Silver Lining

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“Letting you go now is probably for the best.”

Clancy Darling sat back in the chair as anger and astonishment collided deep in her gut and exploded. The sensation washed through her body in waves and gradually subsided, but the residue was unpleasant. She watched her boss across the desk as the man peered at his templed fingertips and avoided looking directly at her.

“You think so?” In her own ears her voice was surprisingly calm. She crossed her legs and smoothed the crease of her pants before adding, “Well that’s good.”

The silence hung between them, growing until it was almost unbearable. Almost. Clancy had instantly resolved that she would make her editor do it the hard way. She waited and listened to nothing in particular and gazed out to the cityscape beyond the windows. The steel and glass architectural statements that housed the corporations of the city of Sydney twinkled in the morning sun. Behind her was the newsroom—the source of more silence. Twenty-first century newspaper offices were so unearthly quiet;
that told you why newspapers were dying, surely? Where was the
hum of things happening, the excitement of discovery and the gasps
of discovering unearthed secrets? And the breathless laughter of
the Shock!-Horror!-Amazing scenes! moments? Somehow that
tasteful tip-tip-tap of keyboards and the unlikely warbling from
cell phones just didn’t do it.

She continued to watch her editor as he clearly tried to will his
newly redundant senior journalist to get up and leave before the
beads of sweat on his forehead united in a trickle down his face.
Maybe that’s why old-time editors wore green eyeshades, Clancy
thought, and almost cracked a smile. But still she said nothing;
she was adept at waiting out the other person and forcing them to
speak first; it was why she was good at her job. Finally her now ex-
editor looked across the clear expanse of his giant desk and smiled;
it was more a twitch of the pale lips.

“I reiterate that I do want you to continue to write for us
Clancy,” he said, and he too sat back in his seat. “We need your
input. But the fact is, the bottom line can’t afford you.”

Been here too long, too much leave accumulated and today’s my
fortieth birthday; so I tick that box too—over the hill!” She grinned
at the shocked expression on the boss’s face.

He groaned and put his pudgy hands over the owlish spectacles.
Clancy shrugged. “It’s okay; don’t worry about it. Just tell me I’m
not over the hill—you have to reassure me on that point at least.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Why do you think I want you to stay on
as a freelance columnist and consulting editor? We can’t afford not
to have you Clancy; you know that. It’s just that you can’t appear
on the salary side of the books.”

Clancy held up her hand and nodded. “Like I said, I do
understand. It’s just not what I expected—today anyway.” The
thought hung between them for a moment like a dust mote, then
she stood up and stretched. “Well I better get back to it, I have a
deadline.”

The small man struggled to his feet and began to put out his
hand, but changed his mind and came around the desk making as
if to grab Clancy in a hug. Without a moment’s thought Clancy
took a step back and they ended up in an awkward two-handed handshake and clasp of forearms. It was the most Clancy could bring herself to give as absolution. The new silence between them was not particularly companionable, but on a scale of one to ten in dealings with the man, it wasn’t too bad.

“It’s all shit Clancy,” said her ex-editor, almost absentmindedly. “It’s all shit.” He stood back and looked up into Clancy’s eyes and blinked several times. “What will you do now?”

Clancy grinned. “Finish my story for Saturday’s paper then get on a plane to New York.”

The editor’s eyes were wistful and he sighed once more. “Fabulous, Clancy. I envy you.”

Clancy held up her hand and shook her head, “Nuh-uh,” she retorted and her tone was minimally sharp. “We could swap places. You can be the suddenly unemployed finance writer and I could sit in your chair and attempt to keep this sinking ship afloat—on a regular salary. What do you say?”

The editor’s smile was just slightly embarrassed, but there was a twinge of alarm in his eyes. “You’re not the editor type,” he said brusquely. “You never have been.”

Clancy laughed. “Whatever you mean by that, I’m taking it as a compliment.”

He nodded enthusiastically. “It is. It is. But you’ve always been a maverick and you know the suits don’t like that. I mean, think of the damn book.” He lifted his shoulders in a see-what-I-mean shrug.

Clancy nodded. “I am thinking about it.” She smiled. “That’s why I’ll go to New York. I’m going to talk to the agent I told you about and sell the damn book in the States.”

