

FOOL'S ERRAND: BOOK 2 IN BEAT STREET SERIES (Excerpt)

By Jenna Zark

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Under a Bridge

Sophie is missing.

I don't know for how long, but I know she's gone.

Soph is my best friend in the world, since forever. Not exactly a Beat 'cause her mother was rich but she was the best comedy writer in town and the best mom to Sophie. (Don't tell anybody, but sometimes I wish she was my mom).

If you want to help me look, her name is Annie Tanya. I call her Mrs. Tanya because, you know, that's what you're supposed to do when you're talking to a friend's mom.

I say she *was* rich because the money Mrs. Tanya made is gone, and that happened because they fired her at her job. Something about the Blacklist, which is dumb because Mrs. Tanya doesn't care about politics.

Funny isn't easy, she always says, but she makes it look that way. She's written for a ton of TV shows and is mainly the only lady comedy writer in the world. She worked with some pretty amazing writers like Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner and Neil Simon

and a few years back wrote for *Your Show of Shows* with Sid Ceasar and Imogene Coca. A producer named Max “discovered her” and brought her into the business, pretty much. I know every big shot in town is named Max these days, but that really is his name.

Sophie’s mom is also beautiful, by the way, like a dark-haired Doris Day, and I always thought she could be a great actress. But Sophie’s the real actress in the family. And since both of us were little, Mrs. T tried out her jokes on us and made us laugh.

Here’s what I learned works best when you’re trying to be funny:

- Bad jokes work best in the middle of an argument.
- Hiccups can be funny, but not as funny as you think.
- Jokes about politicians and people and things we know
- Things we think and never say
- Saying them in funny voices (Sophie’s specialty)

But no one knows if Mrs. T is going to get the chance to be funny any more because of the Blacklist—which isn’t something you can find laying around, but it exists the same as we do. You can only mostly get on the list if someone in Congress accuses you of being a Communist and un-American. I think that means they think you’re conspiring with Russians or something and scheming against the U. S.

And it didn’t just happen to Mrs. T. this year—it happened to a ton of people. Her producer Max is in trouble too. The weird thing is, nobody thought this stuff could even happen in 1958. The Blacklist has been going on for like ten, twelve years after it

was started by Senator Joe McCarthy. He picked out these 10 actors and scared them into naming their friends and labeling them Communists.

If YOU'RE on the list, you lose your job. And it's probably impossible to get anyone else in movies or TV to hire you.

Plus some people even go to jail for it.

You might have neighbors ganging up on you – especially in suburbs with all those people who want everyone to CONFORM, which means going to work and wearing ties and if you're a woman, staying home in a dress and making JELLO.

In Greenwich Village, here, Beats try to do the opposite of conforming. But everyone knows the blacklist is really about people like Joe McCarthy trying to make himself look powerful. It's gone on so long, though, some people really believe it.

Other people are getting sick of the list and some writers are starting to get hired again. So the last thing anyone expected was for Mrs. Tanya and her producer Max to get canned.

For as long as I've known them, Sophie and her mom were going gangbusters through the world. Mrs. Tanya was making pots of money. That's why Sophie got to live in a really cool apartment down here.

They lived in the Village because Mrs. T. really loves the old buildings. And even if she wasn't exactly a Beat Generation lady, she *was* an outlaw, in a good way, not a

blacklist way. She didn't do anything you were supposed to do if you're a lady, like having a husband or being a housewife or anything like that.

Sophie wants to act in TV shows, like Imogene Coca or Lucille Ball. Everyone thinks she'll be really good at it, because if there's one thing Sophie knows, it's how to make you laugh. She can tell a stale joke and have you on the floor howling in three seconds flat, just because her delivery is so funny. She kind of makes her mouth flop and tilts her head, and opens her blue eyes wide behind her glasses and you're just laughing—even if you have no idea why.

But neither Sophie or her mother have been laughing a lot lately. Mrs. T. lost her job about a month ago, two months after my birthday on April 12. She's been trying hard to find some other kind of writing job, 'cause there ARE writers on the list working on the Q-T, underground, so to speak. That means they write something and no one knows it's them. They have a pen name, but they still get a pay check.

