

Excerpt 8 - Barrier reef

The magnificent barrier reef lay off the eastern coast of Belize, extending almost two hundred miles from its northern end to the southernmost tip. The reef varied in width from several hundred yards to just a few feet wide. In some areas, pinnacles pierced the surface among the thrashing breakers. In other places, it lay below the surface by eighty feet or more, where vicious riptides and turbulence created massive ravines and canyons. Consisting of calcium carbonate and trace minerals, the hulking reef had been created through infinite eons of time, as billions of coral organisms added their skeletons to the myriad formations on the ocean floor. There, marine life was bountiful. Nestled within the cradle of life, the living coral reef was a microcosm of the ocean as a whole, a stage upon which the drama of life and death was played out. From the tiniest plankton to the giant goliath grouper, the reef provided for each species to feed on the weak and inferior in the presence of superior predators, all in accordance with survival of the fittest.

Like sparkling jewels flung across the sea, a chain of tiny tropical islands sheltered inside the barrier of protected waters. Fine white coral sand glistened on the windswept beaches, while borders of coconut palms guarded the salt marshes of the mangrove interior. Most of the *cayes* were inhabited solely by thousands of seabirds: brown pelicans, gulls, frigate birds, cormorants, sandpipers, and red-footed boobies. Only a few islands supported human habitation.

The northernmost island, Ambergris Caye, boasted unspoiled miles of windward beaches and a small fishing village of perhaps two hundred people. The islanders were proud of their heritage, and they enjoyed a financial stability superior to that of the mainland, even in the early days before *gringo* tourists made their debut. Their success was due to a rich fishing industry and the San Pedro Co-op, which had enabled them to export fish, shrimp, and lobster to the United States.

The sea was their life. Once a year, the villagers held a somber celebration to St. Peter, the patron saint of fisherman. The midnight mass continued long into the night and ended with a silent procession to the beached boats. In the last hours of darkness, each boat was blessed with a votive candle and fervent prayers were offered for the safe return of the fishermen. As dawn broke on the horizon, the candles were blown out and the men paddled into the pink misted dawn.