

PROLOGUE



IT WAS THE FIRST MINUTE of my first day and my first impulse was to run. Just turn around and get the hell out of there as fast as I could. In that frozen moment between initial response and subsequent action, I stood mute, my vision tunneled to the desk in front of me. It was piled to toppling with files, pink message slips, newspaper clippings, and indeterminate scraps. A multi-line phone was half buried in the middle of this chaos, its angry flashing call buttons casting a blinking orange glow across the papers. What struck me with the greatest force, though, was the sheer number of words I saw in front of me. With the exception of the phone, every inch of the desk was layered in a dizzying collage of blue-black fonts and scribbles. And every word was screaming at me to pay attention and respond. This was my desk. This was my job.

I could feel the muscles in my legs twitching with the effort to keep still. I clutched the strap of my purse with one hand while the other gripped the to-go coffee cup I'd brought in with me. Fight or flight. Every cell in my body was held taut, waiting for the adrenaline rush. My mouth was dry and I knew I had bitten off more than I could chew. Inside my head, the voice of reason told me that this was only a job, not an invitation to walk off a cliff. But the much louder voice of instinct

shouted that walking off a cliff was exactly what I was about to do. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, it insisted, and I had to get out *now*. Before it was too late.

I *could* leave, I thought. I could back up and exit the way I came in and nobody would know I'd ever been there. The girl at the desk to my left hadn't even noticed my arrival. She was murmuring into her own phone, wrapped up in an intense conversation. There was nobody else in sight. Nobody to greet me or to welcome me to my first day on the job. Nobody to express alarm if I just bolted out of the office. It would be easy to simply disappear, go home, and reconsider the whole thing. And then, later, I could call and say that something unforeseen had come up, that I was terribly sorry, that I was unable to take the job, but thank you, thank you so much for your consideration. I could hear the conversation in my head—could hear myself murmuring the apology. In all likelihood, I thought, I wouldn't even have to talk to *her*.

I drew a deep breath and felt the muscles in my shoulders start to relax. Yes, escape was a possibility, and in it I found the comfort I needed to release the death grip on my purse strap and take a tentative step toward the mountain of words on my desk.

I knew then that I wouldn't leave, that I'd stay there come what may. I made an effort to push my misgivings to the farthest reaches of my consciousness and focus on why I was standing there in the first place. The truth of it was, despite my moment of panic, I wanted this job more than I could remember wanting anything. I wanted it with a single-minded desire I hadn't even known I possessed. I'd fought for it and I'd won it and nothing, especially not a few first-day butterflies, was going to stop me from taking it.

I took my second deep breath in the space of five seconds and felt my head start to spin with dizziness. I blinked a few times and swallowed hard. It wouldn't do, I thought, to start hyperventilating before I'd even had a chance to sit down. I took one more glance at what was now *my* overloaded desk, savoring my last few moments of stillness. And then, with one step forward, I moved into the fray.

ONE



IT WAS MALCOLM'S IDEA that I apply for the job at the Lucy Fiamma Literary Agency. Without his prompting, it never would have occurred to me. Which was peculiar, he pointed out, not only because I was about to become unemployed, but because of my almost fanatic love of books and anything to do with them. And it was true; I *was* a passionate reader, able to devour whole tomes in a single sitting. My unquenchable appetite for books was something I'd developed very early in my life. It seems a cliché now to say that books were a welcome escape from reality, but in my case this was the truth. It wasn't that I had a miserable or neglected childhood, but it *was* unstable. My single, hippie mother could never stay in one place ("place" being defined as various communelike encampments) for very long. She was on a relentless quest for enlightenment and never found it, unsurprisingly, outside of herself. Not that this stopped her from searching, or from dragging me with her. I had little in the way of continuity in my schooling and next to no contact with kids my own age. What friends I did make I soon had to abandon when my mother decided that a Buddhist retreat in Arizona was spiritually superior to an organic foods cooperative in Oregon, or that an artists' colony in California was morally preferable to a Wiccan enclave

in New Mexico. My mother seldom had a man in her life to tie her down, and that included my father, whoever he was or might have become. My mother claimed she never even learned his name on the one night they spent together.

Books were the one constant in all this flux and I turned to reading whenever I wanted to be rooted and still. I loved my mother fiercely but never shared her enthusiasm for perpetual change. Nor did I fully trust the revolving groups of people (almost always women) she surrounded herself with. My mother chose to search for her truths in people and places, but I preferred to search for them in books.

But reading was only part of the thrill that a book represented. I got a dizzy pleasure from the weight and feel of a new book in my hand, a sensual delight from the smell and crispness of the pages. I loved the smoothness and bright colors of their jackets. For me, a stacked, unread pyramid of books was one of the sexiest architectural designs there was. Because what I loved most about books was their promise, the anticipation of what lay between the covers, waiting to be found.

Malcolm knew my passion very well. We met, after all, in the aisles of Blue Moon Books, the bookstore where I worked. I was immediately and embarrassingly attracted to him. He was extremely good looking—tall and tan with chiseled jaw and cheekbones—but there was something else about him that made me weak-kneed and fluttery and willing to drop all pretense of professionalism just to talk to him. He was a writer, I learned, which explained the depth of my instant crush on him. Malcolm was looking for a reference book that would help him get his novel published, so I pulled out several guides to literary agents and small publishers and went through every one of them with him, desperate to keep talking to him, about books, about his writing, and, not least, about whether or not he'd consider having coffee with me next door when I got my break.

“How is it you know so much about books?” Malcolm asked me when, to my trembling delight, he took me up on my offer. “Are you a writer?”

“Oh no,” I told him, attempting to flip my hair in a sexy gesture without dragging it through my coffee. “That’s not my thing at all.”

“Really?” he said, nonplussed, raising one blond eyebrow. “Not even screenplays? Or poetry?”

“No, no,” I said, giving him what I hoped was a beguiling half-smile, “I don’t write at all. I *can* write, of course, if I have to. Like letters, and, um, I wrote papers in college, naturally, but, anything else, you know . . .”

