

SWEET DREAMS
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The short blonde was wearing a red G-string, red pasties, one red six-inch platform shoe, and nothing else. A cigarette dangled from her right hand. Standing slap in the middle of the living room, she was eyeing herself less than critically in a full-length mirror, ignoring the nicotine ashes gently floating towards the hardwood floors. A radio blared at full volume in the corner of the room.

I half faced Shay, standing awestruck in the doorway beside me, then muttered almost inaudibly.

"I'm going to kill you. Then I'm going back to the convent on 14th street. Or perhaps to O'Malley's for a serious drinking spree."

Shay punched my arm, steered me into the living room, all the while waving at the girl to get her attention.

"Yo! Cherry! This is Abby Fouchet. Uh. Abby, this is Cherry Ripe."

A dyed head of hair turned from its narcissistic inspection. A sharp nose sniffed at me.

"Abby? You serious? What the hell kinda name is that? Sounds like a dog from the pound. Ya should dye your hair, ya know. Brown ain't in this year."

I realized I was clenching my fists and wondered if I could betray twenty-one years of indoctrinating Southern courtesy by punching out my new roommate. Shay poked me in my side, then hissed, "Say something."

I spoke with (admittedly) icy politeness.

"Hi, uh, Cherry? First of all, my hair is closer to chestnut. Not brown. And it doesn't take kindly to chemicals. Secondly, Abby's a family name. Goes back about three generations. I'm not changing it. But, tell me, how did you come by the name of Cherry Ripe?"

The minute the words came out of my mouth, I knew they were wrong. I was right. The brunette glared at me with blatant dislike.

"Oooh, aren't we miss chi-chi classy? I came by this name, 'cause I picked it for my profession."

"Which is?"

"Just like you guys. I'm a dancer."

I was overcome by a sudden coughing fit. Shay poked me again. My ribs were beginning to hurt and I felt bruises forming.

"Oh, that's. . . nice. Um. Are you in a show now?"

Cherry gave me a look that indicated she perceived my intelligence was on the order of the one platform shoe still on her foot.

"I work at The Squirrel Shot Gentlemen's Club on 8th Ave."

"Oh, that's ni. . . Shay? Didn't we leave the taxi waiting downstairs? Let's go pay the man."

I grabbed Shay's arm and began to forcibly pull her into the hall. Whatever techno-pop dance hit that had been playing mercifully ended. Cherry grabbed the radio as if she feared I'd steal it, turned it off, then calmly walked in front of me before making what an important announcement.

"I'm taking a bath now."

She leaned down over the edge of the sofa to pick up a second cigarette reclining in the Lenox saucer currently serving as an ashtray. Then she stalked into the bathroom still wearing her barely there costume.

I stared at Shay, waiting until I was sure Cherry was out of earshot.

"She smokes in the bathroom."

Shay seemed to be intently focused on a spot on the ceiling.

"Well, yes. But don't let it drive you crazy. Just make sure you look in the drain before you fill the tub. Look, let's get something to eat, then hit the locksmith's for your keys."

"Shay, I don't know if I can even stay one afternoon here. And I know I don't really want to be here when Miss Ripe emerges from the potty."

"It'll be okay. I promise. Cherry's never home. She's either working or staying at someone else's place, if you get my drift. And we really do need help with the rent. And your suitcases are already here. And you have no place else to go."

I stared at those suitcases. She was right.

I arrived in New York nearly three months ago after obtaining my Actor's Equity Card doing half of the summer season with Houston's Theatre Under the Stars. The last two shows had been *The Fantasticks* and *1776*. There are no chorus dancers in either, so I'd packed five suitcases full of dance clothes, dance shoes, headshots, resumes, T-shirts, jeans, jackets, and boots. I'd put all my savings into a cashier's check, kept out about \$400 in cash, found a one-way ticket to La Guardia at a decent price, and waved goodbye to Minette and Paul, my tearful parents.

The first month hadn't been too bad. I'd been taking classes, finding my way around New York, and going to the Gene Kelly festival at a revival theatre in the East Village for entertainment. I'd wandered around the city getting my bearings and playing tourist at the free attractions. I'd visited the Statue of Liberty three times (low-cost for the ferry ride. I hadn't gone in. Too expensive to actually peer out of the lady's lamp.) I'd spent hours gazing at paintings in the Metropolitan Museum and dinosaur bones at the Museum of Natural History. I'd gone to three different Broadway shows, paying rush ticket prices and skipping dinner for the next week.