Except most of the writers are cats—I mean guys—not ladies. So Mrs. T. just can't find anything. She started waitressing, but it hardly gave her near enough what she needs to pay bills. Plus (between you and me), she's a pretty bad waitress, which makes sense, because she never did it before.

When Mrs. T. had to stop working at the TV station, she couldn't pay her rent and Sophie and her mom had to leave their apartment. And without a husband to help, Sophie and her mom are in a pretty bad way.

Of course Nell-mom said they could crash at our place for a while—I've got bunk beds now and there's a fold-out in the living room—and they were here for a couple of weeks. Mrs. T kept trying to be a waitress, but customers complain she's slow and instead of giving her a chance to get better, they fired her.

Mrs. T. told my mom they couldn't *impose* on her any more, even though Nell-mom said we were in no hurry to get rid of them, which I didn't like because it sounded like they were pets or something. But then Mrs. Tanya said she thought they should go to New Jersey because they have relatives there. Except Sophie told me later that's a story.

Now it's June and school's out, which is good, because Sophie and me and our friend Gordy were really looking forward to being free for the summer. This year was the first time any of us had ever been to a real school because our parents let us learn stuff from the owner of a store called Blue Skies in the neighborhood.

I've told you before Beats don't usually do what everyone else does, unless a social worker makes us. Which is what happened and why we had to start school. But today was our last day and Gordy wanted to get sodas at Rocco's to celebrate, even though we'd only been in school for a month and half. I think I can speak for everyone and say that was more school than any Beat should put up with and we wish we didn't have to go back in fall.

Sophie said she'd see us later 'cause she wanted to go home and see her mom. That was the last I saw of her, walking down Bleecker heading over to Charles, getting smaller and smaller as she walked away.

I would have been home sooner, but it started raining buckets all of a sudden and Gordy and I stayed inside Rocco's a while, waiting for it to stop. It didn't stop exactly, but there was a break in the rain and we both left and by the time I got home, all the suitcases were gone and there was no Sophie and no Mrs. T.

That was around five and now it's close to midnight and *extremely* hot and humid, so you feel like you're in a bathtub when you go outside, or even stick your head out the window like Mrs Belusa does when she wants to yell at you. But Mrs. T. left a note about that New Jersey relative but of course I know better. I tried to tell Nell-mom but she refuses to get upset.

I think Nell-mom changed after she married Chaz. She thinks it's a good change and I'd argue differently. She's worried about me and my older brother Ray getting mad at her, so she's always trying to be as sweet as pie, which feels like she turned into the kind of mom you'd see on TV—not that we have a television.

Because Chaz owns a gallery and charges high prices for his paintings (including Nell-mom's) we get to live in a nice pad and things are pretty comfy-cozy. That's if you don't mind having your real dad on the road all the time and your brother skipping out whenever he can to join your father's band.

Nell-mom has this thing, and she says all mothers have it: they want their kids to be happy. She'd do anything to make me happy, she says, and I don't think I can tell her this but if you try too hard, sometimes you do the opposite, and Nell-mom is definitely, truly, completely *trying too hard*.

When I try to get her riled up over something, and I used to be pretty good at that, she smiles and acts real patient and kind and wants to talk through what's bothering me.

I hate that.

"There's no New Jersey relatives," I tell her. "Sophie and her mom are under a bridge somewhere."

"Oh, Ruby," she says. "Annie would have told me if she and her daughter were homeless. She wouldn't put Sophie at risk like that."

"How do you know?" I ask.

Nell-mom frowns. "What do you want me to do?"

I look at her, trying to figure out how far she'll let me go.

"Come out with me and look for them?"

"You need to go to bed," Nell-mom replies.

"How can I?"

"We'll look for them tomorrow, Ruby."

"Tomorrow could be too late."

"I'm sure Annie knows what she's doing," Nell-mom says. "I trust her."

I shake my head and look out the window, while Nell-mom goes over to the sink and starts washing dishes. I'm thinking about this couple I saw once under the Brooklyn Bridge when we had a school field trip about a month ago. A man and a woman sharing a sandwich, and when you got closer you could see their clothes were dirty and torn and the woman's eyes were hungry, like an alley cat's outside of a bar after closing time.

