



 Belize
Navidad

KAREN HULENE BARTELL

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Prologue

Carole Kennedy craned her neck to see out the commuter plane's cockpit window, marveling at the cerulean and indigo waters below. Their gradient blues indicated their depths like an immense mood ring. The warm, shallow waters nearest the shore shimmered a pale aquamarine in the sunlight. As the depths increased, the temperatures decreased, and the hues intensified, becoming azure, then sapphire, until at the reef, where the waters dropped off two hundred feet, the colors deepened into a cool, cobalt blue. Vibrant with life, these tropical waters captivated her. Their capricious whitecaps seemed to wave at her, inviting her to join their warm freedom and escape from the icicle constructs of her Manhattan public relations world.

But she had a deadline and, with a sigh, she returned to the rewrites on her laptop. The only way she could talk her managing editor into giving her Thanksgiving week off was to telecommute. No matter that her entire future hinged on these few days. The deadline was this afternoon, and her editor was adamant. Finish the rewrites by COB today or cancel the flight to Belize. Working for Campbell and Glenrock, New York's most prestigious PR firm, presented its own challenges. Editing forty pages on a laptop with a failing battery while experiencing air turbulence on the plane was only one of them.

Seated in the narrow copilot seat, Carole caught a reflection of herself in the window. Her mouth was set in a determined moue, her lips curling at the corners like a cat's. Her heart-shaped face with its pointed chin and

intelligent, green eyes fringed with long, dark lashes gave her face an arresting appeal. Shaking her dark mane to brush a stray hair from her face, she focused on her notebook's screen.

The ad copy was for a new client. If she could edit it by the end of the day, she had a chance of nailing the account. It could mean a promotion. Pre-Christmas was the busiest season, the worst time to take off. She resented being out of the office, missing any opportunities that might present themselves.

Still, the thought of seeing Nick McKuen brought a lilting smile to her lips. She pressed her knees together, an involuntary reflex to the butterflies she felt in the pit of her stomach, the longing for him a tangible ache. It had been three lonely months since he had visited her in Manhattan.

Closing her eyes, she visualized the last time she had seen him. Particularly poignant, it was the night Nick had returned to Belize. They both had known it could be their last time together. They had agreed that their relationship could not drift aimlessly as it had for the past two years. They would either marry or break up, and they would give themselves three months to decide.

It had been twilight, the last rays of sunlight filtering through the wooden shutters of her East Side, brownstone walkup. She could see his haunting eyes, as cerulean blue as the sea, staring intently at her from his angular, deeply-tanned face. His long, sun-streaked, blond hair tickled her cheek as he bent to kiss her goodbye. She tucked an errant strand behind his ear while he kissed the hollow of her neck. Harbored by the velvet warmth of his lips, she felt anchored, moored for a timeless moment in his arms.

After he left for the airport, she felt adrift, flotsam on the sea of life. It was this connection that had compelled her to meet Nick in Belize. Even if it were the last time, she had to see him once more.

Responding to a deeper urgency, she had come to force the issue—either marry or break up, so she could get on with her life.

Carol returned to her computer with resolve. The sooner she finished the editing, the sooner she could turn her attention to Nick, but the blue beauty of the sea below distracted her. It waved its independence like a vast blue flag, tantalizing and taunting her in a love/hate relationship. It was impossible to view its grandeur without thinking of Nick. The two merged as indivisibly as the blue hues. The sea was his office. It was his mistress,

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her competition. Nick was a dive master with a start-up dive shop. Insisting that his burgeoning business in Belize needed his constant supervision for at least the next two years, he was adamant. He couldn't leave.

The problem was, she couldn't leave New York, either. There *was* nowhere else for a struggling PR rep. To leave in a year or two might be a different story. Perhaps by then she could start her own firm elsewhere after having put in her time in a large corporation, paid her dues, made her contacts. Or maybe she could finally write that novel she had been secretly plotting, but for now those ideas were out of the question.

To leave New York at this point in her career would be to give up any hope of success in her chosen field. He wanted his right to pursue his business. She wanted her right to pursue her craft. *I love Belize, the sea. I love him. But I have just as much right to succeed as he does.*

Why didn't he come to New York for a year, and then they could return to Belize and his business? That was her reason for making the trip, to deliver an ultimatum: choose between his business and her. She mentally rehearsed her speech for the ninetieth time—

For two years, we've been trekking between New York and Belize, taking turns with the airfare and the long-distance phone bills, re-affirming our love every three months, and then refusing to move to the other's environment. It's a few weeks before Christmas, and I want to settle this issue before New Year's. Let's either marry, with one of us moving to the other's territory, or call off this long-distance relationship. I have to get on with my life.

