

The Beat on Ruby's Street

(Chapter 1)

Jenna Zark

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At the Station

There's a guy in the neighborhood who wrote a book on toilet paper. They made it into a real book, but when he first wrote it you could unwind it all the way uptown and back again.

His name is Jack Kerouac and I was on my way to see him at The Scene, when I got waylaid by a blood orange. Now I'm in the police station, and my mother's going to eat me alive. She hates police and social workers, and I'm knee deep in both of them. When my mom was a kid a social worker came by because my grandmother had a car accident and wasn't like she used to be. So the kids ended up with foster parents and only saw their own parents on holidays. That's what social workers do.

The one sitting next to me seems like she's trying to be nice at least. She brought some ice for my arm, which got pretty twisted up after Tattoo Tina grabbed it.

I was trying to put the apples back on her fruit stand because they were falling. Where I live in Greenwich Village, they have all these bins on the sidewalk in front of stores. The bins are piled high with fruits and stuff, and yes, I was trying to move an apple out of the section next to the blood oranges. I love blood oranges—in fact, they're my favorite—but these were kind of wet and the apple was getting sticky. So I was trying to do a good deed.

Of course, Tattoo Tina would disagree. She's not much taller than me but her arms are a lot thicker, with ripply muscles like ropes and tattoos on top of them. As soon as I touched the oranges she reached her hand out and grabbed my wrist.

"Watcha doin', little robber girl?"

I wanted to say "Who you calling a little robber girl?" and leave it at that. But she was grabbing me so tightly I got mad and put my foot down as hard as I could—on hers.

I don't think it hurt too much because she wears these hard leather boots, but just the idea of me—or anyone—defying her makes Tina purple with rage. The next thing I know, she's screaming, "Okay! You want to play rough?" which sounded like "woof" because she was mad. That started me laughing and then like clockwork, she's twisting

my arm.

So now, okay. I should have stopped at this point, gone limp or something until she calmed down. But I've seen Tina drive my best friend Sophie to tears, and once she pushed my friend Gordy so hard he almost lost a tooth. That happened when Sophie dropped her money in the store and got down on all fours to find it. Sophie can't do much of anything without making a joke, so she pretended to be a dog, sniffing around the floor for money. She had Gordy and me laughing so hard we nearly fell over, and Tina came out from behind the counter.

All of a sudden she was screaming bloody murder, which scared Sophie so bad she started to shake, and then Gordy got protective, standing in front of us and telling Tina to cool it. Instead, she shoved him and called him a dummy, which is pretty funny considering how many numbers Gordy can add in his head.

So even though it was crazy, I was not about to knuckle under. I swung my other arm to make all the apples and blood oranges roll off the shelves. By this time Tina was howling and I thought if I kicked her, she'd let go. Instead she twisted my arm even harder—so hard it took my breath away.

Then Tina yelled, "Thief!" The cop outside rushed in and everyone looked at me like I was a cockroach, which I felt like, pretty much. Now I'm in the Greenwich Village police station with a social worker, a slew of policemen tramping in and out with people they've arrested, a bum trying to sleep on a bench by the door, and worst of all, no hope of seeing Jack Kerouac.

That makes me sadder and madder than getting my arm twisted because I've been making up poems since I was four, even though I didn't start writing until I was seven. I want to read at The Scene one day but you have to be old enough. Plus, mostly famous like Kerouac who isn't a poet, really, but writes like one. And the only way you get to be good at writing is by listening to other people. I think you really need to hear them because poetry is about rhythm as much as anything.

I waited a month to see Kerouac and now I'm stuck in this station with questions coming from all directions. But if I tell the truth I'll open a big, smelly can of worms. I try to keep mum, which doesn't work very well because the questions keep coming. Then I get an idea. I can tell the truth in a kinda-sorta way, like salesmen do when they want you to buy something. "Name?"

"Ruby Tabeata." Our name used to be Tabita, but my dad changed it when I was small. For the Beat, which is a secret way of saying we're part of the Beat Generation. When it started, it was about people who were fed up and beat up by the System. That means the world, really—or most of the world.

