

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, just inches from the front bumper and make the yellow light. He's stuck there, waiting in front of the Brill Building. 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 which is approximately twenty seven miles per hour, you can ride straight downtown and never even have to stop. That cabby is stuck in front of the Brill Building where some of the biggest hits of our time are likely being written at this very moment. I'm eight blocks south and pulling up in front of 1501 Broadway.

Benny the doorman lets me put my bike inside, otherwise I'd have to chain it to a pole and take the wheel with me. I'm one of the members of the Fleet Feet tribe, I wear my Mercury cap ironically but my boss doesn't know that. Mercury was the god of war, I told Joe, and all he said was, he had wings.

True.

I'm the only girl who works there. And the other guys either admire me or hate me or do both. It pays a lot better than any of the other summer jobs I could have gotten. And I've been doing it now, for three plus years. This is going to be my final summer, because you know, I'm a college graduate.

Or would have been, twelve credits short.

I might end up being a bike messenger forever, I think.

Then don't think about it, because I'm in the elevator and riding upstairs with my delivery bag over my shoulder. I'm dressed for success or at least for comfort, it's June in the city and eighty-five today, with the humidity it feels hotter. I wear a man's white wife-beater underneath my rayon blue and white bowling shirt.

Celia made me buy it. We saw it in St. Vincent de Paul one day and it has my name in script on the breast pocket. Or rather my nickname, Freddie, short for Fredericka. I sound so elegant, when I'm absolutely not, I complete the look today with a pair of soft and supple Lee jeans with patches on both knees, no socks and scuffed Converse sneakers. My red hair is pinned to within an inch of its life and tucked into the bike cap.

I'm flat as a board, if you need to know that part. Five nine, well okay five eight and a half so sue me.

I've pressed eleven. I stand in the back of the elevator and a few other riders get on. They're all male and all wearing the kind of suits that point out how important they are, but then of course, they work in this building which makes them some sort of professional. Mainly lawyers but there are a smattering of accountants. Finally one of my tribe enters. She is wearing an A-line skirt that stops just right

above the knee, so it's decent. Her shirt is white with a Peter Pan collar. She's got her face made up perfectly, her lashes are thick with mascara and her hair is dyed a brassy blond. She's turned to one of the men, apparently they're colleagues and he's saying a little too loudly, "I couldn't believe that, could you?"

"No!" Her eyebrows rise. She laughs. He laughs back. There's an understanding between them, the sort that happens in close quarters like elevators or work situations or dark movie theaters or no.

I stop myself, I look away from them as the door opens and they get off.

My own stop is next. Eleven. Ping.

Celia, my best friend and bosom buddy since the day we met in kindergarten looks up.

Her blond hair is not dyed. Her blue eyes are original too. She's happy to see me and I'm just as happy to see her. We have plans tonight and other plans too, in a week we're going to move out of our respective homes and into an apartment on East Ninth Street, it's nothing special but it's going to be especially ours.

Then we can pursue our dreams, you know, hers of being a famous actress and mine which used to be law school but certainly first a job as a paralegal which I would be sure to get what with my degree from Barnard and all the accolades that go along with that.

A girl like me, coming from nothing and doing so exceptionally well, it's quite uplifting, a modern version of Horatio Alger with a female lead.

Only not.

I haven't told Celia about not getting the degree.

I might have even said I graduated. I might have lied right to her face, by best friend, light of my life.

I might be a total coward.

I might not want to consider that now. Instead I slouch, half on the desk, half off.

“Delivery from Acme Corporation.”

“Excellent. Give it here Wiley.”

I hand her the thick package. Someone’s getting sued, that’s what they do best here at Taylor, Banks, Allen and Morris. Here’s another ironic twist, her parents think that because she’s been working as a receptionist and doing filing at this firm for three summers that she’s the one who has an interest in the law. But then her parents have believed every single lie she’s ever told them. No one is a better liar than Celia, but then she is a consummate actress.

I love her parents. Her dad works for the MTA and her mom is a nurse and the two of them think their daughter is an angel, or as close as you get when your feet are mainly hitting the concrete pavement. She’s due to break their hearts and I feel truly sorry about that. It kind of makes me glad that I don’t have any parents of my own. No hearts will be broken when I turn out to be failure I’m fast becoming. But then I was raised by a she-wolf, her name is Yvette Brown and she’s my foster mother. Good luck finding a heart to break inside that body.

“Can you get there by seven?” Celia asks.

“You know it.”

“Great, Jimmy said he can get us in before the show, we can watch them set up.”

