

Birdie slammed her heel into the kickstarter. The Norton sputtered, coughed like an old drunk, then died.

“Come on,” she muttered, and kicked again. This time the engine caught with a dry, resentful roar, the whole frame shuddering beneath her knees.

She’d retimed the ignition the night before, working under a bare bulb with a headache that still hadn’t let up. All she could do now was hope it would hold long enough to get her to Brooklyn and back. A quick twist of the throttle made the engine rattle louder.

“Professor Moretti!”

Birdie turned. One of her freshmen was hurrying across the quad, waving a bundle of papers like a white flag. Classes had barely begun, and Birdie had already pegged her as one of those eager front-row types who thought enthusiasm could stand in for comprehension.

The girl skidded to a stop, cheeks pink from the run. “I fixed the oxidation question. I think I see why it’s exothermic now. Is it too late to turn it in?”

Birdie glanced at the name on the page. “Vera,” she said, fitting her leather goggles over her eyes. “If your answer doesn’t say the reaction gives off heat, you’ve missed the point.”

The girl’s face fell. Birdie sighed. “I’m short on time—slide it under my door and I’ll take a look.”

She twisted the throttle and the engine snarled in reply. Whatever the girl said next was lost in the noise. Birdie dropped the clutch and sped off down the edge of the green.

Wind whipped her silk neckerchief against her cheek as she tore down Riverside Drive. She tucked it into the collar of her jacket, then smoothed her skirt flat to keep it from catching in the chain.

*Goddamn it.* They'd had all summer to assemble her tenure file, and she'd only learned this morning that one of the letters was missing. She cursed Enrico, too, for leaving her nothing but a set of old leather diaries and a motorcycle that refused to stay in tune.

The city streets swelled with lunchtime traffic as September air tore past, biting at her skin. She dipped lower, chest pressed to the army-green tank, cutting the drag. To her right, beyond yellowing elms and rust-colored oaks, the Hudson crawled south in a brackish ribbon streaked with oil and silt.

She pictured the letter folded neatly in her desk drawer at home. Last spring, Professor Chandler had written a glowing recommendation, praise she would have rolled her eyes at if she hadn't been so desperate for a promotion. He'd called her the finest PhD student he'd ever mentored at Columbia. Good thing she'd had the sense to keep it. She couldn't count on anyone else to get it right. And the more she turned it over, the less it felt like an accident.

She glanced over her shoulder at 72nd, then swung east onto the bustling crosstown boulevard. Traffic thickened with rattling automobiles, horse-drawn wagons, and ragged newsboys scurrying through it all like rats.

When she turned onto Broadway, the city pressed in closer, the buildings rising in jagged steps toward a soot-stained sky. She steered the Norton through a narrow lane of slow-moving motorcars. The traffic ground to a halt by the time she reached Chambers Street. The sidewalks overflowed with men in threadbare union overalls and heavy wool coats, packed shoulder to shoulder, fists punching the air. She caught flashes of hand-painted signs but didn't bother

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reading them. Mounted officers fanned out across the street a block ahead, redirecting traffic away from City Hall Park.

She squeezed the clutch and planted both boots on the asphalt. A middle-aged, haggard man lurched into her path, thrusting a placard at the Ford idling to her right. This one she couldn't ignore: *STOP THE ALIEN INVASION*.

She tightened her grip on the handlebars. Protests this far south were new. They usually kept to Union Square or the docks. She had half a mind to kick the sign out of his hands but thought better of it.

Her gaze flicked to the line of cars, then to her wristwatch. Just past one. An hour and a half to make it back for her next class. If she could push through this mess, she'd hit the Brooklyn Bridge in minutes, then ten more and she'd be home.

A narrow gap opened onto a dirt path that cut across the corner of the park. It was just wide enough for the Norton to slip through. Birdie downshifted and started to move around the Ford when a policeman stepped into the intersection, raising a gloved hand.

“Road's closed,” he shouted over the engine. “Take it back to Broadway.”

She huffed, kicked the bike into gear, and wheeled around hard. A moment later, she was gunning down Broadway, threading south through the canyoned streets of the Financial District.

The noon rush was in full swing. She considered heading further south before cutting east toward the river, but the streets were jammed with trolleys and delivery trucks. Biting her lip, she turned toward the looming banks and skyscrapers that ran the world's economy.

The smell of steam and mustard hung thick in the air. Pushcart vendors shouted over one another, hawking sausages and apple turnovers. Clerks in pressed suits and polished shoes poured down the marble steps of the Bankers Trust building.

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It was the last place she wanted to be.

A horn blasted just ahead. Then another. Traffic had gone still. She edged the Norton closer to the Studebaker in front of her. Exhaust belched from its tailpipe, catching in her throat. She coughed, and seeing no police in sight, popped the front tire onto the curb.