Chapter One

Once Carole saw the white sand beaches and palm-tree lined airport as the plane touched down in San Pedro, her resolve faltered. The island's breezy openness contrasted sharply with her confining office cubicle and cramped apartment in New York. She breathed in the fragrance of the frangipani and the brisk ocean air as she kissed Nick. In his arms, she realized life without him would be unimaginable. Their lives were inextricably intertwined.

"I've missed you," he said, holding her tightly between kisses, not letting go for a moment. Still clasping her hand, he picked up her suitcase with his free hand. Her laptop case slung across her shoulder, she picked up her carry-on, and they walked to his converted golf cart—San Pedro's main form of transportation.

As Nick drove her to his oceanfront condo, she noticed the new construction along the town's main roads. It was obvious that the sleepy fishing community was fast becoming a tourist mecca.

"It's a boomtown," she said, surprised at the rapid growth in the six months since she had last visited.

He smiled a boyish, dimpled grin. "Ambergris Caye is becoming the next Cancun. It's got the best reef outside of Australia's Barrier Reef, and it's only a couple hours from Houston." His expression took on a sly nuance. "You can see why I want to capitalize on it. A year from now may be too late."

Her joy dimmed as she recognized that his response was actually the opening remark in their ongoing debate. In answer, Carole reminded him of her own responsibilities. "Don't let me forget to email my edits back to the office. The deadline is four o'clock Belizean time."

He frowned but did not counter her rebuttal as they stepped onto his condo's veranda. The coral and crimson bougainvillea veiled the second-story balcony from the beach, isolating them. As the palm trees whispered their welcome in the gentle November breeze, Carole and Nick lost themselves in each other, oblivious of time or space.

"I've missed you," he murmured between kisses, but words were unnecessary. That he had missed her was evident, and Carole's misgivings dissolved in the genuine warmth of his love.

He led her to an umbrellaed garden table with a bottle of wine and a bowl of fruit, hidden from view by palm fronds and clouds of ruby bougainvillea, white frangipani, and blue-green sea grapes. Dappled with sunlight and shade, they toasted each other in the play of light. The heat from the November sun warmed the overhanging frangipani blossoms, and the tight white blooms unfurled, releasing their scent, adding another level of enjoyment, and heightening the pleasure of the moment. Being with Nick again, reconnecting, Carole relaxed, feeling the tension wash away like waves washing away footprints in the sand.

Then the jarring, incessant trill of his cell phone interrupted their conversation. Carole murmured, "Let it ring."

Nick agreed, but his body tensed, and he became distracted, his focus obviously elsewhere. When the phone rang again a moment later, she did not try to dissuade him from answering it. Instead, she sat back in the cushioned seat, listening to the business tones of his deep voice.

Covering the mouthpiece, Nick whispered, "It's Miguel, my assistant. Several clients flew in from Houston unexpectedly, and suddenly we're swamped with business. They want to go to Shark Ray Alley. Developers and legal eagles want to test their machismo by diving with nurse sharks and sting rays."

"Can't Miguel handle it?"

He shook his head. "There's a second group—with my *best* client—insisting we move up tomorrow's scheduled dive to this afternoon." He planted a quick kiss on her forehead. "Sorry, love. I didn't anticipate this, but I can't say no to these groups."

The old grudge resurfaced. *Nothing's changed.* She kept silent so she wouldn't say too much. Despite her attempt at self-control, her tight, white lips and narrowed eyes gave her away.

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Nick saw the storm clouds gathering and tried to placate her. "Look, this will only take a few hours. We'll have all evening, and we'll have all day tomorrow, maybe take in a tour of Altun Ha." Hand poised over the mouthpiece, he smiled winningly, waiting for her approval.

Despite the initial disappointment, Carole returned a grin. Nick knew the workings of her mind only too well. The Preclassic Mayan ruins at Altun Ha were something she had wanted to see for years. In fact, she had an idea for a novel set in the ancient ruins.

Relenting, she drew in a long breath. "All right, but I'm counting on spending *a lot* of time with you this evening."

He smiled at her as he ended the phone conversation. "Give me a minute to change, and I'll drop you off at the hotel on my way to the dock."

