jet-lagged.”

“Sure... even though it’s only a two hour difference.” She squirted sunblock into her hands and hastily rubbed it on her skin, leaving white streaks behind. “Anyway, when you wake up, there’s eye candy thatta way.” Her over-the-shoulder head jerk directed Simon to an Adonis-like blond oiling down washboard abs.

“Huh. Yeah.” His eyes flicked back out to the ocean.

“So...” Alyssa worked to smooth away most of the white globs, though she missed a clump on her forehead. “Things with Eric really over?”

“Mhm. We just weren’t the right fit.”

“Sucks.”

He nodded, but didn’t really think so. It’d only been a couple of months, anyway.

“Simon?”

“What, Alyssa!” He finally turned toward her, frustrated enough to slip up and give her exactly what she wanted—his attention. “I’m trying to relax here.”

“This thing you’re doing with school... it doesn’t have anything to do with... that guy, does it?”

Laughter bubbled up in him—half truthful, and half nervous. “Jesus, of course not. That would be pretty fucking stupid. I told you like a million times, our thing was totally casual.”

“Right.”

“Yeah. Right.” He huffed and shook his head. God, she was being annoying. And the trip had barely started. Thank goodness she and his parents were only staying a week and a half.

“So then you wouldn’t care if that was him over there.”

Simon sprang forward in his lounge chair so quickly his sunglasses clattered onto the sand. “Wh-what?”

She pointed a finger straight ahead, at a familiar figure. What were the odds? Well, really, not that astronomical. They *were* on the same beach. It was the same time of year.

But he hadn’t dared hope. Except maybe in the deepest, darkest, most hidden recesses of his mind.

And now Juan was there again, a few feet in front of him. The face and body Simon had committed to memory without any pictures to help him. The person he’d thought about on lonely nights, and even not-so-lonely ones. The mixture of happiness and sadness he’d carried with him the entire year.

His feet propelled him across the sand faster than he would’ve thought possible. And with each step, another level of the house of cards he’d built up on the whole *it-didn’t-mean-anything* lie came crashing down on him. Because *Eric who?* And what was love without the risk, and God, he’d give anything to see that smile again, to feel those fingers on his skin, to—

He’d reached his destination. “Hey.”

Confused brown eyes met his. “*Hola, señor.* You would like to buy something?”

“What? No.” He let out a nervous chuckle. “At least, not right now.”

He waited for the grin, but all he got was a stiff, awkward smile. “*Bueno*, another time. Excuse me, *señor*.”

“What?” A sharp, cold pain hit Simon’s chest, like an icicle piercing his heart. An icicle that would melt in a second of this heat and leave a pool of half-formed fantasies lying on the sand, ready to blow away with the next gust of wind. “Don’t... don’t tell me you don’t remember me.”

Juan squinted at him, either because of the sun or because he really was trying to place Simon’s face. “I’m sorry, *señor*. Many people come here.”

“You’re... you’re serious? You really don’t...” He lost his breath as his chest refused to take in the salty air.

“I’m sorry.” Juan offered an apologetic shrug.

Simon opened his mouth, only to have the crash of a wave drown out the pathetic *but* that left his lips.

Juan didn’t remember.

Not that first kiss, with palms pressed into sand and eager lips stretching out for each other—even if they had been stopped by poison.

Not that ocean-rocked hand job, arms and legs tangled in the attempt to get closer when the waves wanted them apart.

Not that first time on the rickety cot, not *Beverly Hills 90210*, not eyes meeting with bright smiles as baby turtles clambered their way through the sand for their chance at life.

Not the goodnight kisses that turned into good morning kisses. Not bright poison frogs or skinny-dipping in the Pacific.

It’d all been forgettable.

There was nothing left to say.

Juan walked on past him, over a sand dune and out of sight.

“So?” Alyssa’s book lay abandoned when Simon returned to her. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” Simon sat heavily in his chair. For a moment he stared off into space—into the space he and Juan had occupied only a moment ago—but

when Alyssa's worried eyes came into focus he retrieved his fallen sunglasses and slammed them on. "He didn't remember me."

Alyssa got up to sit beside him. "I'm sorry." She placed a gentle hand on his back, and he was still too stunned to pull away.

"It... it has been like a year or whatever," he mumbled, but his voice came out sounding distant and thin.

"Uh huh." Her fingertips pressed into his shoulder. "It was more than just casual for you, wasn't it."

"What?" He forced himself to laugh. Even if the noise was bitter and clawed at his chest instead of relieving the pressure there. "No it wasn't. Why would you think that?"

"Maybe it has something to do with the number of times you've used the word *casual* to describe it. I mean, who are you trying to convince?"

Simon let a deep, shuddering breath pass through his body as Alyssa's arm slipped all the way around him into a side-hug. "Doesn't matter anyway. He didn't feel the same way."

"Sorry, little brother," she murmured, and he allowed his head to roll onto her shoulder for a moment of comfort.

