

Chapter One

The women behind the counter were filling orders and shouting to customers over the lunchtime din.

'Two chicken pesto?'

'Hold the mayo?'

'To go, or eat in?'

'Want mustard with that?'

'Any beverage?'

'Still or sparkling?'

'You paying separately?'

Only in this city, thought Lucy. Their speed and skill were marvellous. At her end of the counter, three women, Korean maybe, were rolling dough into long rectangles, slamming baking trays into ovens and pulling out cooked loaves which they flipped onto boards. One hand held the bread flat with a padded glove while the other, with a few quick saws, split them horizontally. Down the line, more women, those doing the shouting and serving, used latex-gloved hands to turn the still steaming bread into sandwiches. From the refrigerated wells in the counter they deftly extracted prepped ingredients (cheeses, grilled veg, rocket, tomatoes, salamis, chicken, ham, beef, you name it) to cover the bread in a thick even layer.

Their hands flashed and their arms weaved across each other's as they reached for ingredients, drizzled sauces, flicked spices, scooped salsas, spread pastes, sprinkled bacon bits or pine-nuts.

On with the crusty top, a firm but careful push to consolidate the mass into a sandwich, then into the paper wrapper and over the counter to the customer.

The smell of hot bread and coffee, the crowded, noisy, nonetoo-pristine sandwich shop, the Manhattan lunch-hour ritual, produced in Lucy a wash of pleasure. I love this city, she thought. This is real food, cheap, fresh, and available on almost every block.

But her pleasure was almost immediately followed by a familiar backwash of grief. That's widowhood, thought Lucy, it permeates everything, gets into your life like fog through the cracks. For over thirty years she'd telephoned her husband from all over the world and he'd shared her pleasure (or disappointment or fury) from an Islington armchair and, later, from a Cotswold bed.

David had hated 'abroad', but he enjoyed her delight in travel, food, friends. He liked her to do what she liked to do, and he wanted blow-by-blow bulletins. If she didn't telephone him at seven p.m. every day, he'd fret.

Lucy looked at her watch. It would be just seven p.m. in London now. David had been dead for nearly six months, but some inner clock still told her, wherever she was, when it was time for that phone-call. Thirty odd years of pre-supper drinks or drinks-time telephone calls could not, it seemed, be expunged.

Yet it should be liberating, she thought, that I can now go anywhere I like without worrying about anyone, without checking in, without reporting back. I could disappear for days, maybe weeks, and no one would object – or indeed notice. That's good, isn't it? It's freedom, independence, self-sufficiency . . .

Or will be one day. Meanwhile, she thought wryly, there's no comfort like food. She turned her attention to her sandwich.

The layer of mozzarella and avocado on the base crust was receiving a libation of olive oil and a scattering of black pepper. It set her mouth watering. Why, she asked herself, am I eternally hungry?

Her mind then made a well-trodden journey. That sandwich was probably seven hundred calories on its own. She should be in the

salad line, not the sandwich one. Indeed, she should be skipping lunch altogether since this evening, and every evening this week, she'd be eating in a new, fashionable restaurant and telling herself it was her bounden duty, as food critic for London's HOT Restaurant magazine, to sample every dish she possibly could. She'd have to lose a stone when she got back to London.

Lucy had these interior conversations with herself all the time, especially about what she wasn't going to eat or drink. Monday I'll go on a diet; I'll skip lunch today; tonight I won't drink at all. But she knew she wouldn't keep these promises, any more than she'd keep the ones about taking up swimming or joining a gym.

Her sandwich in a bag, Lucy started up Fifth Avenue, intending to walk all the way to 58th Street, but somehow her arm stuck itself out at the sight of a yellow cab and five minutes later she was at her hotel. Before she went in, she picked up a double espresso at the deli opposite. In the lobby of the hotel, she installed herself in a corner by the window, and ate her sandwich and drank her coffee, alternately reading the New York Times and watching the world go by. It was very pleasant, and the sandwich was everything it should be, except, as always in the US, it was super-sized. But of course she ate the lot. It would have been wicked to waste it after all.

She liked the Winchester and always stayed there if she could. The hotel had certainly seen better times – there was no room service, the shower-head needed fixing and the curtains did not quite meet. But her room was large and airy with high ceilings and a big firm bed.

