

**First impressions:
Amber Deveraux meets Fletcher Broadbent
on the plane to Cancun**

The landscape was smearing beneath the plane in a monotony of green.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” he said.

She wasn’t listening. Then she glanced up and realized he talking to her. “I’m sorry?” she said, partly apologizing but mostly annoyed. He’d left her alone this whole time, and she was hoping they could make it all the way down before she had to engage in any idle chit-chat.

“The jungle—it’s beautiful. You can’t help staring at it.” He was tan and tight and dressed impeccably in that studied casualness you see in Palm Beach or Beverly Hills. “I’m Fletcher Broadbent,” he said, extending his hand.

She looked at it, debating. Long fingers, soft skin, gold watch. “Amber Deveraux,” she said, shaking his hand. Then she quickly pulled back and looked out the window. “I just didn’t think it would be so . . . vast.”

He leaned toward her, sampling her aroma like a dog lifting its nose to a scent in the air. “It’s a pretty unique place,” he said. “You can’t see them, but scattered all over the Yucatán Peninsula are underground pools—cenotes they’re called—that have formed deep caverns and passageways, some linked for hundreds of miles. They are the only source of fresh water on the entire peninsula. And there,”—now his arm reached past her cheek to point out the window, and she followed his tan hand down to the tips of his precisely manicured fingernails—“off the coast, starting just south of Cancun and running all the way down past Belize is the second largest reef in the world, second only to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia.”

Her eyes caught a thin brown smudge tracing the coastline right where the green of the jungle ended and the blue of the water began.

“You *are* here for the diving, right?” He settled back in his seat.

“Diving?”

“Scuba diving. Some of the finest diving in the world is here. The water? The reef? The cenotes?”

She sat up straighter and turned to him. “I’m from Idaho. You know, mountains, snow, dirt. I don’t dive.”

“It’s a pity,” he said as if he actually meant it. “You should learn. It’s easy. It’s a different world down there. Alien and dangerous, yet magical and alluring.”

“So you do, I assume? Dive, I mean.”

He took a deep breath. “No more,” he said, losing the breath. “Ears,” he pointed with his thumb. “Too deep, too long, too often. Not that there’s that much to hear down there, other than your own breathing and the burst of bubbles out of your regulator. I just can’t take the pressure anymore. Can’t clear my ears below five, six feet. So now I have to enjoy it vicariously.”

“Guidebooks?” she asked.

“What?”

“Guidebooks,” she repeated, holding up a dog-eared tourist guide. “You know, your ears and all that. So what, all you can do now is read about diving in guidebooks like this? You know, vicariously.”

He smiled. Naturally, his teeth were as perfect as the pleats in his silk pants. “No,” he said, half chuckling, “dive shops.”

She just stared, not sure exactly when she started to disbelieve him.

“I own dive shops,” he tried to clarify. “A chain of dive shops actually, all across the country. And I own a small ship outfitted just for dive cruises. So now the only ‘diving’ I do is to hear stories from my customers in the shops and on the ship. That’s actually why I’m down here. The ship is arriving from next week, and I’m going to sail back with her to Miami.”

She blinked. She still didn’t believe him, but she blinked. “Sounds pretty exciting.”

“It’s business,” he said in a suddenly throw-away tone. “Got to make a living, right? Might as well do something you love.”

He was being oddly pedestrian, she thought, for someone who was carrying on so poetically a few moments before.

Then he leaned in again like he was about to whisper a secret. “So this is your first time down here?”

She leaned back toward her window. “Am I that obvious?”

“Well,” he said, “your guidebook.”

“What?”

He nodded toward her hand. “Your guidebook.”

She glanced at the tired paperback. “Oh. Yeah, my guidebook.” Then smiled up at him. “Yes, you’re right, I do like to know where I’m going before I get there.”

“So you’re staying in Cancun?”

Now her spiny sense dialed up to High. “Uh,” she stammered and stalled. Then finally, “I’m staying at a little resort down the coast on the Maya Riviera.” She anxiously thumbed through the book to one of the pages. “Punta Costa it’s called.”

CENOTE

As she flipped the pages, a small picture flew out, like a passport photo or from one of those machines with the hard seats and dirty curtains that make you twist your face into contortions not normally possible for a human being.

The photo spun in slow motion to the floor, and he leaned down and picked it up, looking at it casually before handing it back to her. "Someone special?"

She avoided his eyes. "Someone." She tucked the picture back between the pages.

"Punta Costa," he finally said, chewing the name over in his mind. "Never heard of it."

"That's the whole point."

He leaned toward her, but she inched closer to the window. "Oh, I see," he said slowly. "You're here to forget something. Or somebody."

"Something like that."

Now he settled back in his chair like a professor about to reveal some clever academic trick to his star student. "You don't know this place," he began. "People come here trying to forget. But they leave here trying to remember." She randomly fanned the pages of her book. "It's just the magic of the Yucatán. From up here, it looks like one giant blanket of boring green jungle. But down there, on the ground, in among the people, it's all light and life and passion and energy and spirit. It grabs you by the heart, and shakes you up until you don't know whether you're looking at the world or it's looking at you. It opens your eyes and makes you see yourself."

"Wow," she said almost under her breath. "Maybe you should write guidebooks."

He turned his head toward her and smiled. "You won't find it in any guidebook," he said. "You find it inside yourself."

"Well," she said, looking back out the window, "as wonderful as you make it sound, I think I like the view from up here better. I mean, I don't even see any roads down there."

"Oh, they're there," he said. "You just have to know where to look for them."