

## Chapter One

The cabby pulls out in front of me at the last second. He so definitely saw me; I caught his eye along with his receding hairline and his maniacal glint in the side view mirror as I cruised by. Cabbies think they're the one and only gods of the universe, this universe being the city of New York in the year one thousand nine hundred and sixty eight.

I push down on the pedals and surge ahead. I'm just inches from the front bumper as I make the yellow light. Eat my dust, asshole. I can hear him yelling at me, using the kind of language that would guarantee a trip to the bathroom with Sister Maria. You never forget the taste of Ivory soap on the tongue or the gagging sensation you have to fight down. Ah, the joys of being a Catholic schoolgirl, even at a place as classy as the Convent of the Sacred Heart.

The lights on Broadway are timed and if you hit the sweet spot at exactly twenty-seven mph, you can make it straight downtown without ever having to stop at the red. That poor cabby, I feel his pain, stuck waiting in front of the Brill Building where some of the biggest hits of our time are likely being written at this very moment. Me, I'm eight blocks south and pulling up to make my last delivery of the day.

*1501 Broadway.*

Here I come, waltzing through the door, bike slung over my right shoulder.

Benny the doorman holds the service door open for me. He's the perfect gentleman, his blue cap sitting high up on his pomaded black hair. "Freddie!" he calls out, giving me a mock salute.

"Benny. How's it hanging this fine day?"

"Can't complain."

I interpret this to mean he's in the black, as in, on a winning streak. Benny is a handicapper. He has the latest Racing News open at the desk and spends his free time at Aqueduct. The man is a scholar of all things Thoroughbred, with a Ph.D. in equine lineage. I wheel my bike behind him and lean it against the wall. Usually, I would have to lock it up outside, removing the wheel. Tote that upstairs along with whatever I'm delivering. Anything not chained down and padlocked in this city is gone the second you turn your back.

As one of the members of the Fleet Feet tribe, I wear my cap with the Mercury wings, albeit ironically. Al, my chain-smoking boss, doesn't know that Mercury was the god of war and has nothing to do with speed, or efficiency. When I informed him, his response was, "Says you!"

I'm the sole female employee at Fleet Feet. The boys who ride out with me have stopped giving me shit, but they're not friends. Not even close. The job is entrepreneurial. The more deliveries you make, the more you earn. Their anger is based on two things, that a girl is doing what they do, riding through the war zone that is Manhattan traffic, veering round buses and pedestrians at high speeds and getting the job done, and that she's better at it than any of them are. It doesn't matter that I've put in the time, working as a messenger for five, count'em five

muggy summers, or that I wasn't planning on ever doing it again once I obtained my B.A. from Barnard.

Ah, the best laid plans of mice and the modern woman. I was all set to graduate and apply for that assistant curatorial job at MOMA. My bright, shiny future seemed all but assured. And then . . .it went very, very wrong. I've made mistakes, who hasn't? But they all pale in comparison to the one I made, trusting Professor Andrews, first name, Carl. A full Professor of Art History at Barnard, his specialty, French Impressionists, his seminal work on Monet required reading at so many of our great institutions of higher learning. It had basically been promised to me on the strength of my year being his T.A. It just goes to show you, the higher you rise, the further you have to fall. And then there's that bone-jarring landing.

I'm currently a full twelve credits shy of a diploma. And potentially, a bike messenger for life . . .

I push that image away because I'm all too well aware of what will strike next. The churning in the gut is starting up and after that . . .no. I just can't. I shove it all away instead. I'm the queen of forgetting. It's what I have to do in order to get through my days. Nights are worse.

Not now!

I blink back the thoughts. Make my mind shut off. Turn my brain into a Tabula rasa. There. I've gotten really good at this, but then I've always been an overachiever. Just ask the nuns.

It's the last week of May and the weather already sucks. Eighty-nine today. With the humidity it feels about ten degrees hotter. I dress for comfort and ease in a man's white wife-beater, wearing it underneath my rayon blue and white bowling shirt. My best friend, Celia found it in a bin at our favorite thrift store, St. Vincent de Paul down on Delancey, exclaimed, "Freddie, it's you! Look!"

It is. My nickname is written in black script right there on the breast pocket. Freddie is my nickname, my real name is Fredericka, which is aristocratic and way too much of a mouthful for most people. Thus, the shortened version stuck. I fill out my look today with a pair of soft and supple Lee jeans. There are homemade patches on the knees. No socks, just worn out, hi top red Converse sneakers. My best asset, my long red hair is pinned to within an inch of its life and tucked into the bike cap. That's me, a slave to fashion.

I'm not vain about much. But my hair matters, I cut the split ends every week and buy special Kiehl's shampoo over at the drug store on the Lower East Side. It's currently at Joan Baez length, falling past my shoulders but not so long as to be impossible. People tell me I'm striking, high cheekbones, a fair complexion with freckles coming out round my nose in the summer, my nose is straight and thin and not quite big enough to make a statement on its own. Then there's my mouth, which is usually turned up at the corners, ironically. My chin's a little too pointy but there's nothing you can do about that, and then there are my eyes. Green. I get a lot of commentary on them. Guys are always thinking they've come up with some clever opening. As for the rest of me, I don't need a bra and ever since I left high school I

haven't used one. I'm a size A, maybe. And five foot nine. So many men use the tired line, "You should model." Wow, really? Because I'm tall, thin and flat as a board?