And the staff all knew her. They'd been there for ever: the cheerful doorman, the woman pulling and inserting plugs on the ancient switchboard, the trio of old men who took turns manning the hundred-year-old lift, swinging the lever to stop the car precisely at floor level with one hand, clattering the metal gate open with the other. And she liked the chute into which, at any level, you could drop your mail and it would fall through the floors to the mail-box in the lobby. Lucy never wrote letters or postcards –

email had done away with that – but it pleased her that the mail-chute still worked.

In spite of the double espresso, the combination of full stomach, jetlag, and the sight of her bed, made a siesta irresistible. I'll just have half an hour shut-eye, she thought.

She woke three hours later, refreshed and eager to get to her desk, which she was glad to see was a decent one. What modern hotel would provide a proper desk that did not have to double as a dressing-table? She wished she could write about the faded grandeur of the Winchester and its like – very few left now – or Cosi's honest sandwiches. But the HOT Restaurant brief did not include unfashionable hotels or old-style sandwich chains. Lucy felt a small shadow of despair, a fleeting awareness of being out of her time.

Once she could sit in this room, or one very like it, and write a well-researched article about the influence of MFK Fisher on modern food writers, or the vestiges of 18th-century kitchen English (like skillet or scallion) still current in American speech. But today's editors wanted punchy pieces about scandals and food scares, or gossip about trendy people and fashionable food.

She shook her head, irritated with herself for brooding, and pressed the key. The screen flickered and steadied. She read:

Lucy Barnes. New York Restaurants for HOT Restaurant, May issue. 1200 words

One of the appealing aspects of New York is its unabashed love affair with itself, its pride and confidence in its brashness, its bigness, its New Yorkness. Whether in the famous art deco skyscrapers, the 80s' bling of the Trump Tower or today's elegant new MoMA, New York architecture has always been uplifting, sometimes breathtaking.

So I confidently expected the new Time Warner Centre with its 'vertical retail' to be a breathtaking success, gleaming with money well spent, echoing to the tap-tap of well-heeled

women on marble floors. It is not. It is positively depressing: for all the expensive expanses of atrium and lobbies, the comfortable sofas, enigmatic art installations and whole floor of restaurants, I cannot fathom why anyone goes there. The ground floor is uninspired, the shops unexciting and the restaurant floor gloomy. It is also extremely expensive.

Even with an exchange rate of two dollars to the pound, Barbarella is as over-priced as it is over-hyped. A narrow windowless room with a few closely packed tables and a preposterous bar of giant dimensions. A glass of water costs \$10 and the cheapest wine . . .

Boring, thought Lucy, but it will have to do. She worked on, tapping the keys fast, eyes on the screen. She finished the piece, and checked her word count. Years of journalism had given her the ability to produce the right number of words as if by instinct. She was only forty words over, but she edited fast, losing those that were unnecessary. Editing down was a job she liked, knowing that her copy would be the better for it. She was running a final spell check when a window popped up:

'You have mail. Two new messages.'
One was from Sandra, her editor on the daily Globe, the other from her daughter, Grace.
She opened this one first:

Mum, what are you doing in New York? Don't you ever stop working? When will you be back? Archie and I wanted to come down this weekend. It's half term and we've got tickets for Stratford.

Lucy raised an eyebrow, and mentally added 'and you could babysit the children while we are at the theatre, do our laundry and cook Sunday lunch.'

She tapped her reply: Back Friday morning. See you for supper then.
XX Mum

Still, she was glad they were coming. It would be good to see her daughter and even her ultra-conservative son-in-law Archie. But mostly she looked forward to having the grandchildren around, adding noise and activity to a near-empty house now more used to silence. And having people to cook for.

Lucy read her daughter's email again and found she slightly resented the demanding tone. She loved Grace of course, but she could be taxing. Since David's death, Grace had taken to dishing out advice with a subtext about retiring gracefully. Get a decent haircut; buy better clothes; spend time with your grandchildren; join a choir.

Lucy opened the email from Sandra and was surprised at its length. Her boss's editing skills had honed her writing to terse essentials. Her communications seldom exceeded 50 words.

Dear Lucy,
You aren't going to like this and there is no way I can wrap it up, but I'm afraid we will not be renewing your contract next month.

This is not personal. You are a great cookery writer and you've done wonderful copy for the Globe over the last twelve years. But you will know that we are keen to attract a younger readership and the research done by Focus has identified that the younger reader, though very into food, is more interested in the 'celebrity/dining-out/what's hot' scene than in real cooking. If they do cook, they want to do it quickly, with fashionable ingredients ready prepared – hardly your sort of thing, you will agree. (Your famous piece on osso bucco, 900 words if I remember right, is a memorable piece of writing, but when confronted with it as part of the research, the target audience failed to get it at all.)