A man in a bowler hat rushed past and stopped short, right in her path.

“Watch it, fella!” he barked.

Birdie hit the brake, stopping inches from him. His small black eyes, rimmed red, pinned her in place. His dry lips pressed into a hard line. Slowly, his gaze crawled up her body, taking in her petite leather boots, ivory blouse, and jet-black hair pulled tight into a bun. Then those lips curled into a wicked smile as he stepped aside, gesturing her through with a mock flourish.

“After you, my lady.”

A chill ran through her as the bells of Trinity Church rang out the noon hour. She didn't dignify him with a response. Instead, she released the clutch and rolled past, putting space between them. A quick glance backward, and he was gone, swallowed by the crowd.

She turned back to the street, searching for a way through. Half a block ahead, the brass fixtures of the Morgan Bank's entrance gleamed faintly in the overcast light. A little girl in a forest-green cardigan tugged at her mother's sleeve, pointing across the street where a wagon sat hitched to a bay horse, spewing clouds of condensation with each breath.

The bank doors burst open. A short, round man in a double-breasted suit barreled out, tugging at a gold paisley tie. He plowed into the mother and child, glared as if they'd trespassed on his property, and pressed on.

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Beyond them, the street opened up. Birdie traced a route along the sidewalk, around a line of customers waiting outside an oyster saloon, past the horse and wagon, clear through to the dark expanse of the East River.

She kicked the Norton into gear and eased out the clutch. The bike had barely lunged forward when a thunderous blast erupted ahead, followed by a burst of blinding light. The Norton bucked like a spooked horse, pitching her from the seat.

She crashed into the pavement on her left hip. Air rushed from her lungs in a single ragged gasp, pain flaring up her side. The concussion rolled through the street, ricocheting off brick and marble.

A film of dirt and ash clouded her goggles, turning everything a blur of orange and brown. She folded in on herself, arms over her head, pulling in shallow, dusty breaths that set off a coughing fit.

*What the hell was that?*

Her eyes clamped shut. Her mind raced. Not a gas main. Not electrical. Too fast. Too violent.

A detonation.

She curled tighter, folding herself into a fragile ball, shielding her face and upper body with trembling arms.

She'd read the wartime reports. Mixed her share of volatile compounds. Analyzed the chemistry of explosive reactions. But she'd never imagined seeing one here, in the heart of Wall Street.

Her ears rang until the world went white around her. The air was sour and metallic. Not the sulfur reek of black powder. *Dynamite*, she thought. This was deliberate. Something fouler

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lingered beneath it all. She winced at the sickening stench of burnt flesh, thinking of the horse she'd seen tethered near the bank, and felt her throat tighten. The flash had come from the horse and wagon. Could a bomb have been hidden beneath its canvas tarp?

Sound returned in fragments. Birdie rolled over, letting her weight off her left hip. She could hear the tap of hurried footsteps and a streetcar bell clanging in the distance. Over it all, panicked shouts rose and fell. She opened her eyes and wiped grime from her goggles with her sleeve. A dust cloud billowed as orange embers drifted down like fiery confetti. The Norton lay on its side a few feet ahead, smoke rising from the engine block. The Studebaker had been flung halfway into the gutter, its wheels spinning uselessly in the air.

Her hands were black with soot. She rubbed them up her arms, half-expecting to find blood. To her surprise, there was none. But a sharp throb pulsed in her left side, and her skirt clung to the skin above her left leg, damp and sticky where she guessed blood was seeping from a wound.

She staggered to her feet and swept her gaze over Wall Street. The horse was gone. Where it had stood moments before was nothing but smoke and debris. The wail of police klaxons and fire bells grew louder. The Assay Office burned, curtains blazing twelve stories high. Above, windows flew open and stunned clerks and secretaries leaned out. Firelight flickered over their ghostly faces.

Piles of charred hats littered the street. Something golden cut through the sepia haze. Beneath the House of Morgan, a silk tie glimmered where it twisted at the throat of the portly businessman, his body sprawled halfway into the street. He wasn't moving. He lay as still and broken as the rubble around him.

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Birdie turned back to the Norton, not intending to linger. The last thing she needed was hours of questioning from the authorities. The fuel tank was scratched, the headlamp hung crooked, but it looked ridable.

Her headache from the previous night blossomed into a full-blown migraine as she tried to make sense of the sight in front of her. Nothing unnerved her more than being caught off guard. Her career had been built on staying a step ahead, anticipating every question before they were asked. But now, on a street transformed in an instant into a war zone, she felt utterly exposed.