His eyebrows shot up above his spectacle frames. “Well there you are—that’s what I mean. You wipe the floor with every banker and billionaire you’ve ever written about and wonder why you’ll never sit in my chair?”

Clancy’s expression was unreadable; she almost smiled and then shook her head, “No, I don’t wonder that Martin, but I do wonder why your chair doesn’t give you the balls to tell the suits you want to keep me. Without me and the others like me your paper isn’t worth using as kitty tray liner.”
The editor gaped at her for a moment then laughed heartily. It was an odd sound. Clancy turned for the door but a hand on her arm stopped her.

“Give me a list of ideas before you go—features, columns, whatever—okay?” His black button eyes flicked back and forth as if trying to see inside Clancy’s brain.

Clancy nodded. “Sure, I’ll put my mind to it as soon as.”
“W e’ll have a party for you, of course!”
“I’d rather not—just drinks in the pub with whoever’s around on Friday.” Clancy smiled tightly and removed his hand from her arm. She left the corner office and headed straight for the finance editor’s cubicle.

* * *

As Clancy headed her way the tall, skinny redhead got up from her desk. “Sweetie, I’ll call you back in five,” Clancy heard her mutter into her phone. “She’s heading this way. I’ve got to deal with this now.” The receiver was dropped back on its cradle and she watched Clancy bearing down upon her. Like a Valkyrie, her mane of burnished golden curls swirling around her shoulders, Clancy skewered her nemesis from twenty paces across the floor with a look.

“You miserable, cowardly little shite.” Clancy knew her normally velvety voice was cutting through the discreet newsroom hum and instantly it was as if its inhabitants had hit a collective “mute” button. One by one, heads and shoulders appeared above the partitions as Clancy reached Jennifer Costa’s den. She held up her hands and took a step forward, perhaps to stop Clancy before she began.

“Now Clancy hang on…let’s go and get a coffee…” But Jennifer stopped her move forward and instead took a step back toward the safety of her workstation.

“Coffee!” Clancy slapped the flat top of the partition with the palm of her hand. It rattled hard and two tiny Disney figures fell off and plopped to the carpet, closely followed by sheets of paper that fluttered loose from their pins. “Coffee! Jennifer tell me one thing: when did you know about this?”
The finance editor looked about them, conscious of the gaping eyes and mouths. “Just sit down Clancy,” she said and Clancy heard the quaver in her voice.

“I don’t want to sit down with you, Jen. I want you to tell me when you decided to do the dirty. When. Did. You. Know. About. This?”

Clancy watched the finance editor let out a gusty sigh and her shoulders droop. “It was…they mentioned it in conference a couple of weeks ago,” she muttered.

“Two weeks ago? And you didn’t think about talking to me?” Jennifer shrugged. “Nothing was decided, there was nothing to talk about. I didn’t—”

“Rubbish Jennifer, rubbish. Either you’re lying or you’re stupid and I know you’re not stupid.”

The finance editor seemed suddenly to remember the scene was being played out in front of an appreciative audience. She pulled herself to her full height and stared Clancy right in the eyes. “Don’t you call me a liar Clancy Darling, how dare you!”

Clancy snorted a laugh. “Oh please, Jennifer. I’ve just been fired. As if you didn’t know.” She turned as gasps and a flurry of murmurs rippled about the newsroom. “Yes, you heard right,” she said in a clear and carrying voice. “Fired. Anyone who was thinking of coming over the road for birthday drinks can save a few bucks and say goodbye at the same time. A really good deal.”

The mix of outraged voices and cheering and clapping was uproarious; as it died down Clancy leaned toward Jennifer and said, in tones designed to carry to every corner of the floor, “Thank God I never gave in to your begging and slept with you. It’s the best thing I didn’t do in the last fifteen years.”

And she turned from the furious eyes and strode across the floor to her own cubicle. A second round of cheering, whistling and clapping accompanied her march and she waved cheerily as she sat down. Picking up the phone before her hands could begin to shake in earnest, she scrolled through her contacts file until she came to T for travel agent.

“Hi,” she said when the welcome spiel finished in her ear. “I want to book a flight from Sydney to JFK on Monday.”
IN THE BEGINNING…

New York City

“My big sis is going to be in New York for a few days. I want you to meet her so she knows I have women friends,” Malcolm Darling had explained after the dinner invitation zipped into her inbox and was followed up by a phone call.

