

Excerpt 5 - Arrival in Belize

By the time they came to the lower end of Baja Bacalar and took the final turn south, the night sky was jet black. Not one star or street light illuminated the lonely stretch of road leading south from Chetumal. Even the parking area of the tumbledown shack at the border crossing was veiled in darkness except for a feeble beam of light shining through the rickety wallboards. They parked and got out of the car, approaching what they assumed to be Immigration. The source turned out to be a single naked light bulb dangling from an electrical wire on the ceiling.

"I've got the passports," said Max, taking Jordan from her. "Let's go."

Inside, the building was so dim it was almost impossible to make out the contents of the room. Not that there was much to see. The two men behind the counter were as black as the night sky outside. They mumbled to each other in some incomprehensible language as they fiddled with a cheap scratched-up radio.

"I thought they spoke English here," Max whispered.

"Supposedly they do," Alexis whispered back. "But I sure as hell don't know what they're saying."

"*Look hyah mon. Dis ting no work correc at all,*" said the shorter man as he twisted the knobs.

"*Mon,*" replied the taller one, "*Da yu, no de radio. Yu no know noting bout how de ting funkshun propah. Yu use de laudge button first, den de small one fu fine-tune di ting. Den yu get de stayshun clare, clare.*"

Max cleared his throat. "Excuse me?" The taller man glared at Max, severely inconvenienced. "Hi. Is this Immigration and Customs?"

With an air of importance the shorter man stood up and walked over to the young couple.

"*I de Immigrashun mon. He de Customs mon. Mek Ah see yu paypahs.*"

If it had been difficult to go through Mexico without being able to speak Spanish, the language barrier of Belize was proving to be an even greater problem. Asking the border officials to repeat themselves was useless and frustrating, as an unintelligible word, spoken more slowly, is often just as unintelligible. Not only were the men officious, self-righteous, and belligerent, but the Immigration officer was highly suspicious of their motives for entering the country in the first place. How long they were going to stay? Where would they stay? Who did they know? How much money did they have to spend? The Customs man wanted to know what they were bringing into the country. TVs?

Guns? Watches, metal detectors? Tools, alcohol, or illegal drugs? In exasperation, Max finally slipped each of them five U.S. dollars, and again, it worked.

At one-thirty a.m. on January 20, 1976, the Lord family gained legal entry into Belize, the land of promise. They drove several more miles into the consummate blackness before stopping for the night. A peculiar anxiety troubled Alexis as she tried to fall asleep in the airless van beside her husband and baby. Outside, there was no evidence of people. There was no breeze. The jungle loomed on both sides of the narrow road. The darkness was so complete, the stillness so absolute, and the sultry air so oppressively humid, that Alexis felt she'd entered the uninhabited interior of Dr. Livingston's darkest Africa.