

Prologue

February 24, 1980

“This can’t be right!” Millie shook her head in dismay as she looked at the stern of the boat tied up alongside the wharf. “There must be some mistake. Our tickets are for the Yankee Clipper; this boat is the Silver Shadow.”

I felt my stomach clench. When I had surprised Millie with the cruise package, I knew we wouldn’t be sailing on the Love Boat. I wasn’t expecting a sparkling-white floating hotel, complete with a swimming pool, tennis courts, shuffle board, and palatial dining rooms. But, the glossy brochure from the Bolduc Travel Agency in Hollywood, Florida was filled with pictures of a majestic, white, multi-decked ship in full sail. Instead, we were staring at a three-masted, oversized Tinker Toy that wasn’t much bigger than a bathtub. I surveyed the wharf, and spotted an information kiosk on the dock near the bow of the boat. “Let’s head over there,” I suggested. “Maybe we can get this straightened out.” We picked up our luggage and started walking. As we approached the booth, I was able to make out the words ‘Barefoot Cruises’ stenciled in large, blue letters on a sign that hung below the counter. We were in the right place. Our ticket folder bore the same name, and its logo matched the stylized silver anchor on the sign.

The fellow behind the counter was reading the previous day’s copy of the *Antigua Daily Observer* — the local newspaper. I cleared my throat to get his attention, and he looked up with a broad smile, his pearl-white teeth standing in sharp contrast to his blue-black lips and milk-chocolate complexion. He wore a gold ring in his left ear, and a form-fitting T-shirt with Barefoot Cruises emblazoned across the chest. “Greetings, friends,” he proclaimed, “and welcome to Barefoot Cruises. My name is Joshua. May I see your reservation, please?”

“There’s been a mix-up,” Millie brandished the ticket folder at him. “I think we’re in the wrong place. We have reservations for the Yankee Clipper.”

Joshua laughed as he shook his head, his shoulder-length dreadlocks swinging freely. “No, no. You’re in the right place, friends. You’ll be sailing on the Silver Shadow.” He held out his hand. “Now, if I may see your reservations?”

“Not so fast,” I said. “What happened to the Yankee Clipper?”

“She ran aground a couple of weeks ago off Dog Island. Hit a rock at low tide and sank.” He bowed his head, his smile in eclipse. “Pity. She was a fine sailing ship. Three masts, like this one,” he added, gesturing at the boat sitting by the wharf. “The Silver Shadow is the newest addition to our fleet. And Cap’n John will be in command.” He brightened as he finished with a flourish, “Don’t worry. Be happy. You’ll have a fine time.”

Millie looked at me, eyebrows raised. I nodded, and she laid the ticket folder on the counter. Joshua picked it up and checked the reservation against his list. “Mr. and Mrs. Damien Dickens. Yes, you are in 1A. That’s the forward cabin on the main deck, port side. Just leave your luggage at the foot of the gangway, and Kevin will show you to your room. *Bon voyage.*”

I picked up our bags and followed Millie to the gangway, about two-thirds of the way down the length of the boat. A lad with shoulder-length, bleached-blond hair and a surfer’s physique greeted us as we stepped off the gangway and onto the deck. Barefoot and bare-chested, he wore only a pair of low-rise denim cut-offs, a suntan, and a smile that shouted ‘orthodontics.’ “Are you Kevin?” Millie asked, when he held out his hand for the tickets.

“Guilty,” he acknowledged. “Welcome aboard. I’ll grab your bags, and show you to your cabin.” He vaulted over the rail with easy grace, landing on the balls of his feet beside our suitcases. After he carried our luggage up the ramp, we followed him down a narrow passageway. I looked around as we walked single-file, Kevin in the lead, and me bringing up the rear. The hull of the boat — I couldn’t bring myself to call it a ship — was painted black, with silver trim. The contrasting superstructure was white, with black trim. The unpainted wood-plank deck was sanded smooth. I sneaked a peek through the window of one of the cabins as we passed by. The sight was reassuring: double bed, chest of drawers, en-suite bathroom. Small, but ship-shape. Our little caravan came to an abrupt halt in front of a door marked 1A. Kevin opened the door, set down our bags just inside, and stepped back out into the passageway before inviting us to enter our room.