"Everything okay?" Simon jerked up to the sight of his father—khaki shorts, white vacation shirt, drink in hand.

"Heartbreak," Alyssa informed him. Simon pushed her away, his face reddening from more than just the glare of the sun.

"Shut up."

Their father took a seat across from them. "Sorry, kiddo. Will a drink help?" He held his out to Simon.

Simon rolled his eyes beneath his sunglasses.

"This about that Eric kid?"

A genuine laugh—even if it was slightly watery—broke free from his lips.

"Uh, no." He snatched the drink away and took a long, calming sip. "And thanks."

Alyssa snorted beside him. “Yeah, Dad. Eric was *so* last month.”

The crunch of sand under Simon’s bare feet made him smile. It’d been a whole year since he’d felt it—since he’d been anywhere near warm enough to wander around in shorts and nothing else. The humid air already had him breaking out in a light coating of sweat, but he didn’t plan on leaving the shoreline, so relief was only a handful of splashed water away.

He wished he’d brought his special camera, but it was still packed with the rest of his school stuff, and it was little cumbersome to have to lug around. Tonight he just wanted to walk.

Alone.

An acidic churn of his stomach dampened his good mood. He forced himself into a run for some distraction, veering into the cold waves. Maybe things hadn’t turned out like a stupid fairy tale, but *his* memories were still worth something. And maybe eventually he’d be able to write Juan out of them, and just recall the first time he’d held a hatchling, or the adrenaline in his veins when he’d literally fallen over a majestic sea turtle. He didn’t need Juan for those things.

Juan.

Standing right in front of him.

Simon tripped over his feet and wound up sprawled in the fine white sand. It worked its way everywhere, sticking to the sweat on his chest, on his stomach, his neck, and even his face.

Quiet laughter joined the sound of the waves slapping against his hip and thigh.

Juan stretched out his arm to help him up. Simon waited a second before taking it, groaning into the sand and sending little flecks of broken shells flying.

In the dark, the whites of Juan’s eyes alone shone out to him. “You are not hurt this time?”

Simon took stock of himself, pushing the sticky wet sand around on his skin as it refused to brush off easily. “No, I’m f—”

Hold it. *This time?*

He met Juan’s gaze. “You’re a fucking liar.”

Juan immediately turned away, toward the ocean. But Simon wasn’t going to let him get off that easily. Not again.

“What the hell?” He grabbed Juan’s shoulder and spun him around. “That was fucking cold, what you did to me this morning. What was that for?”

Juan wouldn’t look at him. His lips were pressed together firmly, and his chest rose and fell a few times, in sync with the waves.

Finally he shrugged. “I remember now.”

“Bullshit.”

The stream of a flashlight burst out from near the bluff on the other side of the cove, breaking Simon’s train of thought—which had been close to making him punch Juan in his lying face.

“Fuck! I have a Taser... shit, I hope it didn’t get wet.” He took a few rapid footsteps in the direction of the light. “Better not be those fucking assholes.”

Juan’s hand on his chest stopped him. Simon didn’t have a tan yet, so his skin looked almost deathly pale under Juan’s dark fingers. “It’s okay, Simon. The mother left already. I have the eggs.” He pointed to the sack tied at his side. “They may search the emptied nest, but they will find nothing.”

Simon frowned. Even if the eggs were out of danger, it wasn’t so great that the threat to the species remained. And his heartbeat refused to slow down—maybe because Juan still had his hand against it. “Simon, huh? So now you remember me and my name.”

Juan’s hand slipped away. “Fine. I am a liar. That surprises you? You don’t know me.”

Simon rolled his eyes. “You love that line, don’t you.”

Juan began walking along the water’s edge, his footsteps nearly silent in the wet sand.

Simon followed. “Olive ridley or Pacific green?” he asked.

Juan’s eyes flicked to him in surprise.

“The eggs.” Simon gestured to the sack.

“Green.”

“Cool. You gonna tell me why you lied?”

Several possibilities floated through Simon’s head. Maybe Juan had a boyfriend now. Maybe he simply wasn’t interested in a repeat of last year, and figured this was the easiest way out. Maybe he already had another tourist to *pass the time* with.

“I... can’t.”

“Can’t tell me?”

“No.” Juan stopped walking and crouched down by the waves. He gathered a handful of moonlit water and splashed it on his face. “I can’t let my heart be a part of this. Boys come and boys go. It’s the way of things here.”

So it was fear. In some ways, Simon had known that was the answer all along. It was the same reason he hadn’t pursued anything a year ago—the same reason he hadn’t been brave enough to admit what he was feeling. And it was a legitimate fear, really, so he couldn’t fault either of them. But now as he stood inches away from Juan, all he felt was regret at so much lost time.

“I bet you never asked any of those boys to stay,” he said quietly.

Juan kicked the waves with a bitter chuckle. The moon caught the droplets that sprayed out from the surf and lit them up as they splashed back to the ocean. “I am not stupid.”

“And I’m not a boy anymore. Neither are you.”