It was a valid question. We were living near San Francisco, a city that seemed to contain, among many other things, a plethora of writers. To be more specific, I lived in Petaluma—the wrist-wrestling capital of the country—and Malcolm lived a little farther south, in Novato. For my mother, Petaluma had been at least three stops ago, but I’d come of age after we’d landed there and had just stayed. Despite the lack of panache our cities had, both Malcolm and I considered ourselves “Bay Area” denizens, although Petaluma, especially, was pretty far removed from the San Francisco Bay. Still, there were plenty of aspiring writers dotting my landscape. The ones I met came into Blue Moon, located in an otherwise bland strip mall in Corte Madera, searching for books on how to get into print and were usually doing something else to pay the rent. That “something” was often food service. Such was the case with Malcolm, as he went on to tell me, who waited tables in a high-end Marin County restaurant while he crafted his novel.

I was simply a book *lover*, I told Malcolm. I had no aspirations to write one myself. I was happy in my job as manager of Blue Moon Books, where I had unlimited access to the stuff of my addiction. I even liked Elise, the owner of the store, who paid me more than she could afford in order to keep me afloat and had always been more like a mentor and friend than a boss. Because I quickly developed a good sense of which books would sell well in the store, having read most of them, Elise had even put me in charge of buying for Blue Moon, a responsibility I truly enjoyed. I’d already been working at the bookstore for four years when I met Malcolm, but the job still felt as new and fresh as if I’d just started.

“It’s like being a kid in a candy store,” I told him.

Malcolm must have found this charming because, when we’d finished all the coffee we could hold and I reluctantly informed him that I’d have to get back to work, he asked if I’d like to continue our discussion

over dinner. I couldn't believe my luck. The good-looking, confident guys never gravitated to me, especially not the guys who had Malcolm's level of sex appeal. It wasn't that I was unattractive myself. Although, like every woman, I found aspects of my face and body that are too long, short, wide, or narrow, I knew that I couldn't really complain. I'd even done some modeling, which had helped pay for college. So it wasn't my looks that turned off the self-assured, handsome men and drew in the socially insecure, less-than-anatomically-perfect, and vaguely desperate ones. There was something else about me, although I'd never been able to figure out what, that repelled men like Malcolm.

I'd complained about this to Elise on more than one occasion, most often after being hit on by dentally challenged musicians or would-be philosophers with marginal hygiene who'd wander into Blue Moon.

"You're easy to talk to, honey," Elise told me, after she finished laughing at my tales of woe. "And you don't have a bit of snobbishness about you."

"So that makes me a target?" I asked her.

"Not at all," Elise said. "These people—these guys—feel that they can trust you, open up to you. Hell, everyone opens up to you. That's how you can sell books that people didn't even know they wanted to read!"

"That's all well and good," I said, "but why can't a great-looking, successful guy open up to me, too?"

"Don't you worry, honey," Elise had assured me, "it will happen."

And, with Malcolm, it finally had.

It didn't take long for the two of us to become an item and for me to give Malcolm his own key to my apartment, which was where we ended up spending most of our time together. It was there, on the queen-size bed that took up the lion's share of my small studio, that we compared the notes of our days, where we shared our bodies and our dreams. Malcolm's dreams involved getting published and making it big as a novelist. My dreams mostly involved him. I wanted him to succeed as a writer as much as he did, and I was more than willing to support him in every way I could. If my social life was a bit limited (Malcolm made up most of it and Blue Moon accounted for the rest), I didn't mind. While I wasn't

exactly a loner, I'd always been able to entertain myself. Reading a good book, after all, was still my idea of a great time. I suppose that somewhere in the depths of my consciousness I knew that I wasn't really making enough money at Blue Moon and that, much as I enjoyed working there, it wasn't turning into what one might consider a career. And I was going to need a career eventually. Although we didn't discuss it that often, Malcolm and I were planning to get married at some point in the future and one of us was going to need to make some decent money.

Otherwise, though, I was content with my life. There was no reason for me to change anything. That is, until Elise told me that she was closing Blue Moon and that I'd have to find another job.

I wanted to believe that Elise would find a way to keep the store open, and so, even as she began liquidating, I held on in a state of denial for several weeks. That denial might have carried me all the way to the unemployment line had Malcolm not come up with a plan.

I came home from work one evening, in what had become my usual dazed do-nothing state, and found a want ad circled in red and taped to the bathroom mirror. I went to brush my teeth and peeled it off, watching my own curious expression reflected behind it. There was barely any text to the ad.

"ADMIN ASST WANTED," the ad began, "FOR BUSY, SUCCESSFUL LITERARY AGENCY."

I didn't like the first line. The dreaded "administrative assistant" title was just a glorified term for slave. Still, the rest of the ad was very intriguing:

CANDIDATE MUST BE SMART, DETAIL AND MULTI-TASK ORIENTED. PREVIOUS PUBLISHING EXPERIENCE VERY HELPFUL. LOVE OF BOOKS A MUST. FAX RÉSUMÉ ATTN: CRAIG AT LUCY FIAMMA LITERARY AGENCY.

Under the ad, Malcolm had scrawled, *A—This is the perfect job for you! xxx, M.*

Malcolm was right. I had all the bases covered on this one, I thought. By the time he arrived home from his dinner shift that night, I'd added Blue Moon to my old résumé and printed out a copy. I faxed my résumé from the bookstore the next day and, within a few hours, there was a message for me from someone named Anna requesting that I call to make an appointment for an interview.

"Lucy and Craig would like to meet you," the tired voice said. "Please give us a call so we can set up a time."

When I called back, Anna gave me complicated directions to the office in the same listless tone. In the background, I could hear what sounded like an entire bank of ringing phones.

Elise was encouraging, if not exactly enthusiastic, when I asked for a morning off to go to the interview.

"Well, well. Lucy Fiamma," she said. "That's the big time, isn't it? Of course, you know I'll help you in any way I can." A whisper of a frown crossed her features. "Just be careful, dear," she said, and walked away before I could ask her what she meant.

Malcolm, on the other hand, was thrilled to hear that I'd landed an interview. He was so excited that he took me to dinner at *Postrio*, a Wolfgang Puck restaurant in the city that was way out of our normal budget.

"You know I don't have the job yet," I said as we toasted with glasses of Chianti.

"Oh, you'll nail it, baby," Malcolm said. "I have no doubt."