People scrambled to their feet, some swaying, others frozen. Her left leg was stiff and leaden, the bloody fabric of her skirt tugging at the wound. She grasped the handlebars, ready to lift the heavy machine, when a memory flashed in her mind. The young girl and her mother had been right there, beside the man with the golden tie just before the bomb went off.

She turned toward the bank. Horns and bells blared. Police wagons and fire engines would be along soon. But she wasn't about to leave the girl's fate to the formidable hands of the New York Police Department. She lunged forward, barely conscious of the motion.

She sprinted to the granite steps of the Morgan bank. A piercing wail seized her attention, and her heart stuttered. In the shadow of the recessed doorway, pressed tight against the marble wall, a small girl sat curled, knees to her chest. Her green cardigan was blackened and torn at the shoulder. Tears carved clean tracks down her cheeks.

“Hey there,” Birdie said softly, crouching despite the sharp pain in her side. “Are you hurt?”

The child's wide gray eyes darted up, then away. She shook her head but didn't speak.

“What's your name, sweetheart?”

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“Lucy,” came the whispered reply.

Birdie took in the wreckage. “Where’s your mama, Lucy?”

The girl lifted a trembling finger toward the street. Birdie’s stomach dropped. Smoke and dust rose in thin tendrils from the shattered marble steps of the U.S. Assay Office. Chunks of stone were split and overturned, iron railing twisted and half-buried. Bodies lay among the wreckage, flung as if a hurricane had swept them into the air and dashed them down.

A woman in a navy dress staggered through the rubble, her voice breaking as she called out. Birdie lifted an arm. The woman’s eyes found the child, and she ran, falling to her knees.

Her face was gray with dust, eyes bloodshot. She pulled the girl close, kissed the top of her head, then looked up at Birdie. “No one stopped. Not a single soul. They trampled past like we were already dead.”

Birdie was glad the girl was safe, but rage flared at whoever had done this, at the cruelty that could bring such carnage.

A young policeman in a stiff uniform came hurrying up from William Street, barely twenty and visibly shaken. His face wavered between confusion, anger, and fear. “Move it, folks!” he called, his voice thin and unsteady. He waved his arms, whether to push back the lingering smoke or the crowd Birdie couldn’t tell. “Clear the street! Don’t crowd the injured!”

She cast one last look at the mother and daughter, then moved past the young cop toward the Norton. With a grunt, she righted the motorcycle and dropped onto the leather seat, running a hand through her gritty hair. A barricade was going up around her as more police swarmed in. She pulled her goggles over her eyes. The young officer stepped forward, waving for her to stop. For a heartbeat she held his gaze. Then she kicked the Norton to life, popped the clutch, and tore off.

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She rode in a daze, her mind refusing to process. Streets smeared past as she piloted the motorcycle into Brooklyn on muscle memory: left hand feathering the clutch, right hand steady on brake and throttle.

At last she turned into the brick-lined streets of Cobble Hill, the smell of fresh bread drifting from Caputo's Bake Shop, and pulled up in front of her apartment. Now that she was almost home, the weight of it all began to settle over her. Numbness gave way to bewilderment. And to pain. If not for the film of ash on her skin and the blood stiffening her clothes, she might have thought it some perverse dream.

She wheeled the Norton down the alley beside the brownstone, toward the narrow garage she rented from the landlord. The door stuck, swollen from the last rain, refusing to sit flush in its frame. She twisted the key and shoved her hip against it. Pain flared in her left side as the stubborn door groaned open.

As she parked the motorcycle beside the workbench, the sharp smell of burning oil hit her. She knelt by the bike, her heart still hammering. It was the crankcase breather, most likely. Or a cracked gasket bleeding oil onto the cylinder head. But it still rode. That was all that mattered for now. She'd give it a proper once-over tonight.

She locked the garage door behind her and trudged down the cobbled alley, emerging onto the quiet street beyond. Her tenure case—and the feckless committee assigned to review it—felt far less urgent. All she wanted now was to bathe, dress the wound above her left thigh, and lie down. She'd call the department office, leave word of her absence. Or maybe not. Wall Street had just blown up. Crises made the best excuses.

She noticed something off as she climbed the stoop to her building. After nearly three years, she knew every hairline crack in the brownstone, every patch of lichen on the iron railing.

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Her eyes landed on the front door. It was ajar, just an inch. In all her years here, it had never been left unlatched.

A flicker of unease ran through her, nerves still raw from the bombing. The feeling soon gave way to irritation. Probably the new tenant she'd seen moving in last weekend.

Her boots thudded on the tile as she stepped into the dim vestibule, the air thick with radiator heat. She followed the corridor to her rented room. Every door was closed. Except hers.

She paused, drew a sharp breath, and pushed it open.

“Goddamn it.”