

A Marvelous Night for a Moondance

by

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Chapter 1

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Bloody Mary's hut was a nightmare of pink plastic. Pink plastic palms, pink plastic orchids, pink plastic pineapples and pink plastic parakeets. Every cliché associated with someone's hallucinogenic vision of a Pacific paradise had been resolutely displayed. One truly obnoxious plastic parakeet, colored fuschia rather than the candy-blush of its fellows, kept staring at me from across the stage. It was fast changing from "almost" to "past" annoying. I spied a pink plastic machete peeking out of a pink plastic urn and inwardly debated the merits of disconnecting that pink plastic bird from its pink plastic perch.

Before I could do battle, I was accosted by a blonde girl who appeared to be about twenty, who was sauced into very tight jeans and a very tight tube top. She was standing beside her clone, a slighter taller blonde similarly sauced into very short cutoffs and a very tight halter top.

Blonde number one : " Are you Sybil Mackenzie? I really didn't think you'd fly down from Boston just for *us*. Jeez. Our brand-new choreographer come to show us all in backwater Texarkana how it's done. Well, that's just so *sweet!*"

"Yes, I'm Sybil. And - you are?"

A pink-lipsticked smile as plastic as the one of the birds covered the girl's entire face. "Sheri Bixley. I'm playing a nurse. I *should* be playin' Nellie Forbush, but apparently our director wanted someone," she paused for great dramatic effect, "else."

An inane Q and A began. "Do you ever eat? You're just horrifically skinny. And pale. I guess there's just *no* sun up north, is there? Do you just starve yourself?"

By end of the week the theatre gossip grill would doubtless be serving up juicy tidbits claiming that Sybil Mackenzie, ashen dancer from 'up north' was suffering from a severe case of anorexia and some sort of sun phobia.

I considered telling Sheri my physique was due to A) being blessed with a really fast metabolism that easily survives devouring a stack of hot dogs and at least seven non-diet sodas during nine innings of a Red Sox game at Fenway Park. B) My classes at the Tae Kwon Do studio near Fenway Park where I sweat on a biweekly basis. Or - C) Engaging in unsafe sex with the entire Red Sox team in the locker rooms behind Fenway Park thus working off any extra calories. (A and B were true. Option C, sadly, was not.)

At five-feet, ten inches, my weight generally hovers around one-twenty. Models consider me obese. Didn't matter. These girls didn't like me.

The inquisition continued. "Are you just crazy coming down here now?"

"Wha - what? I'm sorry, what are you talking about?"

"Well, this just isn't a good time to be in Texarkana, I mean with this crazy lunatic just running around attacking people. I personally am just avoiding all parking lots with my boyfriend. Aren't you just beyond scared? I am."

Candy-pink blonde number two: "Sheri! Stop it! You're scaring *me* now! Hi. I'm Tiffany White. Wow. We just can't figure Zach going *all* the way to Boston for a new choreographer.

Of course, who in Texas is dumb enough to come here with all that's going on?" She smiled sweetly. "Dennis was just such a doll, you know. We all just *loved* his choreography. Just look, Sheri, she's just really, really tall too. Are you six feet?"

I quickly interrupted before either girl had the chance to say "just" another ten times in the same sentence.

"Sorry, Tiffy. Five-ten and likely to stay that way for awhile. I turned forty several months ago. Age-related shrinking probably won't hit until I'm at least forty-one."

"Huh?"

The combined I.Q.'s of this pair must measure significantly less than that of any plastic pink bird nesting over this stage.

Undaunted, Sheri cooed. "Don't you just love the set? Tiffy and I did it ourselves after Dennis' boyfriend just up and left. Of course, now Zach has another guy. Ethan Somebody."

She pointed at the table hidden just behind the stage left curtain. "We even have refreshments for the cast during breaks. They match!"