PREPARING FOR MY INTERVIEW turned out to be a nightmare. It took a full hour in front of the mirror to come up with an outfit I didn't even like. I'd settled for a blue dress, the most conservative of the three in my closet, and the only one that covered the tattoo—the small but vivid angel wings on the top of my right breast. I'd gotten the tattoo when I was seventeen and angry at my mother, so after downing a few shots of vodka supplied by my bad-girl friends of the moment, I'd allowed myself to be talked into being poked by an inky needle. Getting that tattoo was the only overtly rebellious act I committed in my tame teenage years

and I regretted it almost immediately. My mother couldn't have cared less, for one thing, which completely undermined my purpose in getting it in the first place. I hated the way it looked for another thing and always ended up trying to cover it. Every time I looked at those wings I couldn't believe I'd been stupid enough to brand my own flesh.

Malcolm, however, thought my tattoo was cute—"Angel's wings," he called it—and made a point of kissing it whenever possible. "It's so conveniently located," he always said with a smile. But because we were usually in a state of undress when he delivered these kisses, I was usually focused on things other than my ill-advised tattoo.

My hair was another problem. Up or down? Barrette or free-flowing? At the best of times, I didn't know what to do with my wild mass of curls. It was a difficult color—mostly red, but with enough gold to allow me to classify it as *titian* when I was being both generous and literary about my appearance—and it fell halfway down my back. In the end, I twisted it into a librarian-type bun at the back of my head and hoped it didn't make me look too severe.

Makeup was an issue as well. I didn't wear much to begin with since, unlike many redheads, I had a smooth, almost olive, complexion, with eyelashes and brows that were dark enough not to need mascara. I searched through my pitiful supply of shadows and decided that none of them really matched the hazel of my eyes, the red of my hair, *and* the blue of my dress. I'd have to go bare, I thought, but made a vow to go shopping for both cosmetics and clothes if I got the job.

I was none too pleased with my last glance in the mirror. My legs looked overlong and pale under the dress, and my shoes were undeniably shabby. I didn't dare put on panty hose. Nobody wore panty hose anymore unless they were the thigh-high, my-boyfriend's-coming-over-with-a-bottle-of-champagne variety. And the shoes were just further proof that I'd gotten way too comfortable in jeans and sweaters and had smothered any kind of fashion sense I might have had. Overall, though, I was annoyed with myself for fussing so much over my appearance and didn't want to admit that I felt anything but supremely confident. Finally, I just ran out the door before I could change my mind about my hair, my outfit, or going to the interview at all.

As I drove in search of the office, which was nestled in the heart of lush, leafy, and very tony San Rafael, I tried to take my mind off my inadequacy by reviewing everything I knew about Lucy Fiamma and her agency.

Although I'd never met her, I'd heard enough about Lucy to feel like I knew her. Of course, I wasn't the only one who felt this way. Anyone who worked in any corner of the book business, from booksellers to aspiring writers, "knew" Lucy Fiamma in some fashion. At the very least, they knew her story.

Lucy had been a literary agent for a few years when she got the mother of all big breaks: the publication of *Cold!*, a memoir written by her client Karanuk, an Alaskan Inuit writer. *Cold!* described life in the dark frigidity of the Alaskan wilderness and went into detail about tribal customs and rituals. The emotional impact of the writing was intense, and Karanuk's descriptions were strikingly vivid. It was all those adjectives that reviewers fling around when they love a book: evocative, brilliant, riveting, powerful. For me, though, it was simply a *great* read. You couldn't help but feel the frost creep into your bones as you read through to the dramatic, chilling end. It was one of very few books I wanted to read again as soon as I finished it.

Karanuk and *Cold!* came out of nowhere (literally, in this case) and were a huge hit. There was nothing else out there like it. People who had never bought a book in their lives purchased a copy of *Cold!* At Blue Moon, I'd sell it to customers who claimed they hated reading, but just *had to have* this one. In addition to stirring up huge interest in the Inuit, Karanuk's book was the front-runner in what soon became a memoir craze. So many great books out there never get the kind of attention that *Cold!* did, so its success said quite a bit about what could happen when talent combined with luck. *Cold!* hit at exactly the right place at exactly the right time. The hardcover was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for two full years until the paperback took its place in permanent residence.

Naturally, *Cold!* found its way to Hollywood as well. The movie version won several Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Inevitably, a whole line of *Cold!*-inspired merchandise found its way to various outlets. There were *Cold!* dolls, *Cold!* fur hats, and even a *Cold!* line of

frozen dinners. My personal favorite was the series of cruises around the Alaskan coast that promised glimpses of the scenery immortalized by the book. *Cold!* also became a required text in many university cultural studies classes.

But what made this appealing book even tastier was that the author was totally reclusive. He rarely gave interviews, and when he did, it was always to small, obscure newspapers or magazines. He almost never appeared in public, and the majority of his readers, myself included, had no idea what he looked like. The jacket photo on the original edition showed only a frigid landscape of snow, broken by a single stunted, leafless tree. There were no photos at all on subsequent editions. There was a big brouhaha at one point when Oprah picked *Cold!* for her famous book club and Karanuk turned down the invitation to appear on her show. Of course, unlike the other authors Oprah had selected, Karanuk hardly needed the sales or the publicity. The fact that he *wouldn't* make an appearance only added to his mystique.

After the Oprah incident, the one thing everyone wanted to know was when Karanuk was going to write the *next* book. I answered the same question at least once a week at Blue Moon:

“Say, you know that Alaska guy, Canoe? Kanuk? The *Cold!* guy? When are you going to get his next book?”

“As soon as he writes it,” I always answered.

Lucy Fiamma was the woman behind Karanuk and his book. In various interviews, Lucy spun the tale of how she'd tirelessly shopped a partial manuscript of *Cold!* to disinterested publishers, meeting with a wall of rejections. “But I believed in it,” Lucy was often quoted as saying, “so I never gave up.” She'd finally convinced an associate editor at a small house to purchase the manuscript for “a song” with the promise that the finished book would be exquisitely written. A big publishing company bought the small house soon after and the associate editor was now one of its executive editors.

Unlike her author, Lucy Fiamma had no qualms about appearing in public. She accepted the ever-reclusive Karanuk's literary awards (of which there were several) on his behalf, always telling the same story of how she discovered her “frozen diamond in the rough.”

After the huge success of *Cold!*, the Lucy Fiamma Literary Agency became one of the hottest spots for literary representation in the country, New York be damned. Despite the fact that her agency was located on the West Coast and not even *in* San Francisco proper, and that it wasn't attached to a larger well-established agency, Lucy Fiamma represented big-name authors from around the globe. Karanuk enabled Lucy to pick her shots, and according to *Publishers Weekly*, her books usually sold with big price tags attached. None of her books matched the success of *Cold!* (how could they?), but there were several best-sellers in the bunch and most of them were very well written. Still, and I'd always found this a little odd, few of Lucy's authors seemed to write more than one or two books before they faded from the literary landscape.