I'm sorry I didn't manage to catch you before you left for NYC. But the decision was only made the day you left. I'd have liked to have at least bought you one more good lunch.

Of course we will publish the two pieces we have in the pipeline,

but April 8th will be the last.

I'm so sorry Lucy. If you can bear it, let's have lunch anyway.
Sandra

P.S. You should know I have engaged Orlando Black as our new food columnist. The page is to have a complete revamp, plus colour. Lucy read the email without moving a muscle. Part of her mind told her it could not be true, that they wouldn't, they couldn't. The Globe was one of the few daily papers that had not gone down market, that still published serious stuff. And Sandra loved her writing. In a memory flash of a second, Lucy remembered a whole hour's conversation, held not a month ago, when they'd been plotting a series of pieces on sweet yeasted doughs: gugelhopf; savarin; brioche, rum baba, pannetone. She'd have followed Carême from the kitchens of Talleyrand to the Russian court, and the migration of pastry cooks from Florence to Paris in the wake of Catherine de Medici. It was to be a little bit of history and some perfect, infallible recipes with all the butter, cream, rum and brandy that such lavish times demanded. An antidote to today's diet-mania. Sandra had even agreed to illustrate the piece with Carême's own drawings.

Sandra could not be sacking her. Her reputation as a writer rested significantly on the Globe job. If she lost her column she'd no longer be in the top tier of journalists – she'd be a mere freelance with a monthly column in HOT Restaurant, a minor magazine read principally by chefs.

When she got to the P.S., disbelief gave way to rage. Her mouth and eyes opened wide and she felt the sudden heat of pumping blood. She jumped up from the chair, crying out, 'Orlando Black! Orlando bloody Black! It's ridiculous!'

Orlando Black! He was a minnow. A silly, pretty, telly-made know-nothing, whose gastronomic celebrity was founded on his making a passable Spanish omelette on some reality show. They could not do it. How could they do it?

Orlando Black was a fake. Even his name was made up. And could he write? Unlikely in the extreme. Certainly he could not speak the Queen's English. 'Wow, brilliant' was about the limit of his verbal expression.

Lucy rubbed her hands over her face and again thought this could not be happening. Weaned on Elizabeth David and André Simon, she was in an honourable line of serious authors from both sides of the Atlantic: Jane Grigson, James Beard, Julia Child, Matthew Fort.

To replace her with a non-writer was bad enough, but Orlando Black was not even a restaurant chef. If they'd sacked her for Jamie Oliver or Gordon Ramsay maybe she'd have understood. Celebrity is a powerful seller of newspapers, and at least they could cook. But to replace her with an androgynous show-host of vacuous intellect and zero talent . . .

Lucy stood at the window, seeing nothing. She still had her hands on her hot cheeks, but now her fingers were wet with tears. Her mind ranted on: was her knowledge, and yes, scholarship, to count for nothing? She belonged to that top echelon of food writers who read widely, who knew the social importance of food, who could cook themselves. Who published good, well-researched and well-tested cookery books that people read and used.

She started to weep in earnest, and went to the bathroom to bury her face in the bath towel. She carried it to the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, rocking and sobbing in uneven gulps.

Lucy realised she was crying as much for her dead husband as for the loss of her job. She wanted David. She needed him, damn it, needed to shout down the phone. She wanted his steadying voice, his balance, his ability to make her laugh when she was crying.

Oh, how could the Globe replace her with a pipsqueak who rose to fame because he dyed his hair orange, wore ridiculous chef's pants in green checks and pranced about saying 'Cool'?

She stared at the carpet, tears running down her cheeks.

Ten minutes later she straightened up and said aloud, 'Bloody hell, this is ridiculous.' She rubbed her face with the towel, flung it in the general direction of the bathroom and strode back to her desk. She emailed her copy to HOT Restaurant, pulled on her coat and stamped out of the hotel.

She took a taxi downtown to Rivington Street and was greeted by a blast of good smells and convivial noise at 'inoteca. Good, she thought, comforting Italian food is what I need. I'll have ribollita, that wonderful Tuscan soup with bread in it, followed by pasta. Or maybe risotto. Anyhow, something made of solid carbohydrate.