

CHARTER FOR TOMORROW

by
Jeannette Dean

"Ahoy there!" called the rotund bald man in new deck shoes and clothes of blinding white.

Sasha sat up, not bothering to cover her perfect brown breasts. "Yes?"

"Ah, yes, well, perhaps you could get your captain for me, Dear," he said, his discomfort obvious.

Enjoying herself, Sasha stood up, knowing the narrow scarf tied 'round her hips would fluster him even more.

"I'm the captain and owner of this vessel. State your business," she said solemnly.

He cleared his throat, "Is this the 'Strider'?"

"She is."

"Yes, well, I have two couples coming over from London who want to sail to an uninhabited island. They'll be here in Miami for ten days. The hotel manager recommended this yacht."

She didn't like the guy, but he wasn't the one she'd be taking out. "How long would they be aboard?"

"Umm, excuse me please." They both looked around at a tall skinny man in expensive but ill-fitting suit.

"Oh, hello Mr. Carney," Sasha smiled. "Have you decided to book the charter?"

"I'm terribly sorry I'm late, Ms Sasha, but before you make arrangements with this gentleman, could we please discuss the trip for my friend and I? I have the deposit in cash."

"We are having a business discussion," interrupted the courier, addressing himself to the newcomer, the more easily intimidated of the two.

"Excuse me Sir, I do apologise, but I was speaking with Ms Sasha just last night. I had to clear it with my friend and get the deposit before making the commitment." He smiled at Sasha, blushed and looked down at the quay quickly.

Laughing, she decided to take the pressure off so reached for her shirt. "Both of you come aboard. Take your shoes off first." Buttoning up, she watched them climb awkwardly aboard. Obviously neither had time at sea. She gauged folks by the way they handled the climb. The wooden step was put in place for people in real need.

"Sit down," she motioned toward the cockpit. "What are you drinking? I've got most things."

"Oh, nothing for me, thank you very much," demurred Mr. Carney.

"Beer, if you have a cold one, Dear."

Sasha turned on him. "We should get a few things straight. You call me 'dear' again and you can stuff your tourists. I have my Ocean Master's licence and the only 60ft sailing yacht in Miami that can get clients on an uninhabited Bahamian island legally. I'm also one of the few captains who owns

her boat and was born here. The fact that I'm female enhances my unique position."

Tossing her long sun-streaked hair, she laughed, "Now that we've established my credentials, let's talk business, Boys."

"Oh, I know all about you," Mr. Carney smiled. "I, I mean, you have an excellent reputation," he mumbled, looking away.

She sat down across from him, smiling. "Okay, you were here first, tell me what you'd planned. You've checked out my brochure, right?"

"Yes," he sat clasping and unclasping his hands. "My friend Bob and I have six days beginning Friday and..."

"Now wait a minute," Rand interrupted. "My people are only in Miami for ten days. They are well-traveled, sophisticated and willing to pay top dollar. They want to sail Wednesday and return Sunday."

"We'll pay the going rate, Ms Sasha. I'll give you the deposit you asked in cash now." His voice was almost pleading and she wondered if he would grate on her nerves after a bit.

"I handle a lot of tourists, could have regular business for you *if* this charter works out."

She needed business, this was off-season, but this ill-mannered pig was really irritating.

"What is your name and who do you work for?"

Looking insulted, he handed her his card, "I am John Q. Rand. I conduct groups from several large hotels."

She turned back to the nervous client, "Does your friend sail?"

"He's raced quite a lot. He's really excited about going out on 'Strider'. I mean, if you'll take us."

Standing, she went below. All she really wanted was to sail out of Miami forever. Though she owned no house or car, overhead was killing her. 'Strider' was paid for but she needed a cash cushion before she could begin wandering the high seas. Picking up a couple of brochures, she went back on deck.

Handing them to Mr. Rand, "I'll take your people as early as they can depart on Wednesday. We'll be back here Saturday morning."

He stood, "But they want..."

"Take it or leave it," Sasha snapped. "All info, including rates, you'll find in the brochure. All meals are included. Bring half the money before noon tomorrow to confirm the charter. Bring their wine and beer then as well so all is stowed, cold and ready for immediate departure."

He started to say something, thought better of it. Making his departure without falling, he strode away without a word.

"That means our ETD will be early Saturday afternoon, Mr. Carney, if you're willing to wait until then."

"Oh, I'm sure that's fine. I really liked the way you handled him. I hope it won't hurt your business."

Sasha laughed, "He's an ass. I would have been really rude but I do need to work. Okay, bring

anything you want to drink. I'll supply the soft stuff and food. Give me your number in case there's any change."

"I hope you don't mind small bills," he said and wrote his number on a fat envelope. "Bob has met you before. He insisted we empty our pockets so I could get back to you to reserve. He would have killed me if I hadn't made it in time."

He offered his hand shyly, "Thank you. And, please call me Jeremy."

She returned his surprisingly firm handshake, smiling, "We'll make a sailor out of you, Jeremy. See you around 2:00 Saturday."

Watching him walk down the quay, she shrugged. Another secret admirer. Maybe he would book more charters. Fatten the cruising fund, get out of this jungle.

The first charter went wrong from beginning to end, almost as if the negativity of her encounter with Rand had been an omen. When 'Strider' pulled into her slip Saturday morning with the two miserable couples, Rand was waiting with the hotel limousine and doctor. Sasha had phoned him from sea two hours before arrival.

"Well, certainly a professional charter," was Rand's snide remark as the limo drove away.

Exhausted, Sasha flared, "Prevention of seasickness and sunburn are covered in the brochures I gave you. Obviously they didn't read them. Nor did you. A 'professional' courier would have earned his commission by preparing his clients for their first open ocean sail."