Five minutes later, Nick reappeared on the veranda in a pair of shorts and sandals. Carole compared his wardrobe to her own. Wearing a business suit, stockings, and heels, she was dressed for New York's cool weather and cold business climate. *Got to admit, the island's informality appeals to me.*



That evening, she and Nick walked hand-in-hand to the end of the pier. The first rays of moonlight illuminated their path, while the blinking, twinkling stars shone overhead. Nick explained that a water taxi would pick them up and deliver them to the restaurant at the far southern end of the island.

"Why don't we take your golf cart?" she asked, barely suppressing the grin.

His smile surfaced in his voice as he leaned against a bulkhead. "Why do you have that silly smirk on your face every time you talk about my golf cart?"

"I never knew anyone whose only vehicle was a golf cart." Her raw-silk dress billowed in the balmy breeze, and her dark hair blew gently about her shoulders.

Nick put his arms around her slim waist, playfully pulling her to him. "Until a few years ago, carts were the only motorized transportation on the island, although now there are a few cars and pickups."

"And boats—which reminds me. How did your dive go today?"

Warming to his element, Nick enthusiastically plunged into a description. "We went to the Blue Hole. Diving conditions were perfect. Visibility was two hundred feet after we broke through the thermocline."

"The thermo-what?" she asked, leaning into him as she fell under his spell.

"The thermocline is a layer of water that separates areas of different temperatures. Because of the depth, the temperature gradient is abrupt. Once you dip below it, the cold water increases visibility substantially." His blue eyes grew wider as he related the experience. "It was unbelievable! The divers were experienced, so we went deep."

"How deep?" Carole turned her attention to his story.

"About a hundred and fifty feet straight down sheer limestone cliffs. You should learn to dive, Carole. Get certified. It's another world down there—serene, blue, beautiful. It'd open up new vistas for you!"

She shrugged. "I've seen the Blue Hole."

"When?"

"This morning, from the plane. We flew right over it. With the reef surrounding it, it looked like a gigantic eye in the Caribbean—a cobalt-blue pupil in a turquoise iris."

His lip lifted in a sour smile. "Your perspective is off. Viewing it from two hundred feet above in a fly-by isn't experiencing it from the inside out."

"It's a giant sinkhole, isn't it?" she asked, trying to engage him in another line of conversation. "If most of the sea life occurs in the shallow waters around its rim, I could experience that by snorkeling."

"Yes," he agreed. "You'd see coral heads and purple seafans, but you wouldn't see the stalactite formations. They don't start until a hundred and ten feet down."

"I've seen stalactites before." She jerked her chin. "I've been in caves."

"You've seen them, but you haven't experienced them. You haven't swum beneath their monstrous formations. You haven't seen the surface's eerie blue light above them and marveled that these stalactites were once on dry land. You haven't played hide-and-seek with hammerhead sharks among their limestone columns."

"I'm perfectly happy snorkeling, seeing the colorful schools of fish near the surface. You even said yourself that's where most life exists, in the shallow waters."

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His eyes locked with hers. "Don't you see? You're just skimming the proverbial surface. You have to dive deeper to fully appreciate it." His tone became serious. "That can be said about life, too."

"I don't need to scuba dive to enjoy life." She purposely sidestepped his analogy.

"If you'd ever stay longer than a few days, I'd teach you how to dive. It might change your perspective about life, about Belize, even about us. Why don't you stay another week?"

This time, the sound of the water taxi's motor came to her rescue. "Is that our ride?" she asked, relieved to avoid his question.

The stars shone overhead like twinkling white lights on a Christmas tree. From the deck, it seemed as if Nick and she were alone at sea, enjoying the night in total privacy. The boat's captain was silent, either lost in his own thoughts or discreet. Except for the muffled sound of the engine and the water lapping against the ship's hull, all was quiet. Carole sighed, at peace for the first time since she had arrived.

As they approached the southern tip of the island, she caught her breath. "Nick, look at the palm trees!" The trunks of gracefully arching palm trees were wrapped with thousands upon thousands of miniature white lights. The entire shoreline of the restaurant was lit up with an elegant grandeur that enhanced the setting's natural beauty. Because the trees grew along the bay's edge, the water doubled the effect of the lights, mirroring their wavy reflection.

"Do you like it?" Nick's eyes danced as the tiny lights' reflection played over them. "I thought you'd enjoy the restaurant's subtropical ambiance."

"I love it!"