I'd done all these things by myself. I hadn't been able to take more than one dance class a day due to monetary constraints and couldn't go out to eat with anyone I met in class for the same reason. I'd chatted with a couple of other dancers for a few minutes at the two auditions I'd braved. Most of the girls both in class and auditions had ignored me (that competition thing).

Mother Minette didn't help matters. Daily phone calls kept me between angry and homesick. But then, Minette hadn't wanted me to come to New York in the first place. She'd made her feelings plain since the day I'd told her I wanted to drop out of college and head to Manhattan, two years ago.

"Abby, this desire to go to New York is sheer nonsense. You haven't even finished college yet. If you don't like the University of Texas, transfer somewhere else for your last two years. New York is big and dirty and crime-ridden. You don't know a soul there. You'd be miserable."

"But, Minette . . ."

"I'm not finished. It's nearly impossible to have a career as a performer. You'll end up like millions of hopeful dancers from all over the country working at Macys behind a cosmetics counter or typing for some insurance company."

"I doubt that, Minette. Since I can't type I don't think I'd get hired."

"Abby. Don't be impertinent. That's not the point. If you don't have the back-up of a degree you can't even teach. And you'll never find anyone suitable to marry."

"You've got to be kidding! I am 19 years old. I'm not terribly concerned about being Mrs. Somebody-in-Politics right now. And where is it written that people in Manhattan don't find spouses and get married? I mean, really, how did the city get so crowded if those people aren't reproducing? It's not just all immigrants."

I'd gotten upset and consequently found myself not making a lot of sense. Paul, my Dad, gently intervened, but still sided with Minette in an effort to keep the peace. We were both well aware of the fact that Minette was not pleasant when her ideas were opposed.

He smiled at me and spoke softly as he tried to make a compromise that would be palatable to both daughter and mother.

"Abby. We just want you to be a bit more realistic. Wait until you graduate from college. Then we'll see how you feel. If you still want to go to New York, then that's fine."

I went back to University of Texas and graduated two years later. Minette was, if not happy, at least slightly mollified.

Once I was in New York, I had the stupid idea that my mother might let up a bit. I was wrong.

She called daily on the public phone at the women's residence to inform me about this or that studio in my hometown desperately trying to hire dance teachers. Then she'd throw in little bits about lawyers, doctors, mayor's assistants, and oil barons who were "just dying to meet you, Abby." I'd hang up and give the phone to the next person in line. Usually that was another dancer or actress or artist who was miserable as I at St. Katherine's Women's Residence.

Life changed when I auditioned for, and got cast in, an Off-Off Broadway original musical mystery entitled Numbers Up. I loved being busy and I was getting to know my fellow cast members but the hours I was in rehearsal were causing major conflicts with the hours of operation at St. Katherine's. Conflict, hell. Not even police action. All-out war was a more accurate description.

St. Katherine's Women's Residence. Nuns everywhere checking the whereabouts of their female boarders. Nuns checking to see if the beds were made. Nuns allowing ten minutes on the public phone. Nuns establishing curfews a ten-year-old would scoff at.

I'd finish rehearsal, grab the closest subway ride, then pound on the door of the residence to be let in no more than twenty minutes after the darn curfew expired at 11:30 p.m. I fought constantly with Sister Agnes about letting me in after hours. I kept trying to explain that I wasn't engaged in anything immoral or illegal and that I needed the job to pay the rent so the nuns could the place open and continue to harass others in my position.

I met Shay Martin at dance class. We'd both been less than enamored by a

has-been movie star who was pushing around everyone in class (literally). We eventually found ourselves crammed into a corner near the dressing room.

"Bitch!"

Shay's husky voice spat out the word. She looked at my startled face.

"Sorry. Not you. The movie queen there. She truly pisses me off. Comes in her about once a month and makes life miserable for everyone. She can't dance. She can't sing. She can't act."

I grinned.

"A triple threat."

Shay grinned.

"Did you just happen to see Singing' in the Rain last week at the revival in the Village?"