Men. I tell you, I could write a book. Make that a tome.

Speaking of which, in the elevator everyone else is a guy. They're all suited up. I make them as lawyers with a peppering of accountants to spice things up. On seven, the doors open and in steps a woman in an A-line royal blue skirt and white blouse. She's clutching a manila folder in her hot little hands. Now we are two. She's basically my antithesis, her make up is perfectly done and thick, her lashes weighted down with mascara, blue eye shadow, heavy coral lipstick, and her hair dyed a brassy blond, accompanied by a co-worker. They jam in together in the far corner.

"I couldn't believe that, could you?" he says.

"No!" Her eyebrows rise. She laughs invitingly. There's a realignment of their bodies, an intimacy being expressed. It's the sort that happens in close quarters like elevators or work situations or darkened movie theaters.

Eleven. Ping.

"Excuse me!" I say maybe a little too loudly. They shrink back to let me by. The doors shut behind me.

I exhale. There's Celia, typing away at the reception desk. She sits directly underneath the sign that reads Taylor, Banks, Allen and Morris: Attorneys At Law. Celia looks up, and gives me a welcoming smile. We've been best friends pretty much since the first day of kindergarten. Seventeen great years later and here we are, just two short weeks from moving into our very own apartment.

"Miss Riley," she says. "It's a pleasure and a privilege."

“Back at you.”

She has honey blond hair and bright blue eyes. Aside from the lighter hair color, she’s shockingly like Jean Shrimpton aka the Shrimp. She’s got the same pert nose, the larger than typical eyes and the basic drop dead gorgeous looks that cause people to turn their heads as she walks past. Celia gets the line about how she should be a model at least once a day. But Celia has also gotten actual offers from modeling agents. Their business cards sit in her drawer. A fall back position, if the acting thing doesn’t work out.

She and I have serious plans for this evening. We’re heading to the show at the Fillmore. Tim Buckley. I’ve got an obscene crush on him. I cannot wait.

“That’s for us?” Celia asks, gesturing towards the package.

“Walters,” I say, handing it over. “So, how did your parents take it?”

“Right. That. It’s been crazy busy.”

“You promised me! They’re going to freak! Celia you have to give them a chance to at least calm down, you can’t just spring it on them at the last minute.”

She nods. “I know.”

“When?”

“Tonight.”

It’s been tonight for a month. She’s been working up to letting them know. We’ve already signed a lease, and they still don’t realize she’s moving out. Not to mention that her parents will officially lose it when they see our new place on East Fifth between First and Second. The bathtub’s in the kitchen and the back yard is an airshaft, so there’s not much of a view out that side, for us the good news is that it’s

got gates on every single window already, so that's a saving in itself. Plus, the landlady swears the place is cockroach free, and there are two actual bedrooms. It's a miracle for the price, a hundred and eighty dollars a month.

It's not like we can back out now.

We've been talking about it, it seems forever, but probably only since we got to an age where we realized we could actually move away and live on our own. I'd say that happened for me a lot earlier than Celia, as in about the moment I became sentient. Celia has two doting parents, while I've just got Yvette.

"How did the interview go?" she asks me.

"Not bad."

Okay, so maybe I hedged a little. Made it seem like I was going to meet with someone at the museum today. It's hard to give up that vision of yourself, the one where you're Freddie Riley, that girl who shot out of nowhere to graduate first in her class at the snooty Convent of the Sacred Heart High School on New York's Upper East Side and earned a full academic scholarship to Barnard. Yeah, you know the one; she was going to be her generation's Horatio Alger.

I slouch half on her desk, half off.

"You're going to be at the side door on time, right?" Celia asks.

"When have I ever failed you?"

She rolls her eyes. I have many positive virtues, but promptness is not one of them. "Jimmy said we had to be there at seven, or else. I'm going to run by Harry's boat first to water the plants and feed the goldfish."

Harry is a friend from Stella Adler. He's off doing summer stock and she's been doing him the favor in exchange for us being able to hang out there, whenever we like. The boat is docked at the boat basin off of Riverside. Her parents have no idea it, or Harry, exist. The deception began two years ago when she started classes there and she and Harry ran lines in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Harry, in the Marlon Brando role and he was good! Particularly when you consider the difference between his macho act and the real Harry, who's sensitive and sweet and extremely campy. Celia's dad is incredibly uptight about gay guys. He makes snide comments and he'd have no patience for Harry. I can only imagine how weird he'd have felt at the birthday bash they threw for him at the Ninth Circle. It was room full of the most amazing looking guys, not one of them even remotely interested in us in the usual way. What a relief that was.