I was neither hungry nor thirsty but any excuse to get away from this decorating tag team was worth the sin of a white lie. "Looks - uh - really - uh - pink. Thanks so much, girls. I need to uh, go find Zach now. Nice to meet you."

I disappeared behind that curtain, stared in horror at the swirling pink concoction, then quickly popped back out in time to take note of the various other cast members tacking plastic wildlife onto innocent set pieces. I began to cross the stage to search for Zach, the director, but paused midway for about fifteen seconds while I asked any and all theatre gods - '*why me?*'

"Heads up!"

The warning was welcome but almost too late. I dove under a huge wooden canoe mere seconds before a pink potted palm, hurtling from twenty feet above, hit a few inches from where I'd been standing. I looked to my left. Strong males paraded by juggling more plants, boat-pieces chairs, huge door flats and a wooden ramp. When I saw the nail jutting out six inches from the top of a flat, I grabbed an ankle belonging to a husky mover and pointed out the weapon to him. I finally emerged from my secure little den only to be knocked in the ribs by a long pole bearing a variety of shrunken heads that looked way too real.

My position was growing more precarious by the second. Time to find safer ground. Maybe Boston? I picked up my bag and headed for the stairs leading into the audience, found a quiet spot and began to study music for *Nothing Like a Dame*, which was slated for this afternoon. The cast been forced into an advanced rehearsal schedule because the *Texarkana Players* had very recently lost the services of their choreographer, Dennis Montclair and a set designer named Tony.

“Very recently” was the day before yesterday.

I'd been sprawled ungracefully on the den rug in my little garage apartment, flipping through wallpaper samples which were now all scattered all over the room. When the phone rang, I waded through the books and fabric, cursing as the shrill rings insisted I answer. Difficult. I couldn't find the phone. Ten rings in, I discovered it buried under a pile of ugly violet squares in an peach organdy fabric.

“Yo!” I answered.

“MacKenzie! Whacha doin' for the next couple of weeks?”

“Lovely to hear from you too, Zach. You're calling - why?”

“Chat. Make conversation. So - whacha doin'?”

Suspicions of doom flooded my mind. This was no social call. Zach wanted something.

“Repainting my apartment, ripping up wallpaper samples, ripping up job applications, ripping my hair out after ripping up the samples and the stupid application forms. Why?”

I heard a chuckle from the other end.

“Good. Nothing vital. You’re wanted. I’m going to beg without shame. We’ve been abandoned by Dennis Montclair. The cast is already in rehearsal. What’s left of ‘em. I’m still in the process of recasting the folks who left when Dennis did. How soon can you fly down?”

“Zach. You’re about twenty steps ahead of me. Forget that you’re severely A.D.D. Breathe. Focus. First, you know I get crazy on a plane. It’s nearly impossible to get me out of Boston. So forget whatever it is you think you can con me into.” I stopped. Curiosity took over. “Uh - mind telling me what show?”

“Sorry - thought I had. And yes, you’re a wimp. I don’t care. I’m nuts. I need you. Desperately. Oh *South Pacific*. The show.”

“Opening when?”

“Two and a half weeks.”

I paused.

“Two and a half weeks?”

He paused.

“Yep.”

I paused.

“What’s left to choreograph?”

He paused. This one was longer.

“Everything.”

“Excuse me!”

“I know, I know! Dennis Montclair is now *Numero Uno* on my hate list. But, Mac? It pays - not too shabbily, either. The cast is lovely. I only have to find a Bloody Mary and a Luther Billis and where was I? Oh. Lovely cast dying for competent choreographer.”

“I’m truly confused. I thought Montclair was a god amongst Texas choreographers. And now? Not only absent but *incompetent?*” I took a breath. “Look, Zacharius, aside from my total fear of anything out of my comfort zone, I’m supposed to teach at Littleton this fall. Three lousy classes - which is better than *no* lousy classes. Plus, even if I managed to drug myself into oblivions to get on a plane and fly to Texas, uh, well, not to belabor the point but I *really* am busy redecorating.