I'd gathered much of what I knew about Lucy Fiamma from Elise and from the various interviews I'd read, but also in a more personal way from Malcolm, who had submitted his manuscript to her agency several months earlier and was, for lack of a better word, a Lucy Fiamma groupie. He'd come over one night after work in a state of total agitation. Could I *believe* who had come in for dinner and sat at *his* table? he wanted to know. None other than Lucy Fiamma herself! They'd discussed writing, of course, because, well, he *had* to tell her he was a writer, didn't he, and she seemed so *nice* anyway, he didn't think it was a terrible imposition. She *loved* the title of his book, Malcolm stressed, and, could I believe it, she asked him to *send it in*.

I wasn't as starry-eyed as Malcolm—I'm not a writer, after all—but his excitement was infectious. I helped him create the "perfect" cover letter for his submission, gather clips of all his previous publications in little literary magazines, and put them together for maximum effect. Then there were five empty weeks while we waited for a response. Although Malcolm was quiet about it, I knew he was spinning scenarios of literary glory. As the days crawled by, I watched, pained, as his excitement turned to something much bleaker. Finally, a form letter appeared in the mail, tucked into the self-addressed stamped envelope that Malcolm had provided.

Although your novel shows much creativity and hard work, the letter

began, *we regret that it does not meet our needs at this time and we are unable to accept it for representation. . . .*

At the bottom of the letter, there was a quickly scrawled line in blue ink.

Malcolm, it said, you have a wonderful feel for setting, but your characters are flat! Work on the first 50 pp., try to get your reader hooked! Then I'd consider taking a 2nd look! LF.

Malcolm held the letter in his hand for a long time, staring off into space while clouds of disappointment darkened his face. He was silent for so long, I started to get nervous and blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"She uses a hell of a lot of exclamation points, doesn't she?"

Malcolm looked at me, a shadow of condescension crossing his features as if I had clearly missed the point. "She's right," he said. "The characters *are* flat. Very flat. Flatter than flat. I don't know how I didn't see it before. I'm going to rework it." He folded the letter and placed it carefully in his pocket. "She read it *herself*," he said with more than a hint of awe in his voice.

Malcolm hadn't mentioned Lucy or her agency again until he cut out that want ad for me, but he'd been working on the manuscript like a demon. I knew none of its content aside from the title, *Bridge of Lies*. I was not allowed to read it until it was finished, Malcolm said, and I gladly went along because, although I hated to admit it, I was afraid. Afraid I would be disappointed. I'd read all of Malcolm's short stories and I liked them. But if I was totally honest with myself, I had to say that they were just okay. I'd started helping Malcolm with some of these stories, suggesting little revisions here and there, and he took well to my editorial comments. There was a lot of promise in Malcolm's writing and I could see that he was getting better. So I had every reason to believe that his novel represented a major breakthrough. I had every reason to believe it was *great*.

Thinking about Malcolm's novel gave me a twinge of doubt—the same twinge I'd felt when I'd first read the note he'd taped to the bathroom mirror. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Malcolm stood to gain by having me work for one of the best literary agents in the country.

He'd admitted as much, but he'd also pointed out that I hadn't given a whole lot of thought to developing a career, and that this job was an ideal place to start. He wasn't wrong about that—not by a long shot.

I forced my thoughts away from Malcolm and on to the road in front of me. I'd been driving for much longer than I should have been, considering the distance between my apartment and the office, and was starting to realize that Anna had given me plenty of unnecessary or incorrect information—the names of streets that were nowhere near where I needed to be, for example, and several left turns that should have been rights, or norths that should have been souths. If I had given myself only the half hour Anna told me it would take instead of the hour I'd neurotically opted for, I would definitely have been late. Finally, after doubling back at least twice, I found the famous Lucy Fiamma Literary Agency.

The office, as I'd been told, was an add-on to a spacious two-story home. About this, at least, Anna had been very clear. "Come around and park at the back entrance," she'd said. "The front door is to Lucy's house and you *cannot* go in there."

I felt a little like Alice in Wonderland, standing in front of the small white door, rubbing my sweaty palms on the sides of my dress, and waiting as one, two, three knocks went unanswered. I experienced a moment of total confusion before I turned the handle and just let myself in.

I was immediately surprised by the large size of the office. From the outside, it was impossible to gauge this breadth of space. Directly in front of me was a desk piled with papers of all kinds that looked to be the repository of all office items that didn't have a place. On my right, there were two more unattended desks in various states of disarray. One had the remnants of someone's lunch scattered across the surface and I could detect the smell of peanut butter. The other had several folders spread unevenly across the top. The fourth desk, to my left, which was the only tidy one in the room, was occupied by a dark-haired girl on the telephone, who jumped as I walked in and then motioned with her hand for me to stay where I was. From floor to ceiling, one entire wall of the office was taken up with books, all of which I assumed were titles sold by Lucy Fiamma. The whole room had a strange half-moon shape

caused by the protrusion of a semicircular wall in the back. There was a closed door in the middle of this wall which, I assumed, led to Lucy's private office.

Frozen in place by the girl on the phone, I turned my attention to her end of the conversation.

"Yes, the first fifty pages," she was saying. "No, we don't need to see more than that." There was a long pause. "Well, five hundred pages is too much for us to read all at once. We'll be able to get an idea of the writing from the first fifty." Another pause. "No, she's not available at the moment, but I can tell you that she likes to have a look at the writing before she speaks to an author. No, we don't take e-mail submissions. Why don't you just send it in and— No, I'm sorry, she is *not* available." In the final pause that followed, her head sank lower and lower until it was almost resting on the desk. I could tell that she was being upbraided in a most pointed manner. The tirade on the other end continued for some time until, finally, she said, "Thank you, we'll look forward to reading it," and hung up.

She looked up at me then, an expression of abject despair on her face. The words *I hate my job* might as well have been printed on her forehead.

"Can I help you?" she said as she pulled herself out of her chair and walked over to me. She was painfully thin and the paleness of her skin made a stark contrast to the sheets of straight black hair that hung below her shoulders.