“You don’t have women friends,” Amanda McIntyre had pointed out reasonably. “I’m it.”

“Don’t be difficult. There’s my personal trainer, and I’m really close to Gina at the deli.”

“So invite one of them to have dinner with your sister. Look Mal, I don’t do siblings, it’s not my scene.”

“Just because your brother is a creep doesn’t mean all siblings are shitheads. Clancy is…” Malcolm had stopped at that point then giggled down the phone. “Clancy is scary. She is such an older sister.”

“Clancy! Her name is Clancy? How can anyone called Clancy be scary?”

“She’s really Claire Nancy but nobody’s called her that since she was nine years old, and you better not either. Now come on, be a pal. You’ll like her. I know you will. She’s a dyke; she’s gorgeous. She’s just turned forty-one and she’s way grown-up. So you can dump Natalie and try a good Aussie sheila for a change.”

“Malcolm! You are outrageous! And there are two things you need to remember. One, I don’t do older women. Two, Natalie and I have an open relationship. We are not a married couple, but I don’t sleep around.”

“Unless my math is seriously up the creek, Clancy is no more than nine years older than you, my sweet. If that makes her an older woman then I’d say you have one foot in the grave and another on a banana skin. And…” He whistled a piercing blast down the phone as Amanda screeched her protest. “And, if you and the fragrant
Natalie aren’t a couple, why do you keep her and why do you do
the husband things?”

Amanda had given up the argument and relented. Malcolm
had, in turn, given in to the idea that Natalie should come too,
despite his misgivings that she would balk at having to be civil to
yet more members of the upper middle class. So, on the designated
evening she and Amanda frocked up, in their respective styles, to
meet the legendary Clancy and hold her baby brother’s hand.

Malcolm met them in the hotel bar and called Clancy to tell
her they were all present and correct. His upper lip was beaded
with sweat; Amanda had never seen him so nervous, and told him
so.

“I’m not nervous,” he snapped and threw back his drink in one
gulp.

“We eating here?” Natalie was taking in the smooth piano
music from the baby grand in the corner of the bar and the
gleaming uptown customers and low lighting. At Amanda’s
insistence she had made an effort to dress up but her Village-chic
scrubby crushed velvet-and-patches miniskirt and artfully holed
black fishnet stockings were a unique outfit in the svelte milieu.

“There’s a cute-looking Italian a block west,” said Malcolm,
twitchily surveying the room and keeping an eye on the door. “I
thought we’d go there."

At that moment Clancy Darling entered the bar and Natalie
actually whistled. Not a loud whistle, but one that carried well
enough to catch the attention of Malcolm’s sister and cause her to
stop her survey of the room and stare straight at them.

“Holy cow, Malcolm, you never said she was a fuckin’ goddess,”
Natalie said in mock wonderment as Clancy strode toward them.

Amanda stared at her. Clancy was not quite as tall as Malcolm,
but somehow she appeared to tower over the room. Or perhaps it
was the clear blue-gray eyes and strong, straight nose down which
she seemed to peer at the world. Like Malcolm, her dark blond
hair was luxuriantly abundant but unlike him, it grew in a mane
of burnished curls and waves that cascaded to her shoulders. She
was lightly tanned and freckles decorated the high cheekbones that
mirrored her brother’s and which gave her a striking, hawklike appearance. Her mouth was wide, naturally dusky pink and not smiling. She was dressed in an oversize, cream-colored, crumpled linen jacket and pants that Amanda instantly divined weren’t Armani or any other designer of note, but looked sensational nevertheless. Beneath the jacket was a low-cut black chemise that just revealed the swell of her breasts. In her cleavage lay a pea-sized teardrop pearl hanging from a thin gold chain. 

Luscious—edible—Amanda thought, and told herself that she meant the pearl, of course. Clancy’s eventual smile of greeting was contained and cool, yet there was an aura of heat and light about her that made heads turn.

Amanda kicked Natalie’s ankle in an effort to get her girlfriend to close her mouth and stop staring, to no avail. As Malcolm stepped forward to embrace his sister Natalie cut in before him and put out her hand.