Strains of a mariachi band wafted across the water. As they approached, they could see couples dining at small tables beneath the palm trees. Candles in hurricane lamps flickered from each tabletop. An infectious peal of laughter crossed the water, and in response, they shared a grin.

The water taxi pulled alongside the t-shaped pier. Nick climbed out and then held out his hand to steady Carole's high step up to the quay. His grip was warm and reassuring. In the twilight of the velvety dark night and the twinkling lights, she felt the underlying strength of his grasp. For the second time that night, she felt secure.

A waiter met them at the end of the pier and escorted them to a table beneath the stars. Two impressive palms listed overhead, their trunks wound round and round with strings of tiny lights. The tiny table boasted fresh linen and a candle that glimmered flirtatiously in its hurricane glass.

"Try the pina coladas," Nick said. "They make them with fresh coconut cream." Nick also ordered conch ceviche.

"Isn't ceviche made from raw fish?" she asked, turning up her nose. "And do you mean conch, as in the conch seashell?"

He laughed, correcting her pronunciation. "You sound like a tourist. It's not pronounced conch with a *ch* sound. The locals pronounce it *conk*, with a *k* sound—to rhyme with *honk*. But to answer your questions—yes, the ceviche is 'cooked' in limejuice, and you're right, it's made from the meat of the familiar conch shell. It's delicious! Try it."

The waiter quickly returned with two pina coladas, ceviche appetizers, tiny seafood forks, and crackers. Carole nibbled the skewered fresh pineapple garnish from the tall glass and lifted the drink in a toast.

"To a great evening," she whispered over the sound of water lapping at the shore.

"To us," he said, lightly clinking his glass against hers. Then he heaped a fork full of the ceviche on a cracker and offered it to her. "Try it."

She checked its contents skeptically in the candlelight—finely chopped red chili peppers, onion, cucumber, and white bits of conch with tiny green leaves. She breathed in its aroma, smiling in recognition—cilantro. She bit into the morsel daintily, wanting only to sample its taste. Then her face lit up with delight.

"Nick, this is delicious!"

"You have to try things before you decide whether or not you like them. Don't pre-judge."

She grimaced at his rebuke and popped the rest of the cracker into her mouth, chewing with her eyes closed, relishing its zesty taste.

"Enjoy it while you can," he warned. "Conch season is ending."

"What's in season?"

"Lobster."

"Then let's order lobster. 'Tis the season, ho-ho-ho." She gave a poor imitation of Santa before breaking into a giggle and motioning to the waiter.

Sporting a smile as white as their starched tablecloth, the waiter recommended a whole lobster. "Butterflied, flame-broiled to perfection,

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and served with a garlic-basil sauce. But the only way to really enjoy it is with Belize's own Beliken beer."

They laughed and finished their pina coladas just as their waiter reappeared with a frosty mug of microbrewed beer.

After the waiter set the mug in front of Carole, she asked, "Where's his?"

"I thought the gentleman didn't want any."

Nick declined with a wave to the waiter. "None for me, thanks." Then he turned to Carole. "One's my limit before a dive. I shouldn't have had that, but tonight's a special night." He flashed Carole a warm but tentative smile.

"What do you mean, 'before a dive'?" She waited, consciously controlling her jaw from clenching. Suspicious, but refusing to jump to conclusions.

His eyes shifted, but finally met hers. "I wasn't going to tell you this until after dinner. I didn't want to ruin the eve—"

"Tell me what?" she interrupted, poised for the inevitable.

He sighed. "An important night-diving gig came up."

She rolled her eyes, knowing what was next. "So let me guess—we have to cut the evening short, so you can accommodate one more client . . . tonight . . . our first night together, right?"

"Carole, it came up unexpectedly. My best customer is paying very handsomely for a private dive." His eyes crinkled at the corners, pleading with hers.

She looked past him, refusing to meet his eyes, focusing instead on the starry skies. "When you walked out this afternoon, you promised we'd have all evening."

"I couldn't refuse. This client comes into town once, sometimes twice, a month. I can't say *no* to him."

"But you can to me?"

When her eyes met his, he looked away. Gone was the softness of her lips. Her jaw was angular and stiff, her lips white and tight.

"I feel cheated. I've been waiting to see you for three, long, *lonely* months."

Gesturing with his hands, he tried to explain. "Words are inadequate." Sighing, he tried again. "Carole, I want to be with you, but starting out in a business is so risky. I can't afford to offend any customers."

