



## *Too Safe*

‘Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?’ said the voice behind me. The voice was deep, with some sort of European accent – French? Belgian? Swiss? A tasteful trace of an accent, like a carefully chosen accessory. Like a black leather, three-button jacket bought brand-new at Barneys because it looked ‘so vintage,’ but costing more than I make in a year. He was probably wearing the coat too, despite it being ninety degrees outside.

‘I don’t think so,’ I said, without turning to look at either him or his inevitable coat.

I was sitting in a Starbucks at Tenth and Sixth at seven o’clock in the morning on September 2, 2002. It was the first day of school, and I was making name tags for my class, wondering how we’d all get along. I loved imagining faces to go with the names, trying to

pick out the shy ones, the precocious ones, the troublemakers. After writing each name in red felt-tipped pen on a rectangle of yellow construction paper, I'd close my eyes, repeat the name in my head and attempt to visualize the student. Deep down, I suppose I enjoyed believing I was psychic. Like my superstitions, it gave me a sense of control.

Yes, I still had my superstitions. I'd had them so long they were like birthmarks, and I barely noticed them anymore. But my mother did. She wanted them removed.

A year and a half earlier, I'd stabbed a serial killer to death with a butcher knife after nearly getting murdered myself. And then, just as the residual nightmares were starting to fade, September 11 happened. I'd spent that whole day trying to track down Krull, until he wandered into our apartment at three in the morning, his dark hair gray from building ash, murmuring, 'We're fucked, honey. We're all fucked.'

Sydney couldn't understand how I could go through all that and still think it made a difference whether or not I walked under a ladder. She said I suffered from a disorder with a clinical term: *magical thinking*. But I didn't care. My mother lived three thousand miles away and could not physically stop me from stepping over cracks in the sidewalk. And besides, *magical thinking* didn't sound like a disorder. It sounded like a compliment.

Visualizing this new group of kids from the sound of their names was proving harder than usual, though. There was a Charlotte, an Ida, two Harrys, an Abraham . . . When I closed my eyes, all I could see were friends of my grandmother.

‘But I’m sure I know you. Look at me, please.’

Man, this Eurotrash was persistent. Maybe it wasn’t a come-on. Truth was, I’d heard that question many times since moving to New York from men and women, gay and straight, and only a few of them had said it because they wanted a date. Though puzzled at first, I’d soon discovered that small, dark-haired, vaguely Semitic girls like me were about as common as pretzel vendors here.

Plus, I looked a lot like my famous mother and had been in the press myself after the serial-killer incident. So there were quite a few people I’d never met who had, in fact, seen me somewhere before.

I turned and looked at the stranger with the overpriced accent. And instantly, I felt guilty for being so rude. He was young, but dressed thirty years older, in gray polyester slacks, a short-sleeved yellow Oxford with a white T-shirt underneath. His black hair was short, combed, carefully parted. He had large, dark eyes and an olive complexion. Maybe he was from Puerto Rico, maybe Morocco, maybe Lebanon or Saudi Arabia. He was the type of person who got pulled aside and questioned by airport security

guards, who got glared at on subways and hassled for no reason. I'm sure he'd heard the question too, but with such different inflection, such darker intent. *Haven't I seen you somewhere before?*

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'You probably just have me confused with someone. It happens all the time.'

He took a step closer and gave me a hard, burning look that made me press up against the back of my chair. 'You . . . are pretty,' he said.

I forced a smile. 'Pretty taken.'

But the guy didn't move, just kept staring.

'Okay. So . . . bye.' I looked at the door and, as if I'd willed it, Krull walked through, along with another Sixth Precinct detective, Zachary Pierce – a fellow Stuy Town resident who'd helped out on surveillance during my serial-killer case.

Krull's partners didn't like Pierce – Amanda Patton thought he had short-man's syndrome, and Art Boyle was prejudiced against Scorpios. But I didn't mind him; I saw the guy too often not to cut him some slack.

Around the same time Krull and I spent that weekend in New Hope, Pierce had sold his deceased mother's Queens duplex and moved into a small apartment in the building closest to ours. It had been vacated by a firefighter who'd died in 9/11, and Pierce had snapped it up after just one viewing. ('I think it's haunted,' he'd said. 'But on the plus side, it has a washer/dryer.')

Pierce and Krull became friends, meeting in the courtyard between our buildings and working out together at a nearby gym most mornings before work. Sometimes, Pierce would knock on our door with a six-pack of beer and invite himself in – usually when there was a game on TV, or when his ghost was acting up.

