

Chapter 1 — Sea and Sail

Shelley leaned back from the rail against Pete's strong arm and looked up at the windjammer's massive sails as it moved into the open sea, the pilot boat rapidly slipping away astern.

The double wedding had been a brief ceremony while the ship was still berthed in the harbor. The senators and Rhona's old political friends had left the ship after the reception.

But a few of the relatives on both sides, old university friends, and their new Mexican friends, José and Renata, would accompany them on the eight-day cruise honeymoon along the coast of Mexico.

Shelley grinned to herself at the thought of the police chief sitting behind his desk in that small town in Chihuahua, still wondering how his strong-willed daughter, Renata, had ever talked him into letting her take off for a week with José. Renata had the persistence, and could be as stubborn as a mule, as José laughingly acknowledged on many occasions.

"Where are Mom and Dad?" Shelley asked Pete, scanning the small crowd of guests and other tourists lounging on the deck or lined along the rail – watching Los Angeles slip away into the distance.

"I think they went to the cabin to change. You know Rhona. She's usually more comfortable in shorts and blouse than a fancy dress. They should be back on deck shortly."

"Hmmm. If they don't get 'distracted'! They're missing a spectacular view of the harbor."

"My mom and your dad get 'distracted'?" he said with a feigned incredulity. "They've been living together for more than six months!"

"So have we. Are you suggesting that if we went to our rooms to change, you would rush to get back out on deck at the soonest possible moment?"

"Well, we could test that theory...."

"No way, Romeo! I know you far too well! And me! I'm here on deck until the land slips away and the sun goes down. Besides, I get to wear this wedding dress for only one day!"

As the ship moved further out on the open ocean, the breeze intensified, and Shelley and Pete were startled from their usual banter by a sharp snap in the sails above. There was a surprised audible gasp from the group of passengers ranged down the deck, as they grabbed for something solid. More than one wine glass sloshed over as the deck tilted quite abruptly, the ship settling into the port tack.

The momentary panic gave way to excited chatter. Most guests were new to sailing, and although the Captain had described during lifeboat drill how the sailing ship would behave when coming across the wind, it was one thing to hear him describe it, and something altogether different to experience it.

Shelley made a mental note to pay attention the next time the ship started to come around, knowing the result would be an abrupt, if small, change in the deck angle.

“Given how fast we are going, the wind strength, and the area of sail we are carrying, that was not so bad,” Pete commented over the general hubbub. “My Dad used to sail a racing yacht. Now those would really heel over. This is a brand new boat with an advanced hull design and stabilizers to control the roll.”

“I didn't know you sailed,” Shelley replied.

“Not really a common activity – or even topic of conversation – in the middle of the desert, my lady.”

“So what else don't I know about you, my husband?”

“Probably quite a bit. Good thing we have a lifetime to ferret out our idiosyncrasies and little secrets,” he laughed.

“Anyway, since I can't tempt you into our cabin, not just 'yet' anyway, maybe we should take a stroll around this marvel of modern renewable-energy shipbuilding.”

Shelley laughed. “So lead on, Lancelot, and let's explore this floating castle. The sun has dipped into the western ocean and we won't have light for much longer.”

“Rhona did well to get us – and the wedding party – aboard at all,” Pete continued. “This is a really new cruise line. I think this is cruise number three for this particular ship.” As they passed the entrance to a companionway, Pete

almost collided with a young woman coming onto deck, laden with expensive-looking camera equipment – including a tripod and a massive lens. She shot Pete a withering look.

“Watch where you're going, you stupid oaf!”

Without even acknowledging Pete's mumbled apology, she hurried aft in the gathering gloom with her load of equipment.

“Wow, now there is someone with a massive chip on her shoulder,” Pete mused.

Shelly nodded as she watched the woman hurry away. “I'll say! But there's something familiar about her! I'm sure I've seen her before – but I can't remember where!”

As they continued walking towards the bow, Shelley and Pete saw their parents chatting with Renata and José along the rail. Most other passengers had already disappeared inside, though there were a few stragglers here and there.