Jimmy is one of the many men/boys/males who Celia depends on to ease her way through the highway and byways of city life. He’s a bouncer at the Fillmore East and he’s provided us with fake badges so that we are never questioned and always with the band, be it the Who or Hendrix. Jimmy thinks my constant presence and inconvenient need to get out of there when Celia clearly wants to stay late and longer is the only thing that’s stopping him, he has no idea how many times we’ve worked this together, how many boys have been thwarted, and I will admit that there’s been times when Celia’s been the decoy for me. There are boys who like a girl with long red hair, green eyes and a certain swagger.

If we like them back, we have a signal we give each other, we touch the side of our cheek with a hand and the other one backs off.

Leaves it to fate or love or lust.

Otherwise it’s a full court press on how to get out of there while the getting is good.

Jimmy is being slowly tortured. But then, he should know better, he’s twenty nine and although he’s not married, he has a steady girlfriend who’s clearly pregnant and there is no way he should be putting the moves on Celia. So whatever he gets he more than deserves.

Men.

I could write a book.

Tonight the Byrds headline and Tim Buckley opens, Celia has a crush on Tim Buckley, she says that it's clear he's sensitive and in pain and needs someone who would understand him, whereas I just like his music. Not that she has any interest, she says but who knows. What I do know is that every single band had groupies that come along with them and those girls are ferocious.

"Is that for me?" Phillip Taylor emerges from the hall. I kind of hate the guy, he's a name partner at a law firm but he reminds me of a weasel, and not just because of the way he looks although his looks don't help him. A sharp nose, a weak chin, a receding hairline, it's what he does to the women here, he corners them and talks to them and then of course he manages to touch them, he's done it to Celia more than once and she squirms away but the day she quits for good is the day our plan for revenge goes into action. We have it all worked out.

"No, it's for Henry," I pipe up.

Which is when he deigns to notice my existence. He tried those glad hands with me once and I hit him. Hard. Right in the solar plexus, knocked the wind out of him and then walked away and pretended nothing at all had happened. Right now, he swivels back to pay attention to Celia, monopolizing her by leaning over the desk and cutting off her line of vision.

"See you later," I call out to her. Then press for the elevator. When the door opens and I step in, I look back. He's staring intently at her cleavage. Celia's expression is perfect. Blank. Bland. Like the metal casing they put over a lethal device, like say a neutron bomb.

I press the down button

Our new apartment isn't much, but it's going to be something all the same. Sure, the bathtub's in the kitchen and the back yard is an airshaft, so there's not much of a view out that side, but the good news is that it's safe as houses or at least as an apartment can be, what with the gates that were installed by the last tenants and it's been fumigated, or so the landlady swears, there are two actual bedrooms which is basically a miracle in itself for the price.

Celia has been waiting for the right time to mention it to her parents. I have no idea when that will be, she's put it off because first there was graduation from Fordham and then the party and the relatives coming up from Florida and over from Queens and I keep urging her not to make it into a last minute surprise.

As in, "I'm gone, here's my new address."

I ride home. It takes a whole ten minutes. I live on west Forty-Ninth between Ninth and Tenth, you might have heard of the area, Hell's Kitchen? It's named that after Boeker Hell, he was the Dutchman who was one of the original colonists back when this was New Amsterdam. Yeah, as if.

It's named that because it's disgusting. Hell's kitchen says it all, tenements and Single Room Occupancy hotels where junkies and their friends like to hang out in the hallways and down on their luck families end up jammed into one of the miserable rooms. Some of you may have heard of a nice Puerto Rican gentleman who is known as the Capeman? He was the idiot who thought these two kids were members of a rival gang and killed them in a park nearby. His gang is called the Vampires, cute right? Or maybe you just watched West Side Story, saw Natalie Wood

pretend to be Puerto Rican and all those other guys pretend to be tough when they were obviously actors and dancers and would last about two minutes with a real Westie.

There's no place like home and I cannot wait to be out of here.

Mick, our *concierge* is setting out the banged up trash cans all in a row as I pull up.

"Good day?" he asks.

"Best ever."

He holds open the metal gate that separates the alley from the sidewalk and the street. I wheel my bike inside. Mick and I have a long-standing agreement, he gives my bike a place in the crowded basement and I run whatever errands he needs run. Basement space is at a premium, what with it being home to his apartment and all the buildings mechanicals and an assortment of storage spaces that are basically a department store of items that fell off the backs of trucks.

Mick has sent me out on lots of different runs in the course of my twenty-two years. Some were most definitely illegal, but most were just pick-ups from Royal Hardware or his standing Saturday night order from Little Brazil, suckling pork, yucca and a mess of fried plantains. My favorite though was my monthly stop at Optimo cigars; Mick's Montecristos came straight from Cuba by way of the back room, through the locked safety door and inside where they kept the good stuff. The smell of unlit cigars is truly magical, peaty and thick, and completely counterintuitive because as soon as he got the box he'd take one out and light it and ruin the entire effect. But that's chemistry for you.



