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# And that night they were not parted: lesbian romance fiction 1928-2008 – an exegetical essay, and, Silver lining: a lesbian romance novel

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**And That Night They Were Not Parted  
Lesbian Romance Fiction 1928-2008 – An Exegetical Essay  
And  
SILVER LINING:  
A Lesbian Romance Novel**

**Diana Pamela Simmonds – 3336906**

**A thesis is submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the  
Award of the Degree of Master of Arts (Research)  
of the  
University of Wollongong**

**November 2013**

## **CERTIFICATION**

I, Diana Pamela Simmonds, declare that this exegetical essay and manuscript, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts (Research), in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The documents have not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Diana Simmonds

11 November 2013

## **ABSTRACT**

This Master of Arts (Research) involves two components: a critical essay and a creative writing project. In the essay I discuss the romantic fiction genre and its constraints as they apply to lesbian romantic fiction. In the creative writing project my aim was to write a lesbian romance novel that both fulfilled and subverted the rules of the genre. The resulting manuscript, *Silver Lining*, was accepted and published this year by Bella Books, USA and is now a bestseller according to Amazon.com.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Dr Ruth Walker without whose rigour, humour, patience and encouragement I would not be acknowledging anyone for this work. My heartfelt thanks also to the worldwide group of friends and colleagues whose advice and expertise have been freely and enthusiastically given whether or not I asked for it. Writers Clare Ashton (Birmingham) and Kate Genet (Dunedin) were indispensable in the novel editing process even at the odd hours of global online communication. Gary Simpson AM indefatigably put up with my mid-research grizzles as – for the past 14 years – has my very dear Suzi Whitehead Pope, who also saved my life when the first of three heart attacks threatened during what consequently turned out to be a very drawn out MA project. Thanks too to Blanche d’Alpuget who was my first self-confessed straight reader and stayed up to finish *Silver Lining* until 2am. Susie Eisenhuth at UTS and Jenny-Lee Heylen at UWS both gave pats on the head when they were most needed. Dr Phyllis M Betz (Philadelphia) not only took lesbian romance writing seriously but one of mine in particular in her invaluable text *Lesbian Romance Novels: A History and Critical Analysis*. The late, legendary publisher Barbara Grier rang in the middle of the night from Tallahassee, Florida to unwittingly open my eyes to romance when she elected to publish *Heart On Fire* in 1996. Following on from that, my appreciation for their kindness, warm welcome and professionalism goes to fabled romance authors and editors Linda Hill, Katherine V Forrest and Karin Kallmaker of Bella Books. And lifelong thanks to Professor Mandy Merck and Professor Laura Mulvey for so long ago starting me down the rabbit hole of inspiration in search of representations of women in popular culture.

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## **Lesbian Romance Fiction 1928-2007 – An Exegetical Essay**

In this essay I will discuss the development and changes perceived in the literature of “female sexual deviance” as described by Katherine V Forrest (2005: 51) from its recognizable beginnings in the second decade of the 20th century, through the pulp fiction of the 1950s to the popular romantic fiction of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will argue that the foundational publication of US lesbian magazine *The Ladder* from 1957 to the late 1970s marks a social and literary turning point. I will also argue that the wide gap between the high output-low literary quality of modern “lesfic” publishers versus the popular literary novels of contemporary lesbian-identified author Sarah Waters, is directly related to the pulp fiction of the 1950s and the positive reception of *The Ladder*. It was the democratization of the site of production and consumption, through *The Ladder*, that led directly to the phenomenon of popular lesbian romantic fiction. The disjuncture between the mainstream success of identifiably lesbian literary fiction and the parallel ghetto popularity of lesbian popular fiction will be traced in this essay from 1928, when *The Well of Loneliness* was first published.

*The Well of Loneliness*, the novel commonly regarded as the first modern lesbian literary novel by an identifiable lesbian author Radclyffe Hall (1928), was first published in the UK amid considerable controversy and scandal, in contrast to the unremarked mass-market popularity of lesbian-themed pulp fiction. This developed as a genre within pulp fiction during the 1940s-50s and according to Forrest the genre was written by both male and female authors and was not aimed at the lesbian market, as its titillating cover art suggests (illustrated by Figures 2 and 6 below). Although as pointed out by Clare Bermingham:

Lesbian pulp novels emerged in 1950s and 60s America, as a genre that was marketed to both a mainstream audience, and a marginalized sub-culture, just beginning to organize and articulate a social and political stance. Pulp provided a restricted space for women to enter the literary field, and a significant number of lesbian pulp novels were authored by women who self-identified as lesbians (2010: 1).



Nevertheless, it was rare for pulp fiction to represent lesbians other than salaciously and as the dangerous outlaw “other”, hence what could be argued as the eventual inevitability of the lesbian-specific *The Ladder*. Edited for its final four years by Barbara Grier, who worked on the magazine for a total of sixteen years before founding Naiad Press, she said in an interview published in online journal bigbadbutch.com,

Customers tell you that there are no other lesbians where they live, but you look at your mailing list when taking the order and know that there are other lesbians in their zip code. And then one day, these same women will write and give a brief history of their lives, saying, ‘You won’t remember this, but nine years ago you spent 20 minutes talking to me, and I was in a really bad place.’ Or that ‘Without you I don’t think I could’ve survived/gone on living/made it’ (Grier, 2008: 3).

Although Grier was referring to her own Naiad Press, letters and articles she published in *The Ladder* spoke of similar experiences. The latter years of *The Ladder* magazine in the US therefore marked a social and literary turning point as lesbians became somewhat less constrained in their personal lives and, in many instances, were able to live in ways that lesbians of the 1940s and 50s could not even dream about. Of course, this applies in the main to those living in Western countries. The significance of *The Ladder* for women isolated by fear and geography may be seen in Grier’s unusually positive parental acceptance of her own lesbianism. Grier’s experience would be unusual in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, let alone in 1945:

She told her mother that she was homosexual, and her mother replied, ‘No, because you’re a woman, you’re a lesbian. And since 12 years old is too young to make such a decision, let’s wait six months before we tell the newspapers’ (Grier, quoted in an interview by R Ellen Greenblatt, 1997: 3).



Figure 1: *The Ladder*, 1957.

Humour and levity were not common in 20<sup>th</sup> century lesbian fiction – skillfully written humour remains a rare commodity in what has become popularly referred to by authors and readers as ‘lesfic’ – and is one symptom of the gap between the high output-low literary quality of modern American lesfic romance publishers and the mainstream. This is, I argue, related to the content formula of *The Ladder*: skilled writers alongside amateur writing – encouraged for sound political and social reasons. The establishment of the lesbian romantic fiction genre through specific lesbian-owned and run publishing houses, notably Naiad Press in 1973, developed in close parallel with the heterosexual women’s romantic fiction of Mills & Boon. Both exhibit a similar literary quality and virtually identical stylistic linguistic norms and structures. This essay interrogates the origins of these norms, rules and traditions. This is, I argue, because the formulae and constraints of popular romantic fiction and the way both heterosexual and lesbian fiction have responded to political and social change in the dominant culture bear examination. Similarly this applies to an examination of the specificities of lesbian romantic fiction – a genre written by and for what was a radically marginalized sub-culture and which is now more visible and correspondingly more mainstream and conservative than hitherto.

Joan Nestle, American author, archivist and activist, has described lesbian pulp and romantic fiction of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as ‘survival literature’ because it helped to overcome the restrictions and prejudice experienced by lesbian women at that time, when isolation, personal ignorance and fear played a large part in daily lives. She has written, “The act of taking one of these books off the drugstore rack and paying for it at the counter was a frightening and difficult move for most women” (2003: 89). The advent of specific literature for and by lesbians, while initially underground nevertheless proved to be the catalyst for a social revolution in lesbian

self-image and identity, and a gradual movement towards and incorporation of societal norms. At the same time, lesbian romantic fiction maintains a strikingly similar trajectory to heterosexual romantic fiction in its formulaic and plainly written norms, closely following the generally accepted standards of heterosexual romantic fiction.

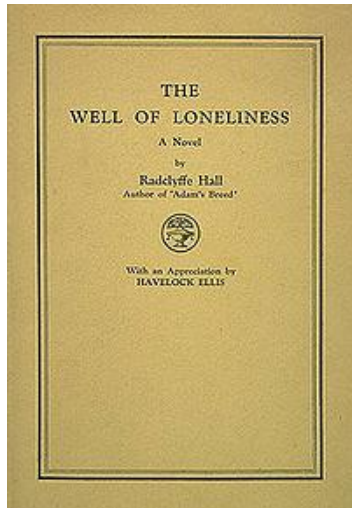


Figure 2: Radclyffe Hall, 1928, *The Well of Loneliness*, first edition from Jonathan Cape.

In 1928, the first recognized modern lesbian novel appeared. The respected mainstream publisher Jonathan Cape published *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall at the significant cover price of 15 shillings. (The average cost of a novel at that time being half that sum.) Deborah Cohler (2000: 8) asserts that “Books which were viewed as ‘dangerous’ or in some way unsuitable for children and/or uneducated classes of readers were priced higher than their production and demand would warrant, as a method of limiting the book’s circulation.” She also notes that the high price of a novel signaled salacious content to the knowing reading public. Nevertheless, *The Well of Loneliness* was earnestly reviewed by the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS):

We ... rather regret that it should have been thought necessary to insert at the beginning a ‘commentary’ by Mr Havelock Ellis to the effect that, apart from its qualities as a novel, it “possesses a notable psychological and sociological significance” as a presentation, in a completely faithful and uncompromising form, of a particular aspect of sexual life. To the book as a work of art this testimony adds nothing: on the other hand, the documentary significance of a work of fiction seems to us small. The presence of this commentary, however,

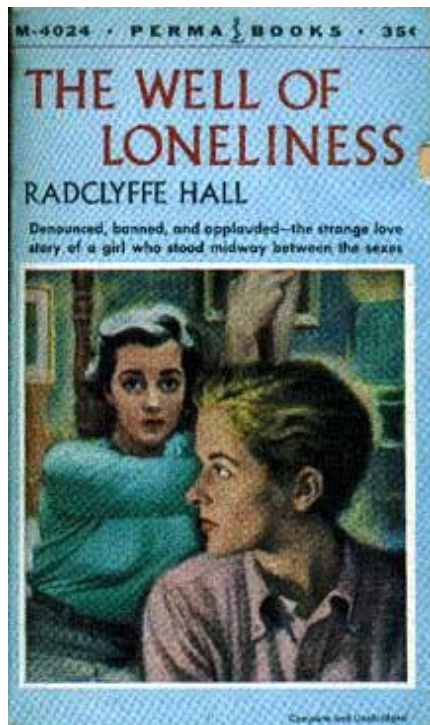
points to the criticism which, with all our admiration for much of the detail, we feel compelled to express – namely, that this long novel, sincere, courageous, high-minded, and often beautifully expressed as it is, fails as a work of art through divided purpose (1928: 15).

The “divided purpose” noted by the *TLS* critic seems to be one that still troubles a majority of lesbian readers, that is, the desire for respectability and social acceptance by ‘normal’ society – the trend towards marriage and “wives” being the most notable contemporary manifestation, and one that reflects the social agitation for marriage equality. Sexologist Havelock Ellis was a key influence in Hall’s characterisation of her chief protagonist and heroine, the ‘invert’ Stephen Gordon who, like the author, was the daughter of an upper class English family. In *Sexual Inversion* the sexologist had controversially described ‘sexual inversion’ (homosexuality) as difference, rather than defect (Ellis, 1927: 32). However, in the novel, Stephen Gordon discovers an equally influential book in her father’s library: Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*. In this book, much favoured by the religious and conservatives of the day, inversion is described as a degenerative disorder (Krafft-Ebing, 1886: 23) and as a condition capable of being cured through treatment. Following this reading, Hall is able to have Stephen describe herself and her expatriate friends in Paris as “hideously maimed and ugly” (Hall, 1928: 186). For Hall’s purposes, the view of inversion – as disease – was more useful to her melodrama. It permitted what some feminist commentators have described as her own self pity and self loathing (Martinez, 1983: 127) to co-exist with a shadowy world of illicit crushes and, finally, a semblance of happiness, albeit fleeting, and life in Paris. At the same time it enabled her as a writer to manoeuvre the anguished Stephen into betrayal by an older paramour – a married woman – with the wounding accusation that Stephen should not use the word “love” to justify “these unnatural cravings of your unbalanced mind and undisciplined body,” (Hall, 1928 : 201).

The other side of Hall’s “divided intent” – as presumed by the *TLS* reviewer – was therefore a purposeful one and encapsulated by barrister James Melville when he appeared for bookseller Leopold Hill and the publisher during the obscenity trial brought in November. Hall herself was not charged. In *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall*, Diana Souhami noted that Melville told the court the book had been written “not to inspire libidinous thoughts but to examine a social question” (Souhami, 1998: 21).

Nevertheless, the court decided that the book, according to the Director of Public Prosecution, “depraves and corrupts those whose minds are open to such immoral influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort might fall.” Stocks were ordered to be destroyed and the defendants to pay costs. This despite support from many literary figures of the day and serious reviews, including that in the *TLS*, another in the *Nation* by Leonard Woolf, and in the *New Statesman* by Cyril Connolly. The latter’s view was respectful at least when he wrote that the book was, “long, tedious, absolutely humourless and a melodramatic description of a subject which has nothing melodramatic about it. *The Well of Loneliness* may be a brave book to have written but let us hope it will pave the way for someone to write a better,” (Souhami, 1998: 122). The appeal failed and for decades the nearest bookstores for British purchasers were those at French ports and railway stations, which stocked the Pegasus Press edition.

Yet, it would be thirty years and more before Connolly’s hope was fulfilled – by Patricia Highsmith/Claire Morgan’s *The Price of Salt* (1952) and Jane Rule’s *Desert of the Heart* (1964).



**Figure 3: Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 1954 pulp paperback, Perma Press. "Denounced, banned, and applauded—the strange love story of a girl who stood midway between the sexes."**

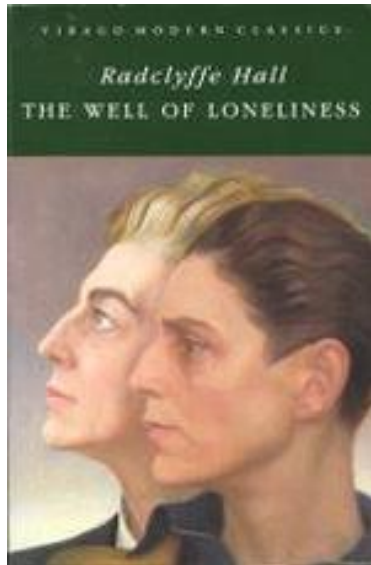
Meanwhile, by the summer of 1929, Donald Friede and his new imprint Covici Friede

succeeded in overcoming the various US state and federal legal hurdles to publishing *The Well of Loneliness* when the US Customs Court declared that the novel contained not “one word, phrase, sentence or paragraph which could be truthfully pointed out as offensive to modesty” (Souhami, 1998: 237). It sold 100,000 copies in its first year in the US and has sold steadily ever since. Nevertheless, the prevailing view of the book, promulgated strenuously by James Douglas, editor of the *Sunday Express* newspaper in which he repeatedly editorialized, called for the book to be suppressed because,

It condoned sexual perversity, loosened the very sheet anchor of conduct and principle, made crime and indecency a matter of individual judgment and inferred that there were no such things as right and wrong in the universe...And murderers only slay the body, while these perverts destroy the soul (Souhami, 1998: 77).

Such sentiments are not too far removed from those that today oppose same sex marriage – with very similar reasoning. Souhami’s more contemporary view of Hall’s never-out-of-print classic took another more recognizable view when she wrote:

It’s enough to turn a bent girl straight. Its ominous prose and exhortations to God, the gloom of its storyline, its theory of lesbians as ‘Congenital Sexual Inverts’ – a third sex and failed men – why, everything about it warns, if you’re a dyke you’re in for a rotten time (Souhami, 1998: 78).



**Figure 4: Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 1990, Virago Press edition, featuring self-portrait by English painter Gluck, right, and her lover Nesta Obermer.**

How long-held these views were can be seen in any number of novels published into the 1960s, including such titles as *The Third Sex* (Smith, 1959) whose suggestive illustration of a sultry, long-haired blonde and her short-haired brunette companion carried two cover lines: “To fool the world, they married, for Joan loved women...and Marc preferred men!” and “Told with unblushing honesty, here is a penetrating study of society’s greatest curse: homosexuality.” Ironically, the author is a serious-minded philosopher, activist and sexologist and the book’s original title – *Joan of Washington Square* – suggested the content was anything but sleazy. However its pulp marketing had it otherwise.



**Figure 5: Artemis Smith, *The Third Sex*, 1959, Beacon Books.**

Although never represented or seen as sleazy, the difficulties and notoriety faced by Radclyffe Hall and her novel were not experienced by three other lesbian-themed novels also published in 1928 – Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, *Ladies Almanack* by Djuna Barnes and Compton Mackenzie’s *Extraordinary Women*. Nor did they have the lasting influence on succeeding generations of the lesbian reading community despite containing themes and writing far more explicit than Hall’s single famous line “and that night, they were not divided” and one shocking pronouncement that “She kissed her full on the lips”. Virginia Woolf, while supporting the principle of publication nevertheless wrote of it, to Lady Ottoline Morrell, “The dullness of the book is such that any indecency may lurk there – one simply can’t keep one’s eyes on the page.” She also wrote to Vita Sackville West:

What has caused this irruption I scarcely know – largely your friend Radclyffe Hall (she is now docked of her Miss owing to her proclivities) they banned her book and so Leonard [Woolf] and Morgan [EM] Forster began to get up a protest, and soon we were telephoning and interviewing and collecting signatures – not yours for your proclivities are too well known. (Woolf quoted by Medd, 2012: 164).

By comparison to Hall’s novel, Woolf’s *Orlando* was immediately seen by critics as a work of literary alchemy and although it was dedicated to and was about Sackville West, it was too coded and modernist to attract the attention of the *Sunday Express*. While Compton Mackenzie’s *Extraordinary Women* – with a cover price of one guinea – was deliberately aimed at notoriety and high sales, it failed to achieve either. Nevertheless, as Cohler notes, the *New Statesman* ended its review of *Extraordinary Women* by urging a second printing at three shillings and sixpence. The *New Statesman* was clearly suggesting that the book was not objectionable. Cohler writes: “price provides an indicator not only of a novel’s expense or perceived marketability, but of the estimation by its publisher of its moral or cultural content.” At the same time Barnes’s *Ladies Almanack* was published privately with the express aim of avoiding censorship.

Radclyffe Hall’s personal life and writing could hardly be further removed from that of modern lesbian life, its romantic fiction, and the majority of this genre’s



contemporary authors. Their everyday lives and generally everyday settings are in sharp contrast to Hall's upper class English background and eventual demi-monde Parisian life – despite her claim to be writing on behalf of downtrodden female inverts. Souhami writes of “the privilege, seductions, freedom, and fun that graced her daily life” and that,

It is doubtful whether Radclyffe and Una, [Lady Troubridge, her then lover] Natalie Barney...Tallulah Bankhead and the rest, with their fine houses, stylish lovers, inherited incomes, sparkling careers and villas in the sun, were among the persecuted and misunderstood people in the world (Souhami, 1998: 273).

Ironically, while as was common knowledge, Natalie Barney – the American heiress, poet, feminist and playwright – was Hall's inspiration for the character of Stephen, Barney's life and behavior were at the opposite end of the spectrum from the determined self-hatred and misery of the English author. Barney lived openly as a lesbian and had many lovers while maintaining a 50-year relationship with fellow American heiress and painter, Romaine Brooks. Wealth and social standing meant none of these women were persecuted – except on occasion by their exasperated families – and few of them cared whether or not the rest of society misunderstood them. High – or in this instance *louche* – society and ‘high’ culture, however, were symptomatic of the anxiety at the heart of Hall's personal and literary concerns.

Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America was a different world in terms of popular culture, literature, social norms and class-consciousness. For ordinary women and lesbians in post-WW2 America, society and its propaganda wing of the entertainment industry were radically unforgiving of any departure from the traditional norms of female sexuality. The internalizing of desire (sexual and societal) has been termed “the anaesthesia of forgetting” (Clarke, Simmonds, 1981, 18). They also argued that “popular memory” is that which a viewer or reader chooses to recall rather than what is actually viewed or read. Thus, *Calamity Jane* (1953) – the character and the film itself – were a (closet) favourite for lesbians who chose to disregard the hetero-normative ending and cleave instead to the perceived romance between a rootin’ tootin’ buckskin-clad butch Jane (Doris Day) and her lace-trimmed, feather duster-wielding femme Katie Brown (Allyn Ann McLerie). This reading of audience response – to cinema and literature,

and in this instance lesbian romance literature – finds support and similarity in the reader response theory. This posits that it is the reader as much as the author who completes and enlivens the meaning of a work. This meaning, wrote Stanley Fish,

Is the property neither of fixed and stable texts nor of free and independent readers but of interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of the reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce (1980, 87).



**Figure 6:** *Calamity Jane*, 1953, (left) Allyn Ann McLerie and Doris Day home-make; (right) Day, McLerie and Howard Keel: the scene is about jealousy – of whom is a matter of point of view.

Similarly, whatever the lyricist's intention, *Calamity Jane's* most famous song, *Secret Love*, sung by Doris Day, is popularly read as a coded reference to illicit lesbian love:

Once I had a secret love  
That lived within the heart of me  
All too soon my secret love  
Became impatient to be free

So I told a friendly star  
The way that dreamers often do  
Just how wonderful you are  
And why I am so in love with you

Now I shout it from the highest hills  
Even told the golden daffodils

At last my heart's an open door  
And my secret love's no secret anymore. (1954)

Corresponding engineering of perception and reality can be seen in popular notions of WW2 wherein women's lives were drastically affected by the absence of men and the necessity therefore to work. For millions of young women, financial independence and the social acceptability of leaving the home to work offered a new and exciting life. For many, the war was a unique opportunity to discover that the widely disseminated perception of women as born to be housewives was radically undercut by their participation in the paid workforce. And although it masked the fact that many women – rural, minority, urban working class women – had always worked, the new participation of middle class women brought about attitudes that survived the war and would eventually lead to the new wave of feminism. Evidence of this can be seen in the documentary film *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Field, 1980) which highlighted the experiences of five typical WW2 women workers and what happened to them after the mass demobilization of women out of industry as the men came home and they and the government expected them to get their jobs back. In *Jump Cut*, Sue Davenport wrote of the influential film:

Official WW2 propaganda and commercial advertising ignored the invisible working women of the United States. Forties media focused on the pert, cheery, white housewife, only too happy to serve her men and her country “for the duration,” (1983, 12).

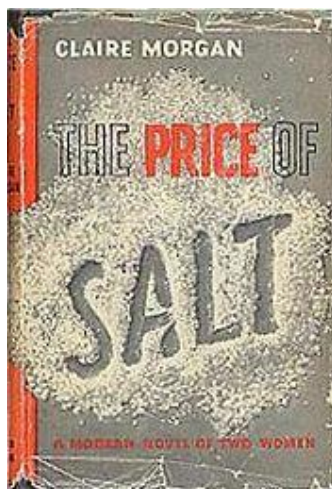
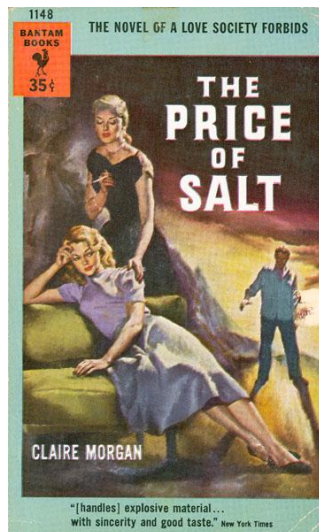


Figure 7: Claire Morgan, *The Price of Salt*, 1952, first edition from Coward McCann.

The desired social model of the housewife and mother whose time was spent mainly

on the lightest home duties, coffee mornings, tennis or charity work, was essentially middle class and it ignored the unpaid labour and financial circumstances of the majority of women. It also maintained the divide between the classes. Therefore Patricia Highsmith's *Carol* (1952) was a landmark in lesbian literature as it was not only about a love affair between two women *with a happy ending*, but also, its heroines were a middle class housewife and a younger working woman. It was first titled *The Price of Salt* and credited to 'Claire Morgan' and published (two years after Highsmith's career-making psychological thriller *Strangers on a Train*). Its cover, from mainstream publisher Coward McCann, was respectably artful and the cover line read "A modern novel of two women". Pulp specialist Bantam Books also published the novel but, in keeping with its market placement, the cover style was classic pulp featuring two attractive women in a somewhat suggestive pose, observed by a shocked male figure in the background. The cover line breathlessly claimed, "The novel of a love society forbids". Nevertheless, it also carried a quote from *The New York Times* that the novel handles "explosive material...with sincerity and good taste." This endorsement signaled that the book was more than mere pulp.

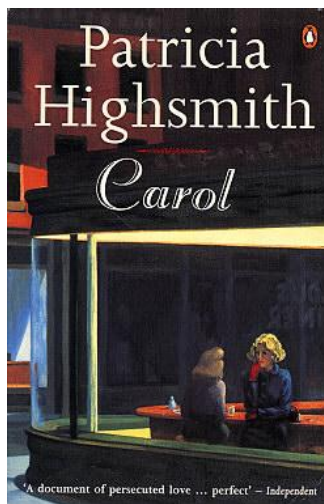


**Figure 8: pulp paperback edition, Bantam Books, 1952 of *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith, alias Claire Morgan. 'The novel of a love society forbids'.**

When *The Price of Salt* was finally published under her real name Highsmith, in an afterword written for the reissue by Naiad Press poignantly observed, "I am happy to think it gave several thousand lonely and frightened people something to hang on to." (1991). The novel was also taken up by other mainstream publishers including Penguin Books whose version featured a pastiche of Edward Hopper's painting

*Nighthawks* as its chic cover art (Figure 9). The novel's now acknowledged place in Highsmith's post-*Ripley*, post-closet oeuvre can be seen as a literary coming out that neatly parallels the place of lesbians in society. Nevertheless, the standard of writing is neither pulp nor typical of the romance genre:

Then Carol slipped her arm under her neck, and all the length of their bodies touched, fitting as if something had prearranged it. Happiness was like a green vine spreading through her, stretching fine tendrils, bearing flowers through her flesh. She had a vision of a pale white flower, shimmering as if seen in darkness, or through water. Why did people talk of heaven, she wondered (Highsmith, 1991: 200).



**Figure 9:** Patricia Highsmith, *Carol*, 1991, Penguin Books cover is an adaptation of Edward Hopper's 1941 painting *Nighthawks*.

As already noted, *The Price of Salt* is about a middle class married woman – soon to be disastrously divorced – and her somewhat younger and lower middle class lover. The marital status of Carol was a worrying element for mid-century America but was nevertheless in keeping with Highsmith's position as the author of transgressive literature – in which normative morals and attitudes are notably absent. It was announced in 2013 that *Carol* is to be filmed in the USA in early 2014 with Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara in the lead roles. The conflation of off- and on-screen/on-page imagery is significant here as Blanchett has previously appeared in *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999) an adaptation of one of Highsmith's *Ripley* novels and as Bob Dylan in *I'm Not There* (2007), yet is a Hollywood star and happily married mother of

three. Mara's screen persona is notably more dangerous – as *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* (2011) – and she will play the young working woman who tempts and liberates the married woman from her respectable life.

Respectability is lately come to lesbian life, both in society and in entertainment. Although written decades later, one of the few mainstream novels to explore the trans-normative lives of modern women is Sarah Waters' *The Night Watch* (2006). Coming after the popular and critical success of her literary historic – Victorian – lesbian romances *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Fingersmith* (2002), Waters moved her protagonists forward a century. Set in WW2 London, *The Night Watch*'s ambulance-driving, 'mannish' Kay is a woman who is a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century lesbian archetype. She has more in common with Radclyffe Hall's elegantly tailored, upper class Stephen than the 1960s' Tonik suit-wearing, working class drivers such as those seen in the gateways Club bar scenes of the movie version of *The Killing of Sister George* (1968). Originally a stage play written by Frank Marcus in 1964, it was then seen as a light if risqué comedy, yet the film was restricted to Adults Only because of one mild and fully clad sex scene featuring Coral Browne and Susannah York. In my view the play and film can now be read more accurately as stereotypical and misogynist in their portrayal of lesbians. But it was a path-breaker of its time and a link between *The Well of Loneliness* – being without a hint of true romance or happy ending – and modern popular lesbian romance in its portrayal of a cross section of women in society living more or less lesbian lives.

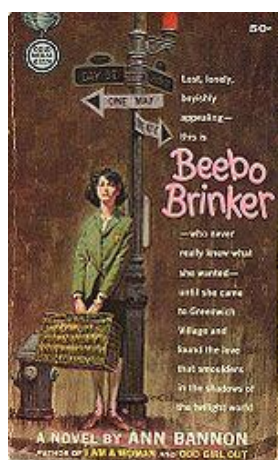


Figure 10: Ann Bannon, *Beebo Brinker*, 1962, first edition, Gold Medal Books, 'Lost, lonely, boyishly appealing - this is Beebo Brinker - who never really knew what she wanted - until she came to Greenwich Village and found the love that smoulders in the shadows of the twilight world.'

A socially typical – and contemporary – depiction of lesbians and lesbianism in America is to be found in the four novels known collectively as *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*. Written by Ann Bannon and originally published in 1962 as lesbian pulp, *Beebo Brinker* featured a tall, boyish young woman who flees the Wisconsin family farm for New York because of her ‘terrible secret’. Beebo Brinker – christened Betty Jean – gradually comes to terms with her sexual orientation but not before dramatic setbacks and heartbreak. Initially she works as a pizza delivery ‘boy’, a job that allows her to wear trousers without remark, then as a lift attendant before being seduced by an older and bisexual television star and taken to California to be a ‘companion’ to the star’s son. That the star is named Venus and their affair is conducted in the closet adds to the novel’s piquancy for a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader, but its original reception on publication was mixed. Like romantic fiction, pulp fiction was rarely reviewed by literary or even popular critics, but even *The Ladder*, which was mostly supportive of lesbian work of any kind, pronounced it “a disappointment”.

Significantly, the next book in Bannon’s series, *I Am A Woman* (1959), flouted the moral code that lesbians not be allowed a successful relationship or a happy ending and therefore, unlike the first in the series, it did not flout the code of romance. In this instance *The Ladder* pronounced its author a hero to lesbians. Barbara Grier, who wrote the original *Ladder* critique under the pseudonym Gene Damon, successfully republished the *Beebo Brinker* books in 1983 under her Naiad Press imprint. In her authoritative survey, Katherine V Forrest, herself a noted writer of lesbian romantic fiction, describes Beebo as “still the most iconic figure in lesbian fiction” (2005: 171).

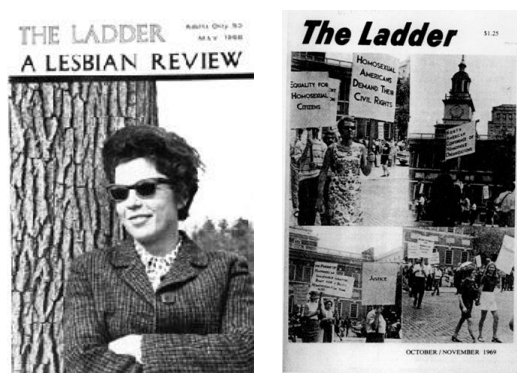


Figure 11: the changing face of *The Ladder* – a real life lesbian, 1964 and political protest, 1969.



Katherine V Forrest and Barbara Grier are both iconic figures in lesbian publishing in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For her part, Grier's experience of the semi-underground world of lesbian writing and readers on *The Ladder* led directly to the founding of Naiad Press in 1973. With a mission statement to promote writing and reading by and for lesbians, *The Ladder* featured work by established writers, as well as contributions from readers; consequently the quality was variable. This can also be seen in the output of Naiad Press, nevertheless, the imprint was a pioneer in producing romantic and mystery fiction by, about and for lesbians at a time when few bookstores would stock such publications and established publishers would not produce such work. Naiad was also innovative in employing mail order to distribute its books – before the advent of specific 'feminist' bookshops in the 1970s-80s. Mail order also assisted in the dissemination of lesbian literature and romantic fiction to isolated and closeted women who might not otherwise access overtly lesbian bookshops. Mail order can also be seen as a precursor of the 21<sup>st</sup> century online eBook, of which technology lesbian and gay publishers were early-adopters.

Forrest first came to the lesbian reading public's attention in 1983 with the Naiad publication of *Curious Wine*. Quickly declared a classic and rarely out of print since, this novel is a slight – 160 pages – but explicitly sexual romance between Diana Holland, a 'personnel assistant', and Lane Christianson, a lawyer. The significance of the latter profession in the early 1980s can be seen when it is remarked of her profession by another character, "Good for you". Interviewed by Devra First for *The Boston Phoenix*, Forrest herself said:

Although some might consider romance novels frivolous, *Curious Wine* broke through many misconceptions about lesbians and lesbian relationships. Lane and Diana are both attractive professionals in their mid-30s who have had plenty of heterosexual experience. They're hardly corruptible naives, or women too ugly to get men. I just attacked as many stereotypes as I could in that book. I consider it a very political book, even though nobody else sees it but me. I basically wrote the book that I wanted to read, because prior to *Curious Wine* there was just nothing I could find that conveyed the passion and the rightness of our relationships, and how beautiful women are together (Forrest, 1999: 2).



Forrest's ambition for her readers included introducing via *Curious Wine*, the poetry of Emily Dickinson. The title is taken from the first verse of Dickinson's poem *Hunger* –

I had been hungry all the Years –  
My Noon had Come – to dine –  
I trembling drew the Table near –  
And touched the Curious Wine (Dickinson, 1924: 902).

The romantic protagonists Diana and Lane maintain the interest in Dickinson throughout the novel and their burgeoning love affair, quoting her work to each other and gifting a special edition collection of her poetry. Also of significance in Forrest's popular romantic fiction is that because it follows the rules of the genre, the happy ending is guaranteed. This tends to reinforce Forrest's view of her work as "political", because rather than the unhappy or fleeting happiness found in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, the lesbian love is successful. And it is this single factor that separates romance novels from "literature", fantasy from reality – albeit a fictional reality – and romance from "love", as Lynne Pearce notes in *Romance Writing*:

The fact that what it reveals is not the messy "truth" of the condition but its spectacular, fantastical "other" is the reason it provides us – as readers and as subjects – with such limitless pleasure; why it inclines us, moreover, to "fall in love" ourselves and to produce stories every bit as spectacular, fantastical and pleasurable to account for the traumatic moment that has seemingly redefined us (Pearce, 2007, 3).

Forrest's romances are also interesting as they closely follow the normative editorial guidelines of heterosexual romantic fiction, as set out by leading romantic fiction publisher Mills & Boon. These advise intending authors of its "sexy romance" imprint:

Although grounded in reality and reflective of contemporary, relevant trends, these fast-paced stories are essentially escapist romantic fantasies that take

the reader on an emotional roller-coaster ride. Written in the third person, they can be from the male or female point of view, or seen through the eyes of both protagonists. All are set in sophisticated, glamorous, international locations.

With its focus on strong, wealthy, breathtakingly charismatic alpha-heroes who are tamed by spirited, independent heroines, the central relationship in a Modern novel is a provocatively passionate, highly charged affair, driven by conflict, emotional intensity and overwhelming physical attraction, which may include explicit lovemaking...(Mills & Boon, 2012, 5-7)

Forrest's novel features a "strong, wealthy, alpha" heroine lawyer who drives a Mercedes coupe, can afford a diamond-studded brooch and a casually purchased first class plane ticket for her "spirited, independent heroine". The author gently subverts what is in essence the patriarchal hegemony of the romance genre. This can be seen in her own description of another of her early, influential Naiad romances, *An Emergence of Green*, which is still in print. Forrest describes the novel:

...Paul and Carolyn Blake are an American success story. Paul is a self-made man who has overcome hardship to achieve a successful business career. Carolyn is the perfect young wife who has made him the envy of other men. Then Val Hunter and her ten-year-old son move in next door. An artist just coming into her own, she is a startling and unconventional woman on all counts: physically imposing, and with a burgeoning independence of spirit ...Paul Blake knows a threat when he sees one... She will expose Carolyn to values that will challenge what Carolyn has accepted and taken for granted. He must fight to retain possession of his wife...(Forrest, 2012, 1).

First published in 1987, *An Emergence of Green* is a realistic portrayal of aspirational middle class America. Paul Blake is a middle-rank company executive and although set in the late 1980s, his attitudes have more in common with those of the 1950s. He disapproves of his wife working and enjoying that work; he disapproves of her taking the contraceptive Pill, and of her friendship with the unconventional Val. Unusually, however, the antagonism necessary in the structure of the romantic novel is between

the husband and artist – the “other woman” – rather than between the putative lovers. Val is alpha-female to Paul’s alpha male. She is initially portrayed and seen through a hostile and aggressive male gaze in *An Emergence of Green*:

Almost all women he met looked at him at least once in sexual awareness, but she had not; there was no acknowledgement of his masculinity...her big strong-looking hands – man-sized hands – dangling casually from the arms of the director’s chair that was his, the one he always sat in... How could so grotesque a woman – a giantess, a freak – be so confident, so poised? Gargantua, he would have called her – smiling of course, as if he meant the nickname to be affectionate...A leviathan, a freak...Real women were soft, vulnerable. Soft skin, velvet pussies, wonderful soft asses...She was grotesque – a mutation of a woman...A vampire. She was a pseudo-woman who seduced real women into her despicable ranks to perform her despicable practices (Forrest, 1987: 18-181).

It must be noted here that the “giantess” is six feet (182cm) tall, while Paul Blake is a “shade under six feet” (180cm) – a fact he hates. At the same time and through description and point of view as variously detailed above, the author has inverted the feminist notion of the admiring if aggressive male gaze as propounded by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). Although focused on mainstream cinema and the rise of independent cinema, other feminist and lesbian feminist thinking and fiction writing parallel her views. For instance, in her overview *Lesbian Romance Novels: A History and Critical Analysis*, Phyllis M Betz writes:

Essentially, a lesbian-authored text not only gives the lesbian reader permission to look, but to look as a lesbian looks, and since the situations and characters available to the lesbian reader aim for a wide audience, the variety of lesbian experience presented in these works provides a greater possibility for reader recognition (Betz, 2004, 131).

Moreover, in describing the differences between Hollywood and the then emerging independent cinema, Mulvey also prefigures the changes that have occurred since in publishing,

Cinema has changed over the last few decades. It is no longer the monolithic system based on large capital investment exemplified at its best by Hollywood in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Technological advances (16mm, etc) have changed the economic conditions of cinematic production, which can now be artisanal as well as capitalist. Thus it has been possible for an alternative cinema to develop (Mulvey, 1975, 4).

Similarly, technological advances have broken the hegemony of the monolithic system of book publishing; consequently unprecedented freedom to publish is now offered by the Internet. Alternative views and stories are now possible and still developing, as are detailed here. Nevertheless, views of women and attitudes towards women by men are still recognizable and changing slowly. Mulvey refers to the way women are perceived as “the alien presence [that] has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative.” She points to the view of Hollywood film director Budd Boetticher’s:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance (Budd Boetticher quoted by Mulvey, 1975, 5-6).