“Malcolm never said he had such a hot sister,” Natalie said as she clasped Clancy’s hand in both her own, and Amanda winced. Clancy’s eyes were not quite part of her smile as she looked Natalie over, then said briskly, “You must be Natalie,” and, turning to Amanda, her smile still not fully occupying her face, said, “And you’re Amanda, Malcolm’s told me a lot about you.”

Natalie was still hanging on to Clancy’s hand so Amanda was spared having to decide whether or not to extend her own in a formal greeting. Instead she raised her glass and said, “Cheers, I can’t imagine what he’s said, but I guess it couldn’t have been all that bad because you’re here and…” She stopped abruptly, before she really started babbling, and her cheeks flushed hot. “What are you drinking?” she asked, lamely.

Clancy’s eyes crinkled into genuine amusement and Amanda understood that she knew exactly why she was blushing. Amanda’s hackles rose and she said frostily, “I suppose you’d like a beer, isn’t that what you Aussies drink?”

A tiny flash of irritation accentuated fine lines at the corners of Clancy’s narrowed eyes; the tightening of her lips also signaled displeasure. “I don’t know about ‘us Ossies.”’ She mimicked Amanda’s pronunciation. “But as an Ozzie,” she pointedly
emphasized the “zee” sound, “I’d prefer a dry white wine.” She gently drew her hand away from Natalie’s and offered her cheek to her brother for a kiss. “Nice to see you Malcolm, I’m so glad you brought some backup. This should be a fun evening.”

Malcolm giggled and hugged his sister. “I hope so, sis,” he said nervously.

Clancy patted his hand and they all sat down as Malcolm raised his hand to attract the attention of a waiter.

The piano player launched into an odd bossa nova version of “The Sting” as Amanda began to speak. She laughed and pointed toward him with her beer bottle. “That’s kinda my tune,” she said, grinning at Clancy. Natalie swirled the ice in her glass and made a further effort to look bored as she glanced around at the chic crowd in the Fifth Avenue hotel bar. As she often did, Amanda decided to ignore her and answer Clancy’s question to her, “So tell me what it is you do?”

“Well,” Amanda said, smiling charmingly at the visiting Australian. “I’ve been at Elleron Frères for two years. It’s a boutique merchant bank—I don’t know how much you know about finance but I specialized in CDSs—credit default swaps—mostly around ten to twenty million—but lately I switched to different types of securitized product that have a credit element; mainly CLOs and CDOs. Pricing derivatives is where it’s at and it’s actually really exciting although I know it doesn’t sound like it.”

“You are so right about that, sweetie,” said Natalie in a dolorous voice. She sipped her drink and swirled the ice again. “I think we could talk about watching paint dry, I’m sure Clancy would find that just as fascinating.” She smiled at Amanda over the rim of her glass, daring her to snipe back.

As usual Amanda failed to resist. “If you understood even one tenth of what makes the world go around you’d find it fascinating Natalie,” she said sharply. “We deal in risk and what we do is what makes this country great.”

Silence hung between the four while the affable sounds of a pleasant evening went on around them. Malcolm shifted uncomfortably in his seat and glanced nervously at his sister. Her impassive expression resembled an Easter Island statue and he
quickly sat forward to somehow fill the black hole that had visibly opened in the flimsy social fabric. But he was too late.

“I suppose you think you’re queen of the world, or something.” Clancy’s words were spoken quietly, with a smile, but the sneer in her tone was unmistakable.

“Definitely ‘or something,’ in fact very definitely ‘or something’ I’d say.” Amanda grinned at her adversary in a way she knew to be attractive to the point of irresistibility. But not this time. The eyes that calmly observed her grin—and everything else about her—remained as chilly as the Atlantic in March. Amanda shivered and despite her determined bravado, the grin faltered. To hide the moment of uncertainty she took a long swig of beer, sucking hard through the quarter of lime wedged in the bottle’s neck. The icy bubbles and acid juice traces hit the back of her throat and she coughed and spluttered. In the same moment she realized she had automatically thought of Clancy as an adversary. She coughed some more, carefully, behind her hand, and thought—hardly surprising, given how rude she is. Amanda set down the bottle on a coaster, leaned back on the banquette and took a careful breath.