How did *that* couple land under *that* bridge? Where did they live before? Did they have a wedding with a white dress and cake like Nell-Mom and Chaz or just sort of live together like Nell-mom and Gary Daddy-o? Do they have kids and if they do, are the kids in a children's home like I was until Nell-mom said she'd get married and brought me home? Did the man lose his job? Did either one of them even have jobs?

And why isn't Nell-mom worried? Maybe it's because she worries so much about me and Ray she doesn't have room to worry about anyone else. Or maybe she just wants to focus on her art now that she finally has a little more money than she used to. Whatever the problem is, though, I don't think I can get her upset about it. She's just too focused on staying *calm*.

I put my hands on the kitchen window, which is starting to fog up because of the rain. Sophie, please don't be under the Brooklyn Bridge tonight. I close my eyes and all I

can do is think of you with your mom, shivering in a jacket you found in the garbage somewhere. What if you don't have a jacket?

I'm happy it's not cold, but I'm also worried about where you'll be when it *turns* cold. June is the month when the sun gets hotter and brighter, bongos are everywhere, little sprouts all over the streets and fruit blossoms into bunches of green, red, orange and yellow on the bins outside stores. So it's a pretty nice time to be outside.

That doesn't mean I want to hightail it out of here right this minute, though. But I can't sit around here worrying. I just can't.

Ray's in his room, getting ready to meet Gary Daddy-o tomorrow on a gig in Chicago. He stuck around for the rest of the school year but I have a feeling he'll be gone until next fall. He understands about Sophie and her mom though and even offered them his room. I just think Mrs. T. was too proud to take it.

I think I could get Ray to come out with me in a little while, since Nell-mom looks tired and once she and Chaz go to bed they rarely come out until morning. I look out the window again, watching the soft white shine of streetlights falling on the building next door.

I start remembering all the slumber parties Sophie and I had growing up. Nights like this we'd tell ghost stories with a flashlight until we both cracked up. We've been talking about moving to Paris when we both turn 16, which is four years away since we both turned twelve this year. Sophie's birthday was in February.

Whenever we talked about leaving, we said we'd wait tables at a café and get clothes that were *tres chic* so we could go to theater parties. Of course we'd have to learn French so I could write poetry over there and she could act in plays and TV shows.

She must have known they were leaving.

I knock on Ray's door and he says, "Come in."

He's 15 now, starting to get tall and lean like Gary Daddy-o even though he looks mostly like Nell-mom, with blue eyes and curly hair. He's got his suitcase open on the bed and the whole room looks like it was in a tornado, with shirts and jeans and jackets strewn everywhere and even the pictures on the walls have undershirts and stuff hanging from their corners. That's Ray. I ask him to go out and look for Sophie and her mom.

"Where?" he asks, and I stare at him. "Where do we even look?"

Good question. I look outside, trying to imagine where I'd go if I was Sophie.

"We could start with restaurants and stuff in the neighborhood—"

"They're not in a restaurant," Ray says.

"Where, then?"

"I don't know," he says. "They went somewhere far, don't you think? Train station? They'd buy their tickets and wait around for their train? I don't think they'd ride the rails."

No, that wouldn't be Mrs. Tanya's style, though thinking of it makes me think of Sophie in a comedy movie, wearing an oversized hat and floppy coat. And thinking of that makes me want to cry.

"Fine," I say. "Let's go there."

"Grand Central?" Ray asks.

"Sure."

"I'll go, but we're taking a taxi," says Ray. "I'm not waiting for a bus right now."

All of a sudden, I'm loving my Ray-Ray because since Gary Daddy-o and Nell-mom split up, he's become the kind of brother I always wanted him to be. Whatever he gets from his gigs with Gary Daddy-o he spends, and it's usually on other people—which is just about the most Beat thing you can possibly do. And even if part of him knows this may well be a fool's errand with nothing to show for it, Ray won't say that and he won't complain. He'll just dummy up and ride along.

You probably know this already but Beats don't like money or buying too much stuff—or much of anything else that makes people in the suburbs happy. Poets like Jack Kerouac say the Beats are "the root, the soul of Beatific," "rising from underground, the "sordid hipsters of America." That's how Ray and I were raised to be. Just don't call us Beatniks. We hate that word.