To Paul Blake, therefore, Val Hunter is feared and hated as an alien presence in his hitherto controlled existence and relationship, even as he is unable to resist watching her at every opportunity. In *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* Mulvey returned to her argument following criticism and debate around her theme of gendered possession of the gaze. She further argued that there are two possible roles for women in relation to the male eyes-lens: “a masochistic identification with the female object of desire that is ultimately self-defeating or a transsexual identification with men as the active viewers of the text” (1990). Somewhat ironically, the latter occurs in *An Emergence*

of *Green* with Carolyn as the ultra-feminine prize over whom Paul and Val do battle. In these scenes it is as if 1970s feminism had never challenged the social nexus and changed the minds of thinking women. Carolyn is a possession to be observed, fought over and ultimately degraded in a scene of disturbing sexual domination and revenge.

While *An Emergence of Green* is deliberately uncomfortable in this last aspect, it provided a fresh template for subsequent lesbian romance writers in that one of the lovers was hitherto “straight”, about to be 30 and married, while the other was a lesbian, in her late 30s and had a child. It was a significant departure from the young and single protagonists of the majority of romance novels to that point, both heterosexual and lesbian. It was also noteworthy, along with most of Forrest’s heroine types, in the way it departed absolutely from the butch dyke representations of lesbians in 1950s pulp fiction.

Nevertheless, aside from the obvious gender difference, the similarities between mainstream heterosexual romantic fiction and marginalized lesbian romantic fiction are numerous. For instance, in lesbian romantic fiction – particularly of the 1990s – it was not unusual for a heroine to sweep up her lover in her arms and carry her off to bed. Although less common in the new century, in Julie Cannon’s *Come and Get Me* – tagged “a modern romance” – the heroine, “carried Lauren into the bedroom and laid her on the bed” (2007). This was a frequent occurrence in the Barbara Cartland-style romance of the mid-20th century where the hero is not only aristocratic and autocratic but also physically imposing. In *Pure And Untouched*, a romance chosen at random from Cartland’s oeuvre of some seven hundred titles, the hero – the Duke of Ravenscroft – is in the cabin of a ship in Odessa harbour with the heroine of the title when “He shut the door and bolted it, then carried her back to bed...” (1982: 79). That this kind of behaviour is rare to non-existent in either real life or general fiction, heterosexual or lesbian never stopped Cartland or her imitators.

Another notable element of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century romance diegesis – both heterosexual and lesbian – is the extreme prevalence of a green-eyed heroine. These include “She could feel Sammy’s eyes, the same shade of green as her own, though less guarded, burning a hole through the back of her robe” in Cate Culpepper’s *The Clinic* (2001: 65). While in Gun Brooke’s *Course of Action*, a male character is

described: “His unruly blond hair attracted the attention of both men and woman, as did his green eyes and broad smile,” (2005: 98) and Robin Alexander has a character with “Thick shoulder-length dark brown hair with dazzling green eyes, thin, but not frail,” in *Devil In Disguise*, (2011: 9). Trickily, in Nicole Conn’s *Elena Undone* “...Peyton appeared even more attractive, more handsomely beautiful, with those piercing green eyes, the square jaw, those perfectly shaped lips...” (2011: 130), but does not look like this in film director Conn’s movie version of the novel. One of the reigning queens of lesbian romance is retired surgeon Dr Lenora R Barot whose tongue-in-cheek pen name of Radclyffe is behind “Quinn turned her head, opened her eyes, and looked into the emerald green eyes inches from her own.” And again, among sixteen references to the martial arts expert heroine’s eyes including: “As always, Sean thought that she would never quite get used to looking into her own face – the same deep-green eyes, the same full lips, the same sweep of dark hair always tumbling over the forehead.” The forehead being in a hospital-based novel where green scrubs are everyday clothing: “And her eyes, even on a gray, overcast day, were heather green. Spring-kissed. Gorgeous,” all these in *Love’s Tender Warriors* (2004: 21). Finally, in Meghan O’Brien’s stuck-in-a-lift erotic romance, *Thirteen Hours*: “She released one of Dana’s wrists and stroked the back of her hand over Dana’s cheek. ‘I admit it, I’m powerless against those beautiful green eyes’,” (2008: 43).

In reality green eyes are uncommon – just 1-2% of the general population worldwide. While green eyes predominate for romantic heroines none of these women are of Icelandic descent – which would make the colouring more likely given that, according to Vilhjálmur Rafnsson et al (2004: 247), 89% of Icelandic women and 87% of Icelandic men have green eyes. Reasons why green-eyed heroines predominate in romantic fiction are impossible to pin down with any accuracy. It seems most likely that they make a point of difference and are an established stylistic norm or tradition rather than a strictly conscious decision. It should be noted that many heroines of historical heterosexual romantic fiction are also green-eyed. Eye colour also appears to connote control and power and the frequently encountered eye colour for the alpha male in hetero-romantic fiction is grey; this allows for steely grey when angry or jealous and can also be described as ‘piercing’. The shade may then turn soft, cloudy grey when the eyes are sexually aroused or loving. Most recently, of course, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon (2011) has only underlined the symbolic status of the

colour, in its cover art and alpha hero, Christian Grey. In lesbian romantic fiction grey eyes also tend to represent power and, often, a profession in which the heroine excels: surgeon, decorated homicide detective, district attorney, fire chief etc. In *Submerged*, the DA is under scrutiny: “Her dark gray suit fit her lithe form perfectly” (2012: 38).

This attention to social status is another unifying factor between popular heterosexual and lesbian fiction. Harlequin Mills & Boon guidelines for the ‘Sweet Romance’ series are the template for the most popular novels in both genres:

The heroine should be the vehicle through which the reader experiences the romance. The reader wants to be able to identify strongly with her, to like her, to want to be her, or want to be her friend. She must be a strong, convincing woman of the 21st century. The hero should always be strong and charismatic, successful in his own way and aspirational — a man you’d want to be with! (Mills & Boon, 2012, 2).

These instructions apply to lesbian romantic fiction equally although there tends to be a greater sense of equality between the lovers – despite the mandatory antagonism and misunderstanding that keep them apart in some way for most of the novel’s length. In contrast, *Leaving LA*, (2011) by Kate Christie, is a relative rarity in being set in the upper reaches of the Hollywood movie industry. Its heroine, Tessa Flanagan, is an ‘A-list’ star and single parent of eight-year-old Laya. Tessa’s lover, Eleanor Chapin, is first introduced as the girl’s schoolteacher. Nevertheless, Christie balances the social inequalities by revealing that Flanagan’s racial mix is not only Irish and Filipina but also a darker secret in her past is revealed: her true background is working class Chicago. Chapin, on the other hand, is East Coast middle class, about to return to university and higher study and is not simply a grade teacher. Their relationship, while patently unequal in that one party is a multi-millionaire and a household name and the other is not, is predicated on an assumption of the perceived natural balance and justice between two modern western women. It is common to all contemporary lesbian romance fiction and stands in marked difference to the heterosexist requirements of the mainstream, as described by Harlequin Mills & Boon for its ‘Desire’ range, among the eleven sub-genres identified in its ‘Author Guidelines’:

The Desire hero should be powerful, wealthy — an alpha male with a sense of arrogance and entitlement. While he may be harsh and direct, he is never physically cruel. He is capable of being saved and it's up to the heroine to get him there. The Texan hero should own the ranch, not work on it, and the urban hero should be the company CEO, not a handyman (Mills & Boon, 2013, 9).

Lesbian fiction, extensively analysed across more than one hundred novels for this project, does not countenance “arrogance”, “entitlement” or “harsh” behaviour unless there is a specific plot requirement for a villain or to make the unpleasant woman quickly see the error of her ways; or alternatively, turn out to be a nice woman who has been harboring an understandable grudge or pain. In *Silver Lining* (2013) I included a scene of relatively mild domestic violence against the heroine, by her outgoing lover and an outraged reader remarked on it (see Addendum below). In lesbian fiction of the 1980s and '90s there were few CEOs or ranch owners; this is changing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For instance, in *Doublecrossed* by Susan X Meagher (2010), the central protagonists are a millionaire nightclub owner and a senior police detective; in *The Candidate* by Tracey Richardson (2008) the eponymous character is running for Vice-President of the United States, while her lover is a high-ranking officer in the US Secret Service. In *The Campaign* (2012) the same protagonists feature – and the title refers to a full-on presidential bid.

Nevertheless, the single most noticeable unifying feature of both heterosexual and lesbian romantic fiction is the plain writing and absence of apparent literary ambition. I would argue that this is due to the dominance of 20<sup>th</sup> century romance writing by Barbara Cartland of whose seven hundred-plus books I wrote in 1983 that she “had been translated into virtually every known world language other than grammatical English” (1983). That millions of readers around the world bought more millions of her books over the decades suggests a deep hunger for romance and a willingness to disregard the writing that supplied the desired escapism.

The antithesis of this style-free writing can be found in the 1964 bestseller, Jane Rule's *Desert of the Heart*. Published before the phenomenon of authorial democratization through the Internet, it is so different as to be virtually another



language. The opening paragraph is indicative of the book that has become a classic and the basis for Donna Deitch's 1985 hit film *Desert Hearts*. Rule was writing about a woman contemplating divorce:

Conventions, like clichés, have a way of surviving their own usefulness. They are then excused or defended as the idioms of living. For everyone, foreign by birth or by nature, convention is a mark of fluency. That is why, for any woman, marriage is the idiom of life. And she does not give it up out of scorn or indifference but only when she is forced to admit that she has never been able to pronounce it properly and has committed continually its grossest grammatical errors. For such a woman marriage remains a foreign tongue an alien landscape, and, since she cannot become naturalized, she finally chooses voluntary exile (Rule, 1964: 7).

The poetry and poignancy of Rule's language have few parallels in the workmanlike language of conventional lesbian romances. Nonetheless, many late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century lesbian romantic novels contain coded if quirky word usages that can only be explained as osmotic in their prevalence. Typically, such codes refer to physical responses between lovers – or soon to be lovers – and drama is almost always inferred. In *Writing Romance*, Lynne Pearce suggests that in the language of romance,

Popular versions of romantic love in the West over the last nine centuries have rendered the phenomenon not only visible but visibly *spectacular*: spectacular in its joys, spectacular in its grief, spectacular in its challenges and ordeals, spectacular in its transformative effect (on both the amorous subject *and* his/her world (Pearce, 2007, 137).

Spectacularly transformative language occurs in many modern lesbian romances, but this is often caused by over-dependence on Spellcheck. Some spectacular transformations of language arguably are not intentional although deliberate, such as the use of the word “slam” – as related to closing the eyes. It is physically impossible to slam shut the eyes, yet, “When her limbs refused to move she slammed her eyes closed,” wrote Frankie J Jones in *Captive Heart* (2012: 109). Again, “Mary Jo's eyes slammed shut,” is found in Laurie Salzler's *A Kiss Before Dawn* (2012: 159). And

“Kim’s eyes slammed shut and an inarticulate cry was torn from her throat,” wrote R.J. Nolan, following it with, “Her eyes slammed shut and she cried out,” in *LA Metro* (2011: 31). Radclyffe’s medical experience may have played a part in, “Candace’s eyes slammed shut as she tilted her pelvis and slid two fingers deep inside herself,” in *Lonely Hearts Club* (2008: 136), while she was more straightforward with, ““You too.” Dana gasped and her eyes slammed shut,” in *Word of Honor* (2008: 203). Also keeping it quite, better perhaps to hear the slam, is Gerri Hill with, ““Oh, God,” she whispered, her eyes slamming shut,” *Love Waits* (2011: 46). And finally, “She slammed her eyes shut to block the image from her mind,” wrote Brenda Adcock in *The Other Mrs Champion* (2011: 79). This last also proves that eye-slamming is not confined to female characters: “When he saw me standing there, demanding to know what the hell he wanted, he slammed his eyes closed, turned around, and walked away without another word,” (2011: 132).

The gaze – psychoanalytically prompted or otherwise – is the generating energy of lesbian fiction. The spectacle of the object of desire is the driving force and in this, closely resembles that which propels the reader of normative romantic fiction. This basic impulse and literary rule lies at the heart of the originally semi-amateur, virtual self-publishing experience of the 1970s, and *The Ladder* perpetuated this in early publications. The pioneer magazine led directly to these traits of plain writing being replicated in the output of Naiad Press and, by influence and unconscious imitation, those of many of the imprints that followed. Stylish writing has never been the point, it seems. As lesbianism as a concept and reality has shifted further into the mainstream of society, at first via the social trends of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> and first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and latterly via the movements for marriage equality, non-discrimination in the armed forces and the workplace, this has been reflected in its popular romantic fiction.

An interesting survey of attitudinal change and subtle politics in popular lesbian fiction can be found in Katherine V Forrest’s series of novels featuring LA homicide detective Kate Delafield. Beginning in 1984 with *Amateur City*, the heroine is closeted and unknowingly homophobic – mirroring her workplace and society at large. As the series goes on, Delafield’s attitudes and adventures reflect a changing world. Writing in *The Lodestar Quarterly*, (2002, 18) in a review of her writing

career, Forrest noted, “As this new century begins in America, except for lesbians who are totally isolated, all of us have grown in political awareness and identity.”

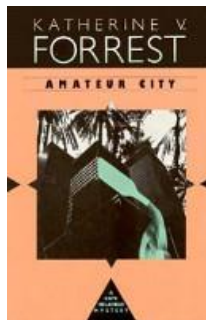


Figure 12: Katherine V Forrest, *Amateur City*, 1984, first edition, Naiad Press

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century lesbian romantic literature was characterized by its place on the margins of respectability, as pulp fiction. It reflected the outlaw status of lesbians and the necessity of living in the closet. By the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century lesbian romantic literature had shifted its heroines and their life outcomes towards the hetero-normative centre with children and marriage as both attainable and desirable ambitions. Ironically, the socially transgressive characters, featured in the virtually underground literature of the 1950s and '60s, have now given way to heroines who aim for or already successfully occupy space in mainstream society. As well, significant numbers of these heroines are 40+ in addition to the traditional youthful romance protagonists. This aspect in particular now sets apart lesbian romantic fiction from its heterosexual counterpart. In lesfic the gloomy women of old, on their journeys from the lonely well of isolation to even lonelier and gloomier ends, have been replaced by unapologetic lesbian successes that demand to frolic in the fount of mainstream, middle ground and happily-married-with-children social norms. Radclyffe Hall would be appalled and disbelieving for, despite what she thought was a daring inference, on no night whatsoever will modern lesbians allow themselves to be parted.

## ADDENDUM

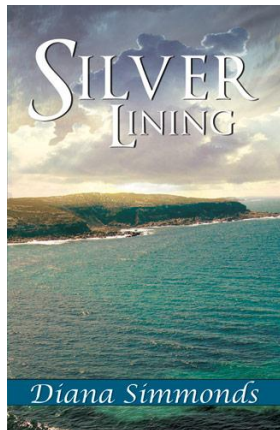


Figure 13: Diana Simmonds, *Silver Lining* (2013) Bella Books.

The manuscript element of this Master of Arts (Research) is titled *Silver Lining* and has already been successfully published in the USA. My aim was to write a lesbian romance that at once fulfills and subverts the genre contract between reader and writer – and get it published. While lesbian romance readers primarily demand a happy ending, they are not happy if it is too obvious or easy. As already noted in the essay, the predominantly American readership enjoys ‘exotic’ locations – in common with Mills & Boon readers – and is quite particular about the perceived authenticity of locales. Of course, exotic for Americans includes Australia and this became apparent when, written for a bet, my first lesbian romance novel was published in the USA by Naiad Press (1996).

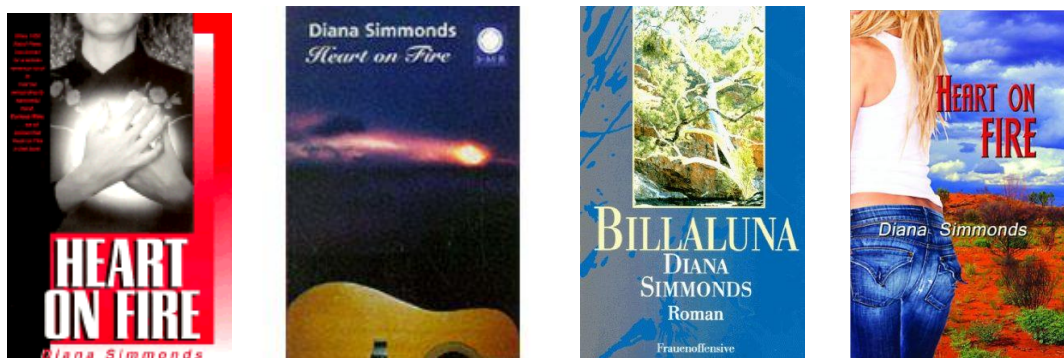


Figure 14: Diana Simmonds, *Heart On Fire*, 1996, Naiad Press (far left), *Silver Moon* (left), *Frauenoffensive* (right) and (far right) 2012, Bella Books.

At the time an American fan wrote of *Heart On Fire*: “An incomparable love story set amidst the shimmering landscape and untamed beauty of the Australian Outback.” It was not seen that way in the beginning however. The bet referred to above was to see whether I, as a journalist on *The Bulletin* and published author of several well-regarded works of non-fiction including *Princess Di: the National Dish – the making of a media superstar* (Pluto Press UK, 1983), could write a romance and be published by Mills & Boon.

In order to achieve the goal I downloaded the Guidelines for my chosen sub-genre – ‘Essence’. The instructions were clear:

Essence: Are big romance novels filled with intense relationships, real life drama and the kinds of unexpected events that change women’s lives forever!

Key Elements

A strong central romance that’s big in scope and believable in execution.

There can be a secondary romance and subplots.

High emotional stakes. The characters’ goals mean something to them, might force difficult choices and might be in conflict with the romance.

Characters and situations should feel familiar to readers. Even if the situations seem larger than life, the characters’ reactions are believable.

The hero and heroine should work for their happily ever after so give them obstacles and complications that need to be resolved. Remember: resolve issues by moving them to the next logical step, but don’t wrap everything up in a neat bow!

A sense of community. Paint a larger picture of the characters’ lives by showing their relationships with family and friends, social lives and work.

Tone can vary from the light-hearted to the deeply emotional, from family sagas to light suspense. The common thread is the complexity of plot and depth of character as well as the unique, contemporary treatment of the themes.

Look at big cities as well as small towns. Even consider settings outside of North America.

Word length: 85,000 words. Our longest contemporary series with a big book feel. (Mills & Boon, 2012, 8)

According to the guidelines, as an already published – professional – writer, I did not need to submit a complete manuscript. A 12-15,000-word draft, pages of dialogue and chapter breakdown would suffice. I did as instructed and sent it off. Several weeks later I received a polite letter saying that although they could see I had paid attention to the guidelines, they regretted being unable to accept my manuscript because it was not up to their standard. After spending the weekend being utterly furious and saying repeatedly to anyone who would listen, “do they know who I am?” I had a brainwave. It came courtesy a new Apple desktop computer that had the first ‘find/change’ facility. It occurred to me that the hero – country singing star Johnny – could just as easily become Jody and be transformed to look like Ellen de Generes (who was then starring in *Ellen* on TV but was not yet ‘out’ – the hunch now known as gaydar was at work). When complete I packed up the manuscript – it was pre-Internet – and sent it to Naiad Press, Tallahassee, Florida whose romances occupied the most shelf space at the Feminist Bookshop in Lilyfield. By then it was titled *Heart On Fire*.

As well as becoming a US bestseller, *Heart On Fire* was also translated into German, re-titled *Billaluna: Roman* and published in Germany, translated into Portuguese, titled *Postal de Alice Springs: Un romance entre mu* and published in Brazil and finally in an English version by British feminist press Silver Moon. However, *Heart On Fire* did not please all readers and one wrote of the first Naiad edition,

When a book says it’s the next ‘whatever’ popular book, don’t believe it. On the cover of this one, it claims to be the next *Curious Wine*. That’s laughable. It’s not even close. The dialogue is cheesy and overwrought, the meeting between the lesbian Jody and the heterosexual Grace is predictable – straight chick pursues gay chick, gay chick pushes straight chick away. Of course, eventually they do get together, but there are a lot of bumps and roadblocks along the way. This book is a prime example of why I don’t buy lesbian literature any more (Amazon Reader ‘A Customer’)

In spite of that condemnation, in 2012 Bella Books successfully republished both early novels, *Heart On Fire* and *Forty Love*. Another reader balanced the above by writing:

I struck up an online conversation with Diana Simmonds recently on writing, and decided to give one of her books a go as a result. I don't read romances; don't enjoy them; they are not my idea of escapism. How surprised was I, then, to find myself immediately engaged? I found Jody and Grace completely different and yet utterly enchanting. I was quickly invested in what happened to them, and when I got my happy ending I wept with joy. Simmonds' dialogue is scintillating, realistic, and moves the story along at a nice pace throughout. There are no boggy passages where I wished something would happen way before it did. I picked it up and couldn't put it down, despite a to-do list languishing nearby (Amazon Reader Jenny-Lee Heylen).

Meanwhile the thesis was unexpectedly delayed because I suffered a series of heart attacks, the latest in January 2013 and in the interim *Silver Lining* was accepted by Bella Books and published in August 2013. In mid-September 2013 it reached #1 on the Amazon bestseller list (lesbian romantic fiction section). This back-to-front turn of events has enabled me to further interrogate lesbian romance through the eyes of readers. As has already been stated, my aim was to simultaneously fulfill and subvert the norms of the genre. So far the response from readers suggests that has been more or less achieved. *Silver Lining* has been given five stars by some, one reader writing, for instance,

I want to get in the car and take a trip to Two Moon Bay! Hang out with Clancy, Amanda, Malcolm and the locals. Grab a beer and laze on the wide verandah – fill my lungs with the sweet smell of eucalyptus, and the salty sea air. If I was overseas this book would make me homesick but living on the semi-rural coast of Australia it made me feel at home. Diana Simmonds has written a book with likeable smart characters. Especially Amanda and Clancy! They say opposites attract? These two collide and repel repeatedly – the energy between them palpable (Amazon Reader 'K Johnson').

A crucial rule in the romance genre is to keep the two main protagonists apart as long as possible while maintaining suspense and reader interest. In *Silver Lining*, although there are sex scenes, there are no love scenes – that is, between the designated heroines – until the very end of the novel. One reader (below) was puzzled that

Amanda should stay in a relationship after its use-by date, which suggests she has led a charmed life,

There was a lot of quarreling in this book and the two main characters do not get together until the very end, but it was a good read. It begins in New York City, where the financial crisis is taking place. Amanda, 32, works on Wall Street. She is in a bad relationship with a woman named Natalie. Why Amanda has stayed in this bad relationship for three years is not explained well so does not make sense... Amanda also has a gay best friend, Malcolm, who has a lesbian sister, Clancy. The financial crisis is a source of conflict for all of them... Although attracted to one another, they interact mainly with verbal jabs and apologies and take the entire book to get together (Amazon Reader 'Lesbian reader').

It was also my intention to paint a realistic picture of modern relationships and times (the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-9); a non-clichéd Australian setting and a New York city that would be believable to a native. I also set out to achieve humour between characters without the aid employed by many romance writers of having characters tell the reader they are laughing and amused over an exchange that is not funny. This reader at least appreciated the effort,

From New York to Australia. This story is much more than a romance. It's about people and places, gritty and tough, languid and seductive. It's about change, letting go – discovering each other and yourself. The writer has captured the sense of humour that is an essential part of the Australian personality and probably put more light on the financial crisis situation than anything I've read before. This is a smart, multi-dimensional read. I liked it very much. Read it! (Amazon Reader 'A Customer').

Many modern romance novels are plagued by stiff, grammatical dialogue that cannot pass the test of being spoken aloud. In *Postmodern Identity (Crisis)* Julie Tetel Andresen wrote,

If you do not have good dialogue, you do not have good romance. Dialogue is 'where the action is' as far as the romantic chemistry is concerned. Dialogue



is the verbal sculpture of the characters, and their dialogic interactions sculpt their chemistry...(1999, 4).

The forward action of *Silver Lining* is deliberately dialogue-based, lengthy descriptive passages and exposition are both severely rationed, as noted by this reader:

I love to indulge in a romance once in a while, but I find so many formulaic both in terms of characters and tone with unrealistic stagey dialogue and incredible story lines (in a bad way). It's such a relief to find *Silver Lining* – a great comfort romance, brilliantly written. The characters are real with faults and irritating habits that make them all the more loveable. The writing is several leagues above your average lesfic romance. And the settings and the way they are evoked make a great armchair get away (Amazon Reader 'A Customer').

As mentioned elsewhere in the main body of the essay, there are some topics and situations that fall outside the boundaries of what is acceptable in romance writing. Domestic violence is high on this list and a reader whose name suggests a male (although there is no way of knowing) gave *Silver Lining* three stars, which seemed generous in light of his views, which were:

I couldn't finish this book. I got to the point where the girlfriend cheated on her, made a porn movie, then slapped her around and trashed the apartment and pretty much everything in it, and she doesn't call the police. Instead, she calls her lawyer who tells her she might have to pay palimony besides. That's when I stopped reading. I can't read about smart women who let themselves get used the way this girlfriend used the main character, especially when coupled with physical abuse (Amazon Reader 'Derek').

To date, the scene has not bothered other – apparently female – readers but does serve as a reminder that the genre lines are to be crossed and rules broken at some peril. The compact between romance writer and reader endures through the pushing but not the breaking of boundaries. And in a final analysis of a rule-bound literature produced

and consumed by a still transgressive and marginalised community, it is perhaps right that the last critical words should belong to readers rather than theorists:

A long journey to love. I was glad that Clancy and Amanda finally got together. I enjoyed learning about Australia. I would recommend this book to my friends (Amazon Reader unnamed).

Diana Simmonds has done a really good job educating readers about the global financial crisis, introducing non-Aussies to the beautiful coast of Australia and keeping our attention riveted to a “will they/won’t they” romance... (Goodreads Reader unnamed).

The writing is detailed and specific... Simmonds made an interesting choice by writing the entire book from the POV of her main character, Amanda McIntyre, the American whose arc of change is at the centre of this book. Amanda begins as ‘king of the world’ selling credit swap derivatives for an investment bank (a thinly veiled Lazard Freres) and slowly comes to understand her notorious contribution to the financial collapse (Amazon Reader ‘Caroline’).

While the focus on Amanda doesn’t enable us to get inside Clancy’s head, we get enough information about her from Malcolm to develop a good understanding of her motivations and hesitations. While both Clancy and Amanda are well-drawn characters, this is truly Amanda’s story, and it is a good one...(Amazon Reader ‘Terry’).

I just love Diana Simmonds’ turn of phrase. Beautifully written, with main characters that I really wanted to see succeed, and secondary characters that often made me laugh out loud with their witty and insightful observations... A delightful and very fulfilling read, even for crusty old dykes like me who don’t like romances (Amazon Reader “An Old Dyke”).

A friend told me not to expect very much from the lesbian romance in the way of writing, but this book proved her wrong! (Amazon Reader ‘Angela’).

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## **SILVER LINING**

by Diana Simmonds

### **IN THE BEGINNING...**

#### **SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA**

“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."

Clancy nodded. "I get that," she said. "I'm way too expensive. 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 owlsh 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 absent-mindedly. "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."

"We'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's 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 towards 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 diminutive 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 towards 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 mini skirt 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 towards 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 blonde 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 Clancy 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 back-up. 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 towards 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 specialised in CDSs – credit default swaps – mostly around ten to 20 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 macro-economics 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?”

Amanda smirked, “Big. Swinging. Dick.” Natalie slapped her knees and let out a bellow of laughter.

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 blonde 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 tumbler of ice and scotch 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 apologise to Clancy *if* she comes back. I’m going to order another round of drinks. Same again?”

“Whatever.” 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.”

“Whatever.” 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.”

“Apologize!” Natalie’s voice rose half an octave. “What for? Because you mentioned big swinging dick? Ooh-ooh! Potty-mouth Amanda.”

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 non-existent 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 blonde 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.

## TWO – REWIND TO 2008

*THE first day I arrived on Wall Street the sun was shining, it was a glorious morning and I was queen of the world, damn it.* Suddenly self-conscious as she walked along the subway corridor, Amanda glanced around to make sure the thought had really been uttered in her head and not out loud. With the cataclysmic news of Lehman's filing for Chapter 11, and rumors flying up and down the street of other banks tottering and hundreds of hotshots being shown the door, today was definitely not the day to be seen talking to yourself.

She checked herself in a convenient window of reflective glass as she passed by. Her spiky, pixie cut silver-blonde hair showed off a perfectly shaped head and elegant neck. The window exaggerated her skinny frame but she knew her legs were long and slim anyway, just as she also knew her big brown eyes made older people tell her she looked like Twiggy. And because she'd Googled the Swinging '60s model she knew that was good and also how to apply mascara and eye shadow to enhance the look.

Amanda grinned at her flitting thoughts despite the sudden arrival of a squadron of tiny butterflies in the pit of her stomach. She inhaled slowly and deeply three times as she skipped up the last three stairs from the subway and stepped onto the street. But she sighed when the morning turned out to be as gray, dank and unpromising as it had been when she trotted down the subway stairs at East 86<sup>th</sup> a half hour earlier.

As a mean little gust of too-early Fall chill whipped at her ankles, Amanda shivered, hunched her shoulders and turned up the collar of her charcoal, classically tailored Armani jacket. She wished she had gone shopping for the new winter coat the week before as she'd intended. But, "Relax babe," Natalie had said. "You so do *not* need a new winter coat yet. It is *only* September seventh and being this obsessive is not cool." Natalie had laughed and added, "You can wait another week, no matter that you have 'buy new coat' in your organizer. It's not going to make the wheels of high finance fall off. Trust me."

As Amanda threaded her way between the men and women in authoritative suits – *and* a fair number of overcoats, she noted grumpily – striding to the beat of

their iPodded ears, she felt herself scowling at how wrong Natalie was turning out to be.

“Hey Mandy! Mandy!” The imperious call and teeth-grating diminutive favored by Jason Markowitz made her stop dead, forcing irritated finance workers to part and sweep around them in a shoaling stream of corporate pinstripes.

“Jason, how you doing?” He was her opposite number in a nearby merchant bank that was currently in the news for all the wrong reasons. The grumbling passing through buffeted the two until they regained their own momentum in the flow.

“So far so good. Still got a desk. And you?” Jason’s bagel crumbs punctuated each word and twirled mote-like in the air between them.

Amanda squared her shoulders and grinned. “We’re looking pretty okay. We’re in good shape and it’s business as usual.”

“Well yee haw, kiddo. I wish I could share your confidence. It’s feeling pretty arctic around here and I don’t think it’s just the weather.”

They sidestepped a swarm of TV camera crews and reporters gathered outside one of the most venerable institutions and were about to walk on when the glass doors of the palazzo of mega-deals swung open and a troupe of taut-faced, well dressed young men and women marched out, each carrying a cardboard carton of personal possessions. In a concerted surge towards them, the cameras lit up and flashes snapped and crackled into disbelieving faces as strident questions bounced back and forth. But no answers were offered in return.

“Oh jeez,” said Jason. “There’s Andy Stark. ‘Scuse me kiddo, I gotta go check in with him. Catch you soon – huh?”

The sight of her peers stumbling jobless into the unfriendly morning momentarily mesmerized Amanda. They no longer looked like masters of the universe; they were small, frightened people once more. She shivered and again wished she had bought the elegant Nicole Farhi coat she had already decided upon during one of her reconnaissance missions.

“Mandy? Hullo? You in there? Catch you later.” Jason was almost dancing about, so nervous were his feet in their highly polished black wingtips.

She shook herself and grinned. “Sure, sure. I’ll call you. No problem.” They air kissed, parted company and she pushed on towards her own temple of glass and multi-billions of dollars. Her stomach was churning and she clutched her current favourite YSL Muse purse tighter under her arm. When it began to vibrate against her

ribs she stopped to rummage and find her BlackBerry. She checked the screen and a smile relaxed her tight jaw muscles as the photo of her lover appeared.

“Natalie...”

“Hi babe, you at the coalface yet? You heard the latest? It’s on TV. Looks like Barr Lopez is down the tubes.”

Amanda began to walk again. Being stationary was all at once too agitating to be borne as her stomach churned. “I’ve just passed by there and a bunch of guys were walking out with their stuff. It’s another let-go.”

“Don’t reckon so, babe,” Natalie’s voice sung merrily down the phone. “The news is they’re gone. Like really gone.”

Amanda shook her head, and her stomach did another full roll. “I can’t see that. Barr Lopez has been around forever. They’re way too big to fail.”

“Hope you’re right babe, but I don’t think so. Check it out.”

Amanda sighed. “Okay, I’ll call you when I get to my desk.”

“Nuh, gonna be busy. Got a video project this morning. Catch ya later, babe.” And before Amanda could respond she was gone leaving Amanda feeling even edgier than before. Having Natalie hang up, sometimes in mid-sentence – always Amanda’s sentence – was disconcerting and made her feel abandoned – and stupid for feeling abandoned. And it was all the more upsetting because Amanda was pretty sure Natalie knew she didn’t like it. And being called “babe” also made her feel childlike and vulnerable and that didn’t help either. Was it sheer perversity or did Natalie really not care? Or perhaps it was a way of keeping Amanda dancing on the string of insecurity. Impossible to know, especially at this hour. Amanda sighed, thumbed the disconnect button and dropped the phone back in her purse. She was annoyed with herself for being susceptible, which itself was even more than annoying. For the third time that morning she found herself reluctantly grinning at her own expense.

“What’s so funny, Amanda?” Marise Mack, who was nakedly after Amanda’s desk and window, fell in beside her rival as they walked up a flight of shallow steps to the slowly spinning brass and glass doors of their building. “You look either happy or crazy. Or both. You gotta hot tip?”

“I was miles away, actually,” Amanda said coolly. “What’s news at your end?”

“Fa-a-a-bulous,” cooed Marise and began to recite exactly how and why her end was fabulous as she wiggled her well-upholstered butt and skipped into the

revolving door compartment ahead of Amanda. For a second Amanda considered waiting for the doors to roll on around to give her a minute's respite from Marise's yapping, but decided being childish was, well, childish. So she stepped in behind her colleague and, as they shuffled forward into the foyer, Amanda couldn't help but admire her would-be usurper's shapely legs and ridiculously high-heeled Manolos. Shoes were Marise's passion. She had others, so it was rumored on the office grapevine, but mile-high shoes were the most obvious.

"You didn't hear a word I said," Marise poked Amanda in the ribs with one of a set of blood red talons. "You were somewhere else."

Amanda attempted a grin as she recoiled from the tickling touch. It was her least favorite form of teasing. And in any case, she wasn't about to tell Marise what she had been thinking.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

They set out across the foyer towards the bank of elevators. Marise's heels clacked liked castanets on the polished marble, counterpointing Amanda's relatively staid three-inch navy Pradas.

"I asked whether you'd heard the latest on Lehman's?"

"Aside from bankruptcy? No, but Barr Lopez is conducting a bloodletting. Bunch of guys were doing the last walk when I came past."

"Wow. This is *so* not good. I got a call yesterday and a pal whispered 'Lehman's' but I didn't believe it. I mean it was Sunday anyway, but shit – it's happened. I wonder who's next for the big drop. This is really amazing stuff, Mandypops."

Amanda's teeth clenched, but her expression remained sunny even if her face was tight around the jaw. She stuck her index finger on the up arrow and pressed hard enough for it to hurt and leave an indentation in the pad of her fingertip. It didn't make her feel any less exasperated with Marise.

"Well heads down, butts up, Marise, and let's see whether we can turn us another coupla mil' today." The doors hissed open on an empty car. They stepped in ahead of a surge of impeccable Italian suiting and two other early birds. Amanda held a spot by the doors despite the barging shoulders and mumbling growls.

"Going up. Twenty-third floor, ladies intimate apparel, leisure wear, tranquillizers and lentils," she recited with determined *joie de vivre*. "Any takers?"



Nervous laughter and a mutter of floor numbers was her reward. The doors swished, the elevator trembled once and began its rapid ascent to the dizzy heights of the institution whose name discreetly decorated the façade of the building.

Elleron Frères, founded by two Belgian émigré brothers in the mid-1800s, was one of the bluest of blue chip firms. Early into electronic and computer technology and quick to take advantage of financial de-regulation wherever it occurred, Elleron Frères had long shrugged off its genteel European origins – although not the chic accent on the “e” – and was an envied and reputable high flyer.

After graduating top of her class, Amanda had made it to the venerable firm’s twenty-third floor in three leaps, each of two years’ duration, from other starry outfits in the financial district. And she had lunched with yet another head-hunter just four days previously to discuss her next option. But a top job at eFrères, as staff affected to call it, was a highly desirable and powerfully attractive thing, with the occasional unexpected perk, as some found out, sooner or later...

It had begun with a simple cream-colored card in a simple cream-colored envelope, hand addressed in proper ink to Amanda – and other senior personnel – requesting her attendance at the annual cocktail party to celebrate “the holidays and another year of success”. It had been signed “Godfrey Nielsen – CEO” in the same hand and dark blue ink.

“For heaven’s sakes don’t drink the punch, let me get you a martini.” The woman Amanda knew to be the president’s executive assistant had murmured in her ear as she stood in line to collect a cut crystal cup of fruit-adorned poison at the eFrères’ “happy holidays” party. Amanda had been with the bank just three months and it was her first Christmas and first opportunity to meet the firm’s high flyers en masse. Amanda could not be certain but it had felt awfully like the tiniest flick of tongue on her earlobe before the elegant woman stood back a pace and turned a dazzling smile on her.

“I’m Carmel Morrow and I’m Godfrey Nielsen’s EA, welcoming you to the wonderfully dysfunctional family of eFrères.” She extended a manicured right hand. Amanda took it and also took in the glossy dark bob, discreet jewelery and a classic black Vera Wang that managed to simultaneously cover and reveal a toned fortyish body. She also took in that she wasn’t getting her hand back any time soon.

“It’s good to meet you and good to be here,” Amanda said, gazing into brown eyes that sparkled with mischief and a dusting of seasonal frosted mascara.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” said Carmel, giving Amanda’s hand a squeeze. “You are one of our brightest young stars.” She turned to head toward another bar area and Amanda had no choice but to follow, or lose her hand.

“Well I don’t know who’s been talking,” she began in what she hoped was a tone of “aw, gee shucks” humility.

But Carmel merely gave her hand an impatient squeeze and continued over her shoulder, “No false modesty Amanda, everyone’s talking and if they weren’t you wouldn’t be here. Now, what will it be? Vodka martini?” Her eyes widened and stared straight into Amanda’s, “Shaken *and* stirred? Could I interest you in something like that?”

She was being flirted with and the keeper of the keys to the castle was doing the flirting. Amanda laughed even as her insides did a flip and a slow burn ignited high up between her legs. She swallowed and said in a voice that was unexpectedly slightly unsteady, “Shaken and stirred sounds very – um – interesting, Carmel. I’ve not tried that before.”