The magazines call us "Beatniks," which makes us laugh because it sounds so stupid. What I think is, people are mostly asleep and when they come down here to see guys like Jack Kerouac, it's because they're hungry for something and Jack fills them up. They want to hear about him driving around the country, meeting people, and seeing things they'll never see. They want to listen to poets like Allen Ginsberg who says the best minds of his generation are getting stomped on by the world.

Ginsberg found a place in the Village and started writing poetry, and pretty soon other cats came down and started writing, too. Now a lot of artists live in this neighborhood, which is below Fourteenth Street but not as far as Houston.

I guess you could say we're trying to break out of the old world and start a new one. But that's not something you can explain to a social worker or policeman. They think the old world is just fine.

The magazines also say Beats are supposed to be cool, but who knows what that means? I can only tell you what it's not. It's not cool to be angry or nasty. It's not cool to care about how you look. Because like my mother says, pretty fades, but cool is forever. And having a name like Tabata says all that. But the phone book still says Tabita because it was never officially changed.

"Date of birth?" the policeman asks.

I toy with making something up but decide on the truth. "April 12, 1946."

"You're going to be twelve soon?"

It's my golden birthday, but I don't say much about that. Because I'm turning twelve on April 12 and it's supposed to be super-extra lucky. If I mention it now I'll jinx it for sure.

"Address?"

"Ninety-six Bleecker," I say, even though it's *really* 96 Perry.

They want to know my parents' names.

I call my father "Gary Daddy-o." It's kind of a joke we have, because all the Beat guys call each other "Daddy-o" when they're goofing on how Beats talk in the movies. I tell the policeman his name is Gerard, which is my dad's given name even though he never uses it. He's like one of those cats you see on bongos, except he doesn't play bongos, he plays bass.

My mother's name is Nell and we call her "Little Nell" because she's the tallest one in her family. I mostly call her Nell-mom, which she likes better than plain old Mom. Too old and too old-fashioned, she says. She has long, curly hair from Wisconsin and

the rest of her is from Wisconsin, too. Little Nell does oils and etchings, all different kinds. Sometimes she does abstracts, which are all these shapes and colors. Other times it's ladies and they're not wearing very much. It's not sexy, she says. It's sophisticated.

Nell-mom paints at a studio near Christopher Street on Saturdays and she's there right now but I'm not going to tell anyone. The last thing in the world you want to do is interrupt Nell-mom when she's at the studio. She needs *TIME TIME TIME* to paint and if she doesn't get that, we hear about it. Over and over again.

I have an older brother, Ray, who is fourteen and never, ever gets in trouble. It's not that he doesn't do anything wrong. He just knows how to get away with it. Ray's one of those quiet guys who fades into the background unless he's playing saxophone. Then you want to stop what you're doing and listen; that's how he gets the girls coming around.

They say Ray's pretty dreamy, and I guess he is, with Nell-mom's curly brown hair and blue eyes. But you don't think that way when someone's your brother. I could tell you more about his leaving every piece of clothing he owns all over the house than what he looks like—and forget about food when he's around because he scarfs up everything in sight.

I'm guessing Ray's with Les and Bo today. They're studio musicians who play on record albums. They also give music lessons, and Ray is one of their students. He usually goes over there Saturdays to play with a bunch of people in what they call a jam. Gary Daddy-o could be there, too, unless he's juggling.

Gary Daddy-o goes out on the road a lot to play at clubs, either upstate or in Boston or Philadelphia. When he's here he puts a cup down in the subway and juggles oranges, and if Ray tags along and plays saxophone, they almost always draw a crowd. If enough people put money in Gary Daddy-o's cup, we get steak for dinner. Nell-mom has a job at an art store and gets free supplies, which she likes. But they both wish they could just play music and paint.

