

# SURVIVAL OF THE SMALL FISH

by

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You may look at me and say, 'You deserve to be there. Inside.'

There have been times, low times, when I've agreed. But not often. Lies were told, mistakes were made. I've paid. Ten years is enough.

Yes, I'm a Yank. A capitalist. But I'm not a survival-of-the-fittest. Quite. In defense, I'll say that the healthiest reefs in the world have a rich populace of sharks. The Food Chain Big Wigs, as it were. Weeding out the weak and sickly is what keeps the reef healthy. Perhaps we're terrified of those sleek predators because they remind us of the self that is really in the closet.

Anyway, I'm out tomorrow. I know you want to hear my story or you wouldn't have pulled strings. I mean, getting past the guv takes more than a press pass. The inner workings of the prison world aren't open to inspection.

In the beginning there was desire. Southern Europe with its hot-blooded men, ambiance, sensuous food, tempestuous history, and some form or art around every corner, had captured my soul. My funds were down to house wine, but that's not too bad on the Cote d'Azure.

Bandol is just west of Marseille. Small, though it boasts a casino and marina. I'd just made a leisurely cruise of the open market and was munching my cache of fresh olives as I checked out the boats.

"The fish prefer that you leave a bit on the pits."

I turned in surprise at the first English I'd heard in weeks. Thinning brown hair, narrow pale lips, designer casual clothes, just a bit taller than my 5ft 10in, and not very brown considering it was August. British upper class, for sure.

“But, I'm selfish.”

“I know. I stood behind you, trying to get olives, but you got all the attention of those horny Frogs.” He was checking me out from behind his Varnets. “I'll share my wine if you'll share your olives.”

I placed a fat black one between his lips, took one of his full canvas bags. “Lead the way.”

His was a Swan 46, one of the classics. She was in good shape, the teak decks natural and clean. Well-maintained but without accoutrements, she was a sailing boat, not a profile and party excuse.

“I'm impressed,” I admitted.

“Very well, you can stay. Open the wine, will you, while I put things away.” He handed me an opener.

“I'm Marnae,” I said and began my assigned task, registering a variety of details. Like his gold Rolex, and no wedding ring, and the stack of charts on the table. The top one was of Morocco.

“You have spent time on boats.” It was a statement, not a question.

“My dad had a Herreshoff ketch. I raced dinghies as a kid, was pretty good. Where are the glasses?”

Thinking back, this was when he began circling, having spotted the financially lame prey. Ego and desire rendered me the more vulnerable.

We went out for a couple of hours, just sailing about, with me at the helm. I tried to be blasé, but the experience was right out of my dreams. She handled exquisitely, so responsive. Charles knew ‘Intrinsic’ so well, was attuned to her in a way only achieved by time at the helm.

“You like her, she likes you,” he smiled. The waiter was clearing away debris from the lobsters we had demolished, appetites enhanced by the sail, the wine and a couple of joints.

“What a boat!” I enthused. “I’m still high from dancing with her.”

“Here is to getting high!” he lifted his first glass from our second bottle of champagne.

We laughed and partied our way through the evening, morning and next few days. It was the ideal fling. Even had a couple of lines of coke with him, my first, and I came to understand why it was so popular. He offered to procure ‘brown sugar’ if I wished, but I wasn’t that brave. He was easy, never pushy, seemed to understand me and to know how to keep the energy flowing.

I now realize that he had pulled an amazing amount of info from me but revealed virtually nothing about himself. I didn’t even learn his surname.

“So, you’re out of money and you’re just going to give up and go home,” Charles put forth as we lay on the foredeck. We were passing the binoculars back and forth, fantasizing about the various shapes we viewed on the full moon’s face.

“I’m not giving up,” I defensively flared, sitting up. “I’ll go make some cash then I’ll come back. I must be self-sufficient.”

“There is work here but I doubt you’re willing to take the kind or risks necessary to make real money.” He was hidden behind the binoculars, speaking in monotones, as was his style.

With an inner voice saying, well whispering, ‘Don’t ask, it’s illegal’, I let a couple of minutes pass before taking the binoculars. I put my hand under his chin, made him look at me. “Spell it out.”

“People in England like to get high too,” he smiled.

“No, I’m not playing mule,” I laughed. “Heard a lot about it and I’m not

going to try it.”

“Fine.” He got up and extended his hand. “Shall we go to dinner?”