It was Carmel’s turn to laugh, and she threw back her head and revealed perfect teeth and the kind of almost invisible creases around her throat that suggested a woman who probably had quite a bit of work done on the flawless face when supposedly on vacation.

“Now that I find hard to believe, you bad girl,” Carmel took a classic martini glass from a bartender in a starched white jacket and handed it on to Amanda. The drink looked vaguely blue and lethal, and the green olive on its little silver stick was plumply inviting. “Now come with me and I’ll give you the million dollar tour of the executive floor,” said Carmel. “You might as well get to know it now as I’m sure you’ll be down here before long.”

Amanda felt it politic not to resist and anyway, there was an unanticipated kick to be had by obediently following her hostess’s shapely form through the crowd of revelers. Carmel either worked out or was sporty – or both. Her shoulders and upper arms were sleekly muscled beneath lightly bronzed skin. She carried her own drink in her left hand, which gave Amanda the opportunity to note a pecan-sized diamond and a heavy gold wedding band, as well as a substantial gold signet ring on her pinkie. *Curiouser and curiouser*, she thought, as they skirted a trinity of silver and

white Christmas trees and slipped through a heavy blond wood door that opened at their approach.

“This is the boardroom,” Carmel said as the door sighed shut behind them. It was handsomely proportioned with carefully lit portraits in ornate gilt frames of seriously historical looking men in muttonchops and frock coats. They peered down quizzically at a vast ultra-modern glass and chrome table with a dozen or so chocolate leather and chrome chairs set around it. Beyond the table there were dark green floor-to-ceiling drapes along the wall that would otherwise have afforded some kind of view of New York’s financial district. On the floor was deep carpeting in an understated, vaguely geometric pattern of dark chocolate and latte.

“Very nice,” said Amanda, knowing it was an inane response but preoccupied at the same time by wondering whether something as corny as sex on the boardroom table might be about to take place.

“It’s functional,” said Carmel dismissively. “You’ll find it comfortable enough.” She peered at Amanda over the top of her glass. “Do you aspire to it, Miss Top of the Class at Yale? Or are you waiting for the right guy to come along and save you from all this?”

Amanda took a larger-than-intended swig of the martini and felt the top of her head almost lift off. She swallowed convulsively, coughed and shook her head. “No.”

Carmel frowned and smiled simultaneously. “No what? No you’re not that ambitious or no, you’re not looking for Mr Right?”

Amanda managed to stem another cough before it erupted and laughed instead. “Mr Right – in New York? I don’t think so.” She took another swallow of her drink, which she figured must be at least a triple and, thanks to its blazingly instant effect, she added, “Anyway, I’ve only been here three months so I really haven’t given much thought to the presidency. Yet.”

Carmel laughed again. It was a pleasing sight and sound. “Oh my,” she said. “Quite a girl we have here, I’m glad to see.” She stepped away from the table that she had been leaning against, legs extended, ankles crossed, bosom on display. “Well let’s go continue the show-and-tell.” Carmel put out her hand and Amanda took it only to find herself being compelled by dark brown eyes and pulled forward until their faces were almost touching. She could feel Carmel’s breath on her mouth and her own heart thumping in her ears.

“But meanwhile,” Carmel said softly, not taking her eyes off Amanda’s, “Here’s a taste of things to come.” And she leaned in and met Amanda with soft lips and probing tongue in a long kiss that was made all the more arousing because their mouths and loosely clasped hands were their only point of contact. Amanda’s initial shock gave way to enjoying the feeling of the slow burn snaking its way around her body, filling every part with pounding blood until her skin tingled and her clitoris swelled. Finally it was Amanda who pulled away and came up for air and Carmel stepped back, smiled and gave her an all over appraisal while slowly running her tongue around her lips.

“Not just smart but sexy too,” she said and her eyes were expressionless. “And very pretty – not unlike Ellen, although perhaps it’s just the hair.” She ran her fingers through the pale blonde strands that framed Amanda’s face, causing shivers. Amanda turned her face into the warm palm and kissed it. Carmel took a good swallow of her scotch and swirled the ice in the glass. “You should go far, Miss Amanda, if you play your cards right.”

“I’ve always enjoyed a game of cards,” Amanda said, smiling. “I’m a cool hand at Snap, but not much good at Happy Families.”

Carmel chuckled. “I imagine you’d be fairly good at poker though.” Before Amanda could react to the innuendo, Carmel once again tugged on Amanda’s hand and led her around the table to another unobtrusive door.

“Here’s the command center,” said Carmel as the door swung open. Beyond was a spacious room that looked more like a chic parlor than an office. The same lush yet discreet carpeting carried through from the boardroom and more heavy green drapes kept out the New York night. On a glass topped oval-shaped table stood a large computer screen and keyboard with not a cable in sight. A tall gleaming glass vase containing a sheaf of white lilies was the only other object on the table. Behind the table was a comfortable looking high-backed chocolate leather chair. Across the room were two armchairs and a couch upholstered in the same rich matte leather. On a glass coffee table in front of the couch was a selection of glossy magazines and the day’s *Wall Street Journal*. On the walls were two abstract paintings consisting mainly of splashes of paint that looked interesting but unfathomable.

“So *this* is Godfrey Nielsen’s office?”

Carmel chuckled. “No silly, this is *my* office. Now how about a top up?” She moved to the paneled walls, pushed a metal roundel and a door swung open to reveal

a well stocked bar and fridge. “Same again?” Carmel held out her hand for Amanda’s glass.

Amanda sculled the remains of the killer cocktail, removed the olive on its stick and obediently handed over the glass. As Carmel made a fresh martini, dropped chunks of ice into her own glass and poured scotch over them, Amanda could not help but watch the play of light on the muscle and flesh of her bare arms as she munched the olive. Carmel was physically lovely, if unnerving.

Carmel turned and the smile on her face told Amanda she knew she was being observed and admired. To her chagrin Amanda felt a blush rise up her throat and she placed a hand over it, wishing she had worn something beneath the black and silver pinstripe of her new Armani Privé jacket.

“Like what you see?” Carmel asked, and it was obvious she was not referring to the work environment.

Nevertheless Amanda chose to look about and nodded. “Very much,” she said.

Carmel sat on the couch and patted the space beside her; again Amanda obediently sat where she was told. It was a weird sensation, as if she were a very insignificant rabbit trapped in the gaze of a very important and strangely appealing predator. *What an odd analogy*, was the last thought that crossed her mind the moment before Carmel took the glass from her hand and kissed her once more.

“I hope you’re not one of those prim types,” Carmel whispered as her whisky-flavored tongue caressed the inner softness of Amanda’s lips.

“I’ve never been called prim,” Amanda muttered and slid her hands down Carmel’s arms to her breasts. They were heavy in her palms and she pressed into them as her seducer’s body began a slow, rhythmic undulation against her own.

“I suppose there’s no chance we’ll be walked in on?” Amanda whispered as her pelvis began to move of its own volition in time with the souging black silk.

“None whatsoever,” said Carmel crisply. She unbuttoned Amanda’s jacket without further ceremony and pinched her nipples hard through the frivolous rose pink satin bra that Amanda had not expected to be revealed in such circumstances. Amanda gasped and squirmed, her eyes instantly dark and flaring at the audacity of the move.

“Ah,” murmured Carmel. “The kitten awakes. Now let me stroke you, sweet cat.” She unclipped the buckle of Amanda’s crocodile belt and slipped cool fingers inside the waistband of her cream cashmere Armani pants. Long nails scored

Amanda's belly and the internal fluttering began to cause her breath to come fast and shallow. She reached for Carmel but her hand was rebuffed. "I do the petting," said Carmel in a voice Amanda barely recognised. "Lie back and let me look at you."

For a split second Amanda's mind was filled with vague alarm and thoughts of *What the hell have I got myself into?* Then she remembered her surroundings and who she was with and decided to go along for the ride. Bemused, yet aroused, she hitched herself up on her elbows and watched Carmel's practiced fingers flip the button and slide the zip of her pants. The outfit was one she had coveted as soon as she'd seen it on Cate Blanchett when she got her Hollywood Boulevard star: it was elegant, understated and old-style glamorous.

Carmel didn't appear to be particularly appreciative of the clothes, however. She tugged the pants down around Amanda's ankles while her tongue, lips and teeth avidly sucked, nibbled and licked at Amanda's smooth belly. Then she slid lower to the fine, almost invisible streak of white blonde down that pointed the way to the two-shades-darker curls of pubic hair. Her breasts snuggled Amanda's thigh and the soft warmth of them was intoxicating on Amanda's flesh. To her consternation Carmel slid off the couch and knelt before her, tugging away the already wet crotch of pale pink satin boxers, pushing Amanda's legs wide apart and plunging her face into the wetness, her fingers parting the damp-darkened hair until she found what she was seeking. "Oh there you are sweet puss cat," Carmel whispered. Her tongue slipped in and out and around Amanda's throbbing clitoris. "Let me stroke you pretty kitten," she murmured and her fingers joined her tongue until Amanda heard her own moans of delight sounding loud in the silent room. It was surprisingly sensual to watch what was happening, her own belly muscles twitching, her own legs spread far apart, thigh muscles flexing as she involuntarily pushed herself harder into Carmel's darting tongue and all-consuming mouth; and Carmel's sleek dark hair that rhythmically caressed Amanda's tingling thighs. The feeling was sensational but the circumstances were strange. Amanda was uncomfortable about being "serviced" so efficiently even as she watched and distantly appreciated the peculiar erotic charge.

"Let me touch you," she gasped between thrusts of Carmel's tongue and fingers. But she was ignored, and instead, to her amazement, Amanda saw Carmel's free hand reach up beneath the short black skirt and begin a furious assault on herself. "Hey, let me," Amanda said, but Carmel was oblivious and Amanda flopped back on the couch, closed her eyes and wondered at the freaky situation in which she found

herself. The rising sensations of approaching orgasm were coursing through her body, yet her heart was untouched although beating fast. As her mind registered excitement, she was distantly aware of being ferociously turned on.

*This is what it's like to be a guy*, she thought as her pelvis moved convulsively with a life of its own. An impulse flashed into her mind, she lifted herself back up onto one elbow, reached down and thrust her fingers hard through Carmel's hair, gripping the dark head tight, holding and moving the open mouth and probing lips until they were in just the right spot. She was rewarded by a stifled moan of delight and ever more frantic masturbation by her elegant assailant as she feverishly sucked on Amanda's flesh.

"Talk to me." Carmel's words were muffled but urgent.

In a voice she barely recognized Amanda whispered roughly, "Fuck me hard. Suck me and don't stop." Carmel groaned and began to lift her head. Amanda kept her hand on the smooth hair and forced it down. "And stay on your knees. You hear me?" She ordered and was rewarded by another long, delighted moan from Carmel and the talented mouth obeyed Amanda's command. "That's it, oh yes, that's it. You are *good*!" Amanda whispered and kept her fingers firmly laced through Carmel's hair guiding the willing lips and tongue as her own belly began to flutter in unstoppable waves of orgasm. "Harder! Faster!" Carmel obeyed and Amanda groaned and spread her knees even wider to take the ramming tongue and fingers in equal measures of pleasure and pain. Finally, almost in self-defense, she cried out, "Don't stop. I'm coming, I'm coming," and was rewarded by Carmel's answering growl of delight; then Amanda gave up all pretense of mutual satisfaction and fell back on the soft leather couch, allowing herself to experience the final thrusts of tongue and fingers and rolling waves of orgasm in one of the most one-sided but perversely pleasurable events of her sex life.

Amanda lay still for a moment, eyes closed and heartbeat racing, her mind frantically processing the last few minutes. *Where in hell does this put me? What have I done? Am I a complete fool or what?* She wondered about the probably disastrous minefield of company politics into which she had so blithely gone skipping. Carmel had risen to her feet in a swish of perfume and, without a word, disappeared into what had to be a private bathroom. Amanda quickly got to her feet on shaky legs, adjusted her sodden underwear as best she could and pulled up her trousers. She felt silly and defenseless, with her clothing in disarray, amid a strong sensation of having been used

– rather than the other way around. It was weird and disconcerting, although thrilling too, she had to admit. *What am I going to tell Natalie?* The thought shot through her mind as she buttoned her jacket with shaking fingers; but the answer formed and came back to her just as quickly: *Don't be an idiot. She wouldn't believe you anyway. And she'd just want to make a film of it.*

A glimmer of doubt waved at the far reaches of her consciousness, but Amanda refused it entry and, by the time Carmel reappeared, she was looking almost as slick as before. She had run her fingers through her pixie-cut blonde hair to restore the expensive windswept look. Her jacket was correctly buttoned and her belt was once again cinched at the right notch. All was in place. For her part, Carmel looked as if she had just left a beauty salon. Her makeup immaculate, hair and dress likewise, even though Amanda now knew she was a *Basic Instinct* kind of a woman.

“Feeling good?” Carmel chirped brightly. “That was fun.”

Amanda nodded and managed to croak, “Great, just great.” Then she added, “I feel like I should have given you a good time too though, Carmel.”

Carmel looked at her, head tilted, a quizzical smile on her face. “You? Sweet puss cat, you did give me a good time. I loved it.” She stroked Amanda’s cheek. “Don’t get the wrong idea little one. I’m *not* a lesbian. I’m happily married. I just like having fun with a gorgeous chickadee occasionally.” She beamed a scarlet smile at Amanda, picked up her tumbler of somewhat diluted scotch and handed a dumbfounded Amanda the martini glass. “Now let’s get back to the party before someone gets any funny ideas. And this is our delicious secret, yes?”

And so it was. On the way home that night Amanda rationalized that telling Natalie would achieve nothing, or worse: she would want to talk about it and storyboard it until the cows came home. When she entered the apartment she discovered Natalie was still out and a scribbled message propped on the hall table said simply “Don’t wait up.” It meant the bathroom was free for a long shower that dealt with all possible evidence of Carmel’s perfume; and that further cemented Amanda’s resolve.

Next morning, walking onto the main floor at eFrères to whispered tales of misdeeds and thick heads, she simply smiled and laughed with her colleagues, but being both the relatively new girl on the block and extremely ambitious, there was absolutely no one that Amanda would have dreamed of telling. And, as the weeks and months went by and she settled into the culture of the company, the encounter with



Carmel became something that almost vanished into hazy disbelief. Then, months later in mid-summer when Amanda knew for sure that Godfrey Nielsen must be at his estate in the Hamptons, she was summoned to his office and instead it had been Carmel who was there to break the news of Amanda's six figure bonus. Carmel had also rewarded her favorite high-flyer with another of her own special ten-minute gifts. And all the while her breezy attitude towards Amanda remained unchanged except during those minutes when she was on her knees being ordered about by the junior vice president. Otherwise, she was always professional, friendly and disengaged in a way that made it surreal for Amanda to watch Carmel – wet-faced, tousled and wild-eyed – as she knelt between Amanda's uncontrollably trembling legs, turning her insides to liquid fire.

### THREE

A ping from her computer drew Amanda's attention away from the chilly morning beyond her window. Last Christmas and summer felt like long ago and the world was turning even colder as Wall Street seemed to be entering its own ice age. The inbox notification showed a new email from "DarlingM"; she clicked on it and read the single line: "How you this morning? Okay?" *Malcolm must be psychic*, she thought as she clicked on "reply." But she couldn't think what to say at this particular moment, so she deleted the empty message space and sat back.

She was known as a cool, unflappable operator even when things were going pear-shaped – as inevitably happened from time to time in the wonderful world of derivatives. Nevertheless, her hands were trembling and she was glad of a distraction. She tapped a once-folded, cream-colored sheet of heavy notepaper on her mouse pad. She leaned back in her chair and the leather creaked and sighed as it obligingly tilted even further. She closed her eyes; not only were her legs doing the trembling thing but her stomach was in a knot. The one line note from the Grand Fromage of the division, as he was known in eFrères-patois, was unlikely to be good news.

The note said simply, "Amanda – see me asap – Dennis." It had been waiting on her desk when she arrived at 7.05 and instinctively she had done exactly as requested. Or ordered, whichever it was. It seemed the same because he was the kind of guy that actually said "Asap" as if it were cool and authoritative and not momentarily fashionable executive-speak. Now, at 7.25, she was back at her desk and gazing out the window. In truth, however, she was actually taking in little of the view. Her mind and body were numb. It was almost as if her blood had turned to some cold, alien substance and was barely circulating through her veins.

Weeks had passed since sharing the ride up in the elevator with Marise. Weeks during which the world they knew had been turned upside down and shaken harder than even the wiliest survivors of the financial catastrophes of last century could recall. Around the world and across the country, banks were collapsing, mortgage providers were sinking, investment values were plummeting, homes were being seized and their bewildered occupants evicted. Millions of jobs were disappearing and, overnight, virtually everyone in the English-speaking world had heard of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, even if they still had no real idea who they were. For Amanda, every bold and brilliant action taken over the past couple of years – which had been

lauded and applauded at the time – seemed now to have always been obvious and egregious errors for which she was somehow solely responsible. She was no longer a heroine; and in the cold unforgiving light of global scrutiny where they had once strutted confidently, her fellow heroes and heroines were all scurrying for cover.

The working day was not the same either. Emergency meetings had become the norm, as had ashen, harried faces. High ranking executives who had proudly clocked up sixty and seventy hours were now dragging themselves to their desks ever earlier and leaving them, reluctantly, even later. Amanda was exhausted and bewildered. Her so recently envied Midas touch appeared now to have turned toxic; and she wasn't alone. Throughout the building and along the street very smart men and women just like her were experiencing the dawning of another reality, and it was not a golden one. For the first time in their working lives they were neither in control nor on top and none of their tricks and trade secrets were working any more.

That morning Amanda had woken even earlier than usual. Beyond the drapes it was still as dark as a Manhattan night could ever be. She lay quietly, listening to Natalie's steady breathing and the sounds of the city. Although she had barely risen into consciousness, Amanda's mind was already racing and her heartbeat was uncomfortably fast. The minute her eyes opened the thought appeared out of nowhere – that the rollercoaster on which she had been riding upwards for six thrilling years was now on a downward plunge that showed no signs of bottoming out. The only thing that kept her from panicking like so many of her colleagues was that history showed what goes around comes around and there had to be an end in sight. Didn't there?

Amanda had been seen as a bit of a dork for taking history as one of her major subjects. It was not a fashionable choice; but the past and its recurring events had always fascinated her. Right now, it was also oddly comforting to understand – even vaguely – that she was not alone in her bemusement and fear and that she at least had a sense of the inevitability of the plummeting fortunes all around her – and the inevitability of those fortunes rising again, soon. But Amanda had also written a thesis on the Crash of 1929 and that meant she had no illusions about how soon the lines on the graphs might stop sinking and begin an upward climb once more. It probably wouldn't be next week, but certainly by Christmas. She swallowed on the knot of fear that swelled in her throat. Natalie stirred and stretched. Amanda closed her eyes and steadied her own breathing; she didn't feel like talking about this just yet, if ever. She

had no answers – barely had any sensible questions, if she were honest – and Natalie’s insatiable curiosity for gossip was wearing thin at this particularly unnerving time.

“I know you’re awake,” Natalie said and slid her arm across Amanda’s belly. “What are you thinking about?”

Amanda shifted slightly and stretched. “Nothing much, just staring into space wondering what it’s all about.”

“You and a million others. What are you up to today?”

“Trying to hang on to my job, I think.”

“As if, babe, as if. You’re a star; it’ll be cool.” And Natalie had given Amanda’s leg a squeeze before she slipped back to deep untroubled sleep. And Amanda lay still and alone and tried to avoid further consideration of what the day might bring.

Now, just a few hours on, here she was, flipping the heavy cream paper of Dennis’s briefer than brief note round and around between clumsy fingers. Amanda had taken the note with her when she answered its peremptory summons and continued to hold it as Dennis tried hard to look her in the eyes while telling her that although he personally was really, really sorry, they were going to have to let her go.

It was such a mundane, over-used and dishonest phrase, Amanda thought as her stomach turned cold as ice.

“Let me go,” she murmured, straight away picturing a heavy ball and chain at her ankle from which she would – today – be liberated. “That’s nice.” It was an unusual response she realized, and she smiled at a plainly surprised Dennis.

He cleared his throat and tugged at the knot of his tie, stared at his blotter and then swallowed, audibly, before saying in a hoarse voice, “So, you’re okay about this Amanda? Not going to throw a hissy fit or anything?”

Amanda was irritated somewhere toward the front of her mind. Aside from the inappropriate use of the frivolous term when he’d just told one of the company’s hitherto most valuable assets that she was being dumped overboard, she was not the hissy fit type and he of all people should know that. But maybe it was he who was the more uncomfortable of the two and his words were evidence of it.

“Me? I don’t think so, Dennis. Not my style.” She smiled down at him; the corner of his left eye began to twitch. “How awful for you to have to do this Dennis. I thought there were special guys called in to perform the executions.”

Dennis's grin was less a twitch and more a spasm; he shifted his pen on the blotter and Amanda saw that his hands were trembling.

"Oh no! Godfrey wanted it to be done the eFrères way. You know – the personal touch." He tried grinning some more but it didn't really work.

"How sweet," Amanda said softly. "I guess the Lehman's people felt so much worse than I do." She squared her shoulders. "How long have I got to get out of here?" She asked, thinking of the scenes on the TV news of executives being frog-marched from buildings on ten minutes' notice, carrying containers of pathetic belongings.

"Take as long as you like Amanda," he said, smiling with a sad tic at the corner of his left eye. "But if you could clear your desk asap that would be real good."

Amanda smiled back, this time with real amusement at the contradiction of the two parts of what he'd just told her. But the smile vanished instantly at his next words.

"Carmel Morrow will be collecting security passes and cell phones later and if you'd just sign a little release that would be cool."

Amanda instantly stopped twirling the note between her fingers and slipped it into the folder of papers that had already been on his desk when she walked into the room. The terms and conditions of her severance, entitlements and cash payout were detailed inside, on more sheets of thick eFrères issue paper. The zeroes told her immediately that it took into account a year's salary, her next due bonus, vacation allowances and a further \$100,000 that Dennis had described as "a token of our wish for privacy and respect for our staff." The documents were signed by Godfrey Nielsen and witnessed by Carmel. That latter signature kick-started Amanda's motor.

"Right. Okay, well I better move. I have things to do. Can I take it the dollars will be electronically transferred today?"

"Sure thing, Amanda." Dennis swallowed and pulled at his collar. Amanda stuck out her right hand and Dennis peered at it as if it might bite or explode before tentatively taking it in his. They shook hands and Amanda was awfully aware of his cold and clammy palm. There were beads of sweat on his top lip and his watering eyes pleaded with her for understanding and forgiveness.

Amanda grinned. "Cheer up Dennis, it hasn't happened to you. Yet!" And she left his office for the last time with her head high and an icy knot of humiliation in her gut.

Having surveyed the events of the morning to that moment to her satisfaction, Amanda fed the historic note through her shredder and watched the strands fall into the recycling bin. It was just after 7.30; if she moved she could be gone before the mob arrived and certainly before Carmel came calling; or before the phone started ringing and her media buddies began nosing around. She turned on the desk computer and downloaded her contacts onto a USB stick, along with a copy of her personal file and notes. She knew better than to start deleting files: any IT goon could retrieve them in five minutes, which was why she had always been careful to keep anything even vaguely tricky on her own MacBook Air and remote from the bank's system.

She looked about her office and registered, with only minimal surprise, that she had very little to take with her to represent virtually every waking moment of the past three years. It was an elegant but impersonal room. The two artworks on the walls were leased and would undoubtedly be returned to wherever anytime soon. She opened the desk drawers one by one and fed the contents through the shredder. In the top drawer was a box of pens of her preferred nib thickness and blue ink color, beside it was a manicure kit and bottle of frosty pink nail polish. She scooped both into the Alexander Wang tote along with a small clear plastic box of multi-colored paperclips alongside the 'Air and its power cord. Finally, she took up a pen and a sheet of house issue notepaper that bore her name and wrote, "I, Amanda C McIntyre, have no further call on nor interest in Elleron Frères, its staff or clientele. September 29, 2008." She smiled as she signed it and wondered whether Carmel would experience even the tiniest twinge at what she had written. *Probably not, she's hardly the sentimental type*, said her infrequently consulted inner sensible self.

Finally Amanda took her electronic staff security card on its lanyard from around her neck and laid it beside the note. She struggled for a moment with the back of the BlackBerry before it gave in and allowed itself to be opened. She managed to pry out the battery without chipping her nail polish and removed the sim-card. The Blackberry itself was clean of all personal numbers and text messages: a nightly habit she was pleased she had long ago adopted. She placed the phone on the note, put the sim-card through the shredder and got to her feet. It was 7.42 am and she was ready to go. *Indeed*, she thought, *I have been let go*.

"Let's get outta here," she said aloud and did.

Leaving the building with just her tote bag on her shoulder, her purse under her arm and a deliberately carefree step had been the ideal way to exit. She was able to pass even her closer acquaintances with a cheery greeting and some meaningless banter as if on the way to collect coffee and bagels. She headed for the subway in a delicious burst of pale lemony sunshine and wondered in passing who else would be getting their marching orders this morning. It was a helluva thing and she knew, intuitively, that it had yet to sink in.

“I’ve been fired,” she said experimentally and aloud, and then more deliberately, “I – have – been – fired.” It didn’t make much impression on her sense of disbelief but she did recognize that she was, out of the blue, no longer concerned about being seen talking to herself. “And I still have a sense of humor, that’s the main thing,” she said to a fire hydrant. Yet sensations of nausea and barely contained panic rose and fell in her throat. Before descending to the subway she bought a copy of the *Times*. It had been years since she’d done that other than on the weekend. Skimming online at her desk while waiting for the digests to ping into her inbox from the media department had been her regular, spoon-fed method of news consumption.

“Buying my own paper, wow!” Automatically she reached into her purse for her BlackBerry and rummaged for a minute before remembering it was no longer there.

“Omigod, I’ll have to get a new cell phone *and* pay for it!”

Natalie *would* be amused. She ran down the subway stairs and, while waiting for an uptown train, began to think of all the other things she would now have to do. The first being to get a job, of course. For a moment the idea didn’t concern her that much, but then a new thought came galloping over the horizon. Her heart dropped into her shoes at the mental picture of how many former hotshots all over New York were having the same sick feelings of disbelief and bewilderment. And as the train began its rattling journey uptown, she sat in a corner seat experiencing another new sensation: idly watching New Yorkers go about their business, preoccupied faces deep in magazines, books, papers, iPods or thought; all apparently with a sense of purpose that Amanda recognized but now did not share. Her stomach was performing somersaults as her mood swung back and forth between elation and fright. For the first time since grade school Amanda C McIntyre (“middle C is for Charlotte but do not even *think* about calling me Charlie”) was without immediate and clear goals.

And as the subway train rattled onward, awareness of this odd new state steadily seeped through the numbing fog of shock that had enveloped Amanda since her brief audience with Dennis. By the time the train reached 86<sup>th</sup> St she was feeling more than slightly sick and light-headed and it occurred to her that food might be a good idea. By this time on a normal working day she would have had a large decaf soy latte and picked at a bran blueberry muffin. *But today is not a normal day*, she thought, *today is – she chuckled aloud – the first day of the rest of my life, because every cloud has a silver lining. A stitch in time is what happens if you go jogging right after breakfast; many hands make a mess; a bird in the hand can be a bit sticky; and any number of other fridge magnets.*

She crossed Lexington and began strolling the one and a half blocks towards her building. First she would go home and change into something casual and comforting; next she would walk a further half block to the diner and have a proper breakfast for the first time in ... who knows how long. It felt like a good plan, if unusually modest. *Then I must call Mom*, she thought. *Oh God, what am I going to tell her? Maybe I'll leave it a few days. But she'll see it on TV. I have to talk to her. Oh God.*

Walking into the lobby of the apartment building at such an hour on a weekday felt unnatural. As she passed the doorman's den this was confirmed as he caught sight of her and popped his head around the corner. Nothing escaped his attention in the building, especially people going in and out.

"Hey, Miz McIntyre, you ailin or summin?" His bushy black brows knit a row of concern.

"Nuh, I'm good Joe. Just uh ..." Amanda grinned and shrugged as she moved on through the lobby to the inner doors and turned the corner out of his sight and walked towards the elevators. "Shit," she said aloud as she waited for one of the two cars to creak and groan down from the upper floors. "I have to get my story together."

It would have to wait though, because from above came familiar sounds of strife between dog and owner. Amanda stepped back and lowered her tote bag protectively in front of her ankles, knowing what was coming. The gates opened and out of the car bounded an ancient, arthritic and ridiculously cantankerous King Charles spaniel. He lunged at Amanda and she took another backwards step, accustomed as she was to the elderly attack pooch from across her landing.



“Puppy, Puppy,” boomed his owner ineffectually. “Come here Puppy. You naughty, naughty boy.” The handsome elderly woman batted at Puppy with her walking stick, but with little conviction.

“Hey Gloria, stop whacking the damn dog,” Amanda laughed as she dodged the partially sighted but wildly determined predator. “Put him on his leash for heaven’s sake, that’ll fix him.”

“Ah! Of course, dear – *so* sorry – Puppy! Come here. Come here at once!”

Puppy paid no attention but growled and charged again at Amanda, his unclipped claws snicketting on the marble floor as he skidded about her in what he imagined was hot pursuit. Amanda dropped her tote and purse, sidestepped another lunge and grabbed the smelly little beast and whisked him into the air where he wriggled and snuffled in shock and disbelief.

“There you are Gloria. God he needs a bath. Phew!”

She held out the growling, almost toothless fiend while his owner struggled with the catch of the leash.

“I’m so sorry dear, he’s never usually like this, as you know. I can’t imagine what’s got into him.” The catch was finally attached to the collar ring and Amanda set down the struggling, snapping dog on his madly paddling paws.

“Nonsense Gloria, who’re you kidding? You know damn well he’s a killer attack menace,” said Amanda, hefting her tote onto her shoulder, her purse under her arm as she stepped around the aged pair. “One day that nasty old mutt will gum someone to death, then you’ll be in trouble.”

“Oh! Don’t say that, Amanda. Oh dear me, I know you’re right, but he is so sweet, and I do love him.”

“Yes Gloria, if you say so. Now have a lovely walk, both of you.”

Amanda kept a close eye on Puppy and stepped into the elevator car, pressed the button for the fifth floor and relaxed as the gates creaked slowly toward each other. “Bye Gloria, bye Puppy. Have a great day. Go maul a giant mastiff why don’t you,” she called merrily as the elevator jerked into life and began its unhurried ascent.

The sounds of rabid growling and gentle remonstrance slowly faded as the elevator car passed the second, then third and fourth floors. It gathered itself with a squeak and a jerk for the serious business of stopping at the fifth floor and managed the maneuver quite well. The elevator was the same vintage as the building: solid, well made and beautifully proportioned. Just like her grandmother, whose apartment

it had once been. Amanda liked its old-fashioned, reassuring qualities for all those reasons even though Natalie was forever angling for something edgier and downtown.

“When I get out of work the last thing I want is edgy,” Amanda had said the last time they’d argued about the Upper Eastside. “I sit on a knife edge all day. Edgy at home is not where I want to be.”

And gusty sighs had irritated her as Natalie wandered disconsolately from room to room before settling back into begrudgingly enjoying the space and honky comforts of Amanda’s home. Even Natalie had once admitted that a cute apartment downtown would definitely not include her very own studio with natural north light. But she did find the building and the area rather embarrassing and almost never invited her art crowd friends home.

Today, Amanda remembered, Natalie had a project happening. Not – in Natalie’s words – “out in bourgie-land” which was her description of how, once a week during each academic semester, she grumpily dressed semi-appropriately for work as an art history lecturer in a nearby private girls’ college. Amanda encouraged it because it gave Natalie independence and her own cash in her wallet and meant, Natalie agreed, that she didn’t feel so bad about Amanda paying all the bills and supporting her nascent career as a mixed media performance artist.

Some of this flitted through Amanda’s mind as she rummaged in her purse for the keys. It was a relief to know the apartment would be empty and she could begin to work out what was happening to her world in peace and without interruption. Amanda needed to know what the peculiar numbness in her head and stomach really meant before she could start describing her state of mind to anyone else, let alone Natalie. Her girlfriend’s relentless fascination with the inner mind and its allegedly subconscious motivations was hard to take at the best of times. Amanda slid the key into the deadlock and turned it.

The heavy door sighed open and she stepped into the spacious entryway with an immediate sense of relief. The perfume of beeswax and lavender still lingered from Manuelita’s weekly visit. Each Friday she came to hum and sometimes sing actual songs for a couple of hours while she sprayed the furniture with polish and occasionally rubbed it in. Mainly she lightly mopped the timber floors and made herself many cups of coffee and sandwiches. She called it “Me cleaning” but, for some mysterious reason, it rarely included doing anything to the kitchen or bathroom and never both in the same visit.

Amanda checked her reflection in the cheval mirror and grinned experimentally at the almost beautiful, freckled nose in the almost beautiful face that looked back at her. *Pretty good for a fired person*, she thought. She raked her fingers through her shaggy blonde hair and shook her head to reassert the tousled look. Then she heard a sound and froze, hands in mid-air, and stared hard at herself in the mirror, dark brown eyes widening. After a few seconds' silence when she had just began the thought – *No, I'm imagining it* – there it was again. And it was unmistakable and not imagined.

*Omigod*, Amanda's already icy stomach lurched and turned upside down. *This is not happening to me. This is so not happening to me and surely not at this time of the morning*. A long, keening yet dramatic moan, answered her. It was coming, quite distinctly, from the direction of Natalie's "studio" and it was the sound of sexual ecstasy; there was no mistaking it. Like an automaton, Amanda began to walk slowly across the parquet floor of the hallway, through the archway and into the living room. It was an elegant and uncluttered space with two comfortable cream leather sofas facing each other across a low, travertine-topped coffee table. Paintings and books filled the wall spaces between long windows that faced onto Lexington Avenue. At the far end of the room the door to Natalie's room was slightly ajar and Amanda walked towards it as if propelled by an unseen hand at her back. At the door, she paused and listened, simultaneously fascinated and horrified at the rhythmic moans emanating from the room. Then there came a squeal and a fey, little girl voice Amanda did not recognise.

"Oh do it to me! Do it harder with your great big cock! Come on! Fuck me harder, you great big bad wolf. Fuck me harder!" In answer there was a throaty roar and grunt that Amanda did recognise, if only marginally. She stood stock-still, staring at the door, momentarily unwilling – and unable – to picture what might be happening on the other side. She was mesmerized and appalled as the moans continued, growing louder and wilder with each answering animal grunt. Finally, she could stand it no longer and, with her blood hissing in her ears and her mouth dry with rising anger and dread, she reached out and pushed at the door. It swung silently inwards and the tableau that opened up in front of her was instantly burned into her retinas like a flash snapshot.

The blinds on the room's two large windows were down but nevertheless the room was brightly lit. In the centre of the floor was an extravagantly furry white rug

that she had never seen before. On either side of the rug were photographic studio lights on spindly tripods. Between her and the rug was a video camera on its own tripod, its red LED winking. And on the rug, seemingly arranged so that the camera had the best possible view, was a pair of women, one atop the other. The one beneath was naked but for a blue floral tattoo on her thigh; she also had long peroxide-blond hair strewn wildly across the white fur; her pale plump legs were clasped high around the waist of the woman above her; her eyes were closed and her red painted mouth was open in an unmistakable “oh” of rapture.

The woman on top, contrastingly darker skinned and sinewy, was Natalie. Amanda knew the body too well to be distracted by the peculiar leather wolf-like mask that all but covered her face. Natalie too was naked but for a black leather harness strapped around her hips. It culminated in a large bright purple dildo that she was thrusting hard and rhythmically between the blonde woman’s raised legs. Natalie’s thigh muscles were straining as her neat, tight, creamy-white buttocks lunged in and out; and her back was arched so that her gleaming chestnut, beaded extensions spread across it from her dramatically thrown back head. Behind the camera, occasionally peering into the viewfinder screen and adjusting the picture, was yet another woman Amanda had never seen before. Sitting in the room’s one easy chair was a balding, buzz-cut man whose right hand was busy on his erection while in his left hand was a cell phone into which he was muttering. In one disbelieving flash Amanda realized what she was looking at and before she could stop herself she had spoken. Except her words came out as a strangled croak and what she said was embarrassingly mundane.

“Jesus Christ, what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

The blonde woman’s eyes opened and she stared straight at Amanda before letting out a high-pitched squeal. Then, in a gesture that would later (much, much later) cause Amanda to feel a kind of crazed amusement, her hands flew to her jiggling breasts to cover her nipples from Amanda’s gaze. For another long moment Natalie continued her frenzied pumping until the blonde batted at her head and shoulders with plump hands, squealing, “Sweetie! Nattie! Stop!”

Then Natalie’s eyes opened wide in the slits of the mask as she caught sight of Amanda and pulled back from the blonde woman; disentangling herself from the pale waving legs. Her movement disengaged the blue dildo with a cartoon-like “schploop!” and the blonde shrieked again and grabbed at her crotch. Natalie sat back

on her haunches and Amanda stared at her lover, open-mouthed, and heard herself begin to giggle hysterically. Wagging roguishly from beneath Natalie's heaving belly and breasts, the glistening wet and amazingly bright purple organ was bobbing and swaying, seemingly still searching for the place from which it had just been wrenched. The woman behind the camera turned to stare at Amanda and the man in the easy chair dropped his phone and leapt to his feet, so there were suddenly two erections waving at her.

"Holy crap!" Amanda whispered, barely able to believe her eyes or to know whether she was laughing or crying.

"Oh shit," whispered Natalie, her breath coming in convulsive gasps and her voice strangely muffled and echoing behind the long snout of the mask. "What the fuck're you doing here?"

Amanda snorted and sobbed on her laughter, almost speechless. Almost. "Ha!" She spat furiously. "I live here, remember? And not much point asking what the fuck you're doing, is there?"

The blonde squealed again as the waving purple appendage nudged hopefully at her knees. She sat up, one arm still clutched across her breasts, and struggled to reach for her clothes where they lay on the end of the daybed. *My grandmother's antique Baltic pine daybed*, Amanda's mind registered. Still Natalie knelt, the disconcerted shock in her eyes suggesting she had been momentarily robbed of speech and thought.

"For God's sake stop pointing that thing at her Natalie," Amanda heard herself say. "And you look ridiculous with that Pluto mask on, take it off." She turned her attention momentarily to the man who was still goggling at her. "You look ridiculous too. Put that thing away and get out of my apartment. Now."

Natalie looked at each person in the room in turn as if seeing them for the first time, then down at the jiggling blue penis. She pulled the mask off her face and looked at Amanda, her mouth opening and closing like a goldfish out of water.

"Amanda, this isn't what you think it is ..." she tried.

Amanda heard herself laughing. It was a harsh sound, but it was definitely laughter. "Is that so? Well. *Do* tell me what it is, then? A post-feminist intervention into the patriarchal ascendancy? Or just a porno movie? Are you going to make some money at last? Huh? *That* would be something."