The glare that issued from Juan’s eyes seemed hot enough to evaporate the puddles forming around their feet. “I’m not going to let—”

Simon snatched his hand and squeezed it. “I’m here for a year.”

Juan’s glare widened into shock, and he jerked his head toward Simon. Finally, the eye contact was there. “What? Why?”

“Spending my junior year abroad as part of my bio major. I’ll be traveling to different parts of Costa Rica, but we’ll be close by for a few months when the Leatherbacks nest... and my parents’ condo will be ready soon... so I’ll be around.”

Juan’s mouth had fallen open, and it took him a few tries to bring his lips together for a response. “So you came back for the turtles.”

“Well I certainly didn’t come back for you, you jerk.”

Juan pulled his hand away to snatch at the water and fling some at Simon’s face. Simon did the same, only with both hands. Before he’d opened his eyes again after the sting of the salt, Juan had deposited the sack of eggs on the sand and was ankles-deep in the ocean, hurling an even bigger wave in retaliation.

They descended into an all-out splash fight. The heaviness in the air lifted as Juan’s eyes crinkled up with laughter, as droplets glossed his face and darkened his hair.

An armload of water hit Simon, much of it ending up down his throat. He shut his mouth, and the next splash wound up being inhaled directly through his nose. “Ouch, fuck. Okay, truce. Truce.”

Coughs and giggles trailed off until they were left in silence again, staring at each other, Simon on the shore and Juan still up to his calves in the ocean.

Juan’s tongue shot out of his mouth and ran over his bottom lip. The memory of tasting the salt on those lips sprang to Simon’s mind, and he drew in a deep breath to keep from forcefully claiming the long-missed flavor.

“A year,” Juan said. “And... you want to pass the time?”

“No. Not with you, anyway.”

Juan drew back a step, into deeper waters. Almost as if he knew what was coming next. “Then what do you want?”

“I want there to be an *us*.”

Either Juan was sinking into the ocean floor, or he was still moving back. Maybe he was considering a cut-and-run... swimming style.

Simon pressed on anyhow. He'd come this far. "I want you to meet my family—for real this time. I think my dad would really like you. And I want to meet your grandmother... and your parents and all your brothers, eventually. I want you to help me with my Spanish, because I took a course last year, but I'm still a total beginner. I want to see where you go to school. I want to take you out to dinner. I want to wake up and have breakfast with you... I want to spend time with you in the daylight."

Not that Juan wasn't beautiful in the moonlight, even with his jaw clenched so tightly and his eyes widened in fear.

The constant slapping of the waves and the hiss of the sand being dragged out to sea seemed to grow louder in the silence that hung between them.

When Juan finally spoke, his voice was thick, like he was forcing the words out through a mouthful of saltwater. "And after a year?"

The surge of courage that had pushed Simon forward began to subside. "I... I don't know. There are risks here, obviously. And maybe it won't work out. Maybe we're too alike."

Juan snorted. "*Alike?* How is it you think we are alike?"

"I dunno." Simon had to grin a little. Maybe not the best choice of words. "I meant... we're both afraid of risking our heart... or we wouldn't have walked away from each other last year and pretended like we felt nothing."

The lack of a denial on Juan's part was at least something.

"I didn't come back here for you, Juan, but I did come back because of the things I learned through spending time with you. You kinda... inspired me, or whatever. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't have some secret hope I'd get to see you again. So now that I have... I guess what I'm saying is... I'm willing to take the chance."

And there it was. All of it out in the open—emotions far too risky to have ever been voiced before.

Juan turned around and faced the oncoming waves. But even from that position, the shake of his head was clearly visible.

No. Just like before.

Simon's heart sank into his stomach, though a sad smile touched his lips. Still no fairy tale, but at least he'd had the guts to say what he hadn't a year ago.

And at least he knew he wasn't *forgettable*.

"Simon," Juan said.

He still loved the way Juan said his name—the rich way the *o* rolled out of his mouth. But this time Juan had only whispered it, like he was expecting the ocean to swallow it up. Like he was half-hoping Simon would miss it and walk away.

Simon remained where he was. "Yeah?"

A powerful breaker smacked Juan's legs as he turned around, but he didn't let it push him forward. Feet still firmly planted beneath the water, he slowly stretched out his hand.

"Quédate."

In two seconds, Simon was at Juan's side, knocking him over and into an oncoming wave. The ocean spit them back out again and they rolled together in the sand, clumps of it sticking all over their bodies and scraping their lips as they kissed.

Because beginner or not, Simon understood that word.

Stay.

THE END

Author Bio

Sara Alva is a former small-town girl currently living in big-city L.A. with a husband, two cats, and an avocado tree. She recently discovered—after a year in her house—that she also has a fig tree in her backyard, which might mean she needs to get out more. But sometimes the stories waiting to be told demand more attention, and when she puts fingers to keyboard, it’s usually to write about journeys of self-discovery, heartache, personal growth, friendship and love. When she isn’t writing, she’s teaching or dancing.

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