"Yet you'll risk our relationship for a buck, is that it? Let's see if I have this right. It's all right to ignore me *twice* on our first day together in

three months, but you're concerned that you *might* offend a customer." When he couldn't answer, she stared hard at him, her eyes piercing his. "Is this how you feel?"

Eyes still averted, he mumbled, "I'm really sorry." Then he raised his head, his eyes searching hers. "But that's the way this business is. Dive shops come and go in a season. If I can build up a solid clientele over the next year," he raised his eyebrows, calculating the time more realistically, "a year *and a half*, the business will take care of itself. Trust me. This is just temporary, just until the dive shop gets on its feet."

"Excuse me," said the waiter, interrupting their conversation. He began clearing the glasses and silverware, making room for the dishes. "Your lobster," he said, ceremoniously removing the cover from the sizzling shellfish.

The aroma would have stopped conversation even without the waiter's flourish. The fragrances of cilantro, basil, lime, butter, garlic, and serrano peppers filled the air. Suddenly, Carole realized she had not eaten all day. She was famished.

They called a tacit truce and dug into their meal with relish, the seafood helping to restore Carole's good spirits. They ate in silence, welcoming the strains of the mariachi band as it wandered from table to table.

When the band approached their table, it began playing *Feliz Navidad*. After tipping them, Nick attempted a light touch, singing '*Belize*' *Navidad*. Instead of cheering her, it depressed her. Even in the moonlight, Nick could see the grim set of her mouth.

When the band moved to the next table, she sat upright, her spine her only support as she struggled with her emotions. Suddenly it became clear, and she decided to voice her ultimatum. "Nick, although I'd meant to work up to this and not spring it on you our first night together"

"Here it comes," he muttered. He touched his napkin to his lips, folded it, and set it on the empty platter, a sign that dinner and the truce were over.

"I can't spend a year or two twiddling my toes on a beach, waiting for you. I have to get on with my life. You're going to have to choose between your business and me." Nick paled, stunned, despite knowing the inevitable moment would arrive.

He made his case again. "In eighteen months . . . two years tops . . . the business will be able to maintain itself without my constant supervision,

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but, in the meantime, I have to be there day and night. I don't have a choice in the matter."

"Oh, yes, you do." She felt almost as if she were dealing with a PR client. This was a negotiation, and she was all business. "I'm giving you that choice right now."

He swallowed hard, moistening his dry lips before starting. "Look, why don't you move to Belize for that year or two, and then, after that, I promise we can move anywhere you choose—even Manhattan."

She knew how New York was anathema to his love of the sea and island life, and she softened. Leaning across the table, she reached for his hand and reminded him why that was impossible for the fortieth, fiftieth time in their relationship.

"Nick, there *is* nowhere else for a struggling PR rep. New York is the only place."

"So we can go back, together, *after* I make of go of the dive shop." "We've been over this before. This next year or two are critical for my career, too. If we went back now, stayed until I put in my time with a large corporation, paid my dues, and made my contacts, it would be a different story. We could return to Belize, and you could start your business then. Maybe I could start my own firm here. With Internet access, I could have my own web site. Or maybe I could finally write that novel I've been noting in my journal. But for now those ideas are out of the question."

"You've mentioned the web. You can be connected to New York instantaneously," he offered.

"It isn't the same thing as being on Madison Avenue, getting established. For me to leave New York at this point in my career would be to give up any hope of success."

He took a different tact. "Who says you have to work? I can take care of us on my income."

Carole snickered. Then she gave him an alternate choice. "What do you want? An individual with a career, a soul, a creative life of her own? Or do you want a camp follower, an apron-clad 'little woman' venting her frustrated creativity in the kitchen?"

"I'm not trying to limit you, Carole. I only want us to be together."

She saw he was sincere, but only partly honest. "*And* you want the green light to pursue your business, right?"

"And pursue my business." He nodded his agreement.

"Well, I want the right to pursue my business, too. I love Belize. I love *you*, but I have a duty to myself to be the best I can be at what I do." She felt like shaking him. "Nick, don't you get it? I have as much right to success as you. Why don't you come to New York for a year, and then we can return to Belize and your business?"

Carole saw the set of his mouth, listened without hearing to his repetitious reasons why he couldn't leave Belize, and was crestfallen. She had looked forward to this trip for three months, doing without small pleasures to afford it, turning down dates with attractive men. She had spent too many lonely Saturday nights. All to be with the man she loved.