Across the low table Clancy watched her without sympathy, but with some interest. The twinkle in her gray eyes even hinted that she was amused, damn it. Amanda took a paper napkin from a small stack beside the peanut dish and dabbed at her wet chin and the teary corners of her eyes. Sitting beside his elder sister, Malcolm seemed frozen with indecision; he was clearly not going to defend Amanda.

“You okay, sweetie? You gonna live?” Natalie’s ironic, teasing words were so much not what Amanda needed from her girlfriend at this precise moment. Neither was the hand whacking just a little too hard between her shoulder blades.

Amanda nodded and managed to get out, “Sure, thanks. I’m fine. And stop that, for heaven’s sakes.” She shrugged away Natalie’s hand and blinked on another cough-driven tear. “I guess it serves me right for trying to explain macroeconomics after a couple of drinks.” She turned back to Clancy who, she saw, was watching them intently. There was something about the way Clancy’s right eyebrow was cocked that riled Amanda and before she could think
better of it she said in tones as acid as the lime juice, “Actually, it’s not ‘queen of the world,’ Clancy. The term is ‘master of the universe’ or ‘BSD’ and they’re both kinda old-fashioned, very twentieth century, in fact. I think you’re getting mixed up with Titanic and—you know—Leo DiCaprio.” She held out her arms as if about to launch herself into the air. “I’m king of the world!” and all that shit. That’s not me at all, but I guess you’re not up with it Down Under.” She smiled again and was pleased to see—despite the low lighting of the bar—a flush rise from Clancy’s throat and into her face. That beautiful face, that mean, beautiful face in which the gray-blue eyes stayed as cold as cold and defied the blush, which somehow seemed to light her golden skin from within.

Natalie frowned, her eyebrows forming a query. “BSD?”


Clancy’s expression was even colder than her eyes. “Oh please,” she muttered, her right eyebrow doing that thing again. “I can’t believe you still say things like that.” She stood, grabbed her purse and looked at Amanda with scorn in her eyes. “Did you ever read any of the statements issued by your Federal Reserve about the dangers posed by your lovely ‘risks’? Perhaps you don’t recall their concern back then about the backlog of confirmations for credit derivatives trades?” She glanced at Natalie and Malcolm. “Sorry if I seem to be speaking in tongues but actually that’s what this is all about. Those who speak the language want to keep it that way.”

“Ha!” Amanda snorted her mock outrage at this smart-assed foreigner towering over her with that amazing blond hair and cheekbones. “And what would you know about this market?”

“Enough to know that the ‘risk’ you think you’re taking is nothing compared to the risk you’re exposing the entire financial system to. I’m afraid you’re playing in a very dangerous game, Amanda, and I know you don’t have a clue.” She shook her head and held up her hand as Amanda began to splutter. “You’ll have to excuse me; I’ll be right back.” Clancy turned and walked away, steering a determined course between the tables and chattering drinkers until she disappeared.
Amanda watched her in amazement and outrage; saw the tight set of the shoulders beneath the crushed linen jacket and the angle of Clancy’s head and lusciously tossing hair. Malcolm groaned and dropped his head in his hands and Amanda’s mood of defiant hilarity began to dissipate. But she grinned brightly at him and Natalie.

“Oops, that’s done it, I suppose,” she said, with determined lightness. “Are you going to murder me, Malcolm?” She reached for the glass of wine that Clancy had abandoned and downed the contents in one swallow. “I have to say she’s pretty damn upfront with her criticism though. What the hell does she know about derivatives? She’s just a journalist, for Pete’s sake.”

Malcolm groaned again and shook his head as he peered at her from between his fingers. But before he could speak Natalie got in first.

“Oh fuck, Malcolm,” she said, her voice sharp enough to cut through the muted murmurs of the chic bar, causing casually turned heads and appraising glances. “And fuck your stuffy sister. If she doesn’t have a sense of humor that’s her fucking problem.”

“It’s not really about a sense of humor, Nat,” Malcolm said from behind his hands. “Clancy is a financial journalist, one of the best known financial journalists in the country. And she’s just published a book back in Australia.”

“So what?” Amanda lifted her chin, trying for defiance. “Anyone can write a book.”