Charles was charming and relaxed through the evening while I fought to appear unaffected. I liked the way I’d been living in Europe. No job, no regular hours, no responsibilities, spontaneity the guiding force. Every day was new and exciting as I adjusted to the world around me like a little kid, hungry to learn more. I liked taking chances, testing myself and breaking rules. I knew that whatever Charles was into was big, well-planned.

It was at the casino that night that I was converted. Unlike the conglomerate you find in Las Vegas, everyone was ‘in their nines’ in European casinos. Money, money everywhere and me with my last fifty in my bag. Casual elegance does have such appeal and most folks looked ‘old rich’. Charles was relaxed about the grand he won at baccarat. I feigned indifference.

Aboard ‘Intrinsic’ I slipped my dress off and began unbuttoning his shirt. “So, what does one do to earn ‘real money?’”

“Oh, one could deliver a car,” he smiled. “Can you drive as well as you can sail?”

“I’m a good driver, never had a ticket or an accident. But, what would I carry, how much would it pay and what would be the penalty if I were caught?”

Slowly stroking my breast, he whispered, “Ma Cheri, this is not the time to talk business.”

Knowing I had already decided, I sighed and threw myself into our loving with abandon and passion. It was good that night, very good. I was turned on by the coming adventure, the danger.

And so it was that two weeks later I drove off the ferry into Plymouth in a new blue BMW, registered to me. Charles had taken me shopping,

purchasing everything with cash, so I was decked out in Ralph Lauren. He'd provided me with a couple of thousand for expenses so I ate well and stayed in nice hotels. Luckily the emergency numbers he'd had me memorize for France and England were unnecessary. All went well.

I drove into Bristol, left the car at the airport and flew to London. Charles met me three days later for lunch at Sambucca, a choice Italian place off Sloan Square.

"Well, you certainly look smart. This life suits you," he said and kissed my cheek.

"Piece of cake," I laughed, unwilling to admit what a nervous wreck I'd been. That I kept thinking someone was following me. That my clothes were all tight as I'd eaten non-stop since leaving Bandol.

"Any problems?" he asked while pouring the Bardolini.

"None." I toasted, "To the good life!"

After slightly strained conversation he handed me a small, nicely wrapped package. "The car is at Gatwick Airport now. The parking ticket and some cash are in the box. Take the ferry to Ijmuiden then drive to Amsterdam. I'll meet you in the lobby of the Grand Hotel at 09:00 Friday morning with the rest of your money."

I stared at him. "Charles, none of this was mentioned. £50,000 for bringing in a load, contents and quantity unknown, was a shaky move but I was game. Now you want me to carry on into yet another country with the altered car, unpaid. For all I know, it could be another load since I don't even know the hiding places."

"Marnae, the car is now clean. This is the safe way, the way you're best protected. Staying in this country after bringing stuff in leaves you vulnerable if anything comes down." His smile was warm as he put his hand gently on mine. "Believe me, I don't want to lose you."

I relaxed, enjoyed our meal together and realized I had come to care for Charles more than anyone for a very long time. Refined and reserved, there were mysteries. Our time together was top quality and that takes more than just money.

The Amsterdam time passed quickly. The canals and coffee shops and multi-faceted cultural enclave pulled me in and I decided to hang out for a while. But, Charles arrived and once again my life was altered.

“I understand your desire to enjoy your money for a while. Can’t blame you really.” He topped up our glasses with bubbles to accompany the feast room service had provided.

“When and where do I turn in the car?”

“If you will drive it back to Bandol, I will more than cover your expenses.”

“I’ll only do it if I can take ‘Intrinsic’ out for a sail.”

“No problem. You could work again, if you wished. It would pay £75,000 this time. Same route, except you’d enter through Portsmouth.”

I stood, stepped out on the balcony, looked down at the canal. Life was slow, tranquil. A couple lay talking on one bank, their bikes lay beside them. What did I really want?

Charles handed me my glass, toasted me, “You were good, impressive. But, you are tired now. Think about it, Cheri. Call the French number when you get to Bandol.” He put his arm around me, began kissing my neck. I delayed making the decision.

I drove down slowly, spent freely, wallowing in the cash. I’d put some into both my credit cards, opened a couple of bank accounts, but kept most in a secret compartment of the bag Charles had given me. He’d suggested I stay low-profile with the cash since it made some folks nervous. He had also offered to open an account for me in Switzerland if I did the next run.

When I pulled into the marina the shock that ‘Intrinsic’ wasn’t there

threw me off. I checked the office and found she'd been checked out the day I'd driven away with the load. I shrugged, there were reasons, and checked into a pension that overlooked the marina, just in case.