The thing about Zachary Pierce was that he overreacted to everything – especially himself. He was short and small boned, but he overreacted by working out so much that his neck swelled huge and his body became this collection of uncomfortable-looking bulges. And a few months ago, when he'd noticed that his hair had started to thin, he'd overreacted by shaving his head until it gleamed. I'd never seen a man more resemble a fire hydrant than Pierce, and it made me feel sorry for him. He tried so hard.

This morning, I'd told Krull that I planned to come to Starbucks before class, but still I was surprised they'd actually shown up. *He remembered.* A sense of relief rushed through me, and then I wondered what I was so relieved about.

From his shirt pocket, the stranger produced a piece of paper and put it in front of me. 'I want you to have this,' he said.

It had been carefully folded into a tiny, tight triangle.

‘Call me when you are alone.’ He winked.

‘Excuse me, but what part of “I’m not available” don’t you understand?’

The two detectives moved toward my table. I wanted Krull to kiss me, deeply and passionately enough to show each and every Starbucks patron just how unavailable I was, but that was not like him, not lately. I found myself envying the shoulder holster he wore under his drab blue suit coat, just because he was comfortable to have it that close.

I wanted Krull at least to say, ‘This guy giving you trouble?’ But he didn’t. Pierce did.

The stranger looked from Pierce to Krull, then raised both hands in a corny gesture of surrender and made a fast retreat for the door. *Guess he knows law enforcement when he sees it.*

‘Looks like a terrorist to me,’ said Pierce.

Krull rolled his eyes and sat down at the table. ‘Only thing he was interested in terrorizing was my girlfriend.’

I smiled at him. *My girlfriend.*

‘What’s that?’ Krull pointed to the tiny paper triangle sitting next to my stack of name tags.

‘His phone number.’ I flicked it across the table. ‘Prefolded and ready for distribution. Way to make a woman feel special.’

Pierce said, ‘Is that a new hairstyle?’

I touched my hair, still damp from my morning

shower. Shoulder-length, pin-straight, parted just off center. ‘I don’t think I’ve had a new hairstyle since I graduated college.’

‘Well,’ said Pierce, ‘you’re lookin’ like a stone-cold hottie.’

*What are you, twelve years old?* ‘Thanks.’

Pierce leaned his forearms on the table, clasping his hands together. One of the sad side effects of his workout regimen was that the bigger his arms grew, the smaller his hands looked. ‘I bet guys come on to you like that all the time,’ he said.

‘Not really.’

‘Listen, if you weren’t with John I’d be hitting on you like crazy.’

I winced. It wasn’t the first time Pierce had said this to me. And I had no doubt it was true – if only because I was one of the few adult women in New York City who was shorter than him.

‘You want to step outside, buddy?’ said Krull mildly.

‘Hey, I said if she wasn’t with you.’

‘Ah.’ Krull twirled the paper triangle between his fingers and gazed at the list of coffee flavors over the counter in a way that made me think he’d rather be anywhere but here.

We’d had a fight the previous night. Basically the same fight we’d been having every couple of weeks – if you could call something that one-sided a fight. This

time, we'd been loading the dishwasher after dinner when I said, 'You were so quiet tonight. Is anything wrong?'

'No. I'm fine.'

'I don't believe that.'

Then came the long pause, the pause he never felt the need to fill.

'John, please tell me what's on your mind. I can't help you if you won't let me in.'

'I don't need your help.'

'We . . . we . . . shouldn't have moved in together. Because I've never felt so alone as I feel living under the same roof with . . . I'm sorry. I didn't mean that.'

He said something I couldn't hear, and I thought, *Is he talking to me, or to himself?*

'What did you just say?'

Krull removed the Tupperware bowl I'd just put in the dishwasher. 'Don't load plastic on the bottom shelf,' he said. 'It melts.' Then he left the apartment – walked out into a raging summer thunderstorm, and didn't come back for four hours.

When he returned, I was in bed, but awake. I shut my eyes anyway.

Krull stripped down to his boxers and climbed in beside me. 'Sorry,' he whispered. 'I just needed time alone.' His hair was damp, and his skin smelled like city rain and sweat. When he kissed me, I tasted cigarettes.

In all the time I'd known him, I'd never actually seen Krull smoke – only tasted it on him. I didn't ever mention it, though. I couldn't let him know I was onto the smoking, because it was one of the few ways I could gauge how upset he really was.