"I did--ten times. I went through an entire bag of bagels and six cups of coffee. I only left the theatre for the bathroom, which admittedly became frequent after those six cups."

Shay extended her hand to me.

"Glad to meet another Gene Kelly fan. Shay Martin."

"Abby Fouchet."

"Where are you from, Abby Fouchet? I detect a hint of South."

"El Paso, Texas, Ma'am. That's far West Texas. Just be glad it's not far East Texas. Those folks sound like they got oatmeal in their mouth twenty-four hours a day."

Shay had been diving into her bag but looked up at this last remark.

"Speaking of oatmeal, I'm hungry. Wanna grab a bite after class?"

"I do, but I'm broke until Friday. I think I have about five dollars."

"Abby, my new friend, my naive little Texas bumpkin. Have you not discovered the joys of the bar buffet? I see by your expression that you have not. What do they teach you in Texas? Never mind. It's quite simple. We trot over to O'Malley's Ale House. We order a glass of wine, or a beer. Cost? Minimal. We place our drinks down, and head for the sumptuous feast spread out on buffet tables in the middle of the bar. We stuff ourselves. With any luck, a few nice gentlemen seated at the bar will appreciate the foxiness of two dancers such as we, and send another drink or two to the table. Voila! A ten course dinner for the price of a glass of wine. That's wine, mind you. No hard liquor. Too expensive."

I was thoroughly entranced. I'd spent far too much time in the dance studio and not enough in the real world.

"Are you sure this is legal?"

Shay struggled to contain her laughter.

"God, you are an innocent. Yes. It's clearly written into the dancers' code of ethics as being a great way to get a meal. The bar owners love it, because they know the regulars could care less about eating. Those guys want babes in the bar. The regulars want to buy drinks for the babes in the bar. The babes want to eat. Just don't leave with any of these clowns. They're all married, all on parole, and they're all nuts."

I had a good feeling about Shay, like I'd known her at least six lifetimes. We

finished class, threw jeans over our leotards, then headed for the bar. Three hours and six drinks later (Shay was right about the gentlemen eagerly waiting to pay) we'd become friends forever. Shay was from Wisconsin, had dropped out of college primarily to spite her father (Chairman of the English Department at a large university) and headed for New York to try her luck as a dancer. At auditions, she was told she was wonderful, but quite honestly, too heavy, so she was shifting her focus towards becoming a choreographer and perhaps a director. She was bright, funny, and as passionate about dance as I was.

I told her about Mother Minette, the Southern Belle Mom with an attitude, not being thrilled that I was trying to be a Broadway dancer (especially since Broadway was located in that land of iniquity called Manhattan). Mother Minette, who consequently called on a weekly, often daily basis, with new reasons for her darling daughter to chuck it all and come back home. Shay shook her head and said one it all in one word,

"Parents."

For the next two weeks, Shay and I met daily at class. I finally had a friend who loved touring the city with me whenever she wasn't working and I wasn't rehearsing. But I was continuously griping about my living arrangements.

"Damn that woman!"

"What woman?"

"Sister Agnes and her curfew."

"Whoa! Sounds like a wonderful name for a rock band."

"Shay, you are not taking my trials and tribulations seriously. I've got to get out of there. She reminds of Sister Errol Flynn from high school who used to bitch at me for wearing my skirts too short. I mean, what else can one do to spice up plaid uniform skirts with pleats?"

Shay put her hand up to stop me.

"Back up there. Did you say Sister Errol Flynn?"

"We called her that because of her moustache. Looked just the way his did in Robin Hood. You know. The one with Olivia de Havilland as Maid Marian. Who was a wimp. I mean really, the woman had to rely on her damn nurse to get her out of every situation with Claude Rains and Basil Rathbone. Actually Sister Errol Flynn also looked a bit like Basil. But the moustache was all Flynn. Where was I? Ah yes. I have had enough nuns to last me a lifetime. I need a life. I need an apartment. My hotel hunting has not gone well either."

Shay looked shocked.

"What hotel hunting? You didn't tell me you were getting that desperate."

I waved my hand in front of her face.