"I'm Angel Robinson. I'm here for an interview. I spoke to Anna on the phone. I'm sorry, are you Anna?"

"No," she said. Her wide gray eyes were too big for her face. Close up, they looked like windows onto a bleak, rainy day. I thought she might be older than I'd first guessed. Her skinny body was that of a little girl, but her face was lined and pinched.

"Anna's in the bathroom. She should be out in a minute. Do you want to sit down?"

I took a quick scan of the room and saw that there was no chair available that didn't belong to a desk. "I'm fine," I told her, wondering if she was going to offer her name. "Thank you, uh . . ."

“My name is Kel— I mean, Nora. My name is Nora.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks, Nora.”

Kel-I-mean-Nora went back to her desk, where she busied herself pulling cards from three separate Rolodexes. I didn’t know what to do with myself, so I stood there like a piece of driftwood for an uncomfortable minute or two until I heard a toilet flush somewhere out of sight and saw another young woman approach me.

“Hi, I’m Angel Robinson,” I said, extending my hand. “Anna?”

“Yes, hi, nice to meet you,” Anna said without taking my hand. Anna was the polar opposite of Nora. She was stocky and had bobbed blond hair tucked behind her ears and smallish, squinty blue eyes. Her cheeks seemed unnaturally flushed and she gasped a little, as if she were short of breath. She also had a rather unpleasant expression on her face that I put somewhere between petulance and condescension.

I noticed, with dismay, that both Anna and Nora were wearing jeans. Clearly, in spite of all that posturing in front of the mirror, I had overdressed.

“Lucy’s in a meeting with Craig at the moment,” Anna said, gesturing to the closed door in the middle of the round wall, “but she should be with you shortly. Why don’t you sit down?”

It felt more like an order than a suggestion, so I backed myself into the chair belonging to the desk piled with the stacks of manuscripts. Anna hoisted herself onto the desk in front of me, her ample backside irretrievably crumpling several sheets of paper beneath it. One wrong move, I thought, and the whole show would topple to the carpet.

“So how did you hear about us?” she asked me. Something subtly different crept into her voice as she spoke. It sounded nasal and squeezed at the same time, as if she were trying to speak while someone sat on her stomach. It was slightly disconcerting.

“I saw the ad in the paper,” I said. “But of course I’ve heard about Lucy Fiamma before. Who hasn’t, right?”

“So you have experience in publishing?” Now there was a note of officiousness in her tone. I didn’t like Anna already and I’d only known her for five minutes. Not a good sign, I told myself. I wasn’t in the mood for

what was turning into a pre-interview, so I answered her question with one of my own.

“Have you been working here long?”

“Yes, I’ve been here awhile already. About four or five months.”

An intercom buzzed loudly on the desk and Anna leaned her entire body over the stacks of files to answer it, promptly knocking several piles to the floor.

“Yup,” she said into the phone.

“Anna, am I going to get that subsidiary rights list today? These magazines are closing for the summer, you know.” The voice sounded extremely unhappy. Anna’s cheeks flushed crimson.

“I’ve got calls in,” she said, “and I’m waiting for the copies to come back from Kinko’s on the George manuscript and—”

“I don’t want to hear excuses, Anna. Do I have to tell you how important subsidiary rights are? There’s a reason we keep serial and audio rights, Anna. Not to mention *film*. Will the list be done today or not?”

“I don’t think that’s possible, Lucy.”

“Then bring me what you’ve got now.” The intercom disconnected with a loud click. Anna slid off the desk and stared down at the mess on the floor. She looked so miserable I jumped out of my seat and started gathering papers in an attempt to help her clean up.

“You don’t have to do that,” she snapped. “That was Lucy. I’ll go tell her you’re here.”

I looked over at Nora as Anna stalked into Lucy’s office, but she was steadfast in avoiding eye contact with me. Okay, I thought, so it’s not exactly the welcome wagon around here. But I wasn’t about to let it get me ruffled. They were obviously very busy and I was clearly an outsider. I heard the rise and dip of muffled voices coming from Lucy’s office and then, unexpectedly, the sound of giggling. Anna reappeared, smiling but still ruddy. “You can go in now,” she said.

Lucy Fiamma’s office was unlike any I’d seen before. The circular room looked as if it had been designed with a specific purpose in mind, but I couldn’t tell exactly what that purpose was. It was pristine, especially compared to the disarray of the outer office, without so much as a

paper clip out of place. Adding to the overall effect of cleanliness and light was the fact that the entire room was done up in white, glass, and chrome. There was no window, but a generous amount of light streamed down from a large dome-shaped skylight cut out of the ceiling. The almost blinding whiteness of the wall, couch, chairs, and carpeting reminded me of something, an image just out of reach that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"Welcome, Angel Robinson." Lucy Fiamma strode toward me and extended her hand. I noticed that her immaculately manicured fingernails were long, pointed, and ended with half moons of white polish. Her hand was small, soft, and very cold as I shook it. The rest of Lucy Fiamma was much more imposing. She was very tall, for one thing. I was five-four at last measure and Lucy towered over me by at least six inches. I had to look up to meet her smile. Her white-blond hair floated in a cloud around her face. It had the appearance of hair on which much time has been spent to create the impression of windblown effortless-ness. She was wearing a peculiar combination of clothing: white capri pants, a lime green cable-knit sweater, and a red leather belt. The whole outfit was finished off with black leather flats. All the separate pieces were of very good quality, yet they were just wrong together. It was difficult for me to gauge Lucy's age; she had smooth, unlined skin, but her face had a vaguely unhealthy pallor as if she had just recovered from a nasty bout with the flu. Her mouth was big—or generous, if one wanted to be flattering about it—and filled with teeth that were on the large side, but, like everything else in her office, spotlessly white. Her eyes were laser green, with glittering gold flecks. I had no doubt she could speak volumes with the hypnotic stare she was fixing on me. All put together, Lucy was a striking woman, but there was something both unconventional and overwhelming about her looks. Perhaps it was the palpable sense of power that emanated from her, washing over me so completely that for a moment, I felt as if I were drowning in her presence.

"I'm so pleased to meet you," I said. "I've heard so much about you."

"Well, it can't have been too bad," she said, laughing, "or you

wouldn't be here, would you? This is Craig Johnson, my right-hand man and the voice of reason in this office."