“God you’re a bitch, and you’re ridiculous,” Natalie spat, hurling the mask across the room. But the shiny, realistically veined if improbably colored organ that continued to bounce merrily between her legs hampered her efforts at dignified fury.

“That’s rich, coming from the last of the big blue hot rods,” Amanda hissed. “I am going to change my clothes and get out of here and when I come home I expect your movie crew and this skanky ho to be long gone. Do you understand?”

The blonde squealed again, this time there was fury in it. “How dare you,” she shrieked. “I’m an artiste. Tell her Nattie!”

Amanda almost choked but laughed instead, “Well sweetie, I don’t care what you are--the message is the same. Get your peachy great artistic ass out of my apartment, *now*.”

Amanda glanced at Natalie who was struggling with the straps of the harness and cursing under her breath. “As for you, Superdick, I’m not sure I want to see you here either right now.” Amanda turned away from the scene and walked, in a daze, through the apartment to the main bedroom and managed to close the door and snib the lock before bursting into tears.

She stood in the center of the room for a few minutes, her fist pressed to her mouth as she struggled to smother gulping sobs. Her thoughts were scattered by shock and disbelief and her stomach was rebelling against dread at the fresh chasm of unknowns that had abruptly opened before her. She sat on the edge of the bed and reached for a Kleenex, and then another and another as her body shook with the effects of fear and the impact of her world collapsing around her.

“Oh Mom,” she whispered aloud, “I wish you were here.” The realization that at this moment, at the age of thirty-two, all she wanted was her mother’s arms kept the tears flowing freely and she fell back, shoved her face into the pillow to muffle the sound and howled. The pain and fear that coursed through her was something she had experienced only once before. She remembered it clearly all over again and the memory of her grandmother’s slow, cruel death made her cry so hard she could barely breathe.

“Oh Gramma,” she gulped into the pillow. “Oh Mom,” she sobbed. “I think I’ve really fucked up somehow and I don’t understand. It’s so unfair.” She whimpered her distress and bewilderment into the duck down pillow that accommodatingly soaked up the torrents of tears until she could cry no more. Finally she sat up, took a deep breath, emptied the tissue box in trying to clear her nose and walked, zombie-

like, into the bathroom to splash her face with cold water. She looked at the red-eyed, mascara-streaked face in the mirror. She shook her head, trying to clear it of the haze of incredulity that had made her mind opaque.

“Why me?” she asked the bleak eyes that stared back at her. “Why now? What the hell?” No answer came from the dazed reflection. Again she shook her head and patted her face dry with a soft hand towel, then blew her nose in it, hard, and threw it in the bathtub. She took half a dozen deep breaths and felt calmer, but still pole-axed. She ran the cold water again and held her wrists in the flow. It was soothing. She inhaled deeply and slowly and stood up, feeling marginally better.

“Okay, let’s move,” she told her reflection and tried a grin; it was shaky but almost there. “When the going gets tough the tough get breakfast.” She walked into her closet and pulled from their shelves a pair of low cut J jeans, a fine knit black tank top and a soft, well-worn, oversize pale gray Yale hoodie. She kicked off her shoes, stripped off pantyhose, discarded the Carolina Herrera jacket and pants where she stood and pulled on her comfort gear and finally, red lambs’ wool socks and a pair of ultra light Nikes. Immediately she felt more secure, despite the indeterminate queasiness that continued to churn her stomach. She kicked her discarded clothes and shoes towards the laundry basket.

“Later,” she told her reproving tidy self. “Right now I want out of here.” She stalked back down the corridor to the living room. From Natalie’s workroom she could hear hushed but urgent and furious voices.

“Out of here. All of you. Now!” She yelled angrily; then took her purse, keys and a pair of mirrored RayBans from the hall table and left the apartment, slamming the door behind her.

The neighborhood diner, the Starlight Grill, was run by the Kumars, an Indian immigrant family whose elder members spoke with the distinctive sing-song Bollywood accent and precise English that Amanda loved to listen to; by contrast the New York City-born generation sounded like any other American kids, but polite and respectful to their parents – which was the cultural give-away – Amanda had once observed to the family’s matriarch.

Amanda slid into in a side booth where she could watch the street as well as the goings-on in the diner. It was the least chic thing she did these days and she

always came alone. It was something that made her think of her childhood and of a life she had left far behind...

"What'll you have, honey?" Eleanor had slid into the booth across from Amanda and pulled off her gloves and scarf. She stuffed them into her jacket pocket and slipped the jacket from her shoulders. Amanda was still snuggled up in her high school duffel coat; the promise of the diner's steamy-window warmth wasn't enough to beat the winter chill, yet.

"Hot chocolate, eggs over easy, home fries and toast," she said promptly, adding "Please, Mom," as her mother's right eyebrow rose.

Eleanor sat back against the vinyl seat and let out a long, contented sigh. "Sounds good to me," she said and repeated the order to the waitress who had remained behind the counter, fully expecting the usual from the McIntyres. "Feel like some fruit?" Eleanor asked Amanda but her daughter wrinkled her nose at the idea.

"It's too cold, Mom. Fruit is for summer. Unless it's your canned apricots all stewed up with cinnamon and cream on top."

"Mmmm, good idea, we could have some for dessert this evening."

"Uh, I'm going to the movies with Jess," Amanda said quickly, carefully avoiding the flash of disappointment that crossed Eleanor's face.

"Right, okay honey. I guess you're really looking forward to seeing her."

Amanda flushed and shook her head. "We're just going to the movies," she said sharply. That she couldn't wait to see Jess and hold hands with her in the back row was not something she was willing to admit to Eleanor; or even to herself, really.

Eleanor had sighed and shrugged. "Sure honey. How about bringing Jess home for supper after the movies?"

Amanda had stuck out her lower lip and said, "Maybe." But she knew she would not. At fifteen she was not about to share Jess or her secret life with her mother.

Amanda turned away from the memory with a sudden wave of sadness. *I was a bitch to my mother*, she thought. *I know I was a teenager, but I was a bitch*. With determination, she brought herself back to the present and the bacon-scented warmth of the diner. The Starlight was a classic local hangout and virtually everyone on the block came by at least once each morning, if only for a takeout coffee or one of the



house specialties: a fried egg and bacon sandwich with a homemade sambal that was delicious and sinus-clearing all at once.

“Today is a special day,” Amanda told her friend Parveen when the daughter of the establishment strolled over to take her order. “Today I would like scrambled eggs, hash browns and Canadian bacon with some of your mom’s sambal on the side. And coffee with cream, plus a pineapple juice to start.”

“Wow, you got something to celebrate?” Parveen leaned her elbow on the booth side and grinned down at Amanda mirror-shaded eyes, hands thrust deep into the front pouch pocket of a navy blue striped apron. She was a luscious, amber-eyed, café au lait-skinned twenty one-year-old grad student at NYU when not helping out in the family business. And, since her nineteenth birthday, she had been trying to get Amanda to help her out in deciding whether or not she might be a lesbian. Despite the temptation, Amanda had managed to avoid this very clear and present danger and maintain an easy friendship.

“Well, you could say that,” Amanda said, she took off the RayBans and set them carefully on the table, then looked up deliberately, knowing that Parveen wouldn’t miss her puffy, red-rimmed eyes. “It’s certainly a first anyway. I got fired this morning and arrived home to find Natalie doing a faux blonde on a faux fur rug with a dirty great bright blue dildo.”

“Wow!” Parveen’s eyes widened to saucers. “No shit, it’s like for real. Yeah?”

“I’m not sure whether you’re talking about what the news is calling ‘the looming economic crisis’ or Natalie wearing a big blue dick, but that actually was quite real – in a rubbery sort of way.”

Parveen looked at her with expressions of horror and amusement fighting for supremacy in her huge dark eyes. Finally she failed to suppress a burst of giggles but also looked dismayed, all at once.

“Holy crap,” she whispered.

“Funny, that’s exactly what I said,” Amanda sighed and shivered. The adrenaline that had been keeping her going was seeping away and without warning she began to feel faint and very much like gagging on the sourness of fright and distress. Parveen saw the blood drain from her friend’s face and squeezed her shoulder.

“Hey, hold on. I’ll be back with your juice and coffee, don’t go away.”

Amanda stared down at her hands, clasped loosely in front of her on the table. They were good hands; she liked them with their strong, long fingers with manicured oval-shaped nails, painted frosty pink. Her thumb joints were prominent so there was an interesting angle to the edge of her hand when she splayed her fingers. On her left pinkie she wore a heavy gold signet ring with an inset of polished onyx bearing her initials. On her wrist was a mid-size Rolex in white gold and brushed steel on a gold and steel linked bracelet. It was low key and few of her acquaintances – whose idea of a watch was a monster Tag Heuer waterproofed to the floor of the Marianas Trench – ever noticed it.

Amanda glanced at the watch and saw the hands pointing at ten of ten. A lot had happened already and it wasn't even mid-morning. She let out a long deep breath and considered this as Parveen returned with a tumbler of pineapple juice and a steaming cup of coffee. She slipped into the booth opposite Amanda and laid her order pad and pen on the table between them. Her dark eyes scanned Amanda's face and her eyebrows rose in a mix of questioning and bewilderment.

"I don't know what to say Amanda, I mean, shit. Where do you start?"

Amanda shrugged, "Not sure. I've never been fired before, so I guess that's an interesting thing to get my head around. And I've never walked in on a girlfriend while she was screwing another woman with a big blue dick."

Parveen snorted on another laugh, "Does that mean you've had experience of other colors?"

Despite her state of shock and distress, Amanda also laughed. "Very funny missy. No I have not. My God, you should have seen it." She waved her arm back and forth, hand clenched in a fist, "It was like the Cookie Monster, but not furry or cute, you know?"

Parveen giggled again and clutched her hand across her mouth. "Wild. Oh wow. Blue!"

"Blue," Amanda confirmed. "But otherwise amazingly realistic. Possibly even modeled from life. If you could get a horse to stand still that long, of course."

Parveen hooted with laughter. "You are wicked Amanda. Your heart might be breaking, but you sure as hell are wicked. And funny."

From the rear of the diner a bell dinged three times and Parveen's mother called from the kitchen hatch, "Parveen! You sitting? You working? You come fetch this breakfast you naughty naughty girl!"

“Coming Mom, be right there.” Parveen leapt to her feet. She grinned at Amanda, “I’ll be back.” And before she raced off to the kitchen hatch she gave Amanda’s shoulder another friendly yet tender squeeze. It was a reassuring touch. Amanda appreciated it so much it brought tears to her eyes. She pinched them tight shut and swallowed hard, breathing deeply and slowly to dispel the lump of sadness that was growing in her chest and threatening her throat.

Moments later Parveen was back and setting down a thick white china platter. The scent of sweet bacon and fresh toast hit Amanda’s nostrils and she licked her lips in anticipation. Eating real food was a luxury she rarely enjoyed.

“Oh wow, I am so looking forward to this,” she said, inhaling deeply the aromas rising from the plate.

“Jelly? Peanut butter? More coffee?”

“None of that yet, but I’d appreciate your company if your mom won’t bite your ass.”

Parveen laughed. “She’s cool. I’ll just have to keep an eye on Mr Edelstein, you know how he loves his coffee topped up.”

Amanda glanced across to the window booth where an elderly man, in an ancient but immaculate three piece brown pinstripe suit and thick horn-rimmed spectacles, sat watching the street while intermittently returning to his copy of the *Times* and the crossword puzzle.

“So,” said Parveen. “Let’s leave Natalie and her ... um ... whatever for a minute and tell me what’s happening on Wall Street. I’ve been reading the news and watching TV and I don’t get it. Have you really been fired?”

“The technical term is ‘let go’ actually,” said Amanda, tucking into a mouthful of scrambled egg, a sliver of sweet bacon and a speck of the fiery red sauce. “They let me go. They’re going to be letting a lot of folks go today I reckon.”

“Is it stupid to ask why? What did you do wrong?”

Amanda grinned, shrugged and shook her head, her mouth full. “Wow, that sambal is good.” She took a long drink of the pineapple juice. “Your mom should market it. Anyway, no it’s not a stupid question because right now not many people have anything but stupid answers. Buffett, Soros and Volcker figured there was something going down, but as usual nobody was listening. There was too much money being made for anyone to listen, me included. And money talks. Money always talks and this century it’s been yelling the place down until everyone got

deafened and dazzled by it. Including me again, if I'm being honest. What we were doing didn't make sense. It was like a house of cards, but not even that well built, y'know?"

Parveen was looking mystified and shook her head. "But all the economists have been predicting steady growth. I've been reading up."

Amanda nodded and chomped on a crunchy corner of buttered toast. "I know, but what you have to realize is that economists are like weather forecasters. If they say it's going to be fine you should probably take your umbrella." She waved her fork at Parveen. "Last month, when all this started to hot up, I got curious and did a little exercise just for fun. I did a comparison of what the major economists predicted on interest rates each year of this decade – as in this century – against what's actually happened. Guess how many times they got it right." She drained her coffee mug and set it down as if to emphasize her question.

Parveen frowned and shrugged. "Dunno. Two – three times? A dozen?"

Amanda held up her thumb and forefinger in a circle and squinted at Parveen through it. "Zero, none, nicht, nada, nil, never. Didn't get it right once. They said rates would go up – they went down. They said they'd go down – they went up. Not once were they right. It's amazing. I don't know why I didn't check before."

Parveen sat back, her frown even deeper. "Okay, so they don't really know zip, but I still don't get it. What's happening? Why you?"

Amanda grinned. "Why *not* me? Bear Stearns and Lehmann Brothers were on the edge, but people were saying they'd never go down. And they're gone. The earthquake from that is what's rattled me loose from eFrères. The dead turkeys have come home to roost."

"Yuk, what a terrible thought. But this can't get worse, can it?"

Amanda shrugged and picked up the last morsel of crispy bacon in her fingers. "Well the pundits have been saying no, so I'd say that pretty much guarantees it'll get heaps worse before it gets better."

"Like a crash? Like 1929? Nah. You're shittin' me!"

Amanda shrugged or shivered – she wasn't sure which – and nibbled on the sliver of bacon. "Debt and panic. That was 1929. Debt's okay just so long as nobody panics--that's the theory and it's worked fine so far. Then there was Drexel Burnham Lambert and Michael Milken – you should look that one up. If you saw it at the movies you'd never believe it. That was debt and crime. This time it's more than debt

and a different kind of crime. This time the crime is a moral and political one and it goes back a long way and started with all good intentions. Debt isn't simply about owing money anymore. You know anything about derivatives?"

Parveen shook her head.

"No, well I'm not surprised, even *we* don't know the half of it and we've been selling them so hard it'd make your eyes water. Now it looks like it's more than eyes watering; it's like the Hoover Dam has sprung a leak, although it'll stabilize. It shouldn't spill over into the rest of the economy, although there's going to be some collateral damage--like me and God knows who else."

Parveen looked relieved. "Okay, so there's going to be a bit of a shakeout and then it's business as usual?"

"That's the way it works." Amanda didn't sound convinced in her own ears, but could think of nothing else to say. Anyway, she didn't want to think about it too hard just yet.

"What happens next?"

Amanda grinned. "I get another cup of coffee, I go buy myself a cell phone. Then I make a few calls and see what's hangin'."

Parveen grinned back and stood up. "Sure. Like coming up."

## FOUR

The Day – as Amanda decided to name it – was one of the strangest and most painful she had ever experienced. She drank her second coffee, paid the check and savored a reassuring hug from Parveen and cheery wave from Mrs Kumar before stepping out onto Lexington Avenue and the disinterested morning. Parveen's younger brother, the self-styled cool dude Ashok, had volunteered directions to Best Buy Mobile on Third and, in honor of her new status in having all the time in the world, Amanda decided to walk the fourteen blocks downtown. It also gave her time to try to think. And trying to think was complicated by the vision of Natalie that kept flashing in front of her eyes.

Every time the waggling blue penis filled her inner vision Amanda felt a roiling wave of fury and disbelief rise. She and Natalie had been together almost three

years and Natalie had moved in a year into the relationship. It had seemed perfect, as far as Amanda was concerned. She had the money, the apartment and the soaring career; Natalie had very little money, a cockroach-infested shoebox in BedStuy and was a talented but struggling artist. They had met at an exhibition opening in a momentarily fashionable loft gallery where the wine was almost as bad as the video installations; and Natalie had picked her up. That evening Natalie had looked like an intriguing cross between two kinds of angel – Botticelli's and Hell's. When she suggested they leave and go somewhere that served wine rather than vinegar, Amanda agreed right away. And that was how it began.

As she walked along Lexington, head down, watching the steady one-two of her Nikes' white toecaps, Amanda examined the parade of feelings and memories from those two years and slowly began to wonder. At the grand old age of twenty-nine she had been unique among her friends in never having lived with a lover – until Natalie came along. And it was not as if Natalie really pushed the idea, she was a free spirit, she said, and liked her independence. But somehow or other, bit-by-bit, she had kind of moved in. First of all, it had been too inconvenient for Amanda to make the possibly life- and jewelery-threatening subway journey to Natalie's rat hole on anything like a regular basis. Then, having got there, the tiny apartment with its ancient plumbing and lack of a proper bathroom had given her the shudders.

"You are such a honky," Natalie had laughed when Amanda squealed and leapt clean out of bed the first time a cockroach scuttled across the pillows. Amanda had not responded immediately because she was too busy rubbing her leg. The horrified leap had taken her right across the room and she'd cracked her shin on the edge of a bike pedal. It was a hefty black and silver mountain bike that Natalie loved to race about on, and it took up much of the floor space. Amanda later discovered just how much space when, in the early hours, she tried to navigate her way to the john in the dark and scraped her other shin on another part of the machine.

Amanda checked her whereabouts. Eight blocks down and a good way still to go. Nevertheless, she was beginning to feel almost mellow and even, for the occasional flashing moment, all but okay. She had not been out and about on the city streets – in daylight during the working week – for more than six years and she was experiencing odd little bursts of enjoying it, as if she were playing hooky. She came upon a display of fruit and vegetables under a cheery yellow and white striped shop

awning and marveled at the color of brilliant red tomatoes arranged in a perfect pyramid in a wicker basket; and a wooden crate of gleaming speckled pink apples. She stopped to peer in the window of another small shop whose age-crackled, gold-painted sign told of an old-fashioned watchmaker and jeweler. In the window was a display of antique wristwatches. Amanda peered at them, enjoying the elegant faces and legendary names. Inside the shop, she spotted an elderly man bent over a brightly illuminated tray. He was working on the glittering innards of a pocket watch, spread out on faded black velvet. He looked up, aware of her gaze. A magnifying eyepiece obscured one eye but not his luxuriant white eyebrow; the other eye twinkled at her and he smiled. She smiled back and continued on her way. She watched a dog walker in a bright blue bomber jacket negotiate the diplomatic niceties of getting his three golden Labs and one yapping, dancing, peach-colored miniature poodle past an elderly man whose snuffling pug seemed to be even more futilely aggressive than old Puppy. Amanda laughed aloud at the sight and, taking her hands out of the front pouch of her hoodie, she began swinging her arms as she strode along the street. Her head was up, the chill breeze riffled her hair and much to her surprise, the thought crossed her mind that life was unexpectedly and inexplicably looking pretty good.

Life also took on a new and interesting turn when she finally reached the phone store. There she had the novel experience of buying her own phone and deciding what brand and how she would pay for it. Forty minutes later, she left the store with a kit of new toys that began with an iPhone and continued all the way through the accessory range from on-ear headphones to a neat Bose sound dock. Somehow, the iPhone signaled a new Amanda, she thought. Old corporate Amanda was BlackBerry Amanda; new, free as a bird Amanda would soon be swinging down the street listening to Beyoncé – or Beethoven – depending on her mood. First, however, she would have to plug the damn thing in and charge its little battery; and that meant going home.

Her heart sank at the thought and as she began the long hike back up Lexington she tried to analyze why. It gradually came to her that it was the video set-up and what it meant that bothered her more than anything. It was the intrusion into *her* apartment first and foremost, and then the realization that whether or not Natalie was an artist, the fact that she had actually been making a tacky porn movie there made her feel despondent. More than that, she felt naïve, stupid and humiliated. A

flare of anger coursed through her, then subsided; but as she thought about the scene, anger erupted again. How many porno movies had been made in her apartment when Natalie was supposedly engaged on an art project? How come she was always broke and playing the impoverished artist? How come she had made so few artworks but was always “working on a new concept”? It all began to make sense – the mysterious and secretive absences; the lock that had recently appeared on the “studio” door.

What kind of fool had she – Amanda McIntyre, Wall Street princess – been taken for? And what kind of fool had she – Amanda McIntyre, gullible dummy – proved herself to be? A sick feeling followed the flash of fury at the thought of Natalie fucking the blonde, but that dissipated with surprising speed, although the sick feeling remained in the pit of her stomach.

“Am I jealous? I don’t think so. How can I be jealous of *that*?” Amanda muttered out loud. She examined the various sensations and the unexpected sense of lightness that followed. It had, she recognized, everything to do with feeling detached from her grinding, relentless, scary-exciting job, and also feeling free – suddenly – of Natalie. She wondered whether it might be possible to retain the feeling. She sighed and walked on.

As she retraced her walk uptown, Amanda stopped at the store with the yellow striped awning and bought an apple. She polished the sweet-scented fruit on her leg and took a sumptuous, crunching bite. The juice ran down her chin and she wiped it away with her sleeve. The apple was as good as it looked: sweet, crisp and flavorful. She sucked at the juice as she chewed and walked and thought. There was an awareness coming over her mental horizon and it was that after the initial shock when she walked in on Natalie, the bitter-tasting emotions were evaporating. As she examined things more deeply Amanda began to suspect that she was possibly glad to be given an excuse to admit that she was no longer in love with Natalie. Even that – her stomach did a somersault as the idea crystallized – she might actually be glad to be rid of Natalie. And that she *did* want to be rid of her was now uppermost on her list of things to do; even clearer than the need to get a job.

*After all, she rationalized. I’ve got plenty of money. I can do without a job right now and I don’t need that bitch.*

By the time her building came into view Amanda was actually starting to feel twinges of guilt over the knowledge that she was neither hopelessly heartbroken nor miserably lovesick. But they were only twinges; the worst feeling was anger because



her pride had taken a severe bashing. She dropped the apple core in a trashcan and turned in to the lobby. Joe was still on duty and she stopped to check her mail.

“How you doing Joe?” she asked as he riffled through the contents of the fifth floor pigeonholes.

“Pretty good Miz McIntyre,” he said, sorting the envelopes into separate stacks. “And you?”

“I’m...” She paused and considered the truth for a second, then went on, “I’m pretty good too, thanks Joe. I got laid off this morning.”

His eyes widened and his mouth opened in a perfectly round “O” bracketed by a droopy black moustache. “You’re kidding me?”

“Nuh. Banks are in a bit of a fix right now. You watching TV?”

“Sure thing, follow the stock market of course, but I never thought ...” He glanced at the sheaf of envelopes he was about to hand her. They all had windows. They were all bills. “Sorry,” he said, grinning sheepishly.

“Never mind Joe. And you’re right, nobody ever thought,” said Amanda. “Least of all me, but hey! I’m always saying I could do with a vacation and this is the first day of it, and so far, I’m having a fine time! See ya later.” She tipped her forehead with the envelopes in a cheery salute and sauntered on her way. Her cheery skip almost succeeded in dispelling the icy feeling that was starting to lodge in the pit of her stomach. Almost. Once again Amanda’s thoughts turned unbidden to her mother; she really wanted to talk to her. She really wanted to be in Connecticut and not in Manhattan. And again, stupid tears threatened and her throat closed on the beginnings of a sob.

As Amanda turned the key and pushed open the front door her heart began to beat a little faster and a wave of nervous nausea rolled around her stomach. She swallowed on a dry mouth and stepped into the entryway. The obviously deep silence of the apartment told her there was no one else home, but she called out anyway.

“Natalie, you home?”

She walked into the living room and laid the bag of phone goodies on the dining table, dropped her keys in the glass bowl on her grandmother’s elegant late-Biedermeier bureau and went on through to the kitchen. It was tidy but breadcrumbs speckled the counter. Out of habit Amanda picked up a wipe and swept the crumbs into the sink and sluiced them away. She opened the fridge and found a Diet Coke.

Her stomach had stopped orbiting an imaginary iceblock and was returning to normal but wondering what to do next and what might happen kept her feeling edgy.

Amanda found the remainder of the first day of the rest of her unemployed life uneventful but unhappy. She broke a fingernail on the packaging of the new phone, finally got it assembled in the right order and plugged into a power point in her den. After wandering around the apartment aimlessly rearranging this and that, she sat down at her desk and started a round of phone calls to industry friends and colleagues. The news was at first unsettling and, by early afternoon, unbelievable. “This one makes the dotcom bust look like a cocktail party, Amanda,” said her analyst friend at the *Times*. “I reckon eFrères will be gone by the end of the week. If you got out with a paycheck you’re doing well. But bank it now!”

At the end of that call Amanda woke up the laptop and brought up her eFrères personal banking page. Her checking account was healthy but there was no sign of the huge payment that should have been there. She rang Dennis. It went straight to voicemail. She left a message that was polite but unmistakably threatening. She had no time now for persuasion or cajoling and she *did* know where he spent many unaccounted for evenings; and she had his home number and had met his wife. Within three minutes the phone rang and it was Dennis, spluttering.

“Hey, Amanda, kiddo – there must be a mistake. Your payout should be through. Give me a second and I’ll check.” His next words echoed: he’d put her on speakerphone; his office door must be shut. “Okay, seems to be a delay so, I’m authorized to override that and I’m just...” Amanda listened to the tippy-tap of computer keys. On her own computer she refreshed her account page and re-logged in. “I’m just making sure, right now, that...okay, your payment should show up like any minute...how’s that?”

“Well, just keep talking and tell me what’s going down while we wait and see if you’re right.” Amanda felt no need to soften her tone. She stared at the screen, refreshed it again, and waited.

“It’s not looking great, Amanda.” Dennis’s voice was hoarse and nervous. “Not looking great at all. Godfrey’s called a senior executive meeting for tonight. Nobody knows what that’s about.” He cleared his throat and hummed tunelessly. Amanda figured he was trying desperately to think of something else to say and also praying that he could escape this call quickly. She did not feel like letting him off the hook. Once more she refreshed the account page, logged in and tapped out her

password; this time a satisfying sum of money featuring many zeroes showed up in the appropriate column.

“Okay, you did it Dennis, good for you. I got it now. I really like that authorization of yours. Maybe you’ll be able to score a job as a teller somewhere after the shit hits the fan tonight!”

Dennis chuckled; it sounded more like a strangled choke. “You’re funny Amanda,” he said weakly. “Well, look, I got a lot of stuff to do so...”

“Sure Dennis, you get on with your day,” Amanda said cheerfully. With the phone tucked between her shoulder and ear she was already well into a further transfer procedure. The payout was on its way from eFrères to another bank--as far as she could get it from Dennis’s alarming “authorization” facility.

“Well, okay, good luck Amanda. Um, I mean – let’s stay in touch.”

“Absolutely Dennis, and give my best to Tracey. Or is that the girlfriend?”

“No, you got it, it’s Tracey.” He tried and failed to chuckle once more. She put him out of his misery and let him go with a click of the “off” button.

## FIVE

Having the money in the bank was one thing, but feeling better about what was going down was another. To cheer herself she decided to call her best friend in the world. He picked up on the second ring.

“Malcolm Darling, how may I help you?” sang out a joyously chirpy Australian voice.

“Mal, it’s Amanda.”

“Sweetheart, it’s still daylight. You *never* call in daylight. Have you been fired?”

“Got it in one.”

“Eeek! I didn’t mean to. Omigod. How...well, how *are* you? Or whatever it is I’m supposed to ask at this point?”

“I’m cool. I think. It’s a bit of a shock. But it hasn’t really sunk in.”

“I suppose not. Fired. Crikey, that’s dramatic. Where are you?”

“At home.”

“Is Natalie there? Is she making you cups of tea and giving you cuddles?”

“Not exactly. Actually when I got home this morning, which was obviously unexpected and I hadn’t thought to call ahead, I walked in on her with a woman I’ve never seen before and they were being filmed having sex.”

“Oh stop! You cannot be serious! Natalie?”

“The same. And I hope you’re sitting down for this one. She was fucking Female Unknown with a purple dildo.”

Malcolm’s squeal of disbelief and joy was almost beyond the capability of a human ear. “Oh! My darling! I’m sorry, but that is the most exquisite thing I have *ever* heard. *Purple!* What *was* she thinking of? *Star Trek?*”

Amanda was unable to resist a honk of laughter, but her anger quickly reasserted itself. “By the look of them, I don’t think they were thinking about boldly going where none had gone before. It looked like a pretty well worn route to me.”

“Jeez. How ghastly. How hilarious. How extraordinary. I think we need drinkies; lots of drinkies. Shall I meet you at Therapy?”

Amanda hesitated then burst into laughter. “Absolutely. See you there at six-thirty?”

“Beaut. On the knocker; and not a minute later. Ooooh! This is all too amazing. Now don’t forget to call your mom, okay? Bye darling.” And he was gone, leaving Amanda feeling better than she had all day.

Although he was Australian and therefore a bit strange, and Amanda had known him only four years, Malcolm was the dearest person in her life and she was instantly looking forward to his affectionate company and comfort. How he could be related to the awful Clancy was a source of continuing disbelief.

She tapped out the numbers for her mother, and waited while the out of area clicks and dings happened. Eleanor picked up on the second ring with a businesslike “Heron Creek, how may I help you?”

“Mom – it’s me.” Amanda swung her legs up on her desk, crossed her ankles and leaned back in her chair in preparation for a long session of maternal interrogation.

“Darling, what’s wrong? Are you ill?” Eleanor’s concern was immediate.

“No Mom, why would you think that?” Amanda stretched and closed her eyes, feeling suddenly weary.

“Because you never call me when you’re at work unless something’s wrong. Actually, you’ve never called me from work.”

“Really? I call you often.” Amanda felt the beginnings of a pout.

“Darling, this isn’t a ‘why don’t you call your mother’ conversation,” said Eleanor and Amanda heard a wisp of exasperation in her tone. “I’m simply concerned because – well, I’ve just explained. Now, how are you? What’s happening?”

“I’m okay Mom. I’m not at work. I’m at home. I was fired this morning *and* I’m breaking up with Natalie.”

“Goodness me,” said Eleanor and her normally low-pitched voice rose half an octave. “Good Lord,” she went on. “Are the two things related? I can’t *quite* see the connection.”

Despite the underlying pain, Amanda laughed. “There isn’t really a connection.” She paused and considered for a second, then went on, “Well, not a connection I want to go into here anyway. Most important thing is I wanted to tell you I got fired because eFrères might be on TV tonight. I didn’t want you to find out like that.”

“That’s thoughtful of you darling. Thank you!” Amanda didn’t like the surprise in Eleanor’s voice but bit her tongue. Her mother’s voice was warm and back

to its usual place on the register when she continued, “I suppose it’s all to do with this awful Lehman’s business, although I don’t really understand why one greedy bank should affect everything else.”

“It’s not quite like that mom. Basically everything’s going to hell along with sub-prime and derivatives.”

“I thought that’s what you’ve been doing...I thought you said it was brilliant.”

Amanda wriggled uncomfortably and screwed her eyes shut, recalling how she had belatedly read Clancy’s book and seen – but not believed – what was about to happen. Exactly what she did – had done – at work was not what she wanted to discuss with her mother at this moment. In the past it had always led to arguments with Eleanor refusing to see what a great system it was for making money.

“It’s too boring to explain on the phone Mom, and...” Amanda stopped, hearing her own voice sounding unpleasantly whiny. She sat up and straightened her shoulders. “Actually, sorry Mom, it’s not boring, it’s devastating and to be honest, I don’t quite understand what’s happening. As soon as I figure it out you’ll be the first to know.”

“Very well darling.” Eleanor sounded unconvinced. “Now what about Natasha?”

Amanda smiled. “Natalie, mom, *Natalie*. That old joke of yours is a bit worn out.”

“Sorry darling.” Eleanor did not sound repentant. “So what’s happened with Natalie?”

Amanda blew out a deep breath and relaxed her shoulders with deliberation. “It’s a sorry tale Mom, that’s for sure, but basically I’ve called it a day. We’re just...” She sighed, feeling both foolish and at a loss. As so often happened, Eleanor rescued her.

“Never mind, darling,” her mother said gently. “As long as you’re okay. Would you like to come home for a few days?”

Tears pricked Amanda’s eyes and a lump formed in her throat. “What have I done to deserve you, Mom?” She asked.

From deepest Connecticut Eleanor’s laughter was genuine. “I have no idea darling, but you’re stuck with me, so who cares? How about it? I have to persuade Thomas Cat he needs his tangles attending to and you’re the only one he doesn’t try to disembowel.”

Amanda smiled as she pictured the cantankerous silver gray tabby Maine Coon. He had mysteriously loved her since arriving at the inn as a snarling ten-week-old ball of spit and fluff and the feeling was mutual.

“That’s settled then, Mom, I’ll get the train up on the weekend probably, if that’s okay.”

“Why wait for the weekend? You’re not working,” Eleanor pointed out, and Amanda’s stomach lurched at the plain truth of it.

Natalie’s key scratched in the lock just after five. Amanda heard the sound as she crossed the living room to the kitchen. She stopped and waited for her to enter. Her heart was thumping in her chest and the churning mix of emotions was impossible to decipher. She was not long out of the shower and wrapped in her rose pink waffle cotton bathrobe; she pulled it more securely around her body and tightened the tie belt, unwilling to be open or vulnerable to Natalie.

“Uh, hi Amanda,” Natalie muttered as she caught sight of her. “I guess you’re pretty pissed at me.” It was a statement more than a question. Amanda said nothing as she wondered whether she was pissed, sad or ... what? She carefully looked at Natalie as if closer examination would offer clues into this unknown person who had shared her life and living space for so long. Natalie shifted uncomfortably and as Amanda became conscious that she was staring, she moved to one of the sofas and sat down.

“You mad at me Amanda?” Natalie perched on the arm of the opposite sofa. She was fidgeting with her keys and her left knee jiggled. She was clearly nervous.

*So she damn well should be*, Amanda thought, but still said nothing because she could not, at that moment, think of an adequate response.

“You gonna do the ol’ silent routine?” Natalie’s voice was a little more belligerent and she slid off the arm of the sofa and into the seat. She leaned forward, elbows on knees and peered at Amanda across the coffee table.

“*Do* I do the ol’ silent routine?” Amanda asked, surprised. “I wasn’t aware of that, I’m sorry.”

Natalie dropped her keys on the table with a clatter and sat back, impatient and irritated. “You know what I mean. I’m like figuring are you talking to me or what?”

Amanda studied Natalie’s agitated face for a second then shook her head. “I’m not sure what to say, to be honest. What do you want me to say?”

“Me? I’m like at a disadvantage here. What the hell do you want *me* to say?”

Amanda shrugged. "I have no idea. You could try telling me what you were up to this morning. Aside from the obvious."

Natalie sighed gustily and flung her arms out along the back of the sofa. "You gonna be bourgeois about that?"

Amanda smiled, despite an instant spasm of irritation. "I'm curious. But, come to think of it, I have the right to be curious. You were fucking a strange woman in my apartment with the silliest equipment I've ever seen. I think you were making a porn movie-- unless it was an artwork that you'll *really* have to explain to me. I think I can ask for an explanation, I don't believe curiosity is an act of bourgeois revisionism."

"You're jealous!"

Amanda managed to laugh. "It was purple for heaven's sake! She'd been doing her hair with peroxide for decades. I'm aesthetically offended."

Natalie's eyes narrowed to glittering slits and her knee jiggled ever more frantically. "And now you're puttin' me down."

Amanda glanced at her watch and stood up. "Replay your video Nat, you were putting yourself down with that...that thing waving around and that mask! Were you supposed to be a werewolf or a rabid whippet? Is it *Halloween Goes Porno*?"

"You think you are so damn smart," Natalie snarled. She sat back on the sofa, her long legs wide apart, her arms spread along the back of the seat. Unconsciously she was offering herself in a way that Amanda would once have found highly arousing. But no more; that recognition made Amanda feel sad and at the same time gentle towards her.

"Nat, tell me what you were doing. Tell me what you've been up to lately," she said softly. "I don't get it."

Natalie sneered and rolled her eyes; her right knee was jiggling frantically. "Now you wanna know what I do – that's rich. When have you been interested in what I do?"

Amanda sighed and it was her turn to roll her eyes. "Okay, I know I've been stupid busy this last year, but you don't tell me anything and ..."

"You never ask!" Natalie yelled. "You're so damn caught up in counting your money and making more and more – what the hell d'you think I'm supposed to do?"

Amanda was taken aback by Natalie's obvious resentment and thought back over the events of their past year. It didn't take long.



“I don’t have time to argue the finer political points with you right now, I’m going out.” She stood up but Natalie’s bellow stopped her dead.

“Don’t you fuckin’ walk away from me, bitch!” Natalie yelled, her face flushed beet red, the furious stain spreading up her usually pale neck.

Amanda looked at her in sheer amazement then said, quietly, “Don’t speak to me like that Natalie. Just don’t.” And she continued on into the bedroom with as much dignity and calm as she could muster. She walked into her closet and switched on the lights. She pulled a fresh pair of J Brand boot leg jeans from their hanger, chose a charcoal, chunky knit, silk-lined blouson jacket and a black, silk-knit skivvy and finally, picked a pair of spike-heeled, red suede ankle boots from their shelf and tucked them under her arm.

“So who’s the chick?” Natalie’s voice was sharp from the doorway where she leaned, casually blocking Amanda’s exit. “Where d’you think you’re going?”

Amanda took a deep breath and deliberately relaxed her shoulders as she fished in her underwear drawer for pink fine cotton boxers, a bra and a pair of super-thin socks.

“Not that I have to explain to you, but there’s no chick. I’m having a drink with a friend,” she said evenly. She turned and looked at Natalie, whose left foot had now taken over from her knee in a rhythmic fidget. “Look Nat, I really don’t want to talk to you right now. I have a lot on my mind and I’m not up for it.”

Natalie flicked back a tousled lock of gleaming auburn hair and her expression was scornful. “A lot on your mind, huh? Like being super critical, as usual? Like making me feel stupid? Huh?”

Before she could stop herself Amanda retorted, “You don’t need me to make you feel stupid, Natalie, you do a really good job of that all by yourself.” She was rewarded by a shriek of rage and Natalie advanced, fists raised, blood pumping in a vein in her neck, to grab Amanda by a handful of her hair. For a long minute they wrestled in the confines of the closet. With great difficulty Amanda stood her ground and willed herself to stifle a yell as Natalie tugged on her hair and banged Amanda’s forehead with her own. The sudden pain was not as bad as the instant dizziness as Amanda saw stars and stumbled against her snarling lover. Natalie’s burning eyes and pinpoint black pupils told her that molten anger was about to burst out, and a clench of fright grabbed at her heart.