They're kinda-sorta married, in a kinda-sorta way. They've been together a long time so it seems like they're married, even though they don't have a marriage license. That's how a lot of people are down here. Gary Daddy-o says 1958 will be a good year because there was a big article about the Beats in *Life* magazine and a lot of tourists are coming. That means a lot of people will be in the subways, which means more money can find its way into his cup.

"Where are your parents today?" the social worker asks. Her name is Mrs. Levitt and she's got short blond hair and stockings. The cops call her "Levitt," like she's a man.

"I'm not sure about my dad. My mom is either painting or at work."

"Okay," she says. "Shall we go find her?"

"What if we can't?"

She sighs. "Then we'll have to come back here."

I get the feeling she doesn't want to do that, and I don't either. But finding Little Nell will be worse. I'm trying to decide what to do as we move toward the door. When I pass the bench I realize the guy sleeping on it is someone I know.

He sits under the arch most days at Washington Square Park with his legs curved underneath him like a pretzel. He went to India and says that's what yogis do, so that's what we call him.

"Yogi?"

He opens one eye and looks at me.

"Hey, kid. What are you in for?"

I tell him about the blood orange touching the apple and how it was all Tina's fault when he interrupts me.

"That's your problem right there," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"Mixin' apples and oranges. She had it all balanced, didn't she?"

"Who, Tina?"

"She had it right and you tipped the apple cart. Literally."

"Yogi—"

"Everything is there for a reason, right? If you mess with it like that, you're not following the flow of the universe. It's like trying to float upstream."

I try not to sigh, because once Yogi gets going there's no stopping him, and I'm not sure, even if I do explain, that he really wants to understand. "Okay, well, right," I say. "What are you in for?"

"Being," Yogi says. "Being and nothingness."

He always says things like that. He calls them Zen sayings. You can't argue with them because they don't make sense in the first place. So you just have to smile and let it go.

“Ruby?”

Mrs. Levitt is calling me.

“I hope you get out of here soon, Yogi,” I tell him.

“Okay, Ruby,” says Levitt. “Let’s go.”

I poke my head out the door, looking up and down the street. I’m hoping Sophie and Gordy will be off somewhere, preferably together so I won’t run into them. There’s not that many kids my age in the Village besides them and Ray, but he’s so tall you might not know he’s a kid. He has a girlfriend but she goes to a regular school, so she doesn’t have much to worry about.

Sophie, me, Ray, and Gordy, on the other hand, are a different story. We’re supposed to be at P.S. 41, which is a normal-looking school on West Eleventh. But, like I said, people here are trying to throw out the old rules. So Nell-mom and Gary Daddy-o thought we should go to a school that would teach us more about how to live and less about pleasing a teacher. Sophie’s mom, Mrs. Tania, and Gordy’s parents agreed.

Now here’s what I mean when I talk about a can of worms. There’s a store in the Village called Blue Skies that’s owned by a couple named Sky and Blu. Sky is short for Skylar, Blu for Bluma, and they just figured they belonged together. Because Sky used to be an English teacher, he said he would teach us if we helped out behind the register—and pay us, too. So Nell-mom, Mrs. Tania, and Gordy’s dad fixed the place up and take turns cleaning it. And that’s where we go to school.

Blue Skies is kind of a candy store but has all kinds of other stuff, too—posters, magazines, stuff for motorcycles. Classes start at all different times—like whenever we feel like it, and we make up our own homework. We read poetry and learn math by running the cash register. Gordy’s really good at numbers, so he shows us how to do times tables and long division. If you count lunch and recess, it’s almost like a regular school.

But it’s not really allowed and we’re not supposed to talk about it. And if I hadn’t got in trouble with Tattoo Tina, I wouldn’t have to. I can still keep it a secret, but I’m going to have to be careful. Once Mrs. Levitt gets ahold of this I don’t know what she’ll do.

“Ready?” She holds the door open for me.

I skip outside like I haven’t got a care in the world. But once I’m outside the station house I go down the stairs slowly, blocking Mrs. Levitt’s way so she has to follow me. If I time it right, I can get into the alley before she sees me. Then I can run.