His face was red, "That is not my responsibility. They are adults. They can read."

"Right, just take their money, deliver 'em and pick 'em up," she sneered. "Your type sicken me."

"I didn't dump the old dear on a coral reef and leave her to get infected."

"I had told her to wait until the dinghy stopped. She jumped off early, gin & tonic in hand, nearly flipping us all. It was on the beach, not a reef, and she refused treatment until today. She'll be fine, just needs antibiotic."

"You better hope you're right," was his parting shot..

After a few hours of exhausting work, Sasha opened herself a beer and sat down in the cockpit.

"You certainly do not look happy," came a timid voice from the quay.

Startled, she saw Jeremy smiling at her. She frowned, "You're early."

"I, I'm sorry. I just came by to see if everything was okay."

Annoyed at herself, she stood, "Come aboard Jeremy, have a beer with me."

"Rough charter?"

"Yeah. The worst part was that my regular crew was away on a race so I hired Nick, a guy who hangs out, works for anyone in need. The useless toad didn't pull his weight and then disappeared as soon as we docked. Luckily my regular's back, is helping me clean and restock. 'Strider' will be ready to go by 2:00."

They turned to commotion on the quay. There was the unmistakable figure of Rand with several

police advancing toward them.

"So, you're still here. Well, the Coast Guard wouldn't have let you leave if you'd tried," Rand chirped sanctimoniously.

Shocked, Sasha stood up. The officer walking beside Rand said, "Miss Sasha Kent?"

"Yes. What's going on?"

"I need to ask you some questions and check your boat. It will be better for you if you co-operate. This is 'Strider' and she's registered to you, correct?"

"Yes, of course, but what is going on?"

"Don't play innocent. We know you took my client's jewelry," Rand raged indignantly.

"Mr. Rand," the officer silenced him.

"Don't say a word," Jeremy counseled. "Bob's a lawyer and he'll be here soon." He turned to the officer, "I've an attorney coming for Ms Kent."

She put her hand on his arm, "It's okay, Jeremy, I've nothing to hide. I'll answer any questions and you may search 'Strider' as long as I can watch. But, I want this man off." She gave Rand the look afforded things that crawl out of one's food.

In early evening the multitude of white yachts softened to pale gold. Lack of activity enhanced the feel of relaxed wealth.

"No one realizes how vulnerable is each of our little 'islands'," Sasha commented as she stepped onto 'Strider' with two new friends. She was hesitant to go below. "I feel as if she's been raped, as if I have."

Jeremy and Bob looked at each other, unsure of what to say.

Bob touched her arm, "Would you rather we go?"

"No, please have a drink with me. I promise no drama or tears. What'll it be? Me, I'm having a large, neat scotch."

She was relieved they'd left the place relatively tidy but knew she'd do a serious cleaning to get rid of the intruder's aura. The police, the Brits, and that little bastard Nick.

"Can't thank you enough, Bob. Both of you. I've sure ruined your vacation." She shook her head, "Can't believe I trusted Nick. I do pray they catch him."

"One thing they're good at in Miami is netting stolen goods," Bob reassured her.

Sasha returned the envelope of cash to Jeremy, "Thank goodness you were here to explain all this cash. They were ready to lock me up. No one does business in cash anymore, legal business anyway."

"Honest, it's legal," Jeremy smiled.

They sat in the cockpit with their drinks, relaxing with talk about everything but the day's events.

"Tell me how you know me," Sasha turned to Bob.

"I skippered a Swan for Jeremy's father last year. You creamed us in the Easter race to Turtle

Cay. Since then I've been dying to get on 'Strider,'" he smiled, his eyes not leaving hers, "and to meet you."

She felt warmth spreading through her body, knew she wanted this man, was startled when Jeremy cleared his throat.

"I, umm, feel we should tell you the whole story," he gave his habitual nervous laugh and stared at Bob.

Sasha looked from one to the other, tensed. This is not the 'bonne moment' for surprises, Gentlemen. It's been a rough day. This better be good."

Bob moved forward, his knee just touching hers, his enthusiasm real, "Oh it is, well we think it is. If you'll agree. See, I've worked for Jeremy's father since school. I'm part of his legal firm and I've skippered a few boats for him. He wants to win the Whitbread 'Round the World Race, told me he'd finance it if I found the boat. I think 'Strider' can do it."

"She's not for sell."

"No, no, he just wants the trophy and publicity. You'd be paid for her charter and repairs afterwards."

"I'd have to be skipper."

"Perfect. I'd be your second. 'Strider' would be tricked out to the max."

Sasha sat back, slowing her breathing, forcing clear thoughts, trying to contain her excitement.

"What's the catch? Why didn't you just approach me with the deal?"

"I'm the catch," Jeremy sighed. "It all hinges on my ability to sail with you. This little charter was to see if I could handle it. To see if you could help me past my seasickness. Past my fear," he mumbled, looking down. "This is my father's effort to 'bring me out'."

Sasha took their glasses and went to top them up, her automatic reaction when she needed to think. It was too perfect for belief. Her first circumnavigation, fully financed. Out of here! The phone made her jump.

"Sailing yacht 'Strider,'" she said, and listened very closely, barely breathing.

"Yahoo!" she yelled as she cradled the receiver, and charged outside. She grabbed Bob, then Jeremy, laughing as she hugged them.

"They got him!" He was trying to sell the stuff to a Puerto Rican jeweler. I still can't take off 'til it's all tied up, but I'm clear. He told them I wasn't connected. Champagne! I happen to have a cold one."

She popped the cork and filled the crystal she kept for special occasions. "Here's to the sailor you're going to be," she toasted Jeremy. "And to our sail around the world!" she toasted them both, her eyes lingering on Bob.

finish