Malcolm sighed. “As I said, she’s a finance writer, the book is about global finance.”

Amanda snorted. “Right. Another boring academic doorstop with pie charts and graphs. Can’t wait.”

Malcolm looked up, his normally placid expression replaced by a frown. “Don’t be a smartarse, Amanda,” he said sharply. “It’s been a big seller in Australia. Controversial, apparently. That’s why she’s here.”

“Really?” Amanda’s right eyebrow rose. She was not convinced. “And the title? So I know to look out for it on the remainder stack?”

“Just quit, you’re not funny.” Malcolm’s tone was harder than Amanda had ever heard before. She saw his eyes were dark and angry.
“Hey,” she held up her hands, “sorry, okay? No offense.”

“That’s all very well,” he continued, glaring into her eyes; she barely recognized her habitually gentle friend. “But you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Amanda backed off further. “Okay. I said I’m sorry—I really am. Okay? So what’s the book called?”

They locked eyes for a few seconds longer, then Malcolm’s innate good nature—and sibling pride—won out and he sighed. “The title is Gone South—How Wall Street Went AWOL and Never Came Back.” He took a long swig of his drink.

Amanda hesitated then wrinkled her nose. “Right,” she said softly. “I’ve heard of it. You’re right—it is controversial. Wow, so she wrote that?”

“Oh puh-lease.” Natalie’s disdain flew across the table with a speck of peanut.

“Nuh, I’ve been a jerk,” Amanda said and held up her hands to Malcolm in a gesture of surrender. “I’m sorry, Mal, I really am. You should have told me before this. I’ll apologize to Clancy if she comes back. I’m going to order another round of drinks. Same again?”

“Whatsoever.” Natalie’s sigh was gusty and she fidgeted and looked about the room. “This is so not my idea of a good time, Amanda.”

“You promised, Nat.” Amanda looked down at her girlfriend’s pouty expression and jogged her knee with her own. “Come on, be fair.”

“One more drink then I’m outta here. I’m not sticking around, ’kay?”

It was Amanda’s turn to sigh. “Okay, but I will. I promised Malcolm and I told you that days ago.”

“Whatsoever.” Natalie rolled her eyes heavenward.

“I wish you wouldn’t say that.”

“I wish you wouldn’t come on like my mom.”

“Do you two ever do anything but bicker?” Malcolm slipped his arm about Amanda’s waist as she stood beside him and gave her an affectionate squeeze, suggesting that he may already have forgiven her. His blue eyes twinkled with warmth but were otherwise the same wide, catlike shape and depth as his sister’s slate-gray pupils.
“No, it’s what we do best, I’m sure you’ve noticed.” Natalie’s snipped words were at odds with her grin and the grin didn’t win the brief tussle with a sour twist to her mouth.

“And I was rude and childish,” Amanda said with a sigh. “And I bet Clancy’s sitting on the john right now thinking everything she’s ever believed about boorish Americans is true.”

Malcolm snorted and gave her another squeeze before looking up at her with a lopsided and sheepish grin. “Um, it’s sort of worse than that, really. I think I’ve neglected to tell you that she’s here to meet an American agent because a couple of the big publishers want to take the book. Apparently they also think she’s written something spectacular.”

Amanda closed her eyes and groaned. “Oh God,” she muttered, “And I’ve just been a total asshole. No wonder she looked at me like I was something she wanted to scrape off her shoe. Why didn’t you tell me before?”

Malcolm shrugged. “You never seemed interested and I didn’t like to shove my brilliant sister down your throat.”

Amanda considered his reasoning for a long moment and felt an unaccustomed sense of discomfort and embarrassment. “Well I really am sorry, Mal. Maybe I’ll go look for her and apologize.”


Malcolm groaned and laughed simultaneously. “Shut up, both of you.”

Amanda shrugged off his arm. “It was crass.” She looked down at Natalie. “It was crass, Nat, and she’s a guest in our country and I’m going to make it okay.”

Natalie’s pout returned. “Well, don’t expect me to trot along behind you. Do world peace if you want, but don’t get all Nelson Mandela on me.” She stood up and grabbed her purse off the table. “Looks like the drink won’t be coming for a while so I think I’ll be getting along. I have an opening party to check out and I have to tell you that’s a lot more important to me than makin’ nice with the ice queen.” And before either Malcolm or Amanda could say another word, Natalie was on her way, cutting a striking figure as she strode between the tables, head high, russet ringlets
tossing, ostentatiously ignoring the curious eyes of well-dressed Manhattanites as they took in her artfully tattered gypsy look.