I hadn't even been aware of Craig's presence until Lucy introduced him. He was fairly easy to miss, so fair and slight he practically faded into the wall behind him. Craig looked as if he hadn't had a decent meal or a good night's sleep for some time. His eyes were sad and brown and his clothes hung lifelessly from his bony frame. So I was shocked when he said, "Nice to meet you, Angel," in a rumbling baritone. Craig had a radio star voice trapped in a milquetoast body. Just one more in a growing list of peculiarities here, I thought.

"Well, why don't we sit down and get started?" Lucy said, gesturing for me to sit on the couch. Craig positioned himself on a chair next to me, holding a legal pad on his lap. Lucy sat down next to me, so close our knees were almost touching, holding a small pad of her own.

"Now, where's your résumé?" she said to nobody in particular. "Nora!" she yelled toward the door. "Can I have this woman's résumé please?"

Nora appeared at the door and said, "It's on your desk, Lucy."

"It most certainly is not."

Nora shuffled over to Lucy's oversize glass desk, removed a sheet of paper, which I immediately recognized as my résumé, and handed it to Lucy.

"Nora, it would help me a great deal if you didn't *hide* these things, don't you think?" Lucy said. Nora simply sighed and left the room.

"Okay," Lucy began, "Angel Robinson. What a name! Surely that's not your real name. You must have changed it, yes?"

"No, no, that's my real name. From birth."

"Then maybe you *ought* to change it. I mean, *Angel* of all things. Quite a title to live up to, I'd think."

"Well, my mother . . . She saw me as her little angel, she said, when I was born, and so she thought, I mean . . ." I trailed off into an awkward silence. The truth was, I'd always been embarrassed by my name. It didn't help that the mega-bestselling book *Freakonomics* listed Angel as the number one "white girl" name that best indicated parents who were

uneducated. I hoped Lucy hadn't read *Freakonomics* and resisted the urge to wipe my hands on my dress. My palms were slick with sweat and I could feel the prickle of perspiration on my lower back.

"Names are very important," Craig said suddenly. Again, I was startled to hear such a deep, sensual voice coming out of such a mouse of a man. I didn't know if I'd be able to get used to it. "My wife decided to hyphenate our names so that she could keep her own identity," he added.

"Hyphens are even worse," Lucy said dismissively, and then stopped short as if something important had just occurred to her. "Do you have a *husband*?" she asked me, her tone making *husband* sound a lot like *herpes*.

"No, no. I mean, I have a boyfriend—fiancé, actually—and he . . ." He what? I cursed myself. Is writing a book? Would love to be represented by you? How was it possible that I had spoken no more than a handful of words and was already in such a deep hole? And why had I referred to Malcolm as my fiancé? The two of us hadn't even come close to making any official plans to wed.

"Are you planning to get married sometime soon, then?" Lucy asked. "I mean, I'd hate to offer you a position and then have you disappear on a honeymoon or something. Or get pregnant. You're not planning *babies*, are you? Little Angels, as it were? Because we can stop right here if you are and not waste any more time. Time is money here and I don't have nearly enough of it to squander."

"Actually, we haven't really set a date." I could hear my own voice getting smaller in my throat. "And I haven't even begun to think about children."

"Good," Lucy said, "because this is an extremely busy office, and while I don't expect my employees to work twenty-four hours a day, there will be plenty of reading to do outside of the office and occasions when you may have to come in early or stay late. And as my assistant—" Lucy stopped herself short, her eyes narrowing, a new question working its way to her lips. "You understand that this position is that of *my assistant*?"

"Yes, of course," I said, but I was confused by her emphasis.

“Because if you are thinking of being hired as an *agent*, we should probably terminate this interview immediately.”

“Oh no,” I rushed to assure her, “I understand the position. And I’m not interested in agenting.” I gave Lucy a broad smile to underscore my words, but I questioned, if only for a fraction of a second, just how truthful they were. *Would* I be interested in being an agent myself? Who knew? I hadn’t even seen it as a possibility until that moment. I was surprised, and maybe even a little intrigued, that Lucy had. But no, I thought again, I could never—

“Good,” Lucy said, drilling me with her laser eyes.

Nora entered the room once more. “Lucy,” she said, “Natalie Weinstein’s on line two for you.”

“I have to take this,” Lucy said, leaping from the couch. “This is a *very* important editor. I’ve been waiting for this offer.”

Craig rose from his seat in tandem. “I’m going to make a couple of calls while you get this,” he said. “I’ll be back in a few.”

“Fine, go, go,” Lucy said. “You can make yourself comfortable, Angel. Have a look at all of our books.” She made a sweeping gesture at the room around us and then sat down at her desk to take the call.

“Natalie, my dear,” she began, “are we in business on this delicious book? I’d love to tell the author that you have won the prize. . . .”

My head had started to buzz and I found myself unable to focus on Lucy’s conversation. I felt my interview had started badly, but I couldn’t explain why. I distracted myself by looking around the room. There was a display on my left, a virtual shrine to Karanuk that I hadn’t noticed earlier. Nestled between various animal pelts and a costume I assumed was native Alaskan garb was every edition of *Cold!* in print. Beside all the English editions in hardcover and paperback there were two shelves of foreign editions. I studied the spines for title changes. *Fa Freddo!* screamed the Italian title in red. The French copy was much quieter. *Le Froid*, it said in beige lettering. There was no exclamation point.

“No, it’s certainly not a bad offer,” Lucy was saying, “but this payout schedule is simply not going to work. Frankly, the author’s no spring chicken, if you know what I mean. Is she going to live long enough to get this money? I can’t say.” Lucy flashed me a toothy grin. I smiled back

and turned my head, afraid to be caught eavesdropping, even though she was clearly speaking loud enough for me to hear every word. But some poor writer's fate was hanging on the outcome of this conversation and it just seemed wrong for me to know how it would all turn out before the writer did.

"No, I'm not implying that she's ill," Lucy went on. "What I'm saying is that we might *all* be dead by the time this advance is paid out."

I turned my attention to another shelf of books. A slim volume caught my eye. I recognized it immediately as *Long Shadows*, the one book I'd always said I'd want with me on a deserted island. It was a short but densely written novel about three generations of women who were all writers. Through the different voices of her characters, the author gave a layered, intricate account of women, history, and the writing process. I'd first read it in college and still kept my copy where I could reach it easily, just to thumb through it. It was the author's first and only book. I reached over, almost involuntarily, pulled the book from the shelf, and felt its compact weight in my hand. I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding and got a little light-headed.