I followed Millie through the doorway and pivoted a full 360°, taking in the bunk beds, the built-in shelves, and a clothes rod that held a half-dozen empty hangers. Through a narrow doorway on the far wall, I could make out a sink and a toilet. A small, round mirror hung on the wall above the sink. I squeezed past Millie and stuck my head inside the tiny bathroom. There was a shower head high on the wall, aimed directly at the toilet seat. The wood floor sloped gently toward a drain set into the center of the bathroom. I pulled my head back out and turned to face Millie. I could see moisture pooling in the corners of her eyes as she attempted a smile. “You want the upper or the lower?” she said, her voice catching as she wavered between a laugh and a sob.

I put my arms around her and gave her a squeeze. “You okay with this?” I asked. “We can always blow this popsicle joint and go back to Florida, you know.”

“No, let’s give it a try. If it’s terrible, we’ll jump ship at one of the ports of call, and catch a flight home. Besides,” she added with a twinkle in her eye, “you did promise me a Caribbean cruise.”

We freshened up, and set out to explore. The sound of a party in progress drew us toward the stern of the ship. I walked up a couple of steps to the aft deck, and was enveloped instantly in a giant bear hug. “Hello,” I said, extricating myself from the unexpected embrace. “Who are you?”

“My name is Barb, and I’m the designated hugger!” I stared down in astonishment at the self-possessed woman. She stood her ground, looking back up at me from her 5’3” frame. Her twinkling, hazel eyes were set in a round, sun-tanned face, which was framed by a curly, dark-blond mane. The corners of her full-lipped mouth were turned up in an impish smile. I was uncomfortably aware that her short-shorts and form-fitting halter top showed off her attributes to good advantage, and equally aware of the amused grins on the faces of the other passengers. At last, Millie came to my rescue.

“I’m Millie Dickens,” she said, “and this is my husband, Damien. Are you a member of the crew?”

Barb laughed, “No, actually, I’m a psychiatric nurse. My name is Barbara Lafleur,” she added, as she wrapped her arms around Millie in a welcoming hug. “I’m from Baie d’Urfé. It’s a small town — a bedroom community really — near the western end of Montreal Island. Sorry if I caught you off guard.” She released Millie, and waved her hand in a broad gesture that encompassed the aft deck. “Can I offer the two of you a drink? The choices are beer, sangria or grog.”

“Grog?”

“It’s a Barefoot Cruises thing. It’s made from rum, water, sugar and nutmeg. Legend has it that grog was the standard drink on the old pirate ships. You have to try it at least once, Damien.” She looked at me, daring me to accept.

“Call me Dick,” I said, with an easy smile. With a raised eyebrow, I turned to Millie, and she nodded in response to my silent query. “Lead on, then, Barb from Baie d’Urfé,” I laughed.

The remainder of the afternoon and evening sped by. Drinks were followed by dinner, accompanied by a speech of welcome from Cap’n John. After dessert, we were herded up to the main deck for the departure ceremony. Following the mandatory lifeboat drill, Millie and I drifted to the stern of the boat. We leaned on the rail, watching the lights of St. John’s fade into the distance, as a phosphorescent wake marked our progress through the gently rolling sea. Around midnight, we strolled back to our room.

I switched on the battery-powered cabin lights, and my mellow mood vanished in an instant. “Dick,” Millie said, her voice tense, “someone has been in here.”

“Probably a crew member,” I suggested, “turning down the beds.”

“No,” she insisted, “not a crew member. No one has turned down the beds. Whoever was here moved my suitcase from the bunk to the floor, and sat or kneeled on the bed. I can still see the indentation in the mattress.”