I lock the bike up in the storage room next to a pile of boxed up RCA Color TV's and take the stairs up to four. I unlock the door and step inside and slide and almost fall flat on my face, do a quick recovery.

"What the hell?" I blurt out.

Which is when I look and . . .see red, a whole lot of red and I know it's blood before I even register where it's oozing out of the man who's lying on his back in the hallway staring up at the ceiling.

"Holy shit!"

His eyes are open. Open wide, unblinking. And oh yeah, there are scissors sticking in the middle of his neck, right where his Adam's apple used to be.

I scream and then shut my mouth fast because I see Yvette; she's lying just past him, smack in the middle of the living room rug. It was muddy yellow when she got me to help her carry it up here, straight from the garbage to our lovely domicile. Now it's taken on a distinctly orange shade.

"Yvette!" I kneel down.

And she opens her eyes.

"Oh, thank God," I say. "I'm getting help."

She looks at me and then her hand grabs me, and drags on my arm and she forces me close. It's hard not to notice that there's blood on her, lots of it and a lot of it coming from her because her leopard skin tight dress, one of her two favorites has slash marks on it and then, well there's what's exposed underneath. I have a pretty strong stomach but I can't bear it. I look into her face instead.

Her makeup is a mess.

She'd hate that.

No matter how drunk she got, she managed to make sure her makeup stayed on right.

"You can't," she says to me. Thickly, but I can understand the words. "You have to. . ." Then she chokes and the words stop. She's leaving me hanging when I can't wait, I have to go, go get help. The phone was cut off three months ago for lack of payment, so I have to go next door, that is if the old crone will open her door and I try to pull out of her grip, gently, but firmly.

She glares at me. She's the one who needs help but somehow I'm pissing her off by trying to get it. How typical is that?

"It'll be okay," I say vaguely as I try to unlock her fingers.

Which is when she manages something heroic, as in, lifting her head and spitting out the words, "Don't. Don't let them get you."

Then she releases me. She falls back to the floor, her eyes shut.

I run. I don't bother with our pain of an ass next-door neighbor; take the stairs in leaps and bounds because there's only one person I know in this building who's even halfway reliable.

"Stay down here," Mick tells me as he reaches for the phone. I don't wait to hear the rest. I go back, back to her. Back to the only person who ever pretended to halfway like me, and even at times try and love me. Not that it ever worked out for long, still.

"Yvette," I say to her.

But this time her eyes don't flutter open.

I stare at her chest, waiting to see it move.

It doesn't.

There's blood everywhere. Her blood and his intermingling and I yell at her now, "Don't die on me!"

I know she has, but maybe if they come in time they can bring her back. Back from the dead, like Lazarus, even though I don't believe in miracles or in God. She did. She does, I correct myself and then I look over at her last mistake. She was always making them, men. Men were her weakness and she'd bring them back here and try to get something out of them, sometimes it worked for a while, other times it ended up in the emergency room at Roosevelt. I was a regular there, the nurses knew me by name. They pitied me.

They didn't pity her.

That's when I do something completely out of character, I do it for her, I make the sign of the cross above her and say the Lord's Prayer, just because. I try to picture her standing outside the pearly gates and then I ask God to let her in, because if there is a heaven she's suffered enough on earth to deserve that much. I lean over then and kiss her on her brow.

I can hear Mick coming up the stairs. Hard.

I get up and go over to the bastard who killed her then and kneel and stare at him, trying to figure out if I know him at all.

I don't. I can't find him in my memory bank but I want a name. I don't flinch as I reach into his pants pockets to see if his wallet is inside either.

Nothing. No jacket.

It's somewhere else. It's where most of them hung them, on the chair in her bedroom. And the bedroom!

Someone's been going through everything in here, like a tornado came and dumped out the drawers and emptied the closets. All her clothes, all her party dresses, all her fancy underwear in black lace and red satin, all her hopes and dreams out on display. Did he think he'd find gold somewhere? I mean, look at this place, what did he think?

Yvette had nothing left to sell. Anyone could see that.

"Jesus!" I hear Mick say and I reach into the jacket, checking the inside pocket, find the wallet, slip it out and shove it into my own back pocket. The jacket sits on the chair and the chair sits in front of her make up mirror, in the corner of it, still tucked there as it always was, her favorite photograph. Yvette back when she was working at the Copacabana. It was her last good job.

I turn, turn away from that, all the possibilities, the what if's and could haves extinguished.

That's what death is, I think as I walk out to find Mick cradling her head in his lap.