After a few days I called, still undecided. An English woman answered and was very enthused when I gave my name. She asked that I call back in an hour, said she'd make sure Charles was there. That left me with a head full of questions and the determination to leave them unasked.

"I regret I was not there when you arrived, dear Marnae," he said. "I had several pressing matters so let some friends borrow 'Intrinsic'. You are well?"

"I've stocked up on olives and am trying to decide what to do with my free time."

"If I come down tomorrow will you meet me at our favorite cafe around 06:00?"

Life seemed more like a movie with each rendezvous, with always more unsaid than not. My amateur status in the smuggling game kept me striving not to appear so. I was still unsure of my standing with Charles, unsure of what I wanted out of the affair. Unsure of if I wanted to work again, to take the chances. I was even unsure of what I would do with the money if I did work. It opened so many doors, money did, but it did complicate life.

We ate steamed mussels, drank wine, laughed, and Charles regaled me with stories. Sea stories, smuggling stories...I was entranced. Then off to the casino where I played baccarat with him gently coaching. Even won a little.

We watched the sun emerge then slept 'til noon. Hung-over but keen, I no longer had doubts.

"If you are sure," Charles gave his naughty-boy smile, "I can take the car

now. I have much to do so will have someone bring it back in a couple of days. Ring the French number with your arrival time before you board the ferry.”

He was excited, dressed hurriedly. “You’re incredible,” he whispered as he kissed me. “I always keep ‘Intrinsic’ down here so you’ll be able to use her lots after this one.”

Emboldened by the first success and energized by the danger, I was probably at my best on that trip. Radiating confidence, it seemed everyone I dealt with treated me with deference.

At our next meeting in Bandol I announced, “Charles, I must do it again.”

His eyebrows shot up, he glanced away then smiled, “You’re hooked.”

“Perhaps, but I know I’m hot now. If I take a break, I may not be brave enough to jump back in. Strike while the iron’s hot, someone said.”

He hugged me, “It’ll take me a few days to get it set up.”

“Fair enough, but I must know what I’m carrying this time.”

“Marnae Dear, it is not in your best interest. You must trust me on this. If, perish the thought, you should run into problems, honest ignorance is your greatest asset. I’ll keep your Swiss bankbook. Just memorize your number, they have your signature. It’s best really if you give me most of your cash to put in as well. If you are found with that much cash on you at any point all kinds of alarms will go off.”

I wanted to argue, to push, but accepted.

“I’m pretty sure I can get you £100,000 this time,” he smiled when starting to leave. He handed me a small package. “See you in London!”

I had no idea it’d be the last time I’d see him as I put in the exquisite emerald studs. I just felt warm and loved life.

I won’t go into the myriad of emotions, the mind-numbing horror or the details of the bust. HM Customs were so proud of their accomplishment



that the newspapers were full of that fateful evening on the Brighton ferry. Suffice to say I was honestly overwhelmed by the 100 kilos of pure, uncut heroin they pulled out of the frame of that car. Charles would have made £3 million on it at that point.

Of course, with a street value of £100 a gram, profits went up markedly with each step down one took. But, I was pretty sure he wouldn't have dirtied his hands that way.

My conscience? Well yeah, it's a nasty drug. I wouldn't touch it. Maybe if it were legal, controlled, it wouldn't be so bad. I don't know.

What I do know is that bastard took advantage. I've altered the info I've given you, like he altered the info he gave me. You see, I don't want him busted. Yet.

A few years after I was locked up, I happened across a society page in a magazine that caught my eye. Who was smiling out at me but Charles with his wife next to him in the cockpit of 'Intrinsic'. Her face fit the voice on the phone. I'm convinced he paid someone to bring up a load on that boat. Wonder how much he paid them.

Voila, I had his name and it was easy to get more info on such a prominent member of British society. A discreet letter posted by a released inmate insured an immediate visit from his lawyer. My prudence, he said, had been appreciated. £50,000 went into my Swiss account each year I was 'inside'. Nice.

However, I refuse to be one of the weak that is gobbled up and forgotten. Even sharks are not invincible. I'm angry, you see. He should have sent in a crack legal team immediately, should have freely shown his appreciation for my silence. I shouldn't have been forced to lower myself to blackmail.

That's why I ask that you wait until I give you clearance to publish my story. At that point, I'll supply the missing names. By then I will have

**emptied my account and be wandering the high seas.**

**It won't be long.**

**It's worth waiting.**

**Isn't it?**

**finish**