*Funny how living with a detective can turn you into one.*

Pierce said, 'So you must be happy about your mother moving to New York.'

It took me several seconds to digest the sentence. 'What?!'

'I thought I heard it on the radio. I could be wrong, but I don't think so. Dr. Sydney Stark-Leiffer, right? *The Art of Caring?*'

'Number one, she's not a doctor. Two, I'm sure my mother would tell me if she were—'

'She's not a doctor?'

'You must've heard wrong. You—'

'Look at this,' said Krull.

I stared at Pierce, amazed to absolute silence that, fight or no fight, someone I'd shared a bed with for a year and a half could hear this news – this life-altering, potentially catastrophic news involving my *mother* – and interrupt it with a directive as irritatingly dismissive as 'Look at this.' What was he looking at anyway, a dessert? An unusual hairstyle?

Pierce didn't seem to get it, though. 'What?' he said.

I turned to Krull. He had opened the paper triangle. *So that's what's so important. Some guy's phone number.*

He handed it over.

There was indeed a phone number on the small slip of paper, but no name to go with it. Just a sentence, printed in neat, capital letters with a red felt-tipped pen similar to my own: YOU ARE IN DANGER.

Pierce said, 'You guys get out of here. I'm calling the bomb squad.'

There was no bomb in Starbucks. I could've told them that. I mean, what kind of terrorist leaves his phone number on a bomb-threat note? And while we're at it, if the guy had indeed wanted to warn me, wouldn't he have written something a little more specific than *You are in danger?* Something like . . . I don't know . . . *Get the fuck out of here; there's a bomb?*

I'd tried explaining that to Krull and Pierce as we stood outside the glass door with all the terrified customers and coffee servers, watching one of the bomb squad guys disassemble an espresso machine. But neither of them would listen. 'You can never be too safe,' Krull said.

'Yes, you can,' I said. 'We're too fucking safe right now.'

Krull didn't say much more after that – not even after the café was officially declared explosive-free. By

then, forty-five minutes had passed, and we all had to go to work.

‘I probably jumped to conclusions,’ Pierce said. ‘It’s just . . . The guy struck me as hinky, and after everything you’ve been through, Sam . . .’

Krull’s eyes narrowed. ‘Can I have the note?’

‘What are you going to do now?’ I said. ‘Handwriting analysis?’

‘Reverse directory.’

I looked at Krull. ‘You gonna pay Monsieur Perp a little *visite*? Teach *le skel* how to say *danger* in American?’

He grinned. No matter how strained things were between us, I could always get a smile out of him with bad cop dialogue.

He gave me a quick kiss on the lips. ‘Affirmative,’ he said before leaving, with Pierce, for the Sixth Precinct. For a few seconds, I stood there on the sidewalk, watching as they walked away. Pierce was the only one to look back.

‘Well, who isn’t in danger?’ said Yale St. Germaine. ‘He may as well have given you a note that says, “You breathe.”’

I shrugged my shoulders. ‘Got my attention, though. I bet plenty of women would have called him, if only out of morbid curiosity.’

Yale and I were in my classroom, taping name tags

to the kids' cubbyholes and straightening books, dusting off chairs and tabletops, inventorying the art supplies closet, all in preparation for the first day of school.

When I'd started teaching here four years earlier, I'd been so nervous on day one that I'd had to change shirts three times. In a state of panic, I'd called Yale, screaming, *'My deodorant isn't working!'* Clearly sensing deeper underlying feelings, he had offered to show up an hour before the kids arrived to keep me company and help get everything organized. The moment he walked through the door, I'd stopped sweating, and without either of us suggesting the idea out loud, it became an annual tradition for him to join me on the first day and stay until the class got settled.

This time around, I'd shown up ten minutes late to find Yale waiting outside the classroom door – a first. When he asked where I'd been, I'd replied simply, 'Bomb scare.'

'Were the bomb squad cops hot, at least?' Yale said now. 'I've always found *detonate* to be an incredibly sexy word.'

'I was too pissed off to look at them. I swear, Pierce needs to be on a leash.' *And John Krull shouldn't be allowed to hold it.*

Immediately, I wanted to take back the thought. *He's been through so much. He's bound to overreact. He wants to be safe, wants me to be safe.*

*But Jesus. The bomb squad? In Starbucks? Since when did he start buying into Pierce's craziness?*

I then heard Sydney's voice in my head, clear as if she were standing next to me: *'Hypervigilance is classic overcompensation.'*

*'Meaning?'*

*'He's having an affair and he feels guilty. Don't be so naive, Samantha. Where does a man go for four hours in the middle of the night in the pouring rain?'*

'That's it!' Yale slammed both hands on the bookshelf, and my skin jumped.