“Oh God,” Amanda muttered. “Sorry Malcolm.”

“No worries kiddo,” he said lightly, but a frown creased his forehead. “You two really do fight all the time, you know that? Is that what does it for you?”

Amanda snorted. “We do not. We…” She stopped mid-sentence and thought for a second. “Okay, yes we do. And no, I don’t like it, but she makes me so mad.”

“And you obviously make her mad; always did. You’re a weird pair.” Malcolm looked about the room once again. “Why don’t I get us another drink and you go see if you can make it up with Clancy? Groveling would be good.”

Amanda snorted. “Me? Grovel?”

He patted her arm. “Try it—just for me. Come on, this is the first time I’ve seen my sister in a year and I want you two to like each other.”

“God,” Amanda moaned. “You don’t ask for much. And admit it, you just want an excuse to eyeball that spunky barman.”

“Spunky? Who, him?” Malcolm’s eyes widened and his dark lashes fluttered innocently.

Amanda punched him on the arm. “I’ll go find her and we’ll meet you at the bar.”

She found Clancy at the powder room mirror, reapplying satiny pink lipstick to her lower lip. The room smelled of disinfectant and weird mixes of perfume, but nothing natural, good or bad. A young woman stood at the far end of the mirror wall checking her profile and tucking in a nonexistent tummy. Clancy’s eyes caught Amanda’s reflected gaze and held it; the look was not friendly, but it was not quite as bad as the earlier death stare. Amanda took a deep breath and moved to stand beside her best friend’s sister; but not too close.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly, hoping that the preening stranger at the other end of the mirror was out of earshot. Clancy made no response and Amanda spoke again to the reflection, “I said I’m sorry.”

“I heard you the first time.” Clancy’s voice was a murmur. “What are you sorry for?”
“Pardon me?” Amanda’s eyes widened as she stared at Clancy’s face in the mirror.

Clancy’s chilly eyes warmed fractionally as she smiled. “Why are you sorry? For being crude or for being an idiot?”

“Holy shit, you are some piece of work!” Amanda breathed the words, but the young woman at the far end caught her tone and the crackling aggression in the air. She glanced at the two women and, apparently sensing their antipathy, grabbed her purse and hurried out.

Clancy glanced at the closing door. “Well, she’s never going to win a medal for valor,” she remarked, and folded her arms across her chest and leaned back to look directly into Amanda’s eyes. “But I don’t know about you, Ms. Queen of the World, I don’t get you at all. My brother told me you’re his best buddy, that you were the silver lining to what was a pretty dark time for him when he first came to New York all on his own. Did you know that?”

“Really? That’s great. I met him at a dinner party and we just got talking. He’s my only real boy friend, you know? He’s a great guy. My mom adores him!”

Clancy nodded and smiled and Amanda saw her rigid posture relax as they both pondered the absent paragon. Amanda gazed into Clancy’s eyes, trying to fathom their depths but failing to get past the gray barrier. The burnt honey-streaked blond hair glowed in a shimmering aura around her strong, angular face.

“You are really beautiful.”

Clancy’s expression barely changed but shock registered in her eyes and her lips twitched into another glimmer of smile before freezing again. At that moment, Amanda realized the words had come out of her own mouth and she covered it with her hand and said, “Omigod, did I just say that?”

Clancy looked around the empty powder room and shrugged; her mouth once again broke its stern line and the smile returned. “No, I don’t think so,” she said reassuringly. “It would have been one of these other women.”

She dropped her lipstick back into her purse and snapped the clasp; she looked at herself in the mirror, tucked an errant ringlet behind her ear and turned back to Amanda. “Shall we go find my
brother? Otherwise he might elope with some big swinging dick and leave us stranded.”

Amanda knew she was goggling at Clancy’s provocative joke and she deliberately shut her mouth and followed her, feeling like a puppy on a leash; a puppy that had just been chastised for disgracing herself then forgiven with a tickle under her chin.