

BAGELS & SALSA

CHAPTER ONE

The Presentation

Laila

On the morning of July 29, 1977, as New York's blistering heat wave persisted, every woman in Manhattan was in a state of panic. The *Daily News* published a handwritten letter from a man claiming to be the gruesome .44 Caliber Killer. That specific day had been singled out in the letter as the date he planned to strike again. Some of my friends refused to leave their apartments. Others escaped to Fire Island or the Catskills, or retreated to their parents' homes in the suburbs.

I tried not to let the panic pervading New York City that stifling summer morning dictate my life despite the fact that July 29th was also the two-year anniversary of my disastrous nuptials to Julian Goldblatt or Jules Gold, the nom de plume he used on his hip late night radio show. Any reminder of my wedding day still made me cringe with rage and humiliation.

Admittedly, my anxiety was at an all time high as I parked my canary-yellow Chevrolet Bel Air, and fed coins into the meter at the curb. Fearful of the new threats from the Son of Sam, I opened my purse and eyeballed the .38 caliber pistol my father had slipped under the table last night at Ratners on Delancey Street, a kosher dairy restaurant, and the perfect choice for a vegetarian like me.

I looked in every direction before leaving the car to walk the two blocks to Morris High School, Pop's alma mater, but currently known as "one of the biggest, baddest high schools in the Bronx."

As I headed down the street plastered with graffiti, a toothless man smelling of stale booze and urine rolled up in his wheelchair. His face glistened with sweat. He held out a coffee can containing a few dollar bills and coins. "Can you spare some change, pretty lady?"

I held my breath and dropped a few quarters in the can.

"How 'bout a dollar? Surely a hot chickie like you can afford that."

Ignoring his request, I continued walking until I came across three Puerto Rican teenagers

glaring at me. I half-smiled and crossed the street to avoid them.

The tallest produced a catcall as the other two made obscene hand gestures.

I tried to appear nonchalant as I moseyed on my way, but this sheltered girl from Long Island started hyperventilating. My stomach was already tied in knots at the thought of standing up in front of a full auditorium of people for my first speaking engagement ever.

“It’s all a matter of confidence,” Pop had said last night. “Just believe in yourself and you’ll be fine.”

My mother thought I was crazy to spend three years at NYU studying for my doctorate in sociology. “What kinda job are you gonna get with that degree? You could have been a *real* doctor for all the time and money you spent.”

In a way she was right, but I’d followed my passion to study the science of social institutions and relationships, and had no regrets. Fortunately, I’d secured a part-time teaching job at Bronx Community College while still in graduate school. And, as luck would have it, my dissertation on the social phenomenon of America's teen pregnancies landed me a grant from the U.S. Department of Health. Since America’s teen pregnancy rate was among the highest in the industrialized world, it was imperative to search for solutions to the epidemic problem.

My NYU advisor had arranged for me to join a panel of speakers at Morris High, a school rampant with teen pregnancies. Over dinner my father had offered to accompany me to his alma mater, but I’d turned him down. “I’m a big girl now, Pop.”

Dressed like a professional grownup in a navy suit and matching high heels, I entered the buff-colored brick building with its elaborate limestone and terra-cotta trim. I had read somewhere that the school, built in 1904, was considered a masterpiece of neo-Gothic architecture.

The corridors reeked of Pine Sol and paste wax, with a touch of locker room jockstraps. The drab green paint was peeling off the plaster walls where metal lockers were attached in rows. My three-inch stilettos (which I now regretted wearing), clickety-clacked on fractured tile floors.

I teetered to the stage of the two-story auditorium with its elaborate balcony and masonry buttresses framing large arched Tudor stained-glass windows. The panelists were already seated on each side of a freestanding white screen as the school auditorium filled up with women and a sprinkling of men.

“Ms. Levin,” said Flo Capuano, the moderator, a stocky woman who wore a skintight leather skirt and white go-go boots. “I was beginning to worry you wouldn’t show.”

I checked my watch. 8:55 a.m. . . . “You told me to be here at nine-thirty.”

Flo’s eyes protruded like an undernourished Pekinese. “Didn’t you get my message? We moved you up to . . . never mind. Thank God you sent your slides ahead of time.”

I sat down in a folding metal chair, and rifled through my notes. As the auditorium lights dimmed, my stomach rumbled. I suddenly remembered my old message machine had been making weird clicking noises for days. Damn! How could I be so careless?

Flo stepped up to the podium and tapped the microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, we’re all here to discuss a serious problem facing our school and community. Our first speaker, Dr. Laila Levin, is an expert on the impact teen pregnancies are having in this country.” She nodded at a man running a slide projector on a makeshift platform in the audience. “First slide, please.”

I walked to the center of the stage to the sound of polite applause focusing on Pop’s words about confidence. My first slide, a map of the United States, appeared on the screen. The areas in the country with the highest rate of teen pregnancies were crimson.

My lips quivered as Flo handed me the microphone and a wood pointing stick. I took a deep breath. “We face a challenging time in our country where—”

BANG BANG! Gunshots cracked through the air.

People in the audience ducked down and covered their heads.

Terrified, I backed into the screen and lost my balance. I braced myself with the pointer, but it snapped in half. Then, I felt a stabbing pain and the room began to spin around.

Next thing I knew, I was lying on the floor. The stink of floor wax filled my nostrils. The pain in my right shoulder was excruciating. My heart about stopped when I turned my head and discovered that part of my white blouse was soaked in blood.

The world ticked by in slow motion. I could hardly breathe. Was this the end? I hadn’t begun to figure out the meaning of life. Wasn’t I supposed to live to ninety-four like Grandma Levin? Voices around me sounded like a 78-rpm playing on slow speed. Someone said, “Is . . . there . . . a . . . doc . . . tor . . . in . . . the . . . room?”

Everything above me looked blurry as two men in dark uniforms whizzed by. Police? I opened my mouth to cry for help, but no words came out. Did anyone see me lying there?

Flo’s garbled voice filtered through the microphone.

A tall man with curly black hair and a thick mustache knelt down next to me. The familiar aroma of Old Spice, Pop's cologne, permeated my senses. "I'm Dr. Quintana. I'd like to have a look at your shoulder."

"Okay."

He pulled out a pocketknife, ripped off the arm of my blouse, and cut my bra strap enabling him to apply pressure directly to my bleeding shoulder.

Was he really a doctor or some weirdo? I tried to push him away. "What are you doing?" The room stopped spinning and my normal breathing returned.

"You're going to have to trust me." He whipped out a white handkerchief from the back pocket of his pleated khakis and pressed it against the wound.

"You don't look like a doctor."

"Actually, I'm a cowboy." He smiled. His well-tanned face had a commanding presence. "You're a what?" Who was this man? Despite my apprehension, I had to admit he was rather good looking.

"That was a joke, honey. Well, a half-truth."

Lord, he had one irresistible dimple. "Don't honey me. How many bullets hit me?"

"Didn't you hear the moderator? It was just some kids shooting off firecrackers."

"You mean I wasn't shot?" The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. Was he saying everything was okay? I wasn't going to die?

"No, you lost your balance and fell down stabbing your shoulder on the sharp edge of the broken pointer stick. Four or five stitches and you'll be good as new."

"I can't walk in high heels. Big mistake wearing them today."

He grinned. "Worst case of stage fright I've ever seen."