I knew then that Malcolm was absolutely right about this being the perfect job for me. The author's mind was certainly where the seeds for great books germinated, but this was the place where they began to bear fruit. Without this agency, who knew how many books would have remained out of sight forever. I replaced the book on the shelf and realized that I really wanted this job. I'd been detached, even equivocal, when I'd first walked in the door, but after being surrounded by this flurry of literary activity for only a few minutes, I couldn't stop the flush of excitement from overtaking me. I wanted this job so badly I could feel my fingertips tingling with desire for it. I wanted—no, I *needed* Lucy Fiamma to hire me, and I scrambled frantically to come up with ways I could convince her to do just that.

Lucy was off the phone. "I see you've been admiring some of our books," she said.

"Oh yes," I said. "*Long Shadows* is one of my all-time favorites. I *love* that book."

“Yes, that was a good one,” Lucy said. “One of my first. It’s a pity the author only had that one in her.” She gave an exaggerated shrug. “And of course you’ve read *Cold!*?”

“Oh, of course. It’s a brilliant book,” I said. “But you must know that,” I added.

“Hmm,” Lucy said, and rose from her desk. “Let me tell you a little publishing story, Angel. Since we’re discussing brilliance. Of course, *Cold!* is a phenomenal book, no question, and would have done well regardless. But do you know what really made that book work? In terms of *market*?”

Several possible answers raced through my brain, but I settled for silence.

“What did it, I mean *really* did it, was the exclamation point on the title,” Lucy said triumphantly. “And *I* am the one who put that exclamation point there. Indeed.” There was a new note in her voice, something like, if this were possible, flirtatiousness. I was dumbfounded as to how to respond, but had developed an instant understanding of her fondness for exclamation points. I smiled like an idiot.

“Right,” she said briskly, as if snapping out of a trance, “let’s get down to this. I’m really running short on time now.” She sat down on the couch and patted the space beside her. “I’ve looked over your résumé and your experience looks pretty good, but my concern is that you haven’t had any direct experience in publishing.”

“Yes, but I—”

“Which could actually work in your favor,” she interrupted. “It means you have no preconceived notions about how things should work. Am I correct?”

I nodded mutely.

“Of course, in terms of *salary*, I’d have to take your limited experience into consideration. I’m sure you can understand. But let’s discuss salary later, shall we?”

I couldn’t figure out if Lucy meant that to be a rhetorical question, so, again, I just kept my mouth shut.

“I should let you know that this will be a very different environment

than Blue Moon. As you've seen, we are very busy here. So you think you'd be able to juggle several tasks at once? Are you prone to feeling overloaded?"

"Oh no, I—"

"Well, let me ask you this. Say you're sitting here, answering the phone, and you get two calls at once. One is an associate editor at a small publisher you've never heard of who just wants to touch base with me. The other is an author whose book I'm about to sell. Say it's *Karanuk*, for example. Who do you put through to me and what do you say to the other one?"

I hesitated, unable to solve this Sphinx-like riddle with any kind of ease.

"Hurry!" she said. "You're not going to have time to mull this decision with two lines blinking."

"I put *Karanuk* through to you and let you know that the editor is on the other line," I said quickly. "Then I tell the editor that you'll be with her—or him—shortly."

Lucy smiled again, showing all her gleaming teeth. I exhaled and felt my shoulders relax a little, confident that I'd given the right answer.

"Wrong!" she said. "*Always* put an editor through first, no matter how small. That's where the money is. Without publishers, we have no business. That small-time editor could be a big-time publisher tomorrow. It's happened before and it will happen again."

"Oh," was all I could think to say.

"But you're obviously an author advocate. That's very sweet."

Craig had come back into the room in the middle of this interchange and seated himself with his pad once again. The two of them proceeded to ask me a series of questions, all of which seemed more or less standard, considering the position. Which books were my favorites? Why? Which popular books hadn't I liked? Why? What had I learned about publishing trends from my work at Blue Moon? How fast and how accurately could I read?

I answered all their questions with responses I'd prepared ahead of time, but part of me was removed from the interview and watching in

dismay. I was quite sure I'd blown my chances with my answer to Lucy's editor/author question.

"Now . . . *Angel*," Lucy said, my name seeming to stick in her throat before she forced it out, "I must, of course, ask you why you've decided to leave Blue Moon. Doesn't Elise treat you well?"

"Oh no, it's not that at all," I said quickly. "Elise is wonderful! But she's closing the store." I felt a pang of sadness just saying it out loud. "I guess you didn't know."

"What a shame," Lucy said, shaking her head. "Although I've often told her she needed to do more to keep up with the big boys. Too idealistic—that's Elise's problem. What a pity."

"Yes," I said, "it's a real—"

"We could talk all day, I'm sure," Lucy interrupted, rising to her feet, "but I've really got to get back on the phone, and I have several other candidates to interview today. Really, we've had an overwhelming response from that ad, haven't we, Craig?"

"Overwhelming," Craig rumbled.

"What I'd like to do is to get your take on a couple of manuscripts," Lucy said. "Why don't you have Nora give you some things from today's mail and also something that we're working on now? She can give you the George proposal. I think that one would be good. You can drop off your notes if you like or fax them in. We'll talk again after that. How does that sound?"

"Great," I said, and shook her hand once more. "Thank you so much."

"Just one more question," Lucy said. "You're not a *writer*, are you? There's no place for writers here."

My mind stumbled over the irony of that statement while my mouth started forming an answer, but Lucy interrupted me once more. "I *have* made the mistake of hiring writers before. It doesn't work." She shuddered, as if remembering a bad dream. "We represent writers here, we don't create them. Is that clear?"

I had no difficulty responding this time. Of all the questions Lucy had asked me, this one had the surest answer.

"I have no talent for writing," I told her. "Reading is my passion." I thought about Malcolm and felt strangely guilty, as if I was somehow betraying him and lying to Lucy at the same time.

"Good, good," Lucy said, ushering me to the door. "What do you think of my office, by the way? Do you think you could be comfortable working in such a beautiful environment?"

"It's fantastic," I said, and as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized what her office reminded me of, the image that had been nagging for definition at the back of my mind. Lucy Fiamma's office was very much like an igloo.