The sound of dance music and muffled conversation drifted out from the bar. Although the ultra modern ship was very large for a sailing vessel, with more than four hundred passengers and crew spread over six decks, it lacked the gaudy casinos and duty-free stores typical of the mammoth fossil-fueled cruise ships.

But it did have a large dining room that magically transformed into a cozy bar with a decently large dance floor – and in the stern, a small theater together with a good-sized piano bar.

It was in the piano bar that the wedding ceremony and reception had been held while the rest of the passengers were being boarded.

Shelley noticed the temperature was dropping rapidly and her bare shoulders were cold. She snuggled back against Pete as they joined their friends, noting that all four were in jeans and jackets. She shivered slightly, and for the first time today wished to be out of the wedding dress.

Renata raised one eyebrow in that signature "Renata look". "You are going to freeze your 'preetty butt' if you stay on deck dressed only in that," she commented.

Shelley laughed at Renata's use of Pete's favorite saying, made all the more colorful with her delightful accent and apparent sardonic expression.

"You had better change quickly, dear, if you don't want to miss the fireworks," Rhona added.

"Fireworks? What fireworks?" *"Surely they don't launch fireworks from a sailing ship,"* Shelley thought.

"Señorita Shelley perhaps doesn't know about the meteor shower."

Shelley laughed inwardly at José's formality. After all these months as friends, his police training still led him to address her as 'Señorita'.

"Hey José, if you are going to insist on being formal, don't you have to make that 'Señora' now?" she joked.

“And what meteor shower?”

Roy gestured to the night sky. “Seems the heavens have decided to honor my daughter's wedding with a light show tonight. They said on the radio it would start to be visible just after ten. Out here away from the polluting lights of the city, we should have a front row seat. It's expected to be quite intense.”

“I met a rather strange girl below deck who was lugging a bunch of camera gear up the stairs. I gave her a hand,” Rhona added. “She was not very talkative, but I did discover she is studying planetary sciences, and is planning to take pictures of the meteor shower for her Ph.D. thesis.”

“Of course! That's where I've seen her!” Shelley exclaimed to Pete. “She goes to university in Tucson. A real loner. Always sits by herself. She is quite pretty, but she “barks” at any guy who comes within five feet, which in turn doesn't make her particularly popular with most of the girls either!”

“Hmmm.... Well M'lady, if the heavens are putting on a show in thy honor, methinks I had best hie me to our apartment and retrieve some suitable attire so that my newly-made wife does not truly freeze her pretty butt.”

With that he heaved a leg up and over, and mock galloped down the deck toward the stateroom – to the laughter of his companions and strange looks from the few other stragglers still on the deck.

He returned momentarily with a couple of light wind-breakers and a small blanket.

Shelley gratefully slipped on the jacket and snuggled close under the shared blanket.

“Thank you. That's much better. But you didn't need to wait on me. I could have just gone and changed.”

Pete leaned in close to her ear. “Yes, you could have, but I get to unwrap you from that stunning dress only once, so I want to take the time to do it right!”

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Two decks below at the stern of the ship, Barbara glanced anxiously at her watch. According to her latest calculations and data from NASA's Near Earth Object Program, the first of the largest meteors should enter the atmosphere in just six minutes.

The idiot Captain had refused her request for exact course data, citing some dumb “security rules”, but had finally agreed to tell her the expected time for the next port tack. Once that was completed, the wind should favor the course for the run down the coast of Baja California, so another tack across the wind should be unnecessary for the rest of the night.

That would give her the necessary stability to record the events with accuracy. Her specialized tripod had a gyroscopic mechanism to totally dampen minor vibrations but without enough range of action to cope with the deck suddenly tilting by up to six degrees.

From her perch at the stern, she watched the wake intently. Yes, the ship was coming around now! She would have just

enough time to get the camera aligned and ready to take a new high-resolution photo every quarter second.