This time would be different, she had told herself. *This* time they would settle their lifestyle differences once and for all. She had forced the issue, knowing the risk, and she had lost.

"What a lousy start to the Christmas season," she muttered. As the mariachi band began playing *Feliz Navidad* softly in the background, she added sarcastically, "Belize *Navidad*."

"Let's—" Nick stopped mid-sentence as three men approached.

"Nick, what an unexpected surprise," said the man leading the trio. Then he noticed Carole. "I see you have company. Sorry, don't want to impose."

Masking her disappointment, Carole smiled politely at the new arrivals. She noticed a certain air of authority about the tall man in front. Wearing khaki pants and a navy jacket, he personified island success.

"Carole Kennedy, I'd like you to meet Damon Eastwood."

"A pleasure," said Damon, extending his right hand.

"How do you do," Carole murmured, annoyed at the interruption. As she shook hands, she noticed a gold Rolex peeking from his jacket's sleeve. When she tried to break loose, Damon hung on, smiling at her, watching her.

"What brings you to Belize, Ms. Kennedy?"

Trying to extricate her hand, she said grimly, "Pleasure."

"Taking a break from business, then," he said, still holding onto her. "What is your business?"

None of yours. The nerve of this guy. With a tug, she broke loose from his grip. "Public relations."

"Really? Do you have an office here? A branch?"

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"I'm not here on business," she reminded him. *Isn't anyone listening to me? Not here on business, not here on pleasure. What am I doing here?* Frustration mounting, she took a deep breath.

"This is fortunate," he said, pulling up a chair, uninvited. "Nick, you don't mind, do you?" He glanced at Nick, not expecting an answer, and then addressed the other men. "Marty, Joe, would you mind grabbing us a table? I'll be along in five minutes."

Carole was used to working with assertive clients, but this wasn't a business meeting. The evening had been a fiasco. The visit was a disaster. Her relationship with Nick was ending, and she wanted nothing except to get back to her room and lick her wounds.

Jaw set, lips pressed firmly together, Carole said pointedly, "We were just leaving."

"Then I'll make it fast—four minutes." A smile played at Damon's lips. "I can see you're a woman who speaks her mind."

With a strained smile, she muffled an exasperated sigh.

"I need a documentary video to show prospective investors how Eastwood Enterprises is helping the ecology as well as the economy of Belize. Interested?"

"As I mentioned—"

"A week's work for five K."

She lifted her left eyebrow, intrigued by his generous offer.

"I'm desperate," he said. "The videographer's schedule moved up, and I need a copywriter—starting yesterday. You'd be doing me a service if you could write the preliminary copy."

Jaw slack, she took a deep breath. "I'd have to—"

"You'd have to think it over, of course." He took a business card from his wallet and scribbled on it. "This is my cell." Standing up, he handed her his card. "Sleep on it. If you're interested, call me in the morning. We can discuss it over breakfast." Then he turned to Nick. "We should be back from the dive by eight, shouldn't we?"

Lifting her eyebrows in surprise, Carole silently questioned Nick. He nodded. "Damon's the client I told you about."



The water taxi met them at the end of the pier. Though the night was still starry and clear, Carole focused inwardly, ignoring the sky's grandeur. Despite the balmy temperature, she wrapped her light shawl around her shoulders, creating yet another barrier, ever so subtle, between Nick and herself. Apparently, even the captain sensed the chilled relationship, and he started up an animated conversation with Nick. Absorbed in her thoughts, she welcomed the solitude.

Though she wanted to discuss Damon's business offer, she didn't feel like sharing anything with Nick—neither her thoughts nor her life. Marriage seemed more distant than the three thousand miles to Manhattan. They spoke in polite monosyllables during the short walk to her hotel. Their shoulders brushed against each other, but neither tried to hold the other's hand.

"Better make it an early night," he said. "Have to get the diving gear set up for the trip." Taking his cell phone from his belt, he handed it to her. "Your cell won't work in Belize. Use this while you're here."

She opened her mouth to tell him how disappointed she was about the evening, how saddened she was about this turn of events, but all that came out was, "Thanks."

"Looks like we'll have to postpone our tour to Altun Ha for another day, but we'll do something tomorrow. I'll call you in the morning."

Silent, she nodded. At the door, he bent his head to kiss her, but she offered only her cheek and a frosty half-smile.

"Night," she said, splaying her fingers in a wave. She needed to be alone.

She found a book online about ancient Mayan civilizations and read herself to sleep, the light still on when she woke the next morning.