"Shay! Where have you been? Haven't you been listening to me? Focus, girl. Desperate is an understatement. I've been hitting every women's hotel in the city. At first it seemed like a good plan. I don't know, seems like I saw some old movie one time with all these classy women from Ohio and Vermont living happily at the Barbizon. But I'm telling you; those girls must have had a major career before they ever moved in. Those places cost more in one week than my salary at Numbers Up for a month. And you wouldn't believe the assortment of perverts hanging out on the corner every night. I had to kick one down a flight of

stairs to keep him from trying to kidnap me."

A wicked gleam appeared in Shay's eyes.

"Abby. Abby! This is so perfect. You need out of your present living space. I know this because that's all you've talked about for weeks. Ta-Da! You, my friend, are now in luck. My crummy landlord has upped the rent again because he painted last month and called it a major renovation, and my current roommate has decided we need a third. You need to save money as much as we do, and we can keep the perverts away. Wanna move in?"

After much groveling and foot kissing, I instantly agreed. She took me by to see the place and I had to admit it was perfect for my needs.

Seven-D was a decent space by even Texas standards. The bay windows with built-in seats overlooked 79th Street, not an alley. There was a real kitchen; not the typical New York galley. The subway was just down the corner, Central Park was about three blocks away and Riverside Drive was one block west. The bedroom was pretty small and Shay's antique furniture courtesy her great-grandmother filled it, but there was a day bed tucked into the corner and it seemed more than capable of withstanding my 103 pounds and 5'2" inch frame.

This third girl had not been there the day Shay had given me the tour. I got my first glimpse of Miss Ripe as I stood in the doorway of Seven-D with all five of my suitcases in hand and no convent to return to.

I tuned back into what Shay was saying while still reeling from my meeting with Miss Ripe.

"And you know you're going to stay. Didn't Sister d'Agostino say you were about to be bounced from the convent for breaking the curfew?"

"That's Sister Agnes, not d'Agostino, you dimwit. She's not a grocery store. What she is though--is scary. The woman looks like she was sent over from central casting to play Miss Danvers in the St. Katherine's Residence version of Rebecca. Or a thin Kathy Bates in Misery. And, yes, I am in trouble for coming in on a frequent basis past the appointed hour. I keep trying to explain that rehearsals for a way-the-hell-Off-Broadway show don't even end 'til eleven, and that it's a ridiculous curfew for anyone over the age of fourteen, but she didn't want to hear it. She thinks all you can be doing after midnight is having sex somewhere. I should be so lucky. Ha! In a word. Ha!"

Shay was pacing in circles.

"Abby, you can't go back to St. Kate's. One more week with the nuns and you'll end up fighting the bag lady on the corner of 79th Street for her space. We talked about this. You love the apartment. You're already here in the apartment. The cab is long since gone from the apartment."

Shay grinned wickedly at me.

"Uh, huh. I see those wheels turning. You do need us as much, if not more, than we need you. And it's very safe here. Think about this. Men hit on you even at women's hotels. You're tiny and you're cute. What are you, five two on a good day? Perverts love tiny and cute. You need protection. If you make friends with Cherry, she'll volunteer Vito and Guido as your bodyguards. The Mariccino twins will love you."

"I don't even want to know. Vito and Guido?"

Cherry suddenly came tearing out of the bathroom

"What about 'em? Did they call? They still comin' to get me at 5:00?"

Shay smiled sweetly at me then threw a robe at the now totally naked Miss Ripe. "Sorry, no, they haven't yet. I was just telling Abby to take a message for you if they call and you're still in the tub."

"Oh, okay. I gotta take my bath now. I just came out for another cigarette."

She grabbed a pack off of the window seat, dropped the robe and headed back to the bathroom.

I looked at Shay. "I've moved into an apartment with a topless naked bimbo. Watch. Cherry will probably set me up on dates with both Vito and Guido. I have no money. Minette the champion worrier, will call here, and Cherry or Vito will answer and she'll immediately call the NYPD to come and get me. And they'll do it for Minette, I swear. She hypnotizes people. I'm in deep trouble. I should go back to the nuns."

A vision of Sister Agnes in her black robes wagging a finger at me, telling me I was headed for the farthest reaches of Hades while I knocked with bleeding fingers on the convent doors at the ungodly hour of 11:31 (and twenty seconds) drifted in vivid Technicolor before my eyes.

I took my suitcases into the bedroom and began to unpack.