“Let me go Nat.” Amanda’s voice was as calm as she could manage, but to her own ears it was tremulous. She tried not to resist Natalie’s grip while at the same time regaining her balance and pulling away from the furious face. Natalie suddenly let go of the hank of hair and shoved Amanda hard, with both hands, against the closet door. The handle caught Amanda between the ribs and she gasped in pain and instinctively held her hands before her face as Natalie advanced and cuffed at them, knocking away the poor protection and slapping the unprotected face, one-two, with the back of each hand. She sneered as Amanda spread her fingers in a gesture of surrender and supplication and reeled back again.

“Natalie, don’t hit me and please let me go.” Amanda’s voice had given up on calm, but she was determined not to cry. “I’m sorry I said that, it was uncalled for. But I really don’t want to talk or fight with you.” She willed her hand to stay away from her forehead although she really wanted to rub the throbbing bump on her forehead and the smarting pain where Natalie’s rings and knuckles had caught her cheekbones.

After a moment’s indecision between them, Amanda took a deep breath and stepped purposefully towards her explosively angry girlfriend and the doorway, her heart thumping, her mouth dry as she went on: “The main reason I have a lot on my mind is nothing to do with you. Actually I was fired this morning.”

Natalie’s mouth fell open and she automatically stepped back so that Amanda could pass her, and then followed her out of the closet. Amanda dropped her clothes on the bed and her boots on the floor beside it. Conscious of her nakedness and vulnerability, she turned away as she pulled on her boxers, then the jeans, before dropping the bathrobe. She leaned into a pink lacy bra, fumbled behind her back for the clasp, managed to make the connection and shrugged her breasts into the cups. She pulled the skivvy over her head and tucked it into the jeans. Keeping her eyes away from Natalie, she sat on the bed and wiggled her feet into the socks, then the boots, fastened the ankle straps and rose. Instantly she towered over Natalie who still stood, gaping, at the foot of the bed.

“What do you mean ‘fired’?”

“Fired as in fired – let go, retrenched, downsized, sacked, dismissed, given the heave ho, the unwanted envelope. Um,” Amanda paused, thinking that she’d already pretty much got the list down pat, then frowned and went on, “Got my marching orders, got the axe. How’s that?”

“Sheesh! Wow. So like who’s gonna pay the bills?”

Amanda turned and stared; it was her turn to be open-mouthed. “Well, well,” she whispered, her voice hushed in wondering disbelief. “Is that really the first thing that comes into your head, Nat?”

“I’m an artist but I’m practical too,” Natalie said plaintively. “You can’t expect me to support you.”

Amanda smiled, without humor. “I certainly cannot, Natalie. Ain’t that the truth.” She rummaged in her bureau drawer and found an overlong red and gold paisley patterned silk scarf, wrapped it twice around her throat and adjusted it so the ends hung loose and uneven.

“Excuse me,” she said to a clearly bemused Natalie and made for the bathroom and her makeup shelf. Her routine was simple: kohl-rimmed eyes, glittery bronze-brown eye shadow in the creases of her eyelids, a flick of mascara on her already long dark lashes, bronze blusher brushed onto her cheekbones, a slick of creamy red Dior lipstick and a dab of moulding goop through her hair with her fingertips to lift and give it her favorite windswept look. Finally, she dabbed her wrists and throat pulse points with perfume and the air filled with the scent of ylang-ylang and jasmine. Amanda breathed deeply, it was a rich scent that she had always liked a lot but now it felt heavy, almost overpowering. *Might be time for a change, to something lighter.* She checked her reflection in the mirrored wall of the bathroom. Each element was nicely combined to finish off her smart-casual, lipstick lesbian night out look. Amanda surveyed herself and was satisfied. It was as funky as she ever got, in a smooth, sophisticated way; definitely not corporate but neither was it rough. She liked it.

“We can talk in the morning,” she said to Natalie, who still stood watching her with uneasy eyes. “I may not be late home, but I really don’t know. And we do have to talk. We can’t go on like this.” She shrugged her way past Natalie and took a small, long-strapped purse from the selection in the bottom drawer of her bureau, flipped the strap over her head and one arm so it sat diagonally on her hip. Into it went her billfold, a couple of credit cards and the lipstick. She slipped into the chunky cardigan jacket and ensured that the purse was tucked away from view beneath its folds. Still Natalie stared, as if struck dumb.

Amanda carefully teetered out of the bedroom on the high-heeled boots, giving herself time to get used to the change from her cushion-soft Nikes. In the living room she retrieved her keys, remembered the newly charged iPhone and slipped both into the purse. Natalie followed her like a spanked puppy and, as Amanda made for the door, she seemed to suddenly shake herself awake. “Hey, wait a minute, I’m like this is so weird man, you can’t just walk out on me!”

Amanda stopped at the door and steadily looked at the obviously astonished Natalie.

“I’m not walking out, I’m going out. And now you need to figure out what you’re up to. Unfortunately, I think you’re right, I really mind what I saw this morning. And it’s not the sex part, although I’m old-fashioned enough to not like it, it’s more that you’ve been lying to me and playing me for a sucker. I really don’t like that one bit. But if we’re honest, we don’t love each other and we’re not even in lust anymore.”

Natalie peered at her, left knee jiggling nervously again. “So what are you saying?”

Amanda frowned, wondering what it was she had said that could be so unclear. “I’m saying, I’ve had enough of this relationship. What I saw this morning was the last straw. I’m not turned on by being hit and I’ve realized I’m not into cheating either.”

“Not into cheating?” Natalie spluttered. “Wow, that’s rich coming from someone who spends every waking minute cheating the system and cheating people out of millions – billions! Only it’s called sub-prime, so that’s okay.”

An angry flush colored Amanda’s throat and cheeks. “You don’t understand Nat, you never have, but you do understand how comfortable it is to live off my criminal earnings. You’re a hypocrite.”

The slap cracked across Amanda’s cheek and she saw stars as the force of the blow snapped her head back. This time she touched her stinging skin with shaking fingers and stared into Natalie’s furious eyes. She breathed deeply and exhaled slowly, hearing the shock of the blow echoing in her ears. She instinctively took a step backwards as Natalie reached out for her.

“Hey, I’m sorry babe, but you made me...”

Amanda shook her head, fingers still covering her throbbing cheek; her eyes filling with tears. “No Nat, nobody made you. We’ve had this conversation before: no

slapping, no punching. It's not sexy, it's not fun, it's not how grownups settle arguments and *this* was not my fault." She pulled opened the front door. "It's the end of the road for us. We are *over*." And before Natalie could intervene, Amanda stepped quickly out of the apartment and closed the heavy door behind her. It shut with a solid "ka-chunk" that gave her an immediate sense of relief. Rather than wait for the elevator and risk having Natalie regain her composure enough to come out and make a scene, she risked her neck in the high heels and ran down the service stairs and out of the building.

Therapy was a good place to meet Malcolm. The likelihood of their bumping into anyone they knew from work was slim to nonexistent. The bar was comfortable and smart, yet intimate and glowingly low lit enough where it counted for them to be able to snare a couple of stools and sufficient bar counter space to prop their elbows and talk close in the rowdy but benign racket of post-work early evening. There was eye candy for him to enjoy in a laidback way and a few women – gorgeous and not so gorgeous – in their very early, giggly twenties. Almost none paid the slightest attention to the pair huddled around a couple of large, frosty tumblers.

"Where to start?" Malcolm peered at her with a mix of amusement and concern as they clinked glasses and dipped into the frigid, salty margaritas.

"It's been quite day," Amanda said with a sigh as the sharp-sweet salty tang made its way down her throat.

"You can say that again!" Malcolm ran his fingers through the mop of blond hair, causing his quiff to stand up even higher than usual. He was a blue-eyed, open-faced, bonily handsome man and unlike most gay guys she knew, he was comfortably clad in an easy masculinity and only turned to camp for comic effect. He worked in third world development policy, or something equally boring and worthy. He laid his hand on her knee. "Job first? Natalie first?"

"Job is easier: I got called in first thing and told to find the door as quick as I could without actually being run out on a rail. That was that."

"Wow. This financial crisis biz is getting worse and worse. Tonight they're talking about Washington bailing out the banks."

"Oh, great. *Fabulous* timing for me. Huh! Maybe I can make a retrospective claim for a bailing bucket. Or a pump." Amanda took another sip of her drink, "But

jeez, if that's the case, it's totally unheard of. I mean, never in our lifetime and probably never at all."

Malcolm took a deep swig at his cocktail, then another. "This isn't just going to be about the US. This'll be like – you know," he tilted his hand in a series of falling motions. "Dominoes, right across the world."

Amanda looked at him, speculatively. "You're right, but I don't know how many people understand that. Or will 'fess up to it at any rate."

"Well, I was reading the internal memos today and they're saying it'll all be over by Christmas." Malcolm grinned, then added, "But I think they said that about World War One *and* Two."

Amanda shivered, despite the warmth of the bar. "Yep. This is different Mal, and the difference is sub-prime. I'm now realizing it's the biggest hole that's ever been dug and an awful lot of people will fall into it before this thing is done."

Malcolm swirled the ice cubes around in the bottom of his tumbler. "I think we need another drink, my darling, because I've got news for you too." He glanced up at her and squared his shoulders.

Amanda saw that his happy-go-lucky face was suddenly somber. She frowned and reached for his hand. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

Malcolm's grin was wry and he let out a long, deep breath before finally saying: "I got fired too. About ten minutes after we talked. Our department's been wiped. Apparently everything we do will be managed out of the Nairobi office from now on."

Amanda's mouth fell open and the cold hard lump in the pit of her stomach became another few degrees chillier as she stared at her friend, willing him to crack and tell her he was making one of his very bad jokes. Instead he caught the attention of the bartender and ordered refills.

Half an hour later, they were through another round of margaritas, were still bewildered by the financial crisis, and Malcolm said, "You haven't mentioned Natalie."

Amanda swallowed hard and touched her cheek where faintly raised weals in the shape of fingers were an inflamed souvenir of the recent encounter. She drew a shuddering breath, not sure whether she was about to laugh or cry. Instead, she raised her hand to catch the attention of a bartender.

By the time Amanda finished her description of the morning, from leaving Elleron Frères to walking out of the apartment, it was Malcolm's turn to be dumbfounded. He gaped at her then licked his salty lips, ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head in wonderment.

"Crikey," he said, solemnly, and then repeated, "Crikey." He shook his head again and raised his eyebrows before lowering them in a frown. "Jeez. I think we should have something to eat so we don't get totally legless. And in view of what you've just described, let me gently suggest you do *not* order the twelve-inch wiener, with or without fries and whether or not they do it in purple."

Amanda half laughed and half sobbed; the laugh won, but only just. She leaned forward off her stool and threw her arms around her friend's neck.

"You are the best, Malcolm, you know that? They are crazy to let you go. They're crazy to let me go. It's all crazy." The words somehow slid into one long one and Malcolm steadied her and shoved her back on her stool.

"Food. Definitely. What would you say to one of their burgers? They come with Roquefort cheese, which is yumbo. And you also get fries."

"Yumbo," said Amanda, grinning at him. "What kinda language is that?"

"It's English. Australian-English, now – you gonna be a good girl and eat a burger and fries for me?"

"Yep. Budiwannanotherdrink."

"Coming up."

The juicy burgers, topped with melting chunks of pungent Roquefort and sitting beside piles of crunchy golden fries, had a steadying effect on Amanda's spinning head; but when she and Malcolm finally left the bar he still had to grip her arm firmly and prop her on a fire hydrant while they waited for a cab to come by.

"I'll be okay to go home Mal, honest," Amanda said. "I can handle this y'know."

"Sure you can," he said doubtfully. "But you don't have to and I don't think you should. I've called Ted and he's making up the sofa bed with clean sheets right now."

Amanda smiled benignly. "Jeez Mal, you have the nicest roommate. Why don't you marry him, eh?"

“Because we’re good friends and marriage would ruin everything.” Malcolm put two fingers to his lips and blew an ear-splitting whistle as a cab came cruising round the corner. “Now try not to look like you’ll pass out or puke in his cab, okay?”

“Sir yessir! Coming right along, sir.” Amanda pushed herself upright, away from the hydrant, and flashed her eyes open wide. To all intents and purposes she looked as if she were actually alert rather than drifting steadily towards somewhere undefined, where the events of the day could not follow her.

The cab pulled over and Amanda allowed Malcolm to fold her into it. She crawled across to the far side and slumped in the seat, but Malcolm pulled her into his arms and settled her carefully against his shoulder and she sighed contentedly.

“Broadway and 113<sup>th</sup>, please,” she heard him tell the driver as she opened her eyes to see suspicious eyes viewing her in the rear-view mirror. “She’s fine,” Malcolm reassured the driver. “Just a little tired.”

The cab driver’s eyes rolled, but he put the vehicle in gear and they were away. Malcolm opened the window a fraction and the chill wind riffled their hair. As the unwelcome cold air tickled her nostrils Amanda snuffled, grunted crossly and snuggled closer into his shoulder. Within minutes she began to snore.

“Hey buddy! You got 113<sup>th</sup>.” The driver’s gruff tones cut through the companionable snoring and Amanda and Malcolm both sat up, wide-eyed and surprised. Amanda wiped a string of dribble from her chin and tried to moisten her dry mouth with an even drier tongue.

“Where the hell?” she exclaimed, then instantly put her hand over her mouth. “Oh God,” she muttered and scrabbled for the door handle. Malcolm leaned across her, pushed open the door and somehow managed to hold onto her as she leaned out and vomited neatly into the gutter between the cab and the curb.

“Great timing, buddy,” said the cab driver mildly as he exchanged bills with Malcolm.

“Yeah, really good,” said Malcolm grinning at the sardonic eyes in the rearview mirror. “Had some bad news today. You know how it is. Tied one on.”

“It happens,” said the driver and shrugged.

Malcolm got out of the cab and went around to help a stumbling, shaky Amanda step over the puddle of her own making and safely onto the sidewalk.

“C’mon kiddo,” he said softly. “Gotta get you upstairs.”

“Gotta go home,” Amanda muttered.



“You are home, at my home. Now come on Amanda, no mucking about.”

Amanda sighed and allowed Malcolm to lead her away from the edge of the sidewalk.

“You are very good to me, y’ know that don’t you Malc, old son?”

“I do and you’re right. But you’d do the same for me. In fact you have. So just shut up and let’s go upstairs and try not to wake Queenie Preston. You know how he loves to be disturbed and come out in his rollers to grouse.”

Amanda giggled. “He is so sweet in those rollers, all pink and blue and spiky. No wonder he’s always awake. How ’n hell could you ever sleep with your head like a plastic porcupine, huh?”

“Great description, and God knows,” Malcolm gently tugged on her hand to persuade her to make the six steps to the elevator landing. It was an unfriendly contraption with metal concertina gates that clanged and screeched horribly no matter how hard Malcolm tried to open and close them quietly. It also groaned like a soul in torment as it began its painful ascent to the third floor. Amanda groaned in sympathy, her eyes closed, a stupefied grin on her face.

Malcolm watched her with affection and concern. Aside from the faint sour smell of her breath, she looked fine and she stayed that way as they got out of the elevator and tiptoed along the landing; then he propped her against the wall as he tapped softly on his front door and made a face at the peephole.

“Teddles!” Amanda exclaimed, as the lanky, shaven-headed African American peered out at them.

“Hot diggety damn, Amanda, what have you done this time?” Ted stood back to allow his friends to pass through the narrow hallway.

“Me? I ain’t done nothing Ted, I am the innocent party in the series of heinous crimes in what I am about to unfold in evidence against them, whomever ’n wherein-so-ever what they may be.” To emphasize her point she hiccupped as Malcolm steered her purposefully towards the bathroom.

“Not until you’ve had a shower and brushed your teeth,” he said firmly.

“You are such a mean old meany man. I thought Australian men are all supposed to be gay *and* kind and nice.” From behind them Ted’s snort was barely stifled.

“Mal, how about some hot chocolate and a cookie for the patient?”

“Sounds great Ted. Wouldn’t mind some myself, tell the truth.”

Amanda was humming tunelessly but there was an undercurrent of jumbled words about mean old Malcolm. “Amanda, shut up. Get your clothes off. Here’s a robe. Here’s a toothbrush. There’s the toothpaste. There’s a shower cap. Get in the shower. Can you manage that or do you need supervising?”

“Oooh hoo hoo, what a scary old wombat you are Mr Mean Malcolm. I can manage justfinethankyouverymuch.”

“Okay, but let’s see you do it.” Malcolm watched, as she stood smiling at him, peering with unfocused eyes and swaying gently to and fro.

“Bossy, bossy, bossy,” Amanda muttered and began laboriously stripping off her clothes. Malcolm took each garment from her, neatly folded it and placed it over the towel rack; he sat her on the stool to remove her boots and socks and then turned on the shower.

“Shower cap?”

“Yes please, miss.”

“Cheeky.” He pulled the pink daisy-decorated plastic cap over her hair and tucked in the stray ends. “Okay, now I’ll get out of here and you can dump your fripperies and hop in. Can you manage that?”

“Fripperies. Frip-per-rees. Fripperies. I like that. Fripperies.”

“Shut up and get in the shower.”

## SIX

Amanda opened her eyes, moved her head slowly from side to side and moaned softly. The pain in her skull felt like someone had removed her brain and replaced it with a molten cannon ball. It rolled and banged sickeningly in her head with the slightest movement.

“Oh mercy,” she muttered, and held it tenderly in both hands. She frowned, but it hurt more, so she stopped. She tried to think, but that hurt too so she decided to breathe slowly and deeply, not move her head again and see whether some idea of where she was – and why – might occur to her without any further effort.

A few seconds later the beginnings of remembrance of the previous night started to seep through the throbbing haze of headache, and again she muttered,

“Oh mercy.”

Very carefully she opened one eye, then the other and looked about. It was not good; even her eye muscles hurt. Across the room from where she lay, a tall bay window gave her a good view of the topmost branches of a large tree whose sparse and yellowing leaves were partly illuminated by a street lamp and partly by the grey light of what might be dawn. After a minute’s careful listening, the tone of the hum and clatter of traffic noise traveling half a block from Broadway confirmed it was indeed early morning. She stretched carefully and sniffed with pleasure at the sweet, freshly washed cottony scent of the oversize T-shirt in which she’d been put to bed. She was snuggled beneath a puffy, dark green plaid-covered quilt that also smelled cotton-clean and possibly of lavender.

On either side of her head were the leather arms of the sofa whose pullout bed compartment had either been surprisingly comfortable, or she had been well and truly out of it. She stretched again and could detect no kinks in her back. If it hadn’t been for the excruciating pain of the invisible bald eagle’s talons as he sat on her head and tried to crush her skull, she would have been perfectly content. Amanda closed her eyes again and willed herself back to sleep to ward off the torture. But worse than pain was the certainty that no matter how hard she tried to block it, the dull throb reminded her of the morning after *that* evening with Clancy Darling.

“Oh God, no,” she groaned out loud and dragged the pillow over her face. “I don’t want to go there again. Please.”

But Amanda’s memory wasn’t being kind; it casually swept her right back to Clancy’s arms and the dark guitar riff and erotic rhythm of the *Top Gun* ballad. “That was *soooo* uncool,” Amanda grumbled into the pillow. “Why *that*?” She began to giggle, but the pain it generated threatened to shatter her cranium. She lay still and gave in to the vivid recollection of the dance as the palm of her hand against her forehead conjured the feel of her temple resting lightly against Clancy’s hair.

They had moved surprisingly easily together to the music, lubricated by three rounds of margaritas that were more than enough to put them dangerously close to the edge of *What the hell*. Amanda closed her eyes to the swirling lights and other dancers and felt Clancy’s hand warm in the small of her back. The sensation was at once comforting and electrifying and instinctively Amanda slid her own hand from where it lay on Clancy’s shoulder to the back of her neck, her fingers slipping into the lush, burnished gold pre-Raphaelite mane. She inhaled a subtle citrusy perfume and the

honeyed scent of Clancy's skin and hair and settled even more comfortably into the light embrace.

"What is it about this song," she muttered into Clancy's ear. "I can't stand Tom Cruise but he was really cute in that old movie."

Clancy laughed, "Yes but Kelly McGillis was in it too, don't forget. Even I would have joined the air force if she'd been my instructor."

Amanda laughed too, pulling back to look at her partner with surprise and unexpected pleasure. "You're right."

Clancy's hold across Amanda's back tightened momentarily as she spun them carefully. The maneuver avoided a collision with two small but erotically charged women who were oblivious to everything as they chugged their pelvises in unison and twirled to a double time beat only they could hear, looking like wind-up toys. Amanda caught Clancy's eye and they both struggled in vain to smother giggles.

"Women haven't danced like that in decades," Clancy murmured, close to Amanda's ear. "Have you ever seen *The Killing of Sister George*? Late night TV, maybe?"

As one of the two small women looked up at them suspiciously Amanda smothered another laugh. "You're right, they're like a pair of Sister Georges! You're bad!"

Clancy grimaced. "I know. Sorry, it's called Australian humor. Very politically incorrect."

"I love it." Clancy's eyebrow rose and her eyes twinkled. Amanda hurriedly went on, "I mean I've gotten used to your brother--he says the most terrible things. He's hilarious."

Clancy nodded and glanced down at their two hands, clasped between them. "He is, and he does say terrible things, that's for sure. He's told me a lot about you."

Amanda gaped at her partner but saw the humor in her eyes, and warmth that was like a magnet and she was unaccustomed to the sensation. Again Clancy led them a step out of harm's way and her perfume filled Amanda's nostrils. She inhaled deeply, enjoying the unexpected enjoyment of being both cared for and led. Without thinking further than the alcohol buzzing in her blood and the tips of her fingers, she found herself settling naturally into the soft and hard places of Clancy's long body and enjoying the easy comfort as they moved together to the slow, low, throbbing tempo.

*You shouldn't be liking this so much,* said a treacherous voice in her head. *You'll regret it. You'll be sorry in the morning.*

Amanda turned her face away from the nasty inner voice and concentrated instead on the pearl that glowed on Clancy's earlobe. She wanted to be oblivious again to the crowd, to the dire consequences of dancing this way with a woman who set her blood racing but who also made her mad as hell and wasn't remotely likeable. Despite the warnings of the inner voice she sighed happily and gave herself up to the warm guiding hand at her back; it was a new and different feeling to relinquish control and she involuntarily shuddered with delight.

"You okay?" Clancy looked into Amanda's eyes.

Amanda tightened her arms around Clancy's neck and smiled. "I haven't danced like this in ... ever. And I just love the way you smell."

"You're saying I smell?"

Amanda pulled back, "That's not what I meant," she said sharply.

Clancy clasped her closer and grinned into her indignant eyes. "Just teasing," she said. Her tone was gentle and Amanda felt it wrap around her and turn her inside out. She studied Clancy's smile with a dizzying mix of bewilderment, delight and irritation flooding her veins. She didn't like it one bit that Clancy seemed able to flick at her emotions as if she were a pinball – helpless to do anything but respond like an idiot. At the same time, Clancy's hand was generating waves of heat in her lower back that were connecting directly to places deep inside – and the pulse at the base of her throat.

"You okay?" Clancy repeated. Her voice had sunk to a whisper that was inaudible above the slow, pounding bass beat, but Amanda saw the words in the movement of her lips and nodded.

"I'm so okay you wouldn't believe it," Amanda replied and although she cocked a cheeky grin at Clancy, the urgency of her voice told her she really meant it. Clancy regarded her closely, the eyebrow rose again, and Amanda looked right back, trying to intuit what it was Clancy might be seeking. She felt her own grin melting to seriousness with the force of Clancy's penetrating gaze. "I don't know what makes me do it, but I say the most ridiculous things when I'm in your company," she heard herself say. And then Clancy's blue-gray eyes softened as she laughed.

"Crazy girl," she said. "Sometimes I get what my brother sees in you." They turned again with the music and their similar bodies meshed together, breast-to-breast,

thigh-to-thigh, brown eyes to blue-gray. As it happened, Amanda murmured in her partner's ear, "Me too." Clancy pulled back and her eyebrows shot up in a question and Amanda added quickly, "I mean I get what Malcolm sees in you." Clancy's eyebrows rose further and Amanda groaned, "There you are – see? What I mean is, he loves you and I can see why."

Clancy's gaze changed as her pupils widened and her eyes became instantly almost black. "Really?" She said, as dry as a stick. "That's nice." And her grin was one that Amanda found herself inwardly describing as "shit eating" even as she blushed at the underlying meaning that Clancy had chosen to take from her garbled words. She returned the grin and leaned back against Clancy's arms the better to try to understand the enigmatic woman, but it wasn't easy. Rather than risk a further accidental *double entendre* she said the next best thing to pop into her mind.

"I don't often get to dance with anyone my own height."

Clancy's eyes were unreadable but shook her head. "Me neither," she replied. "It has its advantages." And in that moment Amanda felt herself being drawn irreversibly towards the smiling mouth; and their lips had met in a kiss so tender it was like an imagining.

Amanda was awakened from her reverie by the scratch and rattle of keys. She quickly withdrew her wayward hand from between her legs and laid it across her stomach. She lifted the pillow off her forehead and even as her heart slowed to near normal, she realized the pain in her skull was receding and there was a slim chance she might live. She opened her eyes and saw that what was streaming in the long windows was definitely the light of a new day. She closed her eyes again. With the opened front door came a gust of wintry air that pulled her fully back to the present. It was a safer place than the disturbing and brief rapport she had experienced with Clancy.

"I'm dying," she cried piteously. "Shoot me now, I beg you!"

Malcolm's snort of laughter was followed by the fresh scent of lemony aftershave and chilled lips that lightly touched her forehead.

"Some breakfast, some painkillers and we'll review your request," he said and went on into the tiny kitchen. Amanda kept her eyes closed and listened to the familiar sounds of breakfast in the making. "Whole wheat toast, bagel or English muffin?"

“Yes please,” Amanda said, pathetically, and sat up. The cannonball thudded once again from one side of her skull to the other and she held her head carefully in both hands and groaned. A minute later the scent of toasting reached her nostrils but, to her surprise, she felt hunger pangs rather than nausea. But her head was unbearable. “I need drugs now,” she called weakly.

Malcolm waved a plate and a glass under her nose. “Eat this, then you can have a couple of tablets.” On the plate was a toasted half muffin, thickly spread with partially melted butter and dark golden honey. Amanda’s stomach gurgled loudly with a spasm of anticipation.

“Yum,” she said, grabbed the muffin and bit a huge chunk out of it. “Bliss. Oh thank you.” She savored the butter and honey with her eyes closed and her cheeks bulging as she munched. “You are the best friend a girl could possibly have,” she murmured – with difficulty – and took another smaller bite out of the muffin, to save the final chunk as a precious treat.

“That’s true.” Malcolm smiled down at her. “When you’ve finished, take these, and she’ll be right.” He placed two capsules and a tumbler of water on the coffee table.

Amanda sighed and grabbed his hand and planted a kiss on it. “God, Mal, you are a good friend.” She sniffed away a sudden threat of tears and swatted him on the bum as he returned to the kitchen. Amanda swallowed the capsules and drained the water; popped the last of the muffin into her mouth and sighed happily. Her head was still pounding but already a sense of wellbeing was beginning to take it on with the possibility of winning.

Malcolm and Amanda were sitting at the kitchen bar sipping fresh juice when Ted came panting into the apartment, checked his stopwatch and heart rate then slumped onto a high stool beside them. Malcolm slid a tall glass of water towards him and a smaller tumbler of juice.

“Good run?”

Ted nodded, took three long deep breaths and steadied his lungs enough to reply, “Going to be a great day. Clear sky. Nice.” He fished in the pouch pocket of his sweatshirt. “Picked up the mail. You got a postcard from Clancy.”

He dropped the envelopes on the counter. Malcolm singled out the postcard, flipped it over and read aloud, “Hi Mal, raining every day. Should have stayed home. Jane left early. How’s tricks? Big love. Clancy.”

“Who’s Jane?” Amanda asked, the words leaping out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Malcolm looked at her quizzically but just said, “An on again, off again, and now presumably off again old girlfriend.” He slid the postcard across the counter to share the palm trees, white beach and blue sky. “Port Douglas – far north Queensland. It’s not the season for rain every day. Still, it would be nice and warm.” He stretched his arms above his head and grinned at his friends. “I think I’ll go home for a bit. If there’s an upside to getting the axe it could be the smell of home in spring.”

“Spring?” Ted chomped on toasted muffin.

“Yup. Fall here and spring there – it’s not called Down Under for nothing.” Malcolm grinned at his friends. “Why don’t you come with me Amanda? Let global finance collapse without us. How’s that for an idea?”

The horrified expression on Amanda’s face told Malcolm exactly what she thought of Australia as an idea and he chortled and slapped his knee. “It wasn’t that bad,” he said.

It wasn’t simply the hangover headache that was causing the throbbing ache to start up again. Amanda groaned and let her head sink into her hands. “We’ve met twice and each time we’ve argued. Why would I go half way around the world for more?”

Malcolm leaned over and rubbed her shoulders and squeezed the tendons in her neck; it felt wonderful. She relaxed back into his hand and moaned, “More please,” as his strong fingers attacked the alcohol-induced pain.

“You know, there’s something funny about you and Clancy,” said Ted with difficulty as he chewed a crunchy mouthful of hot buttered toast. “You really rub each other the wrong way. You can only hate someone that much if you’re on the edge of loving them just as hard.” He waved his toast in the air in triumph. His handsome ebony features cracked into a wide smile. “Yes. I think it’s love.”

Amanda snorted her disagreement and Malcolm laughed, but then he looked at Amanda’s blushing cheeks and his expression took on a quizzical twist. “Interesting thought Ted,” he said and gave Amanda’s neck one last squeeze.



The sun was trying weakly to break through and warm the gray Fall morning when Malcolm and Ted went their separate ways, uptown and down, at the subway entrance on Broadway. Each man kissed and hugged Amanda and told her to call them later.

“I’ll need a decision soon,” Malcolm said. “But don’t stress. Let’s talk. Okay?”

“Sure.”

He lifted her chin and forced her to look into his twinkling, friendly eyes.

“You’ll love Australia and you *will* get to be friends with Clancy. You got off to a bad start.” He chuckled. “Well, okay, a weird start, but I love you both, so there must be a silver lining to the big black cloud you two generated. I’ll talk to her and I promise that if it seems like a bad idea I’ll be honest with you. But I want you to come. Okay?”

“Okay,” Amanda’s heart was full of doubt but she hugged him again and kissed his cheek. “You’re a real goody Malcolm. And I *think* I did sort of like her. But...” She shrugged. Malcolm returned her hug with a big squeeze and a kiss on top of her head.

“Just because you’re political opposites *and* you both had too much to drink *and* tickled each other’s tonsils, doesn’t mean you have to get married – or not be friends.”

“Malcolm Darling! You are disgusting. We did not...”

“Yes you did.” He grinned. “I’m sorry, but I *saw* you. You kissed her.”

“She kissed me!”

“You kissed each other. Then you both thought better of it. Anyway, you’ll be friends. It’ll be great – you wait and see. You’ll be besties.”

“Besties! She’s a bleeding heart liberal!”

“And you’re a class traitor *and* a running dog lackey for the imperialist oppressors of the proletariat. Of *course* you’ll be besties. You wait and see.”

Amanda watched him run down the stairs to the subway and wave a jaunty goodbye. Momentarily she wondered where he was off to as he too had been laid off and no office was calling.

“Where are you going?” she yelled after him.

Over his shoulder came the answer. “Australian consulate. You’ll need to go there too. I’ll take you. Have to make sure you don’t get locked up or prohibited.” And he was gone.

She turned away and surveyed the bustling street, immediately forgetting Clancy as she wrestled with the knowledge that Amanda McIntyre, former hotshot, had nowhere to go at no particular time and was therefore officially aimless. It caused her heart to lurch in a sensation that was part excitement but mostly fright.

“Unemployed,” she murmured, “I am unemployed.” The fright began to feel larger than the excitement and she quickly changed tack. “Free, I’m free. I can do anything I want. I can go to Australia with Malcolm.” That sounded a lot better although not entirely convincing. “But I’ll have to be nice to that awful sister of his. Maybe we might get on this time.” That part sounded even less convincing and she shrugged her shoulders deeper into her jacket, flicked the collar to vertical up around her neck, and began sauntering along Broadway as more memories of her unnerving non-friendship with Clancy Darling began to swirl around in her still hung-over head.

Hard to believe that it had been more than a year since her last encounter with Clancy: a night out to celebrate the American publication of *the* book and a prestige invitation to speak at Harvard Business School. But the restaurant that had been promised as “funky-chic” turned out to be a seedy joint whose décor was stuck in the 1970s and involved raffia-wrapped Chianti bottles. A harassed maitre d’ handed them laminated menus that were sticky to touch. The choices came down to many variations of pasta done any number of ways with any number of sauces. But when the plates arrived the different pastas were uniformly overcooked and each was smothered in sludgy cream sauce or sweaty melted cheese.

As she pushed the slime-drenched components of a chef’s salad around her plate Clancy appeared not to be listening to Amanda’s nonchalant account of her day at eFrères. Until she suddenly broke in as Amanda was in mid-sentence.

“Do you people have *any* idea what you’re really doing?” She asked, laying her fork on the plate and sitting back.

Amanda was startled by the tone of her voice and Malcolm coughed and spluttered.

“We’re making a shitload of money, that’s what we’re really doing,” Amanda said, her chin rising defiantly as she stared into Clancy’s glittering eyes.

To her surprise and irritation Clancy laughed--although it was more of a snort.

“God,” she said wearily. “You’re all the same. You don’t get it, do you?”

Amanda was stung by Clancy’s obvious disdain. “Get what, exactly?”

Clancy sighed; the sound was pure exasperation. “Your bubble has burst already. Your map is out of date. By that I mean the brakes have failed, the steering is shot and the limo you’re driving is heading off a cliff. And nothing can stop it because the driver is asleep at the wheel.”

There was silence at the table for a moment, then Amanda uttered a snarling, angry laugh and it was her turn to lay down her fork.

“Oh really?” She snapped. “And how come you’re such a mechanical expert? *Do* tell.”

“I’m sure you’re not interested,” Clancy snarled. “And I doubt you want to know.”

Amanda was aware that Malcolm and Natalie were watching them with the same head-swivelling fascination as fans at a tennis match at Flushing Meadows. Malcolm began to speak but his sister hushed him with a raised hand.

“Read my book,” she snapped. “Although it’s too late now. But read it anyway, and then we can have a sensible conversation. Maybe.” Clancy raised her wine glass and stared at the contents.

Amanda wondered momentarily whether she was about to get a face-full of the rough red wine, but Clancy visibly swallowed her temper and took a sip before turning her gaze to Malcolm and smiling tightly. Amanda’s rising outrage was compounded by the feeling that she had been summarily dismissed when Clancy calmly said to him, “Terry and Jill Spencer are interested in taking on the land and the dairy. It’ll make their own acreage more viable and the herd will be up to about two hundred. I said yes. I hope that’s okay with you.”

Malcolm goggled at his sister for a moment then nodded as he realized she was not planning to continue her punch-up with Amanda.

“Sure,” he said eagerly. “Sure, that sounds terrific. Anyway, you’re the one stuck with handling it all. I really appreciate that.”

“I’m thinking of moving permanently to Two Moon actually. I’d like to get out of Sydney.”

“Really?” Malcolm looked surprised and laid down his fork. “Leave Sydney? Wow!”

“Yeah, I’m starting to hanker after fresh air and the cove.”

“What about Jane?”

“What about Jane indeed.” Clancy glanced at Amanda and almost grinned; almost. “Port Douglas was the last straw for her. After nine years she finally worked out I’m the most boring woman she’s ever known.”

Malcolm’s mouth fell open and his eyebrows began a dance of protest, but Clancy shook her head. “No, don’t go there Mal, it’s true. We were in Port for a week and it rained for the first four days. I read three novels and did crosswords and she went insane. Then we argued and that was that.”

“I’m sorry sis, really.”

Clancy touched his hand lightly and smiled. It was like a light going on in her handsome face. Despite still bubbling anger Amanda felt its warmth and a near overwhelming desire to reach out to it; instead she clutched her fork and twirled a strand of greasy spaghetti and wondered at the conflicting emotions Clancy provoked.

The evening didn’t improve. Natalie failed to turn up as she had earnestly promised she would and the ill-matched trio struggled with the awful food and rough red wine and desultory conversation. But somehow it had led to the night club, jugs of margaritas and the late night dancing. *Oh God, there was the late night dancing! There would always be the memory of the late night dancing.* As she continued on down Broadway, Amanda felt a fresh new blush of mixed emotions suffuse her cold cheeks. She tried to think of something else, but the unwelcome video clip would not be stopped. She sighed aloud.

Even though working a seventy-hour week didn’t leave her much energy or inclination for late nights or even a small inclination to agree to another evening with Clancy, Amanda had been forced to acknowledge she wanted to know more about her best friend’s mysterious and contrary sister. How she could blow hot and cold and go from friendly warmth to unapproachable chill in the space of thirty seconds meant she was annoying and intriguing in equal measure. And that was how she and Clancy came to be dancing to the absurd sensuousness of *Take My Breath Away*.

Suddenly they were doing much, much more in the middle of the dance floor. And Amanda had thought again about how much they had had to drink and whether she ought to consider giving up margaritas for a very long time. That thought was banished by the taste of salt and sweet lemon on Clancy’s tongue. It was fused with the soft, insistent exploration of her lips and Amanda heard her own yearning as she opened her mouth without hesitation to the probing kiss. Clancy’s gentleness was also

commanding and the sensation of strength and an unyielding demand on her body turned Amanda's knees to liquid fire. She wrapped her arms tightly around Clancy's neck and gave herself up to the unique and luscious feeling of being in the power of something she had never before experienced.

As the song began its slow fade Amanda and Clancy finally drew apart and looked at each other like two people who had found an enchanted glade in the midst of a war zone. It was clear to anyone watching that what had just happened was the last thing either had expected. Clancy's eyes were slightly unfocused and glazed and she blinked at Amanda even as Amanda made a conscious effort to see her partner through the dizzying waves of craving that were surging through her. Clancy's laced her fingers through Amanda's and they stood looking at each other in bemusement. Neither seemed inclined to move even as dancers left the floor and were replaced by others who whooped and hollered and wanted to bop and bounce to the next song.

Clancy perceptibly shivered and asked, finally, "Shall we get a drink? I don't want to dance to this."

Amanda looked about the floor and frowned and shook her head. "No, me either. Let's find Malcolm." Clancy turned towards the bar and Amanda followed, conscious of the strong fingers that still clasped her own.

"What you having?" Malcolm mouthed through the peppy beat of the music and clamor of voices. He moved to one side and let his sister slide into the space at the bar, with Amanda close beside her. "You two can really dance. Together. I've been watching you." His timing was perfect and his eyes sparkled with mischief and pleasure, especially as his sister and friend chorused, simultaneously: "She's really good."

The three laughed and Malcolm nodded, "That was obvious. Just as well Natalie isn't here."

Amanda's stomach turned into a cold knot as Clancy shook her hand free and recoiled, her blue eyes turning to the forbidding, freezing gray once again.

"What's Natalie got to do with anything?" She said hotly, her eyes bullet hole black pinpoints as she tried to shoot her laughing friend dead. "You know we don't have that kind of relationship, Mal."

"Really?" Clancy's tone was sharp as an icepick. "What kind of relationship *do* you have, then?"