I looked around the living room and shuddered. I had absolutely no desire to begin this particular design project.

Groans. “Mac. I implore you. Forget painting and papering. Darlin’, I’m not above offering bribes. I’ll pay your plane fare to Texas. I’ll even put you up in a sweet little apartment. Already has a fun painted kitchen and wonderful non-floral wallpaper. It’s a garage apartment, but it’s much nicer than that fleabag your sister rents to you. And free. Please? Have I mentioned that we need you?”

The idea was becoming quite enticing, but I didn’t think Zach needed to be aware as yet that I was about to shove down all fears, buy a ton of airsick meds - and accept.

“So, what happened to Dennis? Specifically.”

The sound of teeth grinding came over the wire. “Sonuvabitch decided to teach aerobics on a cruise ship bound for Russia and points even further north.”

“Aha. You’re telling me that Dennis is getting paid big bucks for whipping bodies into shape over the ocean?”

Zach snorted. “The only body Dennis is whipping is some misguided crew member with S & M tendencies! Or my set designer’s, whom he stole when he left. Fink.”

“I admit I envy him. Not the whipping. The sailing. Endless days and nights on a veritable Love Boat.”

I closed my eyes for a second, envisioning a gorgeous cruise ship gliding serenely through blue waters while I lay on deck basking in tropical sunshine reading all the mysteries I’d saved for a year. I’d been contemplating a cruise myself - only mine was something more akin to a slow boat to China. A fishing boat, perhaps, on which, if I was lucky, I could stoke furnaces, swab decks or cook brownies to earn passage. Cutbacks at Littleton, the conservatory in Boston where I taught, had been fierce this year. No summer dance classes. No summer drama program. No notice until late April.

I’d frantically sent out my resumé, knowing it was too late. Hiring of staff for most productions is done early, often a year in advance of summer shows, especially for choreographers who don’t want to travel past their own back yard. Consequently, a summer with no salary.

I was broke. I was bored. I was blue. If something creative didn’t materialize, I’d spend the next few months accompanying the man I’d been dating, Kurt Westlake, while he schmoozed at political fund-raisers for the latest candidate he was managing. I’d be in a corner - hiding.

I wondered if Chinese fishing boats served General Tsao’s chicken - extra spicy - and if they were hiring.

“MacKenzie? You there?”

“Sorry. Considering my options.”

He chuckled. “You have none. Come on, whaddya say? You know you miss Texas. It’s been the home of your heart since your college days.”

“True. So, are you sincere about having a nice place for me to live that I wouldn’t have to fix up? I’m currently expecting to see myself on a reality TV series with carpenters screaming at me to leave the island or something.”

“Hell, yeah! To be honest, most of the guys playing Seabees are more at home nailing shingles and planting floor tiles than dancing across the stage. They’d be thrilled to come fix any rotting stairs you might encounter at your home away from home.” He chuckled nervously. “Crap! Not real enticing to my prospective employee, is it?” A cough. “Uh, I also have to be honest about something else because I adore you and I want to get this over with before you come happily tripping down here then immediately fly back for not knowing everything.”

“And that would be?”

“There’s been an incident in town. A couple was attacked.”

“What?” I felt faint. Chinese fishing boats were safer. No way I was coming down.

“Two kids were assaulted when they were out parking one night. I guess parking is still the operative word for making out in cars?”

“Wouldn’t know. My parking days are long behind me.” I tried to breathe. Tried to focus.

“Police think it was a revenge thing on some guy’s ex-girlfriend so shouldn’t be a deterrent to you heading on down. And I promise to have big strong college guys escort you to your cars after rehearsal each night. You’ll be absolutely safe. Really.”