Celia has a whole retinue of guys. Gay. Straight. Married. Single. Jimmy is another one. He's our ticket to getting in free to the Fillmore. He gives us press passes and we slip inside. I bring my camera along and take shots of the bands up close and personal. Jimmy's a bouncer there. He imagines I'm the sole impediment to his being able to consummate his flirtation with Celia. In other words, he's totally clueless. I would feel sorry for him, except for that inconveniently pregnant girlfriend who's back at his apartment, hammering together wind chimes, tie-dying tee shirts and knotting up macramé plant holders.

"Is that for me?" The man asking, or rather, insinuating is Phillip Taylor. The sleazebag has emerged from his lair/office. He looks mainly like a weasel with that sharp nose, weak chin, and receding hairline. He is the worst. Celia has described



how he initiates all the new hires, cornering them and sticking his hands where they don't belong.

I turn it so he can see the name. "Doesn't look like it is, what a shame."

He doesn't find me, or my presence the least bit amusing. But he pretends, forcing a smile. Why? Because when he tried those glad hands with me once, I smacked him, hard right in the solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him. Then I walked away and pretended nothing at all had happened. His eyes slide past me and I like how he goes all squirrely and nervous. He turns around and ducks back inside his office.

Celia and I exchange a raised eyebrow. We both manage not to laugh, just.

"I'll be there on time. Cross my heart," I add, miming it.

I'm up. On the go. The elevator arrives with a whoosh and I step inside. As I look out, I see Taylor emerging from his office to see if the coast is clear. He'll be over by Celia in another second, taking aim on her cleavage. She'll wear her patient, law-abiding expression as she tamps down her contempt and hatred. It's what you have to do to keep this job. But I wonder if guys like Taylor realize what they're doing when they demand it. Sliding metal casing over a lethal device, like say a neutron bomb. It's bound to go off eventually.

Blow them all to kingdom come.

The doors shut with a hard bang and the elevator plummets.

Biking home takes me less than ten minutes. Yvette's place and the only home I've ever known is a fourth floor walk up on West Forty-Ninth between Ninth and

Tenth right smack dab in the middle of Hell's Kitchen. The neighborhood is a slum. No point in mincing words. Hell's Kitchen is an appropriate description, in that Hell itself must be grander than this garden spot. Although it's actually named after a real person, Boeker Hell. Mr. Hell was one of the original Dutch colonists back when this was New Amsterdam and this area was scenic, chockfull of trees and quaint little wooden houses.

Now? Not so much.

The devil wouldn't stand for living in one of these tenement apartments or worse a room at one of our many, luxurious Single Room Occupancy hotels. Junkies abound, nodding out on whatever stoop they might find. Families with six kids jam into a two-bedroom apartment. Two hot days in a row, and the entire place reeks. Garbage piles up and spills out of the upended bins, rats nose around. And then there's our most famous resident, The Capeman. Salvador Agron's no superhero, despite the snazzy nickname. He's an idiot who was a member of a gang called the Vampires- yeah, the Vampires- who killed two kids in the park right down the block from me.

To survive growing up here you make it clear you're not worth messing with. The gang of record in this nabe is the Westies and they have chits out that bind them to everyone who matters around here, very much including our local constabulary. So no, it's nothing like in West Side Story, with Natalie Wood doing a very poor job of being Puerto Rican. As if. Those gang members danced and sang their way right into the moviegoer's hearts. I could barely contain my amusement, watching. Riff was

supposed to play as tough? Over at one of the Broadway theatres he'd have done fine, but walk a few blocks west? He's lucky to get out of here alive.

Mick, our *concierge*, is setting out the banged up trashcans all in a row as I ride up.

"Good day?" he asks.

"The best!"

"Sarcasm will get you nowhere."

Not exactly true. As proof, he holds open the metal gate that separates the alley from the sidewalk and the street. I wheel my bike inside and then lug it down the steps into the basement. Mick lets me keep my ride in his padlocked storeroom. It sits there safe, right next to all the goods that have fallen off the backs of certain trucks. Our bargain is that I run errands for him in return, picking up supplies from Royal Hardware, his standing Saturday night order of suckling pork from Little Brazil and once a month the three boxes of Montecristos Ralph keeps for him in the back room over at Optimo. Cigars are a perfect example of chemistry in action, unlit the smell of them is intoxicatingly sweet, hold a match to the end and they turn into stink bombs.

I lean the bike against the far wall, next to a stack of brand new RCA Color TV's. One of those would be nice in my new place. If only. I take the stairs up to the fourth floor, slide my key into the lock and step through. Then go slipping and sliding. I catch myself on the far wall. Let out a clenched teeth *fuck* and look down to see what Yvette's spilled. Red wine. It's evidently gone to waste here on the hallway

floor. So drunk that she didn't bother to clean it up, of course. She's probably snoring on her bed.

All that goes sailing through my head before I register.

Not wine.

Blood.

My eyes follow the trail on back to its source, a very dead man lying face up on the living room floor.