AT THE SOUND OF Lucy's door shutting against my sweat-damp back, Nora and Anna simultaneously swiveled their heads in my direction. Nora looked completely wretched. Anna simply looked annoyed. Both of them raised their eyebrows, forming two sets of inverted parentheses, as if to ask me what the hell I wanted *now*. Standing next to Anna was a tall blond woman wearing a tailored gray suit and clutching a briefcase in one hand. She was, I assumed, the next "candidate" scheduled to interview with Lucy. She gave me a quick, questioning look as if to ask me what to expect, but I looked right past her. I meant to get this job and I wasn't about to offer someone else any help to take it from me, even if that help came from a simple smile. I turned toward Nora.

"Um . . . I . . . Lucy . . ." I drew back some of the oxygen that seemed to have been sucked out of my lungs and started again. "Lucy asked if you could give me some manuscripts from today's mail and the . . . um . . . the George proposal?"

Nora slid out from behind her desk and began riffling through a mail tub full of manuscripts. Anna got up as well, only to sit down again on the edge of the same desk she'd wrecked before. Both of them seemed to be intent on completely ignoring the woman in the gray suit.

"Guess it went okay in there?" Anna inclined her head toward Lucy's office. I smiled at Anna as politely as I could and hoped that

would suffice as a response to the nosy question I had no intention of answering.

“This’d be your desk, you know,” Anna said, patting the papers underneath her rump. “It’s the closest one to her.”

“Right,” I said. “That makes sense.” I looked away from Anna for a moment, not wanting to brand the image of her backside spilling onto the desk. If I managed to get the job, it wasn’t a vision I’d want every time I reached for a Post-it.

“Does she want you to write notes? On the manuscripts?” Anna asked.

“Yes, that’s what she said. And I’ll fax them in.”

“Do you know how to do that?”

“How to fax?”

“No, how to write a report.”

“Oh. Well, I—”

“Make sure you put your name on it and the author’s name. And what the genre is. The genre’s very important.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks.”

Anna turned toward Nora. “Don’t forget to give her the George proposal, Kelly,” she said.

Kelly? Who was Kelly?

“I’m sorry,” I said to Nora/Kelly, “did I get your name wrong? I thought it was Nora?”

Nora/Kelly sighed heavily.

“It’s my mistake,” Anna said, an air of smugness hanging around her like a low cloud. “Her real name’s Kelly, but we call her Nora. Lucy feels that Nora is a better name for her. So she’s Nora here. Sometimes I forget. Sorry.” Although she clearly wasn’t sorry at all.

“I understand,” I said, although I didn’t.

Nora/Kelly looked at me as if she’d like to vaporize me on the spot. “Here are a few random manuscripts from today,” she said through gritted teeth, “and here’s a copy of the George proposal.” She shot a poisonous glance in Anna’s direction. “You should keep them separate. You can give me a call before you fax them in. Or you can drop them off. But we’ll need them back pretty soon.” I could tell she’d delivered this drill before. The phones were ringing and Anna had managed, once again, to vanish.

"I have to get that," Nora/Kelly said. "Nice to meet you," she added, and turned her attention to the phone.

"Um, excuse me?" I heard the gray-suit-woman say. "I have an appointment?" As I walked past her to leave, I thought I could see desperation flicker across her face.

When I opened the door and let myself out, the glare of daylight hurt my eyes. I hadn't realized how muted the light had been inside the office, even with all that whiteness. I felt weak and a little dizzy. A headache was starting to throb at the back of my skull. I clutched the manuscripts under one arm and my purse under the other and headed for my car, stumbling in the brightness like a drunk.



Lucy Fiamma

Lucy Fiamma Literary Agency

Dear Lucy,

I don't know if you remember me, but I came to the seminar you gave ten years ago at the college in San Francisco. Anyway, I'm writing to you because I have written a memoir and I would like you to represent it.

The book is about me and my cat, Hairy, and the years we spent together, developing recipes. This may sound odd, but my cat spoke to me and told me what ingredients to use and then we made the dishes. Since he doesn't have hands, I do most of the cooking, but he stands right there on the counter as we work. Together we developed many amazing recipes and stories. So I guess this is sort of a memoir/cookbook.

I am enclosing one of the best recipes here for you to look at. The manuscript is completed (it is 527 pages long) and I can send it to you right away.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Clara Reynolds

Hairy Mac and Cheese

½ cup macaroni (cooked)
3 cups heavy cream
1 can Tuna
1 cup buttermilk
1 cup 2% milk
4 tbs. melted butter

Combine ingredients in large skillet.
Sautee at medium-high heat for 20 minutes.
Serve hot!



Lucy Fimma Agency
Att: Lucy Fimma

Dear Ms. Fimma,

I am writing as to inquiry on my fiction book manuscript entitled ONE DARK NIGHT. This is a mystery thriller set in modern times but has an antiquity feeling.

I am looking for an agent to sell this book to publishers and I have read in the guide to literary agents that you have sold books of this type.

I am enclosing the first fifty (50) pages of the book for you to read and a self-addressed-stamped-envelope.

I have also sent this letter and the manuscript to ten other agents.

Thank you,
Robert Brownering

ONE DARK NIGHT

Chapter 1

It was windy a dark night raining. The street was quite for now except for the cars that drove down it no one ever saw the body lying under the curb. He body was dressed ornately because in the subsequent years before this happened he had made a lot of money selling Memberships in a Secret Society sort of like Insurance Salesmen but with riddles. Now he was shot through the heart once there was a brown ring around the wound with silvery dust on the edges. The second clue was the stream of blue ink that was running from his pocket into the storm gutter. The ink forbore to slowly trickle with alacrity across the dry cobblestones.

Above the street where the dead man laid was a late nite restaurant that served all the usual victuals to those who crept through its walls in the deepening hours that raced by in the dead of night. Two people were seated at the counter in the yellow glow. They looked a lot like that famous Hooper print from the 1920s The one person was a Cop and the other was a hooker prostitute, "Why don't I give you a ride home?" the Cop asked the prostitute by the name of Sadie who told him "I don't need a ride of the kind your going to give me."

They walked slowly outside into the warm dry night. The Cop looked into Sadie's eyes were rich in opaqueness the color of coffee. He thought she was beautiful so he didn't notice that as they exited the restaurant he stepped right over an important Clue to what would become the greatest act of subversion and to-