I wasn't thrilled by this news. I'd experienced hell on earth some years back when a friend had been attacked in New York and I had no desire to walk into a dangerous situation. Yet, something within me cried, '*Go. Be brave for once.*' I winced whenever I thought about redoing the apartment. Choreographing *South Pacific* was good for at least a month and infinitely more enjoyable than playing stowaway on that mythical boat bound for Hong Kong. Shoot - I can't even speak the language. I'd wind up in a house of ill repute and get booted out for noncompliance to some client's request for sex in a bed of mayonnaise.

The silence from Zach became impatient. He coughed. "MacKenzie? Hello? Don't say no because of the boogeyman. Please?"

"Um – Just for grins - anything after *South Pacific*?"

I could hear the wheels clicking. "Well, sort of, maybe. I'm planning to have some musical theatre classes this fall after school starts for kiddies. And you could choreograph the Christmas show."

"Not exactly a firm offer with a 401K and vacation time."

"We'll find something extra. Actually, I know where you could teach. Deborah Collier mentioned to me a few weeks ago she was looking for new talent at her dance academy. Perfect. Anyway, I'll see you at seven tomorrow, darlin'. Ticket for you at Logan."

"Wait! I haven't said I'll do this. Jeez. Um, didn't you once tell me that the *Players Theatre* is un-air-conditioned? Yow. Working on a show in Texas in August and on into September? No wonder Dennis took off for Russia. Not too dumb."

Zach growled, "Don't say that. I'm so pissed that he dumped us, I keep wondering if we can bring back the old Soviet Union complete with KGB. The vision of Montclair spending a year or two in a Siberian gulag truly gladdens my heart. I've already started notifying everyone I

know who might even be considering hiring him and informing them that he's defected to the Red Army. With his buddy Tony Montevallo - traitorous set designer."

I almost howled. "Red Army. Yep. From what I've heard, that'd be Dennis' dream job. He'd be in his element among a troop of wild Slavic warriors."

"He deserves a rock quarry a la *Les Miserables*."

"You're a hard man, Zacharius. I pity Montclair if he ever returns. Not that he will. Cool ocean breezes or Texas heat. Hmm. Which would you choose?"

Zach ignored this blatant denigration about the lack of cold air at the *Texarkana Players Theatre*. "I *will* admit, and only to you, but I'm thrilled he left. I'd much rather have you and I do apologize for throwing you into such a total mess. Dennis didn't complete one damn dance. And, darlin', the theatre *does* have air-conditioning during dress rehearsals and performances. I keep about ninety fans cranked to the max the rest of the time so my actors don't pass out. Have I said, 'Bless you,' for taking over - which you will? And I'm damn proud of you. And I've missed seeing you since I was last in Beantown?"

"Aww, Zach. Stop it." I smiled. "I've missed you too, you charmer!"

"Perfect. Give me a firm yes."

"All right, all right! I cave. I'll do it. God help me and I mean that literally. But I can't leave until tomorrow so don't schedule choreography rehearsals yet."

I'd hung up the phone, jumped to my feet, tapped out a triple time step in sheer glee (in my socks) then proceeded to pile every last wallpaper sample into one big heap. I'd let my sister take all this junk back to the foo-foo decorator I couldn't afford anyway.

"Mac! You're lounging. Get your buns over here and check out this great old piano!"

I quit flashing back to the day before and followed Zach's voice toward the stage left wings where four burly college-age kids were hauling a Steinway that had to be over sixty years old. I was so thrilled with it I nearly tripped.

"Fantastic!" I crooned. "Is this our orchestra?"

Zach snorted. "Shoot. This is going in the *Honey Bun* number. Isn't it cool? Left here from the theatre's previous existence as *Big Bobby's Hideaway* - a 1940s juke joint. Adore it?"

"I love it," I promptly exclaimed. "I can smell the cigarettes, Jungle Gardenia and gin!" The odd thing was - I could. I whispered to Zach. "Don't repeat this, but I'm damn glad I'm here."

I was.

South Pacific. Much better than a boat, slow or fast, to anywhere.