'What's it?'

'Marketing campaign!'

'Huh?'

'You know . . . the little man hands out these notes to pretty girls, maybe boys too. They say, "You are in danger." You call the number and it turns out Danger is the name of a club.'

I looked at him. 'Then shouldn't the note say, "You will be in danger"?''

'English isn't his first language, Sam.' Yale went back to alphabetizing storybooks.

'I bet you're right,' I said – not because I thought he was, but because a marketing campaign for a night-club fronted by the likes of that guy, in those clothes, made about as much sense as anything else did today.

I taped up my last name tag: Ezra. *'That was my great-uncle's name, and by the way, John Krull is not*

*cheating on me, and you'd better not be moving to New York.'*

'Yale,' I said, 'have you heard any news lately? About my mother?'

'Good lord, is she getting married again?'

'Pierce said he thought it was on the radio that she's moving. Here.'

He rolled his eyes. 'If that were true, wouldn't she have told you herself, rather than have you hear it from Captain Orange Alert?'

'I . . . hope.' I knocked on the wooden desk for good luck, and, at the exact same time, someone knocked on the door.

'That had better not be a terrorist,' Yale said.

'I beg your pardon, may I?' It was the voice of Terry Mann, Sunny Side's principal.

'He's so polite it's borderline psychotic,' whispered Yale, who delighted in using Terry's formal appellation. 'Hel-lo, Mr. Mann!'

Like a cat, Terry nudged open the door and stepped in. 'Hello, Yale. Samantha, I wanted to remind you that both Ezra and Harry W. have peanut allergies, so please snack accordingly.'

Terry smiled. In the entire time I'd known the principal, I'd probably seen him smile five times, counting this one. It always looked painful, like a contortion he'd been practicing every day for months, but still hadn't quite gotten the hang of.

‘I hope everybody likes cinnamon graham crackers and apple juice,’ I said. That’s what I’d put in the small refrigerator that occupied a corner of the storage closet. It’s what I always put in there on the first day of class and what we had for snack time for about ninety percent of the school year, except on those rare occasions when I got creative and bought string cheese and grapes.

Terry said, ‘By the way, I saw your mother on television.’

‘Why?!’ said Yale and I, a little too loudly.

He stepped back, bracing himself against the bookshelf as if we were a strong, unpleasant wind. ‘I didn’t hear her. I just saw her . . . through the window of an electronics store. I believe she was being interviewed.’

Yale put a hand on my shoulder. ‘Your mother’s always being interviewed on TV. She’s not moving to New York.’

I knocked wood again.

‘I don’t have a television of my own,’ said Terry. ‘But I enjoy her books very much – especially *Your Spiritual Lifeboat*. Very clever indeed.’

I sensed movement behind Terry – a few of Veronica Bliss’s students arriving in the classroom next to mine. *Well, they’re early*, I thought, until I glanced at my watch and saw it was nearly nine o’clock.

‘It’s showtime, folks,’ said Yale. I held my breath, closed my eyes and counted to seven in my head seven times for good luck. Fortunately no one noticed me.

When I opened my eyes, Terry had already begun to greet my new kids and their parents as they filed in.

There was blond, freckle-faced Ida Burroughs, who dragged her mother by the arm like an oversized doll. There was dark-eyed, shy Charlotte Weiss and her peanut-averse twin, Harry, his face damp from tears, both clinging to the legs of their British au pair (a sturdy, serious-looking teenager who introduced herself as Soph). Next came Ezra Sargent, redheaded and classically cute, shouting out an obviously rehearsed, ‘Hello, I’m Ezra, I’m four and a half years old and I love learning!’

*Now there’s a Professional Children’s School candidate if I ever saw one.*

Then Yale said, ‘Holy shhhhh . . .’ like a punctured tire, and what little color was there to begin with rushed out of Terry’s face.

Yale didn’t finish the word – Terry and I both sighed in gratitude for that; I was relatively sure Soph did as well. But when I saw the man sauntering in and standing behind Ezra – yet grinning at me as if I were the only other person in the room – I nearly completed the word myself and added two exclamation points.

It took me a few seconds to get my mouth to open, a few more before I found enough breath to say his name. ‘Nate?’

Yale said, ‘You’re in danger, all right.’