

Chapter 1

“Cast off the stern line,” Paul’s order had come from his perch on the flying bridge of *Seventh Heaven*. The dockhand had complied and Gjergj started pulling the line in, the stern swinging away from the dock just a little because of the pressure of the forward line and the incoming tide.

“Cast off the bow line,” Paul called and he watched a second dockhand cast off the bowline and Henri pulling it in. Paul put the yacht into reverse and started pulling away from its dock. So began the first part of a planned two-year circumnavigation of the world.

Once clear of the dock, he turned the yacht around and started out of the Philipsburg, Sint Maarten* harbor toward the Caribbean. Hearing footsteps on the ladder, he turned and saw Henri’s head appear at the top.

“Take the helm, Henri. I am going below to join Mrs. Peterson in a toast.”

“Aye, aye, Captain Paul,” Henri said.

Paul clambered down the ladder (actually a stairway but in ship’s terminology all stairways are ladders) and walked through the main cabin to join his wife Harriet who was sitting at a glass-topped table looking at the receding town of Philipsburg. Next to her chair was a champagne bucket with a bottle of brut already chilled, towel wrapped around it, and two champagne flutes on the table. Gjergj had done his job well. Paul walked up behind his wife’s left shoulder and put his hand on it. She turned her head and looked up at him.

* Sint Maartan (belonging to the Netherlands) and St. Martin (belonging to the French) share a Caribbean island approximately 190 miles northeast of Puerto Rico. There are no customs or border patrols between the two counties sharing the island.

“Hello, my darling,” she said offering her face for a kiss which he obliged.

“And, so it starts, my love,” Paul said picking up the champagne magnum and starting to work the cork loose. After a couple of expert pushes, the cork popped and the ever vigilante Harriet caught it.

“This one goes in our trophy case,” she said.

“Isn’t that rather full?” Paul said thinking of all the sports and scholarship trophies they and their children had earned during their 35 years of marriage.

“Not that one, silly. Our new one for our new life.”

Paul poured the two champagne flutes full (to hell with the proper way to do it) and Harriet stood up and faced him, accepting a flute. They intertwined their right arms holding the flutes.

“To a brave new world,” Paul said.

“To our *Seventh Heaven*,” Harriet said.

They drank from their flutes, both emptying them, and then sat down to watch Philipsburg recede in the distance. Once out of the harbor’s speed restrictions, Henri had opened the engines to a comfortable cruising speed on a beautifully flat blue Caribbean. As they sipped from their second glass, Harriet mused, “I wonder what wonderful event will next earn its place on our trophy shelf.”

“My guess is the Panama Canal,” Paul said. “That’s in a week. We’ll have to stop somewhere before that to empty the holding tanks, take on water, etc. But we have no scheduled stops. We’ll just play that by ear.”

“The Panama Canal,” breathed Harriet excitedly. “I don’t recall. When are we scheduled to go through?”

“They have us in an 8:00 a.m. passage with several other small ships,” Paul answered, being in charge of the navigation and Harriet the housekeeping, both with the help of Henri and Gjergj. “We have one day in Gatun Lake and will continue westward about 11:00 a.m. the next day. After that a leisurely voyage up the Mexican Coast and the Baja Peninsula to San Diego. The Smythes are joining us there and we will drop them in Oahu after spending a week visiting the other Hawaiian Islands.”

“It will be so good to see them,” Harriet said. “We’ll be so brown and chubby by the time we get there, I am certain they will speed up their planned retirement.”

“Brown I can live with,” Paul said, “but not chubby.”

He had always been a fitness buff and had maintained almost the same trim shape he had when graduating from medical school. His wife, “victim” of five pregnancies (only three of which were full term delivering healthy babies), was the chubby one. She had tried to lose weight and regain her pre-baby figure but been unsuccessful. Partially it was his fault, impregnating her incredibly easily but in truth, neither of them had minded. Lay the blame on the infants.

Facing retirement – make that planning retirement – in five years, they had chosen the Caribbean to be their playground. Anything was better than Minneapolis, especially in the heart of Minnesota’s winters. They had spent vacations visiting various islands but always lurking in the back of their minds was travelling around the world, on their own and at their own pace. It was roughly two years before, when they were enjoying a quiet break on Sint Maarten’s, that they saw (or heard about, neither could remember which) an ad for a yacht for sale and they thought, *Our price cheap*. They had a few reservations at the beginning.

“What are those blotches on that wall?” Harriet, ever the observant decorator, asked. The agent who was guiding the tour (the current owners were absent) had to look at some information.

“It says ‘bullet holes’.”

Bullet holes? Both Harriet and Paul mouthed. Nothing more was said and the tour continued. Harriet was the consummate house hunter (yacht hunter in this case) checking everything. The plastic dinnerware (plates, glasses, even cocktail glasses) would have to go. She didn’t care if it made sense because of rough weather, china could be replaced. Some of the chintzier decorations (chintzy being in the eye of the beholder and hers was very well trained) would have to go. And, of course, the bullet holes would have to disappear completely and to her that meant replacing the wall with a pristine one. Discussions between her and Paul went on for several days but in the end wisdom, frugality, and love for the future *Seventh Heaven* would prevail and an offer was made. The salesman explained that the owners were indeed absent, not likely to return. They were in fact, on the opposite side of the world, location not specified. It might therefore, the salesman explained, take a while. And indeed it did. An entire twenty-five hours. Two days later, papers were signed and the yacht was theirs. Restoration/remodeling started immediately. Harriet insisted on being there to insure that it was done properly (the wall especially) and so Paul had returned to his practice in Minneapolis.