Amanda opened her mouth to explain, but no words came out. The ice of Clancy's gaze trapped her and her blood curdled. She shook her head instead, wanting to plead with Clancy that she should not look at her like that. Still no words came out.

Clancy took a deep breath and dismissed Amanda. "Too much to drink," she muttered, her expression tight and unsmiling. "It was just silly." She turned away, leaving Amanda abandoned with her heart lurching in confusion and embarrassment. For a moment she stood, nonplussed, but Clancy seemed interested only in her glass and did not look up as her words hung in the air between them.

"I'm going to the restroom. Malcolm, Clancy – excuse me." But Clancy's rigid back neither acknowledged nor excused her.

Although she had hoped for a respite from the conflicting feelings that were surging through her, the restroom turned out to be another bad idea; and Amanda realized it the moment she pushed open the door. In the multi-colored glow of a Tiffany lamp she saw a woman backed up against the wall at the far end of the room; her pants around her ankles and another woman kneeling in front of her, face deep and thrusting into her partner's crotch.

"Don't mind us," gasped the woman whose mouth wasn't full and she grabbed her lover's temporarily distracted head and pushed herself harder onto the willing tongue, moaning ecstatically. Amanda waved and said, "Go right ahead," and dived into the first cubicle, bolted the door and leaned against it with her eyes closed. But the sounds from the two women weren't so easily ignored and to her dismay, after a moment or two of reluctant but fascinated listening, her own traitorous body – still palpably throbbing from the dance floor – began to respond anew to the audible pleasure on the other side of the door.

"I must get out of here," she muttered. "But I *have* to pee. Oh God." She unhitched her belt, unzipped her pants and felt the wetness of arousal in her boxers. She crouched on trembling legs and let go as sounds of imminent orgasm filled her ears. She propped herself against the walls of the cubicle with her elbows and hungrily listened to how good it was on the receiving end of that tongue. She thought of Clancy and wondered how they had managed, in the space of three minutes, to make the leap from sworn enemies to that sweet, sensuous kiss and all the way back again. It made no sense, but she knew – even as she tried to deny it – that the two strangers were echoing the way Clancy's touch made her feel. And so she stayed in

the cubicle and listened until the sounds subsided to panting aftermath and hushed giggles. Amanda carefully put herself back together and coughed loudly, pressed the flush button and rattled the bolt before opening the door. She peered out cautiously, straight into the mirror and the reflected eyes of the woman who was not the one whose moans were still ringing in her ears. This one's face she didn't recognize, but her tousled spiky black hair and wet mouth and chin gave it away. Amanda looked about, but there was no one else in the restroom.

"Hi," said the stranger. "Hope you didn't mind." She bent and sluiced the lower part of her face with a handful of water, spat and looked up into Amanda's eyes again. She had a wicked smile; a *nice* wicked smile.

"No, course not – it's a free country," Amanda said lamely and pumped liquid soap into her palm, then stared at the glistening translucent blob before getting the giggles herself. "Well, actually it's not, I don't think – not for that kind of, um, recreational activity anyway. But this isn't really public is it?" She began vigorously rubbing her palms together and shut her mouth to stop it babbling. It was getting to be a bad habit.

"True," said the stranger. "Nearly forty years on and the zipless fuck is still a scandal, yeah?"

"I beg your pardon?" Amanda rinsed her hands as the stranger's eyes twinkled at her in the mirror.

"Erica Jong. *Fear of Flying*. The zipless fuck – you know?"

"Oh! Right, my mom has a copy but I've never ... ah ..."

"Never what? Read it or done it?" The stranger's eyes were all over Amanda, appraising her body. Amanda felt herself blushing and smiling weakly into the dark brown eyes; the heat and tingling from her slow dance with Clancy still stirring deep inside. The stranger pulled a paper towel from the dispenser and dabbed her hands and chin. "You don't know what you're missing. You should try it some night. I'd be happy to show you." She dropped the crumpled towel in a bin and with a spicy grin she was gone.

Amanda let the cold water run over her wrists and stood staring at her reflection in the mirror, wondering about life's strange twists and turns. Three laughing women clattered into the restroom on perilously high stilettos and Amanda grinned at their smiling reflections as they disappeared together into the end cubicle.

Whether it was coke or a threesome, Amanda couldn't tell and anyway, it was all too much for one evening. She took a slow deep breath and gathered herself to return to the bar. She hoped her own pulse had slowed sufficiently so that she could look Clancy in the eye and try to salvage some kind of dignity and the evening. At the same time, what she wanted more than anything else was to feel that soft, full mouth on her own and to press herself once more against the long body--even though, she acknowledged to herself, Clancy was the most arrogant, annoying woman she had ever met and now obviously thought Malcolm's best friend was some kind of frivolous, feckless flirt. It was a bizarre jumble of feelings that swirled around inside her head and heart and Amanda was puzzled and disturbed by the sensation.

As she approached Malcolm and Clancy through the crowd she saw them, heads together, in urgent conversation. Clancy was stony-faced and Malcolm seemed to be trying to placate her but whatever he was saying wasn't working and apprehension dropped into the pit of Amanda's stomach. She threaded through the revelers and stopped in front of the Darling siblings.

"Here I am," she said brightly. "Are we having that drink?"

Malcolm's attempt at a smile was not successful. "Um, I think Clancy is feeling tired," he said, not quite meeting her eyes. "She wants to go back to the hotel, so I'll take her. What do you want to do?"

"I thought we were celebrating," Amanda said too brightly as she grinned at Clancy. Clancy glanced down at her watch and didn't return the grin.

"Okay, so the evening's over," Amanda had said, trying to remain chirpy even as her spirits sank. "Well, don't worry about a thing Mal, I'll get myself home and you take care of your sister."

Amanda sighed now at the memory. Clancy had bid her a glacial good night and Malcolm had awkwardly kissed her cheek and muttered "I'll call you tomorrow about the weekend." And they were gone, leaving Amanda grappling with an odd mix of feelings that included arousal and annoyance.

Now, the idea of meeting Clancy – on her home territory – was partly alarming, partly alluring, and partly made Amanda bristle with antagonism. It was a surreal combination of feelings and she hadn't even begun to examine the memory file labeled "Weekend at Heron Creek." She shivered and continued walking until the immensity of St John the Divine Cathedral loomed in her path. It was about then that



she realized the cute and sexy ankle boots were going to cripple her if she went much further. Instead she climbed the steps into the great cathedral and found herself a quiet pew. She sat and let the benign atmosphere settle around her as her eyes wandered over the soaring roof, stonework, the altars and statuary. Somewhere close by she could hear the “chink-chink-chink” of a mason’s chisel on stone and from across the nave in a side chapel came the sound of women’s voices speaking Spanish.

She breathed in the dry, slightly musty air of the great building and savored the pleasure of feeling her shoulders relax and the lingering headache grudgingly retreat even further.

## SEVEN

Eleanor McIntyre’s rambling clapboard mansion that she ran as an old-fashioned country inn had always been popular with Amanda’s friends. Officially known as Heron Creek, it had a thrillingly creepy attic they had played in as kids on rainy days and in summer, out in the cool grass between the gnarled apple and plum trees. Winter meant skating on the pond and toffee apples in the kitchen, warming hands and frozen noses beside the range. It had been years before Amanda realized how hard her mother worked, how tough were their economic circumstances and how lucky she had been. By then she was at Yale and a school friend had stirred half-forgotten memories by reminiscing about the fun times.

“I remember being so disappointed when my parents insisted I go with them to Gstaad and I couldn’t invite you,” Melanie had sighed. “It was so fun at your house. I loved Eleanor.”

Amanda frowned, puzzled. “Why couldn’t you invite me?” she asked as Melanie lay across her bed, swinging her crossed feet in the air.

“Oh you know how it was.” Melanie tossed back her long dark hair and peered up at Amanda, sighing an exaggerated sigh. “Eleanor couldn’t afford the airfare and Daddy wouldn’t pay.” She made rabbit ears with her fingers as she continued, “Like ‘on principle’. It was so silly, just because Eleanor’s a liberal. I mean – duh.” She slapped one hand to her forehead and giggled.

It was the last time Amanda had invited Melanie to visit with her and they soon drifted apart. It was also when Amanda had resolved that she would never again

be anyone's poor friend, nor ostracized because of the wrong politics. But as much as she had secretly adored Bill Clinton and couldn't *bear* George W. Bush, it meant her political involvement at college had been zero and she had never voted. It was yet more argument material with Eleanor; a lifelong registered Democrat and rusted onto the Clintons – Bill and then Hillary – “like a barnacle on a tugboat's butt” as Eleanor had put it one memorable time.

Amanda smiled, recalling Eleanor's rare venture into raffish language, and the pew creaked as she sat back, remembering how Malcolm, Ted and Clancy had roared with laughter when Eleanor made that announcement as they sat around the kitchen table late on a Saturday morning.

“Well it's true,” Eleanor said defiantly, wielding the French blue enamel coffee pot like a medieval weapon. “I loved Bill, despite his, well...you know...and I just *know* Hillary will make a wonderful president.” She paused to carefully aim the spout at the mug in Clancy's outstretched hand, and then continued, “I just wish I didn't have to decide between her and Barack. Although I think he's a bit young, he could wait.”

“I agree,” said Ted. “It's a helluva thing: we get a real black candidate, a real female candidate and we get 'em together! I mean how cruel can it be? Imagine how my momma's feeling!”

The laughter around the table was interspersed with groans that stopped on a dime when Amanda said, “If I get the chance I'm voting for Hillary.”

Eleanor turned and fixed wide brown eyes on her daughter; her mouth was a perfect “o” of delighted surprise. Malcolm whooped and high-fived with Ted while Clancy sipped her coffee, her calm gray eyes studying Amanda over the rim of the mug. Amanda felt her chin lifting in defiance at the so deliberate appraisal and the boys' jubilant laughter; then, as if that were not enough, Clancy aimed a deliberate, slow wink at her that nobody else could see. The blush that rose from Amanda's neck to her cheeks was provoked by irritation, but nevertheless, her treacherous heart turned a somersault. For such a mean bitch, Clancy was unfairly attractive and could be maddeningly charming.

After breakfast and more teasing about her apparent change of political allegiance, Amanda followed the boys out to the back porch. They sat in the sun on the steps to watch Eleanor's kitchen garden grow. It was a warm May day, birds chirped and bees buzzed. Clancy had stayed behind to help Eleanor clean up and

Amanda could hear their animated voices and intermittent laughter but not what they were saying. It was obvious that Eleanor and Clancy liked each other. Amanda sighed and stretched, trying to dismiss the feeling of being left out. She turned her face up to the sun, partly listening to Malcolm and Ted, partly trying to work out what was being said in the kitchen. When Malcolm nudged her for failing to answer a question she gave up eavesdropping and focused her full attention on the two men who wanted to know where the fishing rods were stowed. When they went off to the river with rods and a package of bread dough and ground beef donated by Eleanor, along with the advice that they would catch nothing, Amanda returned to the porch and the swing seat. She stretched full length and closed her eyes, trying to ignore the laughter that erupted intermittently from the kitchen.

It was three days since Clancy and Amanda had shared the dance and the kiss and the tortured end to the evening. To Amanda's surprise Clancy had not tried to pull out of the Connecticut weekend. And, after a half-hearted attempt to tell Eleanor that she was too busy to come up, for which Eleanor had given her the sharp end of her tongue, Amanda met the other three at Grand Central for the train ride north.

She and Clancy had been polite in the way of distant acquaintances. It had thrown Amanda that this handsome, self-possessed woman could sit opposite her and exchange pleasantries while Amanda could only stare at the way the intimately familiar lips moved as she spoke. Finally Amanda had pretended to fall asleep on Ted's shoulder rather than suffer any longer the burning sensation that flared between her legs every time Clancy smiled. Snuggled in the sun rocking quietly on her mother's veranda Amanda remembered the infuriating sensation only too well; she wriggled and pulled the crotch of her jeans lower. At the same time another part remembered how not infuriating Clancy had been the previous evening when, at Eleanor's insistence, Amanda had walked their guest around the garden and down to the river.

"This is what I've always imagined New England to be like," Clancy had said as they strolled along the path between the raised kitchen garden beds. Twilight wasn't quite ready yet to descend. A clear sky retained the luminous reminder of the sun and haloed Clancy's head in subtle light.

"It's pretty classic, isn't it?" Amanda looked back at the rambling clapboard mansion, its two floors, gables and verandas cast in many shadows and planes; the windows glowing gold and welcoming. "You should see it in summer. Mom's kitchen

garden is famous in these parts. What started out as necessity is now one of her visitor attractions.”

“I bet.” They walked on in silence while Amanda tried to be less aware of Clancy’s perfume.

“The house was built by a ship’s captain for his wife and daughters, early 1800s,” Amanda said suddenly, relieved at hitting on a reliable topic. “But he was lost at sea and they fell on hard times. A bit like Mom really. They both looked after their kids by taking in paying guests. Funny isn’t it?”

“Resourceful women,” Clancy remarked. “So many resourceful women.”

They reached the white-painted hexagonal gazebo; a pale lilac wisteria softened its geometric structure and it stood on a small bluff above the water meadow and the river. Clancy sat on the bench seating that ran around five of its sides. She rested her folded arms on the railing, propped her chin on her arms and looked out at the ink-dark water. “I wonder how often she came out here when the day was done. It’s so peaceful.”

Amanda hitched her butt on the railing and leaned back against the nearest post. “Probably as often as my mother. We knew to leave her be when she was here. I remember looking out my bedroom window and seeing this little red firefly glowing in the dark. Then she gave up smoking and I just knew she was here anyway and it felt good – like you say, peaceful.”

For a few minutes the plup and gurgle of slow moving water around a half sunken snag were the only sounds in the deepening dusk; then Amanda sensed Clancy’s eyes on her before she asked, “What was your dad like? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Amanda shifted on the railing and pulled up her feet and clasped her arms around her knees. She let out a long breath that wasn’t a sigh. “No I don’t mind. I don’t really remember him that well. I was just ten and my brother was twelve. One day Dad was home, the next day he was gone. Mom sat us down and told us he had to go on a long trip and she didn’t know when he’d be back. I think it affected Andrew more than me, although neither of us really knew him well. He was always away a lot. He was an engineer: built bridges, fixed bridges, blew up bridges. The only bridges he didn’t build were with his family.” After a surprised silence, Amanda laughed and said sheepishly, “Wow. I suppose I mind more than I’m letting on.”

Clancy's hand grasped Amanda's ankle and squeezed gently; it was comforting. "As I said, resourceful women," she said quietly.

"I guess." Amanda continued to feel the gentle grip on her ankle, like a connection to a safer place. "I think I was angry for my mom. I didn't like to see her sad and even back then I knew she was working harder than hard to keep everything together. Andrew got difficult for a while – not that you could blame him – but the stupid asshole has stayed difficult, so maybe he always was and we just didn't know. Maybe he's like my dad – funny, I've never asked Mom that question."

"No photos?"

"There's one, but she put it away years ago. It was of us all together at the Empire State Building, I must have been two – Mom is holding me. I look like a cartoon: chubby cheeks and great big eyes."

Clancy's laugh was almost inaudible. "Well, you've still got the great big eyes, but lucky for you the chubby cheeks didn't last." She squeezed Amanda's ankle again and withdrew her hand, leaving a dual feeling of warmth and loss. "You and Eleanor are very alike – which is also lucky for you."

Amanda frowned, "But Mom is really gorgeous."

"Yes."

The silence between them stretched and tingled and Amanda held her breath as she digested Clancy's words. Somewhere in the woods beyond the water meadow across the river an owl hooted – once, twice. The soft sound both broke and enhanced the spell and Amanda had uncurled her legs and stood up, unsure what to say or do next.

*So, if you were me, what would you do, God?* Amanda didn't speak aloud in the cathedral but figured that God being God and all, She could hear anyway. No answer came that Amanda could make out, so she added: *You can answer too, St John, if you have any advice. Please?* Amanda listened to the friendly silence of the great cathedral and again found her mind wandering to the past. This time it was to the last occasion she had been in a church.

"I can't believe we're doing this Mom," Amanda had whispered in her mother's ear. "This guy is a full blown, fascist heathen and he's got the nerve to think God hasn't figured out his damned hypocrisy?"

“Hush up now, Amanda,” said her mother, stifling a giggle and slapping her daughter’s arm with a kid glove that was the color of pistachio ice cream. “This is your brother’s wedding and we have to behave.”

Amanda noted the “we” and said nothing, although her gusty sigh was eloquent. She took her mother’s gloved left hand in both her own and gave it a squeeze. They sat in silent pleasure, watching as the plume on the organist’s hat bobbed in time with her feet, pumping at the pedals to produce the wheezy holy groaning that filled the church. Amanda watched the pews fill with guests who all seemed to know one another. The men shook hands heartily and the women exchanged careful air kisses before having a good look around to check out rival hats and outfits. She recognized some of the older couples but the rest were strangers.

“Who *are* these people, Mom?” She whispered. “I can’t believe Andrew has any friends, never mind this many.”

Eleanor gave her daughter’s hand a fond smack. “You are a very bad girl Amanda. But actually, most of them are newcomers to town and they are Sara-Mae Gentle’s friends and her family too, I think.”

“Sara-Mae Gentle!” Amanda’s snort was mulish. “Sara-Mae Gentle! You cannot expect me to call her Sara-Mae Gentle. Spare me Mom. If she wasn’t christened Priscilla Mary Piranha then I am definitely Rita Hayworth.”

Eleanor stifled a giggle and squeezed Amanda’s hand. “You are my lovely girl Amanda, but you are definitely *not* Rita Hayworth. Now hush, here comes your brother. Try to smile when he catches your eye.”

The groom and his best man headed up the aisle flashing broad grins at the pews on either side. Somehow Andrew managed to miss seeing his sister although he did incline his head graciously towards his mother. He was a shorter, less handsome version of Amanda, with an almost porcine nose. Yet it was as if the colors that had gathered so vividly in Amanda had been leached from his skin and hair, which he wore long to his collar with sideburns that were close to muttonchop. These side-whiskers and a pale gray morning coat and vest, with an even paler violet jacquard silk cravat at his throat, gave him the look of a faded photograph of a 19<sup>th</sup> century worthy. His best man was a head taller, but identically dressed.

“Omigod, he looks like Wyatt Earp without the six-shooter,” Amanda whispered to her mother as the two men slow-marched towards the altar.

“Shush,” whispered Eleanor. “It’s very romantic.” But she coughed on a stifled giggle.

“Pah! Horse feathers,” hissed Amanda, loudly enough for her brother to glance sharply over his shoulder and glare at her.

Eleanor’s warning pinch caused her retaliatory glower at her brother to soften to a simpering smile. It was the only communication between the siblings during the wedding service or the reception that followed, during which Amanda dutifully danced with her first and last high school boyfriend, now a local lawyer with a shingle on Main Street and married and the proud father of Darren, Warren and Ward.

“Warren and Darren are twins,” her ex-beau explained as they two-stepped around the over-decorated hall. “They’re named for Melanie’s granddaddy.”

“Lovely,” Amanda murmured. “He must be rich?”

“You don’t change, do you Amanda?” Her old boyfriend’s face instantly suffused with bright pink annoyance from his tight collar up to his already receding hairline.

*Yep*, Amanda thought as she watched the color rise, *granddaddy is rich*.

Much later that night, back at Heron Creek, she settled herself in the swing seat and kicked off her shoes. She could hear her mother busy in the kitchen and she lay back, pushed at the floor with her foot and started the swing gently rocking back and forth.

“How long do you give it, Ma?” She called softly and was rewarded by a clatter of glass and china and a muffled guffaw.

“Evil child,” her mother’s voice answered her, then the screen door squeaked open and Eleanor appeared carrying a laden tray. “Although I have to say I do think, these days, expensive wedding gifts should be given with the proviso that they must be returned to the giver or donated to charity if the marriage doesn’t last two years.” She laid the tray on the low table and kicked off her shoes. “It’s darned expensive and then one party takes off with the loot. Darned irritating.”

“*Darned* irritating,” Amanda agreed. She drew up her legs and made space for her mother.

Eleanor sat and leaned back with a happy groan, stretched her legs and wiggled her toes. “Oh, this is good,” she sighed. “I hope you’re not expecting me to get dressed up like this for you one day, my girl.”

Amanda took a deep breath and set down her champagne flute, looked her mother in the eye and smiled as she took her hand.

“Mom, we’ve never really talked about this but I don’t think I’ll ever get married,” she said. Eleanor smiled back at her; she shook her head. Amanda waited and watched the bubbles rising up the flute. She held it up to the light of the candle burning straight and steadily in a storm lantern set on the low table.

“No, I don’t suppose you will, my darling,” Eleanor said, her tone matter of fact, sipping on her own champagne. “Not until the law is changed and you can marry some nice woman.”

Amanda choked on an oyster and coughed violently. Eleanor patted her back gently and continued calmly sipping on the chilled Veuve Clicquot until Amanda recovered herself.

“Better now, honey? Would you like a glass of water?” she inquired serenely.

Amanda shook her head, coughed and sniffed. “No, Mom, I’m fine, but jeez.” She coughed again convulsively and took a long swig of champagne. “How long have you known?”

Eleanor shrugged and narrowed her eyes in thought. “Not sure, honey. I always knew you were different. I called it being a tomboy--it suited your father to think that anyway. And when he took off it didn’t matter about labels just so long as you were happy and got through that time with minimum damage.”

“You mean you could tell when I was *twelve*?” Amanda’s eyebrows were perfect bows of astonishment.

Eleanor shrugged, “Well, it *could* have been just a tomboy phase, but you did look and behave more like Huck Finn than Becky Thatcher, put it that way. You were far more boyish than your brother.”

“That would *not* be difficult,” Amanda said tartly. “He’s such a big old sour milk pudding.” She suddenly sat up, “Actually I bet he’s a closet queen. Only he doesn’t know it yet!”

Eleanor snorted, “You’re being very stereotypical, darling.”

“Well, let’s wait and see.” Amanda lay back into the cushions and sipped her champagne, watching her mother’s elegant profile and enjoying the glint of light on her still-blond but silver-streaked hair. Then she had a thought. She looked at Eleanor curiously, her head on one side, trying to see her eyes in the shadows.

“You’ve never asked me about it.”



“Well you never told.” Eleanor shrugged and smiled. “And I thought you would when you wanted to. Or needed to – when it was important enough to tell me, I mean.”

They continued to sit in companionable silence, with just the steady creak of the swing and occasional sounds from the surrounding woods. On this night the only guests at Heron Creek were regulars: a party of deadly serious birdwatchers who went to bed early and rose before the first lark. Amanda and Eleanor were alone in the peaceful night.

“You don’t mind, Mom?” Amanda eventually asked, reaching for her mother’s hand.

Eleanor gave her daughter’s hand a squeeze and sighed. “I want you to be happy, Amanda. I’ve only ever wanted you to be happy. To do whatever it is that makes you happy. If I were being honest, it would have been fun to think about a nice boy – man – and grandchildren. But these days grandchildren aren’t out of the question anyway, whereas a nice man is very hard to come by. So, as long as you’re happy and you don’t get hurt I’ve had enough time to think about it and know that I really don’t mind.”

Her mother’s speech confirmed to Amanda that Eleanor had thought through her feelings long before this conversation, and she swallowed the lump that rose in her throat and blinked back tears. Then her mother took a deep breath and what she said next told Amanda that she’d been considering these thoughts a long time too.

“Are you going to continue on Wall Street forever though, my darling? You seem so tired and stressed all the time and to be frank, I can’t see the point. The only thing you do is make money and that never made anyone happy. And the kind of money you make seems to come from causing trouble for millions of people, unless I’ve got the wrong end of it. I don’t want to offend you, but as long as we’re talking turkey, I have to tell you that if there’s anything about your life I don’t like and never will, it’s your choice of career.”

Amanda was shocked into silence while she contemplated the understated vehemence of Eleanor’s words. Finally she gave her mother’s hand a squeeze. Eleanor continued, “You are beautiful, very smart, and I hope I brought you up to have decent values, and some day I’d like to see you doing something worthy of you. Something worthwhile.”

Amanda was about to make a quip about going off to the Third World to save the poor starving millions, but thought better of it. It was the first time Eleanor had ever criticized her choices and she was astonished. And also abashed at the unexpectedly unattractive picture her mother was painting of her only daughter.

“You’ve never said anything, Mom,” she murmured, scooping up another succulent oyster onto a crumbly cracker. “I thought you were proud of me.”

“My darling, I *am* proud of you. But I can’t be proud of what you *do*. Maybe I’m old-fashioned, but I want to see something good come out of what you do. What do you give the world at the end of your working week? What’s worthwhile about it? As far as I can see, globalized corporate business is about exploitation of the people who can least afford it and never benefit from it.”

“Mom! You sound like a socialist!” Amanda regretted the flippant remark the moment it left her lips.

Eleanor withdrew her hand from Amanda’s and made a sound that was part hiss and part snort. “*That* is a silly thing to say and well you know it!” She said tartly. “If we can’t have a sensible conversation there’s no point.”

Amanda grabbed for her mother’s hand. “Mom! I’m sorry, I really am. You’re right, that was a ridiculous thing to say. I know that. But I’m a bit shocked, to be honest. I never knew you felt like this. You should have said.”

“I have never wanted to interfere, but lately I’ve been thinking about you a lot and watching what’s going on in your world and I just don’t think it’s worthy of your talent.” Eleanor thumped her glass down on the table for emphasis. “There, that’s it. I’ve said it.”

After another long but not uncomfortable silence Amanda lifted her mother’s hand and kissed it. “I love you, Mom,” she murmured. “You are a great woman. I am very lucky. Maybe I’ll come home and help you run Heron Creek.”

“You need to learn to love making beds.” Amanda had heard rather than saw her mother’s smile. “Or at least pretend you do.”

“Madam? Are you in need of assistance?”

In the cathedral Amanda opened her eyes to see a young black woman sitting beside her in the pew. She was wearing a prominent crucifix over a black shirtfront, along with blue jeans and a navy blue cable-knit cardigan; and her hair was teased out in something like a 70s-style Afro.

Amanda realized there were tears on her cheeks and she wiped them away with the back of her hand. "I'm fine, thank you," she said to the young woman. "Thank you for asking, and caring. I was just thinking through some stuff and asking for a bit of advice."

The young woman's face split into a wide smile of large white teeth with a gap between the front two. "That is most excellent," she said and Amanda heard an unusual accent.

"You're not American?" she asked, curious.

"I am from Uganda," said the young woman. "I am working at Saint John's for one year. I am most very fortunate." Her words were perfectly enunciated and each "r" was rolled with relish and precision.

"Wow, that's great," said Amanda. "Well I hope you're enjoying your time in New York City."

"And I hope you enjoy whatever it is you have decided you must do," said the young woman. She looked closely into Amanda's eyes and smiled again. "I think you may be traveling on a long journey quite soon and you will be leaving some unhappiness behind. You are changing your life for the betterment of mankind."

Amanda's eyes widened and she looked about and shivered. The young African was either a messenger from St John or God, or she was some kind of obeah woman.

"Yeah, well, I'm not sure about mankind. It's hard enough looking after myself."

The young woman frowned and shook her head. "You are quite wrong madam," she said firmly. "When we are helping others we are always helping ourselves. You will see."

Amanda smiled. "Okay, whatever you think." She held out a hand and the two women shook warmly. "Thanks," Amanda said. "This is a great place for thinking things out."

"The good Lord must be doing his work in the mysterious way that is often spoken of," said the young woman seriously and hugged Amanda in farewell.

When Amanda walked into the apartment she was immediately aware of two things: the deep silence of an empty apartment and the acrid smell of paint. Then she noticed the cause of the paint smell. On each of the living room's four walls – and

right across the paintings as if they weren't there – was sprayed hugely in bright, dripping graffiti red, the letters “c”, “u”, “n” and “t”. Amanda stared, turning around slowly to take it all in. Then she saw the coffee table: a now ruined slab of glass split in two and splintered in a star pattern at its centre where something heavy had struck it.

Amanda let out a long deep breath. The small abstract sculpture by Jellica Frakes, a 21st birthday present from her grandmother, now lay in the center of the ex-coffee table. Both were irreparably smashed. On the floor, beside the marble shards was Clancy's book. It had been ripped in two.

“What next?” Amanda said aloud and, with a fast beating heart, tiptoed to the corridor leading to her bedroom. She pushed open the door with one finger and stepped inside. It looked as if a hurricane had been through the room: the sheets and mattress and drapes were shredded, the walls decorated with more red aerosol paint – although Natalie seemed to have quickly run out of inspiration and simply sprayed the walls and pictures at random. The bureau drawers were on the floor and the contents scattered amid the wreckage of the bed. Amanda hardly dared look in her closet but knew she must; and the destruction of her clothes was as thorough as she had anticipated it might be.

“Holy frijole,” she said to the ruins. She felt sick with shock and disbelief and her heart thumped in her throat as she realized the levels of rage and revenge in Natalie's actions.

“Revenge for what?” she whispered to the fractured image of herself that stared back from the shattered mirror. “*What* did I do to deserve this?” Her own puzzled eyes looked back at her, in multiples of no answers.

Amanda made her way through the apartment, stopping to peer into Natalie's studio, which looked much as it usually did, although the white furry rug and lights of the morning's activities were still there and shoved roughly into one corner. But Natalie's laptop and video camera were gone. Amanda went on into the kitchen. It was untouched, as far as she could see. *That makes sense*, she thought sourly, *given your total lack of interest in cooking or eating at home*. Fearfully Amanda pushed open the door to her own small study and looked in. Her laptop lay on the floor and as she picked it up its screen began doing convulsive things involving striated light patterns, then it flashed to black and stayed that way.

Amanda tenderly laid the dead machine on her desk and stood back to take in the full extent of the red spray that now decorated the room. Natalie had repeated her favorite four-letter word on each wall in carelessly drawn capital letters that covered the surfaces regardless: pictures, photographs, a calendar, a whiteboard and even the window were daubed. It was a complete and utter mess. Amanda opened the top drawer of her two-drawer filing cabinet. The Rolodex was intact. She tucked it under her arm and returned to the living room, double-locked the front door, slipped both bolts and hooked up the safety chain; then she sat down with her phone in shaking hands to call a locksmith and her friend and lawyer.

The incisive way her buddy said “Jan Mattson” as she answered the phone made Amanda feel instantly better, if only slightly. “This is a curly one Amanda,” said Jan after Amanda explained what had happened. Her voice on speakerphone sounded metallic yet thoughtful. “You’ve been together long enough for her to pull a palimony stunt on you, you understand that?”

“That’s why I’ve called you,” Amanda said, sniffing and wiping tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand and feeling the bruise on her forehead. “I don’t want to be unfair, but I don’t want any trouble either and I want her out of here. She’s scared me. You should see the place. It’s crazy stuff.”

At the other end Jan cleared her throat tentatively then said, “Um, does she have any reason to trash the place? I mean, like a *real* reason?”

Amanda snorted. “You mean am I seeing anyone else? Ha! I wish. We’ve not touched each other in six months and I’ve been so busy at work I couldn’t have got it on with anyone else if I’d wanted to and, actually, I haven’t *wanted* to. I’ve been so damn tired all I want to do at the end of a day is come home and watch TV.”

“Could that be part of the problem? Have you neglected her?” Jan’s voice was quiet, lawyerly and reasonable.

“Oh give me a break Jan! You know what it’s like in this town – at my end of it. You put in your seventy hours or you go scrub bathrooms. And Natalie has never complained about the money.”

“I’m sure she hasn’t, at least not to you,” said Jan soothingly.

“What are you getting at? What have you heard?” Amanda’s tone was sharp as she sat up straight and really listened.

“Nothing, really, nothing that matters anyway.” Jan’s tone was intended to pacify but instead alarm and anger shot up Amanda’s spine.

“Has she been talking to our friends?”

“Shaz and Barb mentioned they’d seen her at a club recently and she was very sour when they asked her where you were and how you were.” Before Amanda could respond Jan hurried on in soothing tones, “But I’m thinking out loud and trying to figure out what Natalie’s up to. First of all, are you sure you want out, in this way?”

Amanda paused and thought for a moment. Jan was asking the question that had been lurking in the back of her mind since she had walked in on the unexpected tableau. And that was only twenty-four hours ago. She took a deep breath and let it out in a long, teary sigh.

“Oh God,” she sighed again, tremulously. “I can’t believe it, but the answer is yes. I– uh–I don’t want to have anything to do with someone who can behave like this. I feel...” She paused and thought for a moment. “I feel like a fool. I feel like I’ve been made a fool of. I feel insulted. Dirty. Stupid. I’m wondering whether I should have an AIDS test. And I’m probably being melodramatic about the whole thing. And unreasonable.”

The silence on the other end seemed deafening and accusatory to Amanda’s raw nerves, then Jan’s voice came warmly down the phone.

“Amanda, I don’t think you should beat yourself up.”

Amanda let out a strangled snort. “I don’t have to, Nat did that.” She gasped; it was the first time she’d admitted it out loud. She heard Jan’s intake of breath.

“Are you serious?”

Amanda sighed. “We had a bit of a tussle. We bumped heads, she slapped me a few times.” She hesitated then went on, “It’s happened before. That’s *really* why I want out. I can’t handle it. I don’t *want* to handle it.”

Jan’s silence said a lot, and then she sighed. “You two were always a strange pair—ask any of our friends. But that’s not the point. Natalie has stepped way over the line with this— and I mean the vandalism to the apartment, not the—sorry, I might laugh at this point—the big dick.”

Amanda’s shoulders relaxed and she giggled. “Don’t Jan! It’s too awful. I feel like such a idiot.”

“Well look, we’ve all been made fools of by someone, some time. The most important thing, from my point of view, is to make sure she doesn’t make more out of this than she already has. I think we should require her to take an AIDS test.”

“Oh God, really?” Amanda’s heart lurched and the pit of her stomach was suddenly awash with fear.

“Just for peace of mind,” Jan said soothingly, “but also to underline our concern at her behavior – and that you don’t know what else she’s been up to.” She paused, and then went on, “It would be helpful for me—if it ever comes to court. Hitting you was good, by the way—if you see what I mean.”

Amanda heard her own giggle mingling with Jan’s; it was a good sound. “Okay. Can I change the locks?”

There was another pause then Jan said, “I’d rather you didn’t ask me that, I’d rather you told me you’ve already done it.”

Amanda giggled some more. “That’s what I meant. I did, I changed the locks.”

“Okay, well, we might have a bit of bother over that. Let’s deal with it when we have to. But the hitting is something else. And it’s not you who should be ashamed, by the way. Meanwhile, photographs will be important, so if you’ve got an intact camera, or even use your phone, but take snaps of everything she’s done. Do you want to call the police into this, by the way?”

“Must I? They’ll take one look at this and be *so* not interested in a pair of brawling lesbians.”

“I hate to agree with you, but you have a point. Although domestic violence and criminal damage is what it’s called and from where I’m sitting that’s ugly. But we’ll fight fire with fire, if necessary.”

“Yuk. Okay. I’ll call you back later. And thanks Jan, I appreciate everything.”

“Don’t mention it kiddo, let’s get you out of this mess, then I’ll send you the bill.”

Amanda shivered and tried not to look at the red paint that disfigured her living room, but the smell of it was pervasive; she couldn’t get away from it. Miserably she dialed the doorman and asked him for the phone number of the neighborhood locksmith.

“You had a robbery Miz McIntyre?” he asked anxiously.

“Not exactly, Joe. More a break out than a break in. Don’t worry about it; I’ll fill you in later.”

By the time the locksmith fitted new barrels to the door, tested the keys and handed them over in exchange for a substantial check, Amanda had begun to feel less shaky and more resolute. She methodically photographed the apartment, then,

realizing that Natalie would inevitably return some time soon, hid the camera at the back of the bottom drawer of her filing cabinet. Then she reluctantly turned her attention to the mess.

“Domestic trouble or something else?” asked the detective, her clear blue eyes frankly appraising Amanda’s face and body.

“Domestic,” said Amanda reluctantly. She squared her shoulders and looked the detective in the eye. “I came home unexpectedly yesterday morning, caught my girlfriend in a compromising situation and left. I stayed at a friend’s last night and got back today to find the place trashed.”

“And your, um, girlfriend, is where now?” The junior officer was busy writing in her notebook, but Amanda saw her mouth twist in a smirk.

“I have no idea,” Amanda muttered, an angry blush suffusing her cheeks.

“Happen often?” The young officer’s expression was almost neutral but Amanda caught a flicker of disdain in her eyes.

“No. Never, I don’t do violence,” Amanda said, sharply.

“So who did you stay with last night? Is she the cause of the trouble?” The distaste was more obvious, as was a flash of curiosity.

“Not ‘she’, officer; as I said, a friend, a good friend. But frankly, it’s none of your business.”

Detective Novak took a step forward and with it, took control of the exchange. She held up her hand. “We have to ask questions Ms McIntyre,” she said soothingly, then turned to her colleague. “But we don’t make assumptions Officer Shelton.”

The junior officer opened her mouth to argue but thought better of it and looked around the room instead.

“Would you mind showing us all the damage, ma’am?” The detective smiled at Amanda and the corners of her blue eyes crinkled comfortably. Amanda could not help but smile back and feel more secure.

“The kitchen’s okay but my bedroom and the study are like this. And I don’t have much left by way of clothes. They’re slashed to shreds.”

Amanda led the two officers through the apartment and Officer Shelton made more notes and began popping photos on a small camera.

“Were *you* threatened with physical violence?” The junior officer had a ready knack of getting under Amanda’s skin.



“As I said, I wasn’t here. It was like this when I got home.”

“Ah, right. So you haven’t actually been assaulted?”

“Take a good look at my wardrobe and the walls, officer. And the wreckage of the table – the sculpture was valuable and a gift from my mom. If that’s not an assault, I don’t know what is! But actually, yes, she did hit me.” She indicated her cheek. “A slap across the face, I think that counts as assault, wouldn’t you say?”

Again Detective Novak stepped in to stem the growing friction. “Sherry, get some shots of the clothing, please. Ms McIntyre, perhaps you could answer some questions for me. Let’s go sit in your living room.”

“Sure,” but as she and the tall, good-looking blonde cop left the bedroom, the sound of fists pounding on the front door told Amanda that Natalie had returned.

“Let me in you bitch!” Screamed the familiar voice. “You can’t do this! I’m gonna fuckin’ punch your fuckin’ lights out, Amanda! ”

Amanda’s stomach turned over and her heart began to thud. She looked at Detective Novak, feeling paralyzed partially by fear and partly by embarrassment. The officer’s expression was grim and she stepped in front of Amanda.

“Let me handle this,” she said softly, straightening her cap and moving lightly to the door. As she opened it and stood back Natalie almost leapt into the apartment, propeled by rage, her fists raised and the veins in her neck pulsing beneath reddened skin. Then she saw that it was not Amanda in the hallway and she stopped dead, eyes wide and blazing with fury.

“What the fuck...” she hissed and glared about as Officer Shelton came up behind Amanda, nightstick in hand. Detective Novak quietly closed the door behind Natalie and stepped between her and Amanda.

