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Sarah Scott-Malden
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *Cristina's motorbike*

At eleven o'clock one morning the director of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, Leonardo Martinez, asked Cristina Rinaldi to come into his office.

'I want to talk to you about an important job I'd like you to do, Cristina. I think you'll be interested in it.'

'Of course. What is it?'

'A museum in Paris wants to send some Impressionist paintings to Buenos Aires. I spoke to the Paris museum director, Philippe Maudet, this morning and he's interested in using our museum to show the paintings. It's an important job. Would you like to do it?'

'Of course I would. Great! You know I'd love to see Impressionist paintings here in the museum,' answered Cristina.

'Good. I want you to begin work as soon as you can,' the director said. 'There is a lot you'll need to do.'

Cristina felt good all day. She loved Impressionist paintings. This new exhibition was wonderful. She couldn't wait to begin.

After work Cristina got onto her motorbike outside the museum. She was feeling good. She had an important new job, the sun was warm on her back and it was the start of spring weather in the city of Buenos Aires. Maybe tomorrow she could leave her jacket at home. This year September was warm, and people were already talking

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about a hot summer. Cristina started her motorbike and felt the warm air on her face as she rode along Avenida del Libertador. She never wore a helmet because she liked the feeling of the wind in her long hair. But her father didn't know that. She remembered his words when he gave her the new motorbike: 'always wear your helmet, Cristina – every time you ride!' She hoped her father would never see her without it.

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Every day at this time Cristina rode down Avenida del Libertador to the gym at the Recoleta Health Club. Her day's work at the museum was finished and she was free. She usually forgot about her work as she rode down the Avenida. But today was a little different. She couldn't stop thinking about her new job.

Cristina began to slow down for the traffic lights. The traffic in the city centre was terrible. She didn't work far from the gym but the road had so many traffic lights. She stopped and looked into the car next to her. She saw two men in the car. She couldn't believe her eyes. One of the men had a gun. Then he looked out of the window at Cristina. She looked into his eyes, into his dark brown eyes and for a moment the man looked back. Then he turned his head and she saw a tattoo of a flower, a red poppy, on his neck.

Then she heard the sound of police cars. The man in the car lifted up his gun. Cristina felt afraid. She wanted to go quickly. She tried to start her bike but she couldn't. Everybody else was moving but she couldn't. Suddenly a taxi hit the back of her bike. She fell from the bike onto the front of the taxi and then down onto the road. Her head hit the road hard. She saw nothing, she felt nothing – she didn't even hear the sound of the ambulance which took her to hospital.

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Two hours later Cristina was lying in bed in hospital and her parents were waiting outside her room with a policeman.

‘Where’s her helmet?’ asked Mr Rinaldi, Cristina’s father. ‘I know she had a helmet. She always wore a helmet.’

‘She didn’t come in here with a helmet,’ the policeman told him.

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‘I can’t believe it, she always wore her helmet,’ Mr Rinaldi said.

‘Maybe the helmet fell on the road, maybe the police left it there,’ Mrs Rinaldi said quietly to her husband. ‘It’s OK. I’m sure she’s going to be all right.’

They waited ten more minutes before the doctor came to see them.

‘She’s lucky,’ the doctor said. ‘She’s going to be OK. You can see her now, but she doesn’t remember anything about the accident.’

The doctor took them into the room where Cristina lay in bed. Cristina’s mother and father began to cry.

‘Are you sure she’s OK?’ they asked. ‘Can’t we take her home now?’

‘No, it’s better if she stays here for a few days,’ said the doctor. Her mother stood by her bed.

‘Come back and live with us, Cristina,’ she said. ‘It’s not safe for you in the city. It’s not only the traffic. We hear so many terrible things. Please, Cristina, your room is there for you. Come back and we’ll look after you at home. You can change your job if it’s too far to go.’

Cristina felt angry. She had her own flat in the city centre and her own life. She liked to look after herself. But her parents weren’t happy about her staying in the flat on her own after the accident. Cristina couldn’t believe her bad luck. She lay in bed listening to her parents.

Her father tried some other ideas. ‘How about a flat with your brother, Cristina? He’d like it and he could look after you. Or maybe your mother could stay with you for some time. Just until you are better.’

But two days later she went back to her own flat alone.

She phoned the museum. 'I'm OK. I'll be back at work in a week,' she told the director. Her mother visited her every day and Cristina talked to her father every night on the phone. They agreed to let her keep her flat but there was something they disagreed with her about. They did not want her to keep the motorbike.

All of Cristina's family talked about Cristina's bad luck. 'It's the traffic in the city centre,' her aunt said when she phoned Cristina. 'It's the same at four in the afternoon and three in the morning.'

'Those taxi drivers go too fast and they don't look,' said her uncle who drove a bus through the city centre every day. The story of the accident was in the newspaper, a short story on the third page. Cristina's name and job were there but there was not a lot about the accident. Cristina's brother cut the story of her accident out of the newspaper and put it on the fridge in his flat. It wasn't every day that his sister was in the newspaper!

But Cristina herself was worried. She couldn't remember anything about the accident except the sun on her back when she was riding down Avenida del Libertador. But she wanted to remember. The police were still asking questions. The taxi driver said Cristina was sitting there on her motorbike in the centre of the road when the traffic lights were green.

The doctor said she was all right but Cristina felt strange – she got headaches – and she tried hard to remember what happened, to find answers, but she couldn't remember anything.