She tensed abruptly as a man and girl appeared around the far side, and moved to the rail to stare into the night. The man's hand reached out and circled his companion's waist, pulling her closer.

Disgusting filthy creatures. How can she endure that?

Feeling the familiar nausea, she forced her attention back to her hi-tech equipment. Only two minutes to spare.

Chapter 2 — Barbara

Rhona stepped out onto deck, the bright sun dazzling her eyes. She balanced her breakfast tray carefully with one hand as she reached up and pivoted her sunglasses down from their perch on her head.

There was a quiet whir as the automated masts high above the deck unfurled some additional sail and then rotated a couple of degrees. With the minor course correction taking effect, another faint whirring sound of a slightly different pitch came from forward on the ship, as the tracking solar panels just above the bridge made a compensating change to match the altered course.

Rhona had been on many cruises in the past, but never on a solar-augmented windjammer. *"I sure don't miss the constant noisy throb of engines and the frequent smell of diesel oil,"* Rhona thought, as she moved to the back of the ship.

The light show last evening had been quite spectacular, with hundreds of shooting stars appearing over a period of about two hours. Then the moon had edged up on the eastern horizon and made the viewing more difficult, so most people had headed to their staterooms. Taking one last turn around the upper deck before turning in, Rhona and Roy had noticed the girl, all by herself, still huddled over her camera equipment.

So Rhona was surprised to see that same girl having breakfast by herself on the back deck at this early an hour. Roy was still sound asleep when she headed out, and she had not seen Shelley or Pete, or any of their party for that matter. But Rhona was a creature of habit, and her growling stomach had dragged her out of bed.

There were a couple of empty tables but they were close to the bulkhead. Rhona scanned the area, pursed her lips, and then said to herself, "OK. Let's do it!"

"May I join you?"

Barbara looked up briefly from her book. "It's a free country".

"Thanks. I always prefer to sit by the rail."

The girl grunted as reply and returned to her reading.

"Very personable," Rhona thought. "Pretty much as Shelley described her. Wonder what is sticking in her craw?"

Rhona ate in silence for a few minutes, watching the seagulls cruising alongside on the lookout for any tidbits that might show up and occasionally dropping into the wake to retrieve some morsel. She sipped her coffee, noting that her silent companion seemed absorbed in what looked like a physics textbook.

A waiter appeared with a pot of fresh coffee, and Rhona motioned him over. He filled her cup and then turned to her companion. "And for you, miss?"

"If I had wanted any I would have asked," Barbara snapped, not even looking up.

The waiter shot Rhona a puzzled look before hastening off to another table.

Rhona took a deep calming breath. She had met her share of strange people over the years, especially having worked in the political sphere – to say nothing about some of the oddballs she ran into as a forensic accountant. But this one was in a class of her own.

When she had herself back in control, she took the plunge.

"So did you get some good shots last night?"

Barbara looked up in surprise. "Oh! You're the woman who helped me with the equipment last night.... I hadn't realized. Yes, I did actually. A couple of them were quite spectacular and might help support my hypothesis."

As if startled by her own enthusiasm, the trace of an “almost” smile disappeared as quickly as it had showed up, and she averted her eyes, looking away at the sea.

“Well, that’s a bit of progress,” Rhona thought to herself. “She is clearly excited about her work, and – if I know the type, is compulsive about it. But at the same time she’s insecure, and seems almost ashamed of showing any emotion – lashing out one minute and going into a shell in the next. She’s been through something exceptionally traumatic, and is carrying the scars.”

Rhona thought back to those difficult years with Pete just after his father died in that horrible accident. Had she not focused on pulling her young son through, she might have cracked under the stress herself. There had been no time for self pity. Though it was far from her university study area, she had plunged into psychology and counselling books, pouring through them late into the night. With that knowledge – and a lot of love – they had pulled through it together.