“Are you kidding me?” Amanda saw then that Natalie’s pupils were pinheads of black and her pale face shone beneath the fine sheen of sweat. She was iced to the eyebrows. “What the fuck you playing at, Amanda? Get these bitches outta here!” Natalie lunged towards Amanda and Detective Novak put out her arm and stopped her dead while Officer Shelton semi-crouched and made ready to strike.

“Whatever you’re thinking of doing ma’am, I’d think again,” Detective Novak said in a steady voice. “Is your name Natalie...” She glanced at her partner who holstered her gun, consulted her notebook and said, “Marcus. Natalie Anne Marcus.”

“And if I am? So fuckin’ what?” Natalie’s chin was belligerent but her eyes flicked nervously from one officer to the other and a trickle of sweat ran down the side of her face; she brushed it away with her jacket sleeve.

“Ma’am, watch your language please. And I’ll ask the questions.” Detective Novak seemed easily in control and Amanda felt relieved by that. Also, she realized, nobody could hear her heart nor know that her dry mouth made it impossible to speak. Detective Novak turned to her and smiled reassuringly.

“Ma’am, would you mind giving us five minutes with Ms – uh – Ms Marcus? If you could wait in your bedroom perhaps?”

Amanda swallowed hard and nodded meekly. “Sure,” she whispered and stepped away, unwilling to turn her back on her enraged ex-lover, noting that Officer Shelton still held the nightstick even as she began to shepherd Natalie into the living room. Reluctantly Natalie did as she was told, but before she complied she turned and directed a murderous look at Amanda that seemed intended to strike her dead. Detective Novak watched the look and stepped quickly between Natalie and Amanda, her tall, black leather-jacketed form blocking any further flow of venom. The detective smiled warmly at Amanda. “I’ll be with you shortly, just wait for me,” she said softly, and Amanda let out a deep sigh of relief as she retreated up the hall to her bedroom.

## **EIGHT**

Amanda climbed onto the couch beside Malcolm and sat down cross-legged, leaning into his encircling arm and shoulder. She let out a deep sigh and closed her eyes as the TV newscaster droned gloomily about the economy and the day’s fresh financial disasters.

“Do you want to watch this or shall we give it a miss?” Malcolm asked.

“The off button feels like a really good idea right now,” Amanda muttered. “I think I’ve had enough drama for one day.”

Malcolm aimed the remote at the TV and the screen crackled and went dark. He leaned back into the cushions and brushed strands of dark blonde hair back off her

forehead. Amanda sighed again, this time with contentment seeping through and submerging the anxiety and unhappiness.

“You want to tell or you want to sit on it for a bit?” Malcolm asked as the relative quiet of the apartment settled about them. “Although I don’t recommend sitting on it, you might get piles or something worse.”

Amanda grinned despite her weary dejection. “Life is looking pretty shitty right now, but it could be worse, I think,” she said.

“It could always be worse, unless you’re dead of course, but that’s not the point. What’s happened today?”

“After Natalie trashed the apartment and I called the police? Or after a detective who looked like Cagney in *Cagney and Lacey* came in and fixed everything? Did you ever watch *Cagney and Lacey*? It’s lez-cult viewing. Or how humiliating it felt to go have an AIDS test and have to explain why, although I didn’t mention the words dildo or porno movie?” She sneaked a look at Malcolm; his eyes remained closed but he was grinning.

“At least you haven’t lost your sense of humor,” he remarked, peeking at her through his eyelashes.

“Okay, so I had a long talk to Jan Mattson. Remember Jan – my lawyer pal?” Malcolm nodded. “She said I could lay charges against Natalie and it would all get very disagreeable, but the nice detective would be pissed off with me if I didn’t; or I could use the trashing to stop Natalie going the whole palimony route, because if she does I’d lose my shirt—and probably my bra too.”

“Could Natalie do palimony? You’ve supported her! When did she ever pay for anything?” Malcolm sat up, suddenly paying full attention.

“Not the point apparently. We’ve been together more than two years, so she could claim she was being housewife or househusband or something, thus enabling me to go out and hunt woolly mammoths on Wall Street.”

“But that’s ridiculous!”

“It’s the law.”

“Bloody hell. So what are you going to do?”

“Jan is talking to Natalie’s lawyer and if I’m lucky, apparently, I will only have to pay her about forty grand and she’ll disappear out of my life forever and take her strap-on with her.”

Malcolm spluttered and sat up. “Forty grand! You *are* kidding me!”

“No. And Jan advises that’s cheap. If we went to court she *could* claim half of everything and it would cost me more than fifty grand in legal fees and no guarantee of winning.”

“My bloody oath, that’s rough. You sure?”

“Jan’s as sure as anyone can be and I’d rather take her advice than risk a horrible public scene *and* have to sell my grandmother’s apartment and give Nat half the proceeds.”

“Whoo! I don’t believe it.” Malcolm flopped back on the sofa and ran his fingers through his thick hair until it stood up comically all over his head, reminding her in passing of Kramer and *Seinfeld*.

“Well you’ve never lived with a lover, so why would you?” Amanda leaned over and rearranged his hair, then examined a slight chip in her nail polish and frowned. “Time for a manicure,” she added.

Malcolm snorted. “You girls are a menace. One bonk and you get married.”

“We were not married; we had an open relationship,” Amanda pointed out grumpily.

“Maybe, but no wonder you get yourselves in these tangles.” He hugged an affronted-looking Amanda and laughed, but the expression of disbelief still widened his eyes and he shook his head. “I really can’t take it in,” he said in wonderment. “That she could actually think of doing this. Are you upset?”

Amanda grimaced. “I’m sort of upset that I’m not more upset, if you see what I mean. I thought I’d be heartbroken, or something, but I just feel kind of numb and relieved. It makes me think I’m very shallow.”

“Shallow is good,” Malcolm observed and kissed the tip of her nose. “You know where you stand with shallow. Deep can be dangerous. True love is always a pain in the arse.”

“Arse! I love that you say ‘arse’ and not ‘ass’. It shows you haven’t been totally co-opted by America.”

“Why thank you, I think that’s a compliment.” Malcolm peered at her through his eyelashes once more and raised one eyebrow in a gesture reminiscent of his sister. “But I have noticed that you didn’t pick up on my true love bait,” he remarked.

Amanda sighed and flopped back on the sofa, staring at the ceiling mainly to avoid her friend’s all-seeing eyes. “I don’t think I believe in true love, Mal,” she said

softly. “At least, not for me. I’ve actually never thought ‘this is the one!’ Do you do true love? Do *guys* do true love?”

Malcolm shrugged and frowned. “I don’t know about the ‘One True Love’ thing, but yeah I’m looking for love, if I’m honest. I’m tired of flings and bored with partying. And there are more reasons than you can poke a stick at to not do one night stands anymore; including that it’s too embarrassing at my age. I think it’s okay for guys to say they want roses ’round the door and someone to come home to—someone special. Don’t you – really—deep down?”

Amanda shivered as an image of Clancy’s quirky grin flashed before her eyes, but she shook her head, dismissing the thought. She took a deep breath and said, with uncertainty, “No, really probably not. I think it would be too dangerous because I’d probably pick the wrong kind and that would lead to misery—like my mom. I guess that’s what I don’t want to do.” She sat up and peered at Malcolm with wide eyes. “Wow, I’ve never really put that into words before, but I think that’s it: I’d rather not get in too deep and then there are no regrets.” She noticed Malcolm’s raised eyebrows and went on quickly, “Well not many. And this time it’ll cost and I’ll have to get the apartment redecorated and stuff replaced. I don’t really care about that but I *am* pissed she broke my Frakes sculpture because *that* was deliberate.”

“So every woman is going to be like your father, is that it?” Malcolm didn’t sound convinced.

“No. Yes. No, that’s not what I mean. Well, maybe it is sort of. I just don’t want to ever be like my mom was when her heart was broken in tiny pieces. It was too scary.”

“You were a kid, that’s why you were scared. Broken hearts mend and they’re part of being human.” Malcolm sounded firm and sure.

Amanda’s eyes widened and she snorted on a giggle. “Boy, and you’re the great expert, I suppose?”

Malcolm grinned and shrugged. “Okay, you win that point, but you wait and see. One day there’ll be a whoosh and a ping and you’ll have an arrow in your heart.” He shook his head at Amanda’s expertly blown raspberry. “You just wait and see,” he repeated solemnly and again Amanda laughed out loud.

“Right, I’m changing the subject. So what are you going to do about work?”

Amanda stopped laughing, flopped back into the sofa and rested her bare feet on his thigh. “Good question. I spent the rest of the day on the phone to contacts, even

the head hunters who've been after me, and the answer is the same everywhere—not a great time to be out of a job, Amanda. Sub-prime isn't popular out there in mortgage-land. Everyone's running for the hills or hiding under their beds and nobody—but nobody—is hiring. Last month I could pick and choose. Now there's nothing to choose from." She wrinkled her nose and examined her perfect, frosty pink toenails. "I was told by someone who was dying for me last month that I am now unemployable. It's like I've got leprosy."

"You could get a gig as a waitperson."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Well you could so, Miss High'n'Mighty. But seriously, you might have to think about doing something else. Because I think your current line of work is what is called—in scientific terms—toast."

Amanda stared at him and frowned, then poked his leg with her toe. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Deadly. The ship is heading for a huge great shoal and there's nobody at the wheel. Wrap your head around that my darling, the sooner the better, so you can out-swim the rest of your pals and get to dry land before them."

Amanda frowned some more and shivered, despite the warmth of the apartment. Then she said, in a very small voice, "I don't know what to do Mal, everything's collapsed in a heap and it's all happened in twenty-four hours. I've never been on a scrap heap before and I haven't a clue how to get off. I've been working at being *this* me ever since I started college and now nobody wants this me. The only person who's going to be really pleased is my mother, because she never liked this me anyway. What *do* I do? "

He took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "You can do anything Amanda. That's the great kick. Suddenly you don't have to keep on keeping on. You're not broke. You don't have a girlfriend, so you don't have any ties. Your mum is healthy and has her own life; she doesn't need you to help out at Heron Creek. You're on your own."

"Oh thanks, that's supposed to be comforting?"

"Don't be a duffer! It's exciting. You can make some real decisions for a change." He grabbed her other hand and held them both hard. "Like I told you—come with me to Australia for a bit. You can take stock, have a decent think, see the country, cuddle a smelly koala, or whatever. But come *on*! Don't be a cream puff.

This is actually the sound of a door opening even though you think it's just slammed on your fingers!"

Amanda's heart began to race and it wasn't just fright. Despite her ingrained habit of careful, strategic thinking she sensed a growing excitement and possibility that she couldn't quite ignore. *I could do anything—I'm free*, the feeling whispered. But she shook her head anyway.

"You're going home *and* you're going back to Clancy, don't forget. *And*—don't forget—she hates me."

Malcolm snorted and rolled his eyes heavenward. "You got off on the wrong foot. She doesn't *hate* you, she just has a thing about not messing about with married women."

"Okay, so she despises my job—my ex-job—and she despises my loose morals and you want me to land on her doorstep with you?"

Malcolm's merriment knew no bounds. "Loose morals—I like that, but you have to admit you did slip her the tongue five minutes after you met."

It was Amanda's turn to try not to laugh. "Malcolm! That's gross! And anyway, she started it."

"True, I guess you'd both had a lot to drink and were just hot for each other."

"We were not! We argued all evening, until..." Amanda shrugged and tried to stem the blush that was threatening to rise up her throat.

"Until you both did the old tongue tango."

"Stop! It was *Top Gun* that did it Well the theme song anyway."

"I wouldn't be admitting that in public if I were you, it's *so* not cool."

"Oh and you'd know all about cool Mr Mean Malcolm, but I don't want you going round telling people I'm hot for your sister. It was a one off."

"Uh huh."

"It was too. And that won't change even though I've split up with Natalie. Clancy's not my type."

"Didn't look like that from where I was standing."

"Let's change the subject again. Do you honestly think Clancy won't mind if I come stay with you for a bit?"

"I honestly know she'll be fine. I've talked to her and she said—and I quote—'just as long as she's house trained and doesn't get under my feet'."

Amanda gaped at him, "Are you serious? That's not a friendly invitation!"

Malcolm grinned. “Well, no, actually she said ‘tell her she can come just as long as she doesn’t cause another global financial crisis.’ I think she really likes you Amanda, honest.”

“Huh. Well if that’s what she’s like when she *likes* someone, I hate to think what it’d be like if she didn’t.”

Malcolm grimaced. “Not good, that’s for sure. But she’s a decent sort really. I told her you’d split with Natalie and what happened and she was really concerned.”

Amanda didn’t look or feel convinced. They sat in silence for a while. Malcolm looked at her with his eyebrows tied in a quizzical knot of inquiry. Amanda held her finger in the air as a thought came to her. “How are things with her girlfriend–Jan? Jane? The holiday when it rained?”

Malcolm chortled, “Oh God, Clancy and Jane have been getting on each other’s tits for years. They’re like Martha and George in *Virginia Woolf*. But I bet Clancy has never kissed Jane like you two kissed—that was totally le jazz hot!”

“The what?”

“It’s *Victor/Victoria* – you know – Julie Andrews in drag?”

Amanda groaned again and remonstrated with her friend, “Malcolm! You and your old movies. But I do wish you’d drop it. Are you trying to put me off the idea of Australia now?”

Malcolm raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, no more mention of the tongue tryst. But go on, say you’ll come.”

Amanda tried to avoid his laughing eyes as she considered the possibilities. Finally she had a useful thought. “What about the apartment? It’s a mess. I can’t just leave it.”

Malcolm shook his head. “No problem. I’ve thought of that. I’m giving up the lease on this place and Ted doesn’t want to take it on. He’ll be looking for somewhere else—why not get him to move in and take care of organizing the repairs? He stays on until you decide what you want to do, then you can both go from there.”

Amanda considered this new idea in silence. Malcolm poked her thigh with his toe and said impatiently, “Come on Amanda. I didn’t have you figured for chicken shit.”

Amanda stared at him for seventeen long seconds then groaned theatrically and hurled a cushion at his head. He caught it and whacked her with it.

“Chicken.”



"I am not. And it's not that easy. I can't just decide to...to..." She waved her hand in the general direction of JFK. "Fly off to Australia."

"Why not? What's stopping you?"

The sound of a key turning in a lock saved Amanda from an immediate reply. Ted entered the apartment, bringing a rush of briskness and good cheer with him.

"It's getting cold out there," he said, and began to unwind a long red wool scarf from around his neck.

"There you are, and it's spring in Sydney," Malcolm said triumphantly to Amanda. "You'll love it. Tell her she'll love it Ted."

"You'll love it," Ted said dutifully. "If Malcolm says so, it must be true." He slipped out of his overcoat and threw it and the scarf over a chair-back before flopping onto the second sofa and stretching out his legs with a happy sigh. He grinned at his friends and said, "Are you two going to hog that merlot or can an honest working man get a drink?"

After they finished the bottle of wine, opened another and phoned for Thai takeout, Amanda rang Eleanor with a sinking heart, knowing she would get nothing but encouragement from her mother to embark on Malcolm's madcap scheme.

"What a fantastic idea!" Eleanor said immediately. "When will you be leaving? Will Natasha be going with you?"

Amanda giggled. Natalie was something else about which her mother had never offered an opinion, but the way she never seemed able to get her name right shouted louder than any openly expressed disapproval.

"No, *Natalie* won't be going anywhere with me, ever again. It's all over, but I'll tell you about that when I come and see you, if I may?"

"Absolutely darling, when? And when will you be leaving for Australia?"

"Mom! I haven't decided whether to go yet. Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"Of course you're going. It's a wonderful opportunity. And I'll visit and we can cuddle koalas or something."

"Malcolm says they're smelly. And I haven't even begun to think about all the other poisonous things. Snakes, spiders, toads, sharks..."

"Sharks aren't poisonous darling, you don't have to worry about them."

"Mom!" Amanda heard herself laughing, but Eleanor was unstoppable.

"And you can get to know Clancy properly—that will be good. She's such a lovely woman..."

“Mom!” This time Eleanor had gone too far. “We thought we’d come up on the weekend? Are you very busy?”

“Lovely darling. It’s just the usual and I have Sally and Tillie here to help so the place will run itself. Tell the boys I haven’t seen them since Thanksgiving--almost a year ago.”

“Thanks Mom that will be great.” Ted and Malcolm nodded vigorously and whooped agreement. Amanda hushed them, half-heartedly.

“Make her say yes, Eleanor! Australia is calling!” Malcolm yelled towards the phone.

“He’s right, darling,” Eleanor said into Amanda’s ear. “This could be a wonderful new start for you and I want you to go. This is the silver lining to your cloud. After all, what else are you going to do? You were never any good as a waitress.”

“Mom!”

The rest of the week passed in a blur of alternating fright and excitement as Amanda steadily checked off each item on a list compiled with the help of Malcolm and Ted. The list didn’t include getting around to buying a new copy of Clancy’s book, but she did it anyway after detouring into Borders on her way back to the apartment. *C.N. Darrow. How was I supposed to know her silly damn name is Claire Nancy Darrow Darling?* She grumbled to herself, recalling how foolish she had felt on realizing how impressive and infuriating C.N. Darrow’s book had been among her ex-colleagues. She opened it, resentfully, that evening and found herself going back to it every spare minute after that. She realized all over again that Clancy’s foresight and analysis of what was happening to the world economy was more than prescient and even more correct.

By the time she closed the paperback on the last page it was after two in the morning and Amanda’s confidence in herself was jolted even harder than it had been by the eFrères layoff. More than once during the evening she had found herself with her iPhone in hand, about to call Malcolm and tell him she’d changed her mind. But each time her thumb hovered over the screen she had been unable to tap it. What would she say? *Malcolm, I’m not coming to Australia because your sister scares me shitless?* Or how about, *I’m not coming to Australia because your sister knows more about my business than I do and that means she thinks I’m a loser?* Or maybe, *I don’t*

*want to go on this trip, Malcolm, because I can't face your sister again. I've had enough of the way she makes me feel?*

That was probably the most honest thing she could say, but in the end Amanda had to admit to herself that she was too scared to tell Malcolm she was too scared. That meant she would simply have to get on with it and go. She could always get on a plane home again at a day's notice. It wasn't as if she would be trapped on the underside of the world with the meanest woman she'd ever met. Would it?

Most of the items on the list were crossed off by Friday evening when the three met at Grand Central to catch the train north into Connecticut. Amanda had been amazed to discover, during her preparations, that she didn't need vaccinations or other precautions against fatal diseases or toxic biting things; that Australia was actually quite civilized and well stocked with essentials such as Prada, manicurists and beauty salons. The most surprising thing, though, was the revelation that Malcolm's hometown was nowhere near Sydney or Melbourne.

"Don't call it *Mell-born* otherwise people will *know* you're foreign," Malcolm instructed. "It's *Mell-bn*. Okay? Try it." They were sitting opposite each other on the train. Ted was beside her and obligingly recited, "*Mell-born*."

Amanda repeated it after him.

"No! Can't either of you hear the difference?" Ted sniffed, turned his shoulder to them and slid down in the seat to sleep. "You can do Ossie pronunciation class without me; just make sure you don't leave me on the train."

Malcolm sighed and turned to Amanda. "It's *Mell-bn*. Cut it short. 'Bn' and anyway, we're not going there."

"*Mell-bn*," Amanda recited defiantly. "*Mell-bn*, *Mell-bn*, *Mell-bn*. Bn bn bn. So, where are we going?"

"Two Moon Bay. It's south of Sydney and it's a little place of about two and half thousand people. It used to be fishing and timber cutting and now it's mainly tourism. But Clancy says that it's in the doldrums and everyone is running scared. So she reckons it's time I came home and helped out before the whole place collapses in a heap."

"Help out doing what?"

“Family dairy farm. We sort of inherited it when our aunt and uncle decided they wanted to mooch around Australia in a Winnebago. They decided to stay in the Top End and that was that.”

“Heavens,” Amanda exclaimed. “Then what?”

“Clancy was working in Sydney. She went back to Two Moon to sort it all out and discovered she really loved it. She’s been going back ever since for as long as she could and she was thinking of chucking in the full time job on the *Herald* when she got the axe anyway, so that’s where she is now.”

Amanda thought about the tall, elegant blonde and tried to picture her milking cows and shoveling dung. It wasn’t an image that came easily. Then another question sprang into her mind. “So how came she wrote the book?”

“It came out of her daily rounds as a columnist; she started to figure out that most finance types didn’t have a clue, or if they did, they weren’t admitting it.”

“It’s an amazing book,” Amanda said quietly and watched Malcolm’s eyebrows rise. “I can see why she was so unpopular with the banking industry. I remember when it was first published, there was such a shit fight in the *Journal* about it. I didn’t bother then but I recall all of Wall Street saying the writer was a traitor and should be pelted with rotten tomatoes.”

Malcolm grinned. “Yeah, Clancy was interviewed on one of those late night cable shows and if it hadn’t been by satellite I think she’d have been lynched.”

Amanda nodded. “Are you surprised? What she wrote then was unbelievable. Everyone on Wall Street said ‘crap’!”

“They would, wouldn’t they? She got one helluva caning from economists and otherwise she was pretty well laughed at. But it did sell.”

Amanda frowned. “Everyone was talking about it at eFrères. Well,” she grimaced, “more like sneering about it. But the name never clicked when you first told me it was Clancy’s book.”

Malcolm nodded. “C.N. Darrow – she used her married name as a journalist.”

Again Amanda’s mouth fell open and her eyes widened. “Married! But I thought...”

Malcolm laughed, “A long time ago. They were divorced when she was about thirty. That’s when she really worked out she’s gay. An affair with a married woman will do it every time.”

Amanda sat back in her seat, barely aware that Malcolm was watching her, a big grin on his face. She felt embarrassment and something like a snaky little whisper of shame as she considered how little she knew, how few questions she asked and—if she were to be brutally honest with herself—what a self-centered bitch she really was.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Malcolm said gently and Amanda realized she had spoken aloud. “You’re not that bad.”

His grin widened again and she laughed uncertainly and grabbed for his hand. “I’m sorry Malcolm,” she said, not quite able to look him in the eyes.

Malcolm chuckled and patted her hand. “You two are going to get along just fine. You wait and see.”

“And now she’s running a dairy farm too?”

“Sort of. But I need to do my share now. And I need to get involved with Two Moon Bay. It’s my little home town and it’s dying in the bum right now.”

Amanda took his hands in both hers and examined them. The fingers were ringless, chunky and strong, but there was not a callus to be found on either palm. “I don’t see these as milker’s hands,” she said.

“There are machines for that,” Malcolm laughed. “And there’s the manager, she kept him on. Clancy doesn’t know enough about the nuts and bolts of dairy farming.” He sighed. “And neither do I.”

After a moment’s reflection on everything she had just learned, Amanda said, “Wow. I can’t believe I never knew any of this.”

Malcolm smiled indulgently. “There are a lot of things you Mistresses of the Universe don’t realize, my sweet. Welcome to the real world. And you’ll have to read her next book, won’t you?”

Again Amanda was surprised. “Wow, what’s it about this time? Is it out yet?”

Malcolm shrugged. “Definitely not a follow-up to *Gone South*. I think it’s a novel. But she’s not saying. I’m going to shut my eyes now kiddo, wake me when we get there, hey?”

And Amanda retired companionably into a magazine and staring out the train windows as her friends snored quietly and the train click-clacked north into Connecticut.

The quiet weekend with her mother and two friends was bittersweet as it dawned on Amanda that it might be the last for some while. And it seemed inevitable that the conversation, over dinner on Saturday night, would turn to Clancy. Amanda

was sitting at the foot of the long dining table, with Eleanor in her customary place at its head, her silver-blond hair gleaming in the glow of six tall red candles. They burned steadily in the battered pewter candelabra that had formed the table's centerpiece for as long as Amanda could recall. The light on her mother's face was beautiful. On Eleanor's left and right sat Malcolm and Ted, both men attentive to their hostess and she basked in the pleasure of their company. Laughter and good conversation sparkled around the table as they ate and drank their leisurely way through three traditional courses and four bottles of excellent wine. It made Amanda feel simultaneously happy and sad to distantly watch and listen as she stroked Thomas Cat's head. The Maine Coon lay illicitly in her lap, his bulk hidden by a starched white damask napkin, but he was purring so loudly Amanda felt sure they would be found out sooner or later. But before that could happen she came back to full attention when Clancy's name dropped into the conversation.

"It would be wonderful to have Clancy visit again," Eleanor was saying. "We had the loveliest weekend when she was here. Didn't we, Amanda."

Malcolm's eyebrow rose in his friend's direction; Amanda ignored him and looked deep into the swirling ruby red wine in her glass.

"Clancy was the perfect house guest and if only I can be half as charming, you'll sleep easy while I'm in Australia," she said to her mother.

"Amanda Charlotte, I do believe you're being snaky," Eleanor said, and peered around the candelabra stem to get a better look at her daughter.

"Well all I ever hear is Clancy this and Clancy that and Clancy, Clancy, Clancy and I'm sure she walks on water unaided and is *really* kind to lost dogs and unwanted kittens, but can we just..." Amanda stopped in the middle of her rant as she noticed three pairs of wide eyes, staring at her with ill-concealed amusement. "Oh stop it!" She banged her wine glass down on its silver coaster to emphasize her demand. Instead Malcolm, Ted and Eleanor looked at each other with raised eyebrows and one by one, began to snigger until they were chortling and rocking back and forth in their seats.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," said Ted in his best Laurence Olivier voice.

"Shut up," Amanda said. "All of you. I hate you."

## NINE

The 747 turned in a vast, lazy circle giving Amanda a curved horizon-wide view of endless blue-green, tree-clad mountains, misty purple mysterious gorges and almost no sign of human habitation other than an occasional meandering track and the glint of sun on a solitary metal roof.

“That’s the Blue Mountains and the country beyond is Kanangra Boyd,” Malcolm said over her shoulder. “We’ve turned south and we’re circling back round to the east and the coast, so we’ll turn north and come up to Sydney that way. You’re a lucky girl, you’re going to see everything.”

“It’s beautiful,” Amanda said quietly, awed by the immensity of the wilderness far below. “I had no idea it would be like this. It goes on forever.” She craned her neck to look towards the blue haze of the western horizon. “I thought Australia was all desert, but this is forest and it’s totally uninhabited. It’s amazing.”

“And four and a half million people live just over there.” Malcolm pointed ahead of the plane. “But you’re right, there’s virtually nobody down there and there aren’t any roads, just a few fire trails and access tracks for the water catchment people.”

“Wow,” Amanda said and sat back in her seat. “So what happens when we land?”

“After we discover our bags have gone to Dubai?”

“Ha, don’t forget I have my essentials up there.” Amanda pointed above her head. “It makes me feel very smug, I don’t know why I’ve never done it before.”

“Grasping the concept of traveling light is harder than quantum physics, that’s why,” Malcolm said and lay back in his seat, shut his eyes and sighed happily.

Amanda examined his face. The lines on either side of his mouth had softened and the almost perpetual frown creases were also fainter; he looked almost boyish.

“You pleased to be coming home?”

His eyes opened straight into hers and he grinned and stretched. “Actually, yes I am. I doubted I’d ever feel like this but...” He paused to consider his next words. “I really do feel as if I *am* ‘coming home’ and it’s good. Sort of scary and exciting, but good.”

“I’m glad—for you.” Amanda smiled down at him and stroked the golden hairs on the back of his hand with gentle affection. “But, tell me, what’s the plan? Somewhere in the middle of the Pacific while you were snoring...”

“I was not!”

“While you were snoring,” she went on firmly, “I realized I’ve been a passenger in more ways than one. I have no idea what we’re doing, when or where.”

“Well,” he began deliberately. “I hope you’re not going to be disappointed, but we’re not staying in Sydney this time around. I really want to get home and check out how things are. You can settle in and get your bearings. Then I thought we could come back up to the city in a couple of weeks and show you the sights and party a bit. How’s that?”

“Fine, but how do we get to Two Moon Bay?”

“We’re being met,” he said enigmatically and Amanda’s stomach turned a somersault as she intuited what he meant. But before she could ask another question he pointed to the window. “Now, concentrate will you—we’re circling up the harbor and you’ll get a look at the opera house and the bridge, so you can tell your mum.”

Amanda fumbled for her iPhone. “I’ll do better than that,” she said and peered out the window at the vista below. “Wow!” She murmured, “it really *is* gorgeous. Look at that! All those little bays and boats, and all those houses. My God, everyone must have a boat and harbor views!”

“That’s the ambition,” Malcolm laughed, peering over her shoulder. “Look—down there. Recognize it?”

And Amanda did, immediately. The curved white, segmented structure of the Sydney Opera House shone in the bright easterly sun and was as familiar to her as the Empire State Building. Around its base the ocean was glittering cobalt into which ferry boats slit sparkling white wakes as they hurried back and forth. Amanda placed the phone flat on the plane’s window and aimed at the absurdly pretty building. “I’ll send this to Mom when we land to prove I’m here.” She pressed and clicked; aimed again then dropped the phone in her lap and stared out the window. The glittering towers of the city’s business hub were flanked by emerald green parkland on one side, and on the other, shimmering water kept them from marching into the bay from where the matchbox-size ferries came and went.

“There’s the harbor bridge, wow, this is amazing. You weren’t kidding.”



Malcolm laughed over her shoulder. “It’s pretty good, isn’t it? ’Specially from up here.”

The aircraft banked again in its cruising descent and then they were over seemingly endless suburbs. Amanda turned back to Malcolm and narrowed her eyes.

“Okay, so I’ve noticed you still haven’t told me how we’re getting to Two Moon Bay.”

“Clancy is meeting us.”

“Oh shit.” Confirmation of her suspicion did nothing to settle her stomach, or her suddenly racing heart.

Amanda’s first hour on Australian soil was a series of surprises. First, there was the weird sensation of standing up and walking on solid ground again after twenty-something hours in the sky. Then there was the unlikely early morning cacophony of the crowded terminal as hundreds of passengers from half a dozen intercontinental jets all made for the exits in a bleary-eyed stampede. Next, she queued up to stand in front of a cute Immigration official who displayed a sumptuous cleavage despite her uniform shirt and who checked the passport photo, checked out Amanda, grinned, and said in a broad Aussie accent, “Welcome to Australia,” somehow managing to charge the simple words with promise. To her chagrin, Amanda had to make a supreme effort not to run her fingers through what she knew must be unkempt and frazzled hair and instead, smiling idiotically, said, “Why thank you ma’am.”

She was rewarded with a flashing smile and wink. For a moment she goggled, then the officer waved her on. Her next encounter with Aussie officialdom was a Customs officer with a terse moustache who asked whether she was carrying any fruit. Then she was waiting for Malcolm before the final walk to freedom and an even greater hullabaloo of excited meeters and greeters and dozens of bobbing pink and silver helium-filled balloons and squealing small children.

Malcolm surveyed the throng that, to a dazed Amanda, was an impenetrable mass of anonymous but obviously happy humanity.

“We are being met?” she asked, realizing yet again that she was still being a helpless passenger.

“Clancy said she’d be here,” Malcolm muttered as he continued scanning the crowd.

“Why are you only telling me this now?”

Malcolm smiled at her and shrugged. “I thought it would be better for you and Clancy to sort of start again and be friends this time and for you not to fret about it on the plane. Anyway, you’ve never been very curious so I figured if you didn’t ask, I wouldn’t say.”

Amanda’s mouth fell open and she reeled back as if she’d been slapped. “That’s not ...” But she stopped. The recognition had instantly entered her mind: *He’s right. I’ve never asked anything serious; only stupid jokey questions about koalas. I really am awful.*

Malcolm was still smiling at her. “You’re just a self-absorbed New Yorker whose career has always taken precedence over everything.”

Amanda stared at him, eyes and mouth wide open. “So why do you like me? Why am I here?”

“Because you’re funny, smart and lovable. And your mother is a goddess, so you’re going to be a goddess too one day. Just as long as you don’t go back to high finance.” He turned away and scoped the crowds as more incoming travelers trundled their wheelie bags past them.

Amanda closed her mouth, and then opened it again as a startling thought popped into her head. “Did you actually plan this trip with my mother?”

“Sort of, but not really. Well, okay, yes we did. Ah, there she is.” Malcolm stuck his hand in the air and let out a deafening whoop that sounded like “Coo-ee!” An arm waving at the back of the scrum and another “Coo-ee!” answered him.

Malcolm set off, pushing his way between baggage trolleys, stacks of bags, embracing, weeping, laughing families and bobbing shiny balloons. Amanda struggled to follow him, terrified lest she lose him in the melee. Her mind was a maelstrom of new impressions, new emotions and new information, she felt even more dazed than before. This morning was about to turn into yet another Clancy nightmare.

“So. The cause of the global financial crisis has finally arrived.” The familiar voice cut through the general hubbub and sent a shivering shock down Amanda’s spine. The voice was light and dark, honeyed and sharp, burred and clear; and twangier than Amanda remembered. But she did clearly remember the mass of burnished gold hair, the angular cheekbones sprinkled with freckles, the firm jaw and chin. And this time gray-blue eyes twinkled in cahoots with the well defined, smiling

mouth that Amanda recalled in circumstances that sent an immediate red-hot shock coursing through her veins. Her heart rate instantly speeded up. Clancy's widening grin told Amanda that she was staring and she shut her mouth to stop herself gaping like a goldfish. She tried to speak but the barest croak came out, so instead she stuck out her hand.

The grin widened and Clancy took Amanda's hand and gave it a firm one-two shake, then she leaned forward to lay a soft kiss on both cheeks. "Welcome to Australia," she said, and after a moment's pause for Amanda's response, went on helpfully, "Did you have an okay flight?"

Amanda nodded and glanced down at her hand to see whether the tingling sensation in her fingers was visible.

"I have washed my hands this morning," said Clancy reassuringly, but there was the tiniest edge to her tone. Then before Amanda could articulate the thought that, *No, no, it's just that you've set my hand on fire* – Clancy turned away to envelop her brother in a mighty hug. Amanda let out a long breath. She didn't think she could survive another bout of embarrassment just yet. She watched the two siblings rocking each other in a mutual bear hug and felt a stab of envy for the obvious affection and warmth between them. She couldn't recall ever having a tender feeling or loving embrace with Andrew. Her nose wrinkled involuntarily at the thought of him. She settled her bag strap more comfortably on her shoulder and examined Clancy in her own environment.

Aviator RayBans were pushed up into the burnished blonde hair that was a little longer than before and again tucked behind the neat, pearl-decorated ears. She was dressed in khaki cargo pants and a pale blue denim shirt with a frayed collar and sleeves rolled up to her elbows; on her feet were grubby old sneakers, no socks. Her forearms were freckled and lightly tanned, the color natural and outdoorsy. Maybe she plays some kind of sport – tennis maybe, or golf, Amanda thought. Or maybe it was just chasing after dairy cows all day. Whatever, for a woman of forty-one Clancy was on the scalding side of hot.

Clancy released herself from Malcolm's embrace and turned back to Amanda once more. In place of the fine chain and pearl that Amanda remembered, Clancy's throat gleamed with a much heavier and more ornate gold chain; it still managed to nestle into her cleavage in a way that was hard to look away from. She glanced down at Clancy's hands, which were conveniently placed on her hips with strong fingers

elegantly splayed. She still wore only one ring: a small gold signet on the little finger of her left hand. Clancy was very disconcerting.

Instantly taking in Amanda's stare but again misconstruing it, Clancy said, "And the clothes are clean too, if not exactly Rodeo Drive," and her voice lilted with the same sharp amusement that twinkled in her eyes. "Altogether let me tell you I made a big effort to get here on time to meet you two."

This time Amanda could do nothing about the flaming blush that rose from her throat to her cheeks. But she at least found her voice.

"I'm sorry," she croaked. "I didn't mean to stare, but until about half an hour ago I didn't know you were, you know, going to be here. So it's a surprise to see you." It sounded unconvincing and Clancy's satirical grin told her she wasn't alone in hearing it that way.

"A communicative soul, our Mal. Typical bloke," Clancy said, giving her brother an affectionate cuff on the shoulder. Amanda tried to laugh but it came out as a strangled cough and she carefully avoided catching Malcolm's eye. "Yeah, well you know what guys are like. I guess I should have asked him more questions," she said lamely. Clancy's eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly and she nodded, a speculative look in her eyes.

"I suppose so." Her tone was neutral. Then she became brisk. "Now, let's get out of here and on the road." She punched Malcolm on the arm. "What do you think, little brother?"

"Absolutely, sis, whatever you say." He grinned sheepishly at Clancy. "It's good to be home."

"Glad to hear it." Clancy laid her hand on his cheek in a tender gesture that caused Amanda a fresh burn of envy. "We had begun to wonder whether you'd ever come home."

Malcolm shrugged and grinned again and grasped his sister's hand lightly. "Time seems right," he said, gruffly. "So how is everything—everyone?"

A fleeting frown made a furrowed shadow between Clancy's eyebrows and was quickly gone. "They're...well..." She grinned. "Let's go."

Amanda followed Malcolm and Clancy out of the terminal and into a bright, crisp morning and a virtually solid cloud of cigarette smoke. They passed quickly through a crowd of dazed looking long distance passengers all desperately dragging

on their first nicotine in many hours. Amanda tried not to breathe and dropped her head to get through the throng before being forced to inhale. Clancy and Malcolm were catching up on personal news, as far as she could hear from the snatches of “And how is...” followed by names that meant nothing to her. Despite the bright blue sky and sharply pale sunshine Amanda could feel a cloak of despondency dropping onto her shoulders. She didn’t know why she was doing this, why she was in Australia, why she was leaping into the unknown with a man she now realised she hardly knew at all and whose sister thought she was a fool. And if that wasn’t bad enough, Amanda glumly examined her left hand, she had broken a nail and chipped the polish. Great. Perhaps being out of work in New York wouldn’t have been so bad after all.

Just as Amanda was deciding to tell the Darling siblings she had changed her mind and would get the next plane back to the States, they reached a charcoal gray Subaru Outback.

“This new sis?” asked Malcolm, hauling up the rear door.

“It was a demonstrator, just a few hundred on the clock and five thousand off the asking price. It’s a bloody brilliant car,” said Clancy. “You’ll love driving it.”

Malcolm heaved their bags into the rear cargo space. “You get in front Amanda, then I can stretch out and you can see the sights.”

Amanda opened her mouth to protest but once again shut it. She was really beginning to feel like a goldfish. And a goldfish that had been flying for twenty-three hours and knew she wasn’t up to arguing with anyone.

“I might fall asleep,” she said feebly, but obediently climbed into the front passenger seat, which was on the wrong side of the car.

Clancy slipped in behind the steering wheel and clicked her seatbelt. “Have a snooze if you need to but try to stay awake, you’ll be better off later on if you can.”

Amanda turned to look at Malcolm who was sprawled across the back seat grinning at her. She stuck her tongue out at him. Clancy turned the key and the engine gurgled gruffly into life.

“Hey, diesel, sis,” Malcolm remarked.

“Yup. Cost more but the fuel economy is amazing. I find myself checking to see whether the gauge is working. You wouldn’t believe it.” A high-pitched whistling sound filled the car. “Seatbelts you two,” said Clancy. “That’s another thing about this car, it’s very bossy.”