"Think we'll find a taxi?" I ask.

“No idea,” Ray says, and slips me his jacket as we leave, closing the apartment door as quietly as we can. I look at him a moment, and he cuts me off.

“We either get a cab or go back inside. I’m not walking.”

“Let’s go down a few blocks to the avenue at least?” I ask, and he frowns, but walks along with me. Luckily, and I wouldn’t say this if it weren’t true, a cab stops when we’ve only gone a few blocks and a lady gets out. We rush inside before the cabbie can turn around.

“What the—“

“Grand Central,” I tell him. “And step on it.”

I’ve just always wanted to say that.

But the cabbie gives me more than I bargained for. He’s weaving in and out of streets and nearly runs into three other cabs trying to get us there. I don’t even know what streets we’re on because he’s going so fast. All I can do is cringe when I hear his brakes squealing, which happens every other second. When he finally pulls up to the curb at Grand Central Station, I’m practically drenched from sweating buckets. Ray pays him and I jump out, fighting the urge to kiss the ground.

“Keep the change,” Ray says, and I grab his hand and pull him towards me. I don’t want either one of us near that cab again for the rest of our lives. Ray lets me drag him into Grand Central before he drops my hand.

“Where—“

“This way,” Ray says, pointing towards the central ticket booths.

“No,” I tell him. “If they’re here, they’ll be in the waiting room.”

We walk through the station, edging closer to the benches. It looks like there are mostly single people waiting for their trains, but here and there you can spot families, with kids wailing or trying to go to sleep. A guy is feeding doggie biscuits to a German Shepherd, and someone else is cooing to what seems like a guinea pig in a cage. For some reason, it’s not noisy like people say it is during the day. In fact, it’s not noisy at all.

Sophie, Sophie, Sophie, where are you?

“Look, Ruby!”

Ray’s voice shatters the quiet and I stop in my tracks to look at him. Wouldn’t you know it, he’s pointing upward at the ceiling.

“What are you — “

“Just look!”

Twinkly yellow stars and constellations in a turquoise sea meets my eyes.

“Zodiac,” Ray says, and for once I don’t want to tease him about being obvious, because I never learned much about stars at Blue Skies. I was hectoring Sky and Blu to take me up here, or at least to the planetarium, but they never got around to it. This zodiac mural has a lot of cool stuff, like Aquarius (the Water Carrier), Pisces (the Fish),

Aries (the Ram), Taurus (the Bull), Gemini (the Twins) and Cancer (the Crab), plus constellations like Orion the Hunter.

Normally I'd stand here staring at this stuff for hours, but I'm just too worried right now. "It's cool, Ray," I tell him, "but we've got to find Sophie."

"Just for a second, Ruby," says Ray. "See Pegasus?"

I've read about Pegasus in a comic they had at Blue Skies. I think he was Sophie's favorite, because she loves horses anyway and this one could fly. I can't help but think of her looking up at him tonight.

"Just wanted you to see," Ray says, and then for some reason, or no reason at all, my eye falls on a bench with a mother and daughter at the opposite end of the station room. Maybe it was Pegasus; maybe it was just taking my eye off the benches for a while; or maybe it was just the color blue they used on the zodiac that perked me up a little, but I felt like I could see more clearly now than I had since she disappeared.

The woman had dark chin-length hair like Mrs. T and her daughter's was only a teeny bit longer—like Sophie's. I couldn't tell if the girl had glasses but it looked like she had a royal-blue sweatshirt the exact same color as Sophie's, and the back of her head—leaning on her mother's shoulder—was exactly like my friend's.

I ran like the wind, faster than Pegasus, with Ray right behind and then overtaking me. He practically flew at the bench, blocking my view until I grabbed at his

shirt and he stopped, suddenly, his wet sneakers squeaking on the marble tiles of the floor.

“Soph?” I call, but when the woman looks up at me all I see are the tired eyes of a woman I’ve never seen before. I can tell Ray is staring at me but I don’t want to look at him. If I do I’ll have to admit something, and I don’t want to own it right now.

Both of us know it anyway.

Sophie’s gone.