This young girl had not been as fortunate. *“She needs professional help to get through this, but just getting people to even consider counselling can be a major battle.”*

Rhona studied her companion, who continued to stare out to sea. As Shelley had commented last night, the girl really was quite pretty – with an ovoid face, high cheek bones, and strong but delicate features. She seemed slim and athletic, but was dressed in a totally shapeless sack that reached to her ankles. Her thick red hair was pulled back in a severe fashion and carelessly pinned.

Her skin was darker than was typical of redheads and flawless except for what looked like a small scar under her right eye. She wore no make-up, but had slathered a semi-opaque sunscreen onto her nose and cheeks.

"It's almost like she is deliberately making herself unattractive."

Rhona sipped her coffee slowly, wondering what the next move would be. The red-haired girl stared away for another few minutes, seemingly lost in thought. Then she turned abruptly, looked directly at Rhona, and announced, "I'm Barbara."

Rhona sensed the inner struggle of fear versus trust and an almost palpable need for acceptance. "And I'm Rhona."
"Nice to meet you, Barbara. It is not every day one gets to have breakfast with a planetary scientist. Is this your first time on a cruise?"

"Yes. My aunt bought my ticket, booked excursions and everything. Not my idea, and I didn't want to come at all. But I owe her a lot, so when she insisted, I finally agreed."

"Did she come along then?"

"She's not that well now and *said* she wasn't up to the trip."

Barbara suspected there was actually more to it than that – and shuddered at the thought.

"I've lived with her since I was thirteen, so leaving her in Tucson and coming on my own is pretty difficult."

She looked down at her hands. "But when I found out about the meteor shower, I thought at least I could do some work on my thesis."

"Are you doing your Ph.D in Tucson, then? Perhaps you know my daughter-in-law, Shelley. She is in ecology there."

"I don't know many people at the University. We live a long way from the campus, and I'm not much of a 'people person'." Again she averted her eyes, seeming to study her fingernails intensely.

"There are only a few people in my exact field, and even the cross-field courses in things like advanced math and geology are small classes."

"Interesting that a planetary scientist would need to take geology, but then I guess planets and asteroids are rocks too," Rhona replied. "My son, Pete, studied geology in undergrad but now is taking a Masters in Engineering."

Barbara gave her a look like she was from another planet. "You have a son?"

"Kind of a pre-requisite to having a daughter-in-law," Rhona thought to herself.

"Yes, he's a wonderful young man, and I am very proud of him.... He had a very rough time of it when his father died. He was only 14, but we pulled through it."

Barbara again stared out to sea, her mind reeling with conflict.

She was drawn to this woman: strong, independent, competent, yet friendly and outgoing ... all of the characteristics she wished for in herself, but knew she did not deserve, and were beyond her reach. Rhona was very like her aunt – except her aunt had never married or had “men” in her life!

Still looking away to the sea, Barbara replied in a low and flat voice, “My mother died when I was nine. Asphyxiated in the garage. There was no autopsy. They *said* it was suicide.”

[end of sample]

Chapter 3 — Baha	15
Chapter 4 — Islas de Todos Santos	21
Chapter 5 — Exodus	27
Chapter 6 — Baptism	35
Chapter 7 — Friends	45
Chapter 8 — Shipboard	51
Chapter 9 — Revelations	57
Chapter 10 — Alone	69
Chapter 11 — Release	75
Chapter 12 — Voice from the Past	83
Chapter 13 — 666 and All That	87
Chapter 14 — Home Again	93
Chapter 15 — Back in the Saddle	101
Chapter 16 — New Friends	107
Chapter 17 — Kitt Peak	115
Chapter 18 — Verification	123
Chapter 19 — TV Talk	129
Chapter 20 — The Bug	137
Chapter 21 — Lord of the Dance	145

Chapter 22 — One if by Land	149
Chapter 23 — Relapse	153
Chapter 24 — Transport	159
Chapter 25 — Papago Tunnel	165
Chapter 26 — Missed Opportunity	171
Chapter 27 — On the Road	175
Chapter 28 — Into the Fire	187
Chapter 29 — Smoke'n Fire	201
 Author Notes for Fireballs	 205