Amanda drew the belt across her body and watched as Clancy reversed the car out of its space. It was weird to be on the wrong side. Amanda wondered whether she would ever get the hang of it. She also watched Clancy as she concentrated on negotiating the lines of cars streaming and pushing towards the exit gates. The golden beauty of the profile filled Amanda's field of vision and the laugh lines at the corner of Clancy's eye and mouth somehow added to the allure. *This is pathetic*, she told herself crossly, shaking her head. *You are jetlagged to hell and back and less than a month out of a relationship and you're scoping a woman you don't like and who doesn't like you. Stop it.*

Malcolm's fingers flexed on her shoulder and she looked back at him, startled, wondering whether she had actually spoken aloud. The broad grin told her she might as well have shouted.

The next hour was a blur of freeway and traffic and a brief exhilarating glimpse of an immense sapphire bay. A runway brought planes down into it to the north, beyond that cargo ships snuggled beside giant bright orange cranes and beyond that again was the open sea, edged by two massively looming green capes. To the south, the flaming tower and tanks of an oil refinery were an odd contrast to the calmly beautiful bay.

"Botany Bay," said Malcolm's voice from behind her. "It's where Captain Cook landed in 1778. *Tres historique* too because the Frogs got here first."

"Really?"

Malcolm pointed towards the furthest and northern side of the bay, so far across the water its outline was hazy in the soft sunlight. "Over there is La Perouse, it's named after a French explorer who arrived before Cook but decided it was all *merde* and bugged off again."

"Wow," said Amanda, laughing. "That was a bad move."

"Sure was," Clancy joined in. "We could all be speaking French and they could have nuked even more of the outback than the Brits did."

"I was thinking more of speaking French and eating escargots," Amanda said. "But I guess you're right, even us pesky Yanks did that at home in Nevada."

"That was good of you; as long as you discount Bikini," Clancy said mildly, but before Amanda could retaliate Clancy cursed and slammed her hand on the horn as a motorcyclist cut in front of the car. The rider gave her the finger and zoomed away. "Americans are better-mannered drivers too," she added.

“You reckon?” Amanda was surprised to hear any positives coming from her hostess.

“Definitely. Sydneysiders are the most aggressive drivers ever.”

“It’s true,” Malcolm said from the back of the car. “You really notice it when you’ve been away.”

“Well that’s amazing, I thought New Yorkers were supposed to be the world’s worst.”

“No way!” As if to prove her point, Clancy glanced over her shoulder and accelerated into the next lane. Amanda shut her eyes then decided to look at the bay instead.

“It’s the colour of sapphires,” she said, surprised at the pale intensity of the blue.

Clancy glanced away from the traffic to the expanse of water. “It’s often that color, especially in the mornings. The Aborigines called it Stingray Bay, I think. And most people still swim in enclosures, see the posts and nets?”

Amanda shuddered: another deadly creature to add to her list. Within minutes their route south took the car in a sharp turn away from the water and inland through streets of red tile roofs, silver metal roofs and the variegated greens of lush trees and splashes of vivid color in neat front gardens. Here and there a violet-purple topped tree added to the vibrant color spectrum and Amanda was dazzled; it was unlike anything she had ever seen.

“What’s that amazing tree – the purple thing?”

“Jacaranda,” said Clancy without taking her eyes from the road. “Originally from South America but now pretty much the symbol of spring in Australia. Gorgeous isn’t it?”

Amanda nodded and breathed an almost silent “Yes.”

“I can point out things to you,” Clancy went on. “That’s if you’re interested, of course.”

Amanda’s eyes widened and for a long moment she stared at Clancy’s profile in disbelief. Just as it seemed that Clancy was thawing towards her, out came the spikes again.

“Of course I’m interested,” she retorted. “I got a distinction in geography.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth Amanda would have given anything to grab them back and swallow them whole.

Clancy grinned in obviously sardonic amusement. “Is that so? Well good heavens, an American who’s interested in the rest of the world. Now there’s a novelty.”

This time Amanda was not only astonished but also furious and snapped at her tormentor: “Are you always this rude or do you make a special effort for me?” She was gratified to see Clancy blink at the directness of the counterattack and went on, “I’ve been told Australians are racist but I didn’t expect to experience it quite so soon.”

Clancy pulled the car to a smooth stop at traffic lights and this time it was her turn to stare at her guest, wide-eyed. A crackling moment passed as the two women glared at each other then Clancy took a deep breath and settled back into her seat; her eyes crinkled at the corners and her mouth curled into a slow—almost—penitent smile. She relaxed her shoulders and carefully let out her breath in a silent whistle, then reached out her free hand to Amanda, palm up, and said, “Pax. I’m sorry. That was more than rude, it was...um...unforgivable. But forgive me anyway. What do you say?”

The grin was obnoxiously beguiling, Amanda knew it well—she often used it herself yet she couldn’t help but study the lips and their mobile upward quirk that twitched in hopeful supplication. Despite herself and despite her righteously raised temper, she experienced a treacherous flood of warmth in the region of her heart; she took Clancy’s and they clasped firmly.

From the back seat came a gusty sigh. “Okay you two, so peace has officially been declared,” said Malcolm with exaggerated ennui. “Now, do you think we can stop at the next Macca’s because I’m busting for a pee and a coffee?”

Clancy continued to hold Amanda’s hand and they gazed at one another a few seconds longer. Amanda felt no great need to pull away from the sudden warmth in the twinkling depths of gray-flecked blue. Finally she nodded and murmured “Pax,” and was rewarded with a familiar quirky grin. As the lights changed to green she reluctantly withdrew her hand and Clancy returned her attention to the morning traffic.

The journey from Sydney’s international airport to their destination took a little over two, steadily driven hours. After a comfort stop and takeout coffee, bought at an amazingly familiar McDonald’s somewhere on a suburban strip that reminded Amanda of the mid-West, they did not stop again. Soon Malcolm was snoring in the



back seat. Clancy glanced across at her passenger and her voice burred softly in Amanda's ears.

"How you doing?"

Amanda smiled happily. "Fine, thanks."

Clancy nodded. "If you want to grab a bit of shut-eye, go ahead, I'll wake you when there's something to look at."

Amanda shook her head vehemently. "No! I don't want to miss anything."

The second hour of the journey passed in a relaxed fashion, the highway skirting the grey-green rolling wilderness of the Royal National Park, down the spectacular escarpment of Bulli Pass. They bypassed the urban sprawl of Wollongong and Port Kembla and finally, after more glimpses of ocean, higgledy-piggledy townships and lush green paddocks dotted with fat black and white cattle, Amanda spotted a large green sign pointing left off the highway announcing that Two Moon Bay was just 5km that way.

Amanda's stomach audibly grumbled. Clancy grinned and snatched a quick look at her. "We'll have lunch very soon," she said. "Will you survive?"

"Anticipation is everything," Amanda responded then blushed as Clancy's eyebrow rose in a teasing question mark. Amanda looked away and wondered why it was that Malcolm's sister seemed to be hostile one minute and almost flirtatious the next. It was disconcerting and she didn't know what to make of it. Maybe it was because she was older. Forty-one seemed impossibly grown up, somehow and—looking at Clancy and her vivid beauty—not the terrifying thing Amanda had always thought it would be. She glanced back at Malcolm who was waking up, stretching, groaning and blinking. She longed to get him alone and question him about Clancy, but it would have to wait. If only she had known more about the ferocious sister before; if only she had been less self obsessed and more curious about her buddy and his life, she might have understood this situation better and known what made Clancy tick. She sighed yet again at the unlikable portrait of herself that had so clearly been revealed. It was a shock to recognize how accurate it was. Malcolm's eyes were closed and a half smile curled the corners of his mouth in a way that made it obvious he and Clancy were closely related. He looked relaxed and happy. Amanda envied him.

“Hey Mal! Almost there.” Clancy’s voice cut through Amanda’s reverie and Malcolm opened his eyes, saw his friend peering wistfully at him and sat up with a grin and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. He stretched and yawned.

“Oh God, I shouldn’t have done that,” he groaned. “Why did you let me sleep?”

“Just love to hear that snore,” Clancy responded.

“I do *not* snore!”

“Oh yes you do and this time I have a witness,” Clancy crowed.

The Subaru reached the crest of a pass between high green banks and stands of rainforest trees and suddenly the Pacific Ocean was before them, horizon to horizon. For a second the car seemed to hang in the air then they were swooping down towards the sparkling blue, this time with hedged fields on either side, with more black and white cattle and windblown, flat-topped trees. A jumble of roofs appeared in a fold in the coastal edge. A keyhole-shaped bay appeared and Amanda saw that the roofs belonged to small, boxy houses and cottages, some painted blotchy pink, others faded blue and still others a mix of old fashioned green and cream. They were plain, sturdy buildings, myopically peering out at the ocean from salt-rimed windows.

“Ah!” exclaimed Malcolm happily, as they passed the civic sign. “Welcome to Two Moon Bay, Amanda; population 3304 and any minute now, 3306. Not exactly a seething metropolis, but it’s home.”

“It’s lovely,” Amanda exclaimed as she took in the strange and riotous shrubs and trees that decorated front yards and the street. “And everything’s in English!” The car filled with laughter as they cruised gently through the village center. A pink sign in floral script in one shop window caught Amanda’s eye and she tried to make a fix of the location: “Jackie’s Hair and Body Salon.”

“Wow, is that really a café with proper coffee, Clancy?” Malcolm leapt from one side of the car to the other, taking in every changed and familiar sight.

“It is. A tree-changer from Sydney; he had a one hat restaurant and last year he gave it up for country life. Nice guy. Gay.”

“Ooh! What’s his name? Should I meet him?”

“Jonny Sparrow. We go in there quite a lot. We’re all very big on supporting local business these days and the food is as good as the coffee.”

“Um, excuse me,” Amanda interjected. “Can I have a translation here? What’s a tree-changer? And why is he or she wearing one hat?”

“Sorry,” Clancy said, glancing at her. “Sea change is when you leave the city for the beach life. Tree change is when you leave the city for the country. I suppose that makes Jonny a bit of both, actually. And restaurants are graded here with a chef’s hat symbol, like the *Michelin* guide in France. Getting a hat is a big deal.”

“Huh. Well what do you know? Thanks.”

A single set of traffic lights with a marked pedestrian crossing bisected the street and Clancy stopped the car while an elderly woman in a pale blue floral house dress made her way across, followed by a large and elderly black poodle with a blue bow in its topknot.

“Mrs Laverty hasn’t changed a bit,” said Malcolm happily as they waited for the pair to complete a leisurely crossing. “And that damn dog must be older than God by now.”

“Cranky too,” said Clancy. “Rotten thing tried to chew Postie’s leg off last month. Caused a shocking kerfuffle because he said he wouldn’t deliver mail to the old bat anymore. She complained to Council about discrimination and got the *Herald* to come down and do a big Saturday picture story on her plight.”

Malcolm laughed. “So what happened?”

“The Council moved her mailbox outside the fence and fixed her gate so it won’t open when the dog paws the latch. She was cranky about that too. Said it was an infringement of the dog’s rights.”

“You are kidding,” said Amanda between laughs.

“No, Mrs Laverty is the lunatic fringe all by herself. It’s a full time job.”

Clancy gave the focus of their discussion a cheery toot and waved when the elderly woman turned to glower and brandish her walking stick. For a moment Amanda thought of her fifth floor neighbor and the dreaded Puppy back in New York and wondered what it was about old ladies and equally old dogs.

“Well this is Two Moon Bay, Amanda,” said Malcolm, breaking into her reverie. “You should see it in the rush hour.”

“It’s cute,” she said with some small misgivings about life in such a tiny place. “What do people do for fun?”

“Oh, nightclubs, theatre, the symphony, the opera—usual stuff,” said Malcolm airily.

Clancy snorted, “Don’t you be smart just because you’ve been living in New York, Malcolm Darling. There’s a lot going on, Amanda. And there’s a party

Saturday fortnight that I'm hijacking to welcome you home, you miserable sod," she said to her brother's reflection in the rearview mirror.

"Great, where?"

"The School of Arts, where else."

"Lordy, but you're in for a treat Amanda dearest, you mark my words. The full Aussie knees-up—complete with disco ball, prawns on the barbie and lots of Abba."

"Ooh! Great," said Amanda. "Can I come as Meryl Streep or what?"

"You could do worse. Do you have any half-mast overalls?" laughed Malcolm.

Minutes later Clancy eased up on the gas pedal and turned at a faded white wooden sign that read "Two Moon Farm & Dairy since 1947." They passed through a gateway whose peeling white-painted and moss-streaked five-bar gates stood open and guarded by a cattle grid. The Subaru rattled across it and into a tussocky graveled avenue of sinuously curving and massively overhanging trees whose dappled shade was instantly cooling. Around a curve and over a rise in the lane the trees gave way to scrubbier trees, green fields and another startling glimpse of the Pacific. Nestled in a dip in the land and behind protective shrubs and trees and a rough dry-stone wall was a low, rambling, brick-built house, surrounded by wide verandas.

Clancy turned to Amanda and smiled. "Welcome to Two Moon Farm."

The warmth that rushed into the air-conditioned interior of the car as Amanda pushed open the door almost took her breath away; it was thickly laden with new scents. One she recognized as eucalyptus, beneath it the salty pungency of the ocean and wafting through was a sweeter scent that drifted from cascades of tiny white jasmine flowers whose dark green tendrils curled up and around the veranda rails and pillars. She took a deep breath and got out of the car just as a madly excited golden Labrador came skittering around the corner, claws clattering on the veranda timbers, barks rising to howls of delight as she flung herself at Clancy then, with overwhelming joy, at Malcolm. Behind her, stalking along with a studied display of dignity and disinterest, came a large black Burmese cat. His tail stood erect and cocked at the tip in the shape of a question mark, his amber eyes skewered Amanda with an imperiousness that she found irresistible. He leapt from the top step to land beside her and rubbed his head against her leg.

“Oh lord, will you look at that,” said Malcolm to his sister. “That big flirt has cottoned on to Amanda already.” He batted aside the still leaping golden Labrador and scuffled his fingers between the dog’s ears. “Meet another Thomas Cat, usually known as Tommo, although he doesn’t have his equipment anymore.”

The cat reached out and clawed at Malcolm’s leg and he drew back, laughing. “I’ve let out his secret and he doesn’t like it. But he doesn’t let it stop him any. You’ll have to lock him out of your room, if you want any peace.”

Amanda reached down and gently stroked the glossy black head. The cat purred like a buzz saw and rubbed his face and whiskers against Amanda’s leg again. Amanda scratched him under his velvet chin and felt the rumbling of his purr against her fingers.

“He’s gorgeous,” she said, thrilled beyond reason that he obviously liked her. “Tommo,” she whispered. “Will you be my friend? I’ll tell you all about my Thomas Cat in America, if you like.” The cat answered with an elegant, loose-limbed figure of eight turn between her legs. Then he reached out for a quick swat and spit at the dog, as a wildly wagging plume of tail whacked him up the tail. The Lab barked at the cat and grinned and leapt about to avoid his amiable efforts to get her across the nose.

“Leave Tom alone, Jessie,” said Malcolm, tugging fondly on the dog’s tail. “You shouldn’t tease him, bad girl.”

Jessie paid no attention but crouched at Tom’s feet, her tongue lolling, her front paws reaching towards him in supplication. The cat licked Jessie’s face and she rolled over on her back, her eyes closed and her paws waving in the air.

“As you can see, Jess and Tom are inseparable,” said Malcolm to Amanda. “The silly mutt adores him.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Amanda. “He’s sort of like George Clooney.”

Malcolm laughed, “Hear that Clancy?” Clancy’s neat rear end was protruding from the rear of the wagon. “She dotes on that cat,” Malcolm remarked and went to help his sister and grabbed their bags. “C’mon, Amanda let’s get inside. Do you want a shower and change before we eat and do the grand tour?”

Amanda considered the sticky grubbiness of her hands and back of her neck. The flight had been endless and they had been on the move for what now felt like weeks. She was suddenly enamored of the idea of running water and fresh clothes.

“Where’ve you put her, Clancy? She on the courtyard or what?”

Clancy emerged from the rear of the car with a cardboard box of groceries. “Yes, it’ll be quieter and she can settle in and sleep better, I thought.” She looked at Amanda and seemed distant once more. “You can find your way to the kitchen, can’t you?”

Amanda was disconcerted by the change to sharpness, and simply nodded. Clancy stomped off along the veranda and disappeared around the corner, followed by Jessie. In the humming silence that fell about them Amanda stepped up into the shade of the veranda and looked around.

“This is lovely Mal,” she said, enjoying the deep green cool thrown by a luxuriant wisteria vine. Its gnarled trunk was thicker than her thigh and coiled inextricably around one post. Just below the roofline it divided so that its creeping growth spread the length of the veranda on either side of the steps. “It must look fantastic when the wisteria is in bloom.”

“Yeah, it does, my Gran planted it when she was a young woman and this was a new house.”

“She gone now?”

“Died about ten years ago, after Mum died. She couldn’t handle that. That’s when my aunt and uncle took over.”

“And your grandfather?”

Malcolm snorted, “You’ll appreciate this. He buggered off years ago. Gran ran the place, raised Mum and her brothers. Clancy’s like her – tough as boots but heart of butter.”

“Really?” At that moment, given Clancy’s sudden switch of mood, Amanda couldn’t quite picture the butter center, although the toughness was evident. Maybe she’d have to look harder.

“Well, let’s go inside anyway.” Malcolm reached up under the veranda eave and felt for a key. “We never had to do this when I was a kid,” he remarked as he showed her the door key. “But town is a bit more modern these days and druggies and kids have changed all that.”

“It must be the same everywhere,” Amanda said, sighing. “Eleanor never used to lock up at night—the guests came and went as they pleased, it was almost like family. They loved it. No more, though.” She perched her carry-on on top of the wheelie and balanced it against the stow-away handgrip. “Okay, where am I going?”

“Follow me.”

Amanda did as she was told and they met Clancy coming toward them in the hallway. “You’re in your old room little bro,” she said to Malcolm. “Get yourself settled and I’ll show Amanda where she is.”

The two siblings shared another hug, and then Clancy reached for Amanda’s soft bag.

“I can manage,” Amanda said hurriedly, trying to grab it back. Clancy’s eyebrow cocked and her grin was sardonic.

“Sure you can,” she said, “Wouldn’t want you to break a nail though.” And she strode off with the bag over her shoulder.

As Amanda followed Clancy into the cool interior of the house she wondered whether she was being over-sensitive. She made a huge effort to resist punching Clancy in the head and instead looked about with interest at the house’s interior.

Clancy led her along a long, wide passageway where dark, polished floorboards were bare but for a long Persian runner. On either side, doors opened into what Amanda glimpsed as a spacious living room and dining room to the left and an office and another bedroom on the right. The mingled scent of beeswax and jasmine was pleasant to her nose, and the air, shifted by slowly turning ceiling fans, was cool.

“Lovely house,” she remarked to Clancy’s back.

“Yes, it’s one of the oldest in these parts. Not that it means all that much, but you know what Aussies are like.”

“No I don’t, what do you mean?” They had stopped at the end of the passageway where glass-paned double doors opened out to another expanse of veranda and beyond that again, a grass and flower-filled courtyard surrounded by more verandas onto which doors opened on each side.

“White Australia began just a couple of hundred years ago. That’s old to us.”

“And black people?” Amanda felt uneasy about where they might be going and uncertain how she should address the subject.

“Aborigines have been around this area for millennia. Now *that’s* old!” She grinned at Amanda. “And here we are, this is your room.” She pushed open a door that opened to the right of the double doors and stepped back so Amanda could enter first, then she followed and stowed Amanda’s bag on a polished wooden bench at the foot of the bed. “Bathroom’s through there. I imagine you’ll want to shower, so I’ll leave you be.”

“Fantastic, thanks Clancy. I’d love to talk, when you have time, I have a lot to learn,” Amanda said. She extended her hand yet again and Clancy took it, but instead of a formal handshake, she stepped close and lightly kissed Amanda on each cheek. Then she was gone. And once again Amanda was unsettled by the mixed messages of sweet and sour that Clancy seemed so able and willing to dish out.

Amanda’s first shower at Two Moon Bay was, she decided, probably the best she had ever experienced in her life. It was not so much about soap and water, but about the glorious feel of the cooling of her sweaty and travel-sticky skin. It was the sensation of the warm water raining down from a dinner plate-size, verdigris-stained brass showerhead on her upturned face and hair.

The bathroom was separated from her bedroom by a louvered wooden door. Like the rest of the house, it was cool and dimly lit by a long narrow window onto the veranda of the courtyard. A dark green, thickly woven cotton rug kept her bare feet from the chill flagstone floor. A large wall mirror over an even larger old white porcelain basin reflected her body back to her tired eyes. It was a good body – she knew that – and uniformly pale skinned; something she was more aware of since being met at the airport several centuries ago by the muscular, golden Clancy.

Suddenly she recalled Natalie’s aversion to the sun and anything that suggested the outdoors.

“You cannot be serious,” Natalie had virtually snorted when Amanda suggested a game of tennis on one of the early – and rare – occasions she had been cajoled out of New York City and to Heron Creek for a weekend. “You’re such a bourgeois at heart, aren’t you?”

Amanda was becoming accustomed to Natalie’s favorite insult and merely said, “I am, actually, yes. Do you have a problem with that?”

Natalie had lain back on the bed, her ripped jeans and chain-decorated boots a curious and careless contrast to the pale green French floral print comforter, and grinned indulgently at Amanda.

“Nuh. It’s kinda sweet. I’m thinking of making you the subject of my next project. Just don’t expect me to whack balls around though. Okay? I think I’ll take a nap then maybe we can have a cocktail. What do you say?”



Amanda had swallowed her disappointment and irritation and retreated to the kitchen to find her mother and help out with whatever dinner extravaganza she was concocting.

*I should have realized then*, she told herself as she stood in the bathroom at Two Moon Farm. *We had absolutely nothing in common and opposites so do not attract*. At that thought an image of Clancy's shrewd gray eyes and mocking eyebrow floated in front of her and she paused to consider the picture. As the vision clarified she watched her own reflection as she cupped her breasts and hefted their weight in her hands. She rubbed her thumbs hard over the dark nipples and saw them spring to life even as she felt the rush. She let one hand drop to the glinting curls at the base of her belly and watched as her fingers closed over herself. The sensation of warmth and racing blood caused her to gasp aloud and her breasts began to rise and fall with the faster rhythm of her breathing. Scrolling through her mind, like a film clip, she saw Clancy's strong, long-fingered hands and the ripple of muscles beneath the freckled skin of her forearms. Amanda sluiced her fingers in her own wetness and moaned at the thought of those hands. After a nerve-tingling minute of sliding fingers she swayed, faint with ripples of desire, and leaned onto the edge of the washbasin. The chill of the white porcelain on her bare thighs was enough to bring her out of the daydream and her eyes widened as she saw herself in the mirror, an expression of total abandon hazing her eyes. She turned away, dismay extinguishing the throbbing want that had come out of nowhere to overtake her.

"Shit," she said aloud. "You are out of your mind. It *must* be jetlag." She stepped back into the shower stall and turned the cold full on to shock herself into something like sense; then she wrapped her body in the rough white bath sheet and toweled vigorously. It was punishing and she managed to nearly banish the remnant languor of almost-orgasm from her limbs, and the face of her hostess from her mind.

Amanda wondered what to wear. She unzipped her bag and took out all her carefully tissue-rolled clothes, shook each garment and laid them on the bed. Tailored creamy linen Bermudas seemed the best bet, with a pale pink v-neck tee and flat strappy sandals. She hung everything else in the old-fashioned polished timber closet, used one drawer for underwear and the other two for the tank tops, fine knit cotton sweaters and two spare black tees. She placed her shoes on the floor of the closet and that was that. Having your entire wardrobe destroyed made for an interesting experience in deciding what really had to be replaced and what could be done

without, Amanda thought as she slid the empty bag beneath the bed and looked around the room. It was simply furnished and decorated. As well as the Edwardian closet there was a Persian rug of dark blues and reds beside the bed, which was covered with a lightweight patchwork comforter in shades and patterns of pink. A pretty wing chair upholstered in dark rose velvet stood beside a pair of French doors that gave her an outlook to the veranda and into the inner courtyard. On either side of the doors hung long drapes of the same fabric as the comforter, caught back with rose pink ropes. Between the open Venetian doors, screen doors were latched with a small brass hook. On the opposite side of the doors from the wing chair was a small, elegant antique writing desk and tucked beneath it, a matching chair. Probably early Georgian, Amanda thought and ran an approving hand over its rich patina and wondered whether she was right.

## TEN

Amanda's first few days at Two Moon Farm passed in a blur that included wondering whether she was right about all kinds of things. It was partly jetlag, partly the new faces, new sights and sounds, new smells and new experiences. She gradually found her way around the rambling house, then to the dairy and to the beginning of an acquaintance with the good-natured, brown-eyed cows that came to its doors twice each day and the equally good-natured Bernie, the ranch hand who took care of them. Trying to be less of a passenger, she volunteered to help in the kitchen but was banished instead to feeding the chickens. Clearly she would have to work on Clancy to rise anywhere in the pecking order of Two Moon Farm. And in between times she managed to limit the number of times she obsessively checked her iPhone for the financial news and the New York Stock Exchange to no more than three...or four...or more times in twenty-four hours.

Now, lying awake in the small hours, while her body clock still struggled to adjust, she listened to the night and marveled at it. A fan, suspended from the high ceiling, swirled air around the room and left her cool enough to pull the comforter up and over the white sheet that enveloped her in sun-scented softness. The fan blades' muted whirr and occasional feeble squeak were the only sounds in the shadowy

darkness; and Tom, curled at her feet was so deeply asleep that he'd long ago stopped purring. For someone accustomed to the all-night clatter and chatter of Lexington Avenue, the absence of man-made noise of any kind was fascinating. She listened to her own heartbeat and waited for a night bird to hoot or cry. Beyond that was the muted boom-whoosh rhythm of distant breakers and on the fourth night of restlessness, it was the sound of the ocean that eventually slipped her into deep and dreamless sleep. Hours later, she awoke with a start when a cockerel crowed with great vigor right outside her bedroom doors.

Amanda sat straight up and peered about, wondering for a moment where she was; then the events of the past few days tumbled into the vacuum that had been her sleeping mind and she murmured out loud, "Ah, Two Moon Bay. Australia. I'm here."

Tom jumped down from the bed, stretched his length and shook himself awake. Amanda followed him and pulled back the drapes. Strutting around the courtyard, pecking, scratching at the herbaceous border, was a handsome bird with a bright red comb and wattles, beady black eyes and yellow beak. Gleaming chestnut feathers fluffed out his chest and balanced a luxuriant tail of glistening chestnut with flashes of emerald green that matched his neck.

Amanda found yesterday's shorts, ransacked the pockets to find what she was looking for, then slipped the hook on the screen doors and gently pushed them open. The cockerel caught sight of the movement and Tom and shrieked. Amanda stepped out onto the veranda and he ran around in circles, flapping his wings and cackling hysterically.

"Stop it, you silly bird," she said softly. "Here, come and get this treat. You know you want it." She held out her hand to him. On her palm lay the dried corn left over from the previous day's sucking up to the hens. She clucked her tongue in a chicken-like fashion and he paused in his panic and put his head on one side to better take a look at her. She clucked again, it was a soothing, definitely hen-like sound. The cockerel fluffed his feathers and took a step towards her; she clucked again and murmured sweet nothings low in her throat. He cocked his head to the left and peered at her curiously, then took another step towards her. Amanda advanced carefully, bent low, her free hand tucked behind her back, crooning softly like a sleepy hen. And so it went for a few minutes and circling moves around the grass. As if hypnotized, the

cockerel continued taking one careful step at a time in her direction, placing his yellow-clawed feet as delicately as if he were walking through a minefield.

“C’mon chooky chooky chook,” Amanda coaxed and rubbed her thumb enticingly through the corn treat. “C’mon, you know you want some, c’mon, there’s a good bird...” She crooned her invitation in a soft, reassuring voice and within a minute the cockerel was within inches of her outstretched hand. Almost imperceptibly, she drew her hand back towards her body while her thumb rustled the corn as it lay in her palm; then, as he took the last fatal step toward her, she lunged and grabbed him by the legs and swung him up into the air.

The bird shrieked afresh and frenziedly flapped in the moment before Amanda grasped and enveloped his wings in a hold that he seemed to find immediately comforting. Right away he stopped squawking as she tucked him beneath her arm while her gentle voice crooned to him about his handsomeness and uncommon bravery. Slowly Amanda opened her free hand and let him see the corn; for a moment he ruffled his neck, cocking his head suspiciously from one side to the other, his beady eyes taking in the ruinous tidbits, then he reached forward and grabbed one kernel and golloped it down, then another and another.

“That’s quite a party trick.” Clancy’s amused voice came from the doorway to the main house and it was Amanda’s turn to leap out of her skin. It set the cockerel screeching again, but she stroked his neck and soothed him with a couple of clucks and the remaining corn and he settled once more.

“You startled me,” she said to Clancy who, she noticed, was already clad in her favored faded blue denim shirt and frayed cut-offs.

“Bet you startled him too, stupid bird. I’ve been looking for him everywhere. God knows how he got out. The foxes will have him one of these nights.”

“Foxes? In Australia?”

“Afraid so, introduced by the early gentry so they’d have something to hunt when they’d finally got rid of the blackfellas.” Clancy was examining with interest Amanda’s bare legs and her houseguest blushed, realising how ridiculous she must look, especially with a large cockerel cawing dreamily under her arm.

“I learn something every day,” she said feebly. “Would you like to take him back to the pen?” She made to hand over the bird but Clancy took a step back.

“Oh no! I’m no good with them. I don’t do chooks. Why do you think I asked you to feed the damn things? You’ll have to take him.”

Amanda's eyes widened and she laughed, "You mean there's actually something that fazes Clancy Darling?"

Clancy's eyes narrowed and she thrust her fingers grumpily through her hair. "I wouldn't say that," she began and then obviously thought better of it as her face softened into a sheepish grin. "Well, okay, I would, if I'm being honest. Bloody things give me the creeps. All that shrieking and pecking."

Amanda felt her insides turn over as Clancy's face was transformed and humor softened the hard planes, allowing her amazing beauty to emerge.

"So, you carry him and I'll make you breakfast. And you don't mention it to Malcolm. Deal?"

Amanda took a deep breath and stopped staring. She nodded. "Deal."

Clancy nodded and pushed her sleeves up her arms. "Better get something on your feet, can't have you ruining your pedicure."

Amanda took another deep breath, decided not to snipe back, mainly because she couldn't think of anything good enough at that minute, and with a reassuring chuck under the chin for Wilbur she slipped back to her bedroom for the sandals. When she emerged Clancy looked her up and down and her expression was one of mild amusement.

"Is that what poultry whisperers are wearing on Fifth Avenue this season?" she asked, carefully appraising the tailored khaki linen shorts and creamy, cap-sleeved Armani blouse.

Amanda ignored the jibe and said instead, "Okay, let's go," her chin and gaze challenging Clancy to say just one more word.

After depositing the cockerel safely in the run Amanda followed Clancy to the kitchen and poured a mug of coffee from the pot on the table. Clancy busied herself at the stove with a frying pan and pointed at the toaster with a spatula.

"Sit and butter some toast for us."

Obediently, Amanda sat and began spreading pale, creamy butter on the thick slices cut from a crusty home-baked loaf. She was already far too accustomed to the fresh-churned butter and her mouth watered at the prospect.

"Where's Malcolm?"

"He went into town, something about going to the bank." Clancy grinned and wiggled her nose. "Which doesn't open until nine-thirty. Truth is, he's suddenly

discovered Jonny Sparrow's coffee. And Jonny Sparrow, although he didn't say that exactly."

Amanda laughed. Clancy's nose wiggle was cartoon-like and charming. It seemed to say something about what she might have been like as a little girl – before a sore heart had had time to firm her beautiful face into the tight-lipped reticence behind which she habitually sheltered. Amanda sighed aloud as she watched the cook's breakfast preparations and Clancy turned and caught her staring.

"What's up? That was a big sigh."

Amanda blushed and shrugged, caught out and unable to think of a plausible excuse. "I...um..." She shook her head and, as so often happened, the lightness in Clancy's expression turned to something closed and remote.

"You must be bored out of your brain," she said and her tone had changed from warm to chill, in an instant.

"No, no! I'm not—please don't think that. It's lovely here. It's so different. I love it. Wilbur, Tommo...I'm..." Amanda stopped and her mouth remained open; she knew she was looking like a goldfish. Clancy had that effect on her. "I'm gabbling as usual," she said sheepishly, feeling the blush growing hotter. She took a deep breath and decided that for once in her life she'd say the first thing that came into her head. "Actually, I was thinking that I wished I could wiggle my nose like you can, you look like a cartoon. It's really funny. It reminds me of a Disney character. And...I'm gabbling again."

Clancy's eyes were round with astonishment and she touched her finger to her nose, as if remembering something from long ago. Then her face softened and she grinned at Amanda as, again, she twitched the tip of her nose. "Ah yes, the Wabbit twitch," she said and it was her turn to blush. "It used to drive Malcolm nuts because he can't do it. I forgot all about it. I didn't realize I still do it."

She turned away abruptly and scooped eggs onto two plates, took a tray from the warmer and forked crispy bacon strips beside the eggs and placed a plate in front of Amanda. She sat across the table and picked up the coffee pot, her eyebrows performed a question mark and Amanda held out her mug across to be filled. Clancy filled her own mug and carefully set the pot back down on its trivet and they regarded each other for a long, almost amiable moment.

Amanda shifted in her chair; it nearly killed her to be without the protection of makeup as she watched Clancy regarding her. Clancy, who had the darkest, longest

eyelashes and most ironically shapely brows she had ever seen. Along with unblemished, glowing skin and absurd freckles, Clancy also had a smile that was made perfect by the crookedness of one of her two front teeth. Clancy's eyes crinkled at the corners as she put her head on one side and looked at Amanda with frank appraisal.

"You look about twelve when you don't wear makeup," she remarked matter of factly, and Amanda felt another flush rise up her cheeks. She put her hands to her face in a vain attempt to hide the blush and peered at Clancy from between her fingers.

"I'm thirty-two," she said sharply. "So do you mean I'm childish?"

Clancy snorted and raised her eyes to the ceiling. "God no! Don't be so damn defensive. I mean you look gorgeous without all that crap you usually slap on."

"Oh thanks. I guess that's a compliment?"

Clancy sat back in her chair, a forkful of bacon halfway to her mouth, and frowned and smiled simultaneously. "What is it about us that we can't go two minutes without getting under each other's skin?"

Amanda forced her chin to drop from the pugnacious angle it had assumed and it was her turn to frown and smile. "I honestly don't know," she said softly. "I'm sorry—I'm a guest in your home and I..." She shrugged helplessly. "I really like you, in a funny way, I don't know why."

Clancy's eyebrows rose, and Amanda grimaced.

"No—that came out wrong! See—it's hopeless. I just don't get it. Why are we always arguing? Malcolm is my dearest friend and I've been a pig to him, as he's probably told you," Clancy shook her head. "Well, that's because he's a decent person. I don't deserve him. I'm going to try to improve. I promised him that."

"Improve?" Clancy's eyebrows did their amused questioning thing again.

"I'm selfish, self-centered and really awful, I've decided," Amanda said, in a rush. "I'm learning such a lot from him and, well, I'm sorry. That's all." She picked up her fork and stabbed it into the egg, not daring to look at Clancy. She watched the golden yolk bubble up and begin to trickle down onto the toast, but it took forever and finally she glanced up.

Clancy was regarding her with gentle eyes and a slight smile. Amanda smiled back tentatively as they spontaneously reached across the table and gripped hands.

"Is this another peace treaty?" Amanda asked hopefully and Clancy laughed.

A few minutes later Clancy laid her knife and fork neatly side by side on the empty plate and set it to one side. She peered at Amanda over the rim of her mug, her eyebrows question-marked. “So, where in hell did a Wall Street banker learn chicken whispering?”

Amanda dragged her thoughts and eyes away from her companion’s face and took a deep breath. “Okay, chickens.” She deliberately slathered honey over her toast, took a bite, munched it thoroughly and swallowed with obvious pleasure. “As you know, poultry actually isn’t big on Wall Street,” she said, and licked honey off her thumb. “My mom has always kept hens at Heron Creek. When I was a kid I discovered I could make chickens do what I wanted. It was my party trick. The guests thought it was cute and—as you now know—it can be useful.”

“Wow,” Clancy breathed, her eyes wide with amazement. “I was sort of joking, but you really are a chicken whisperer!”

Amanda grinned, “Helluva talent isn’t it?”

“Probably more useful than knowing all there is to know about derivatives,” Clancy said and her twinkling eyes belied the sarcasm of the retort.

Amanda sighed, “I’m sure you’re right,” she said sadly. “I checked the news on my iPhone this morning and it’s even worse than yesterday.”

“Catastrophic, I’d call it,” said Clancy. A frown clouded her brow and her jaw perceptibly tightened as her lips clamped down on what Amanda saw was a panicky intake of breath.

“What is it?” Amanda asked, reaching across the table in an instinctive gesture to comfort her but Clancy drew back, although she stopped short of what her expression suggested was going to be a “mind your own business” response. Instead she looked at Amanda for a long narrow-eyed moment then shook her head and sighed.

“Malcolm hasn’t told you what’s been going on here has he?”

“No, not really, but he did say he was coming home to help out.”

The sound Clancy made was half snort, half laugh. “That’s a bit like telling you he’s going to raise the Titanic,” and with that retort her broad shoulders slumped; she suddenly looked tired and every day of her forty-one years.

“Tell me, please,” Amanda said softly. “You can’t leave me in the dark if it’s that bad.”



A suddenly restless Clancy began to fiddle with the pepper grinder and Amanda could see uncomfortable thoughts and fears visibly flitting across her face. Clancy set down the grinder, stood up and paced the kitchen, unconsciously twisting a strand of curls between her fingers, a frown clamping down on the glitter of unshed tears. Amanda watched her for a moment then made a decision. She cleared the dishes into the dishwasher and wiped the table free of crumbs, and then, as Clancy's anxiety began palpably to build, Amanda grasped her gently by the arm and steered her to the back door.

"Let's walk," Amanda said, "It'll do us good. Come on."

For a moment Clancy stared at Amanda as if at a complete stranger, but Amanda tightened her grip on the stiff forearm and said quietly, "Come on. We're going for a walk and you *are* going to talk to me." Clancy searched Amanda's eyes for a long uncertain moment then, without further prompting she nodded.

At the word "walk" Jessie had leapt off her bed and they headed out into the morning. Words began to pour out of Clancy like a long held back dam breaching as she led the way around the house, across the garden, through the trees towards the cove and the walking track that skirted the cliff edge.

It was a story that sounded ominously familiar to Amanda: after a hundred years quietly chugging along minding its own business, Two Moon Bay was no longer flourishing. The reasons were familiar too: fish no longer as plentiful, only a handful of boats leaving its safe haven on any given day, others rotting on the beach or sold to pay their owners' debts. The sawmill closed five years and deserted; the timbermen long gone, their pockets temporarily full of cash from city types who'd bought their quaint old homes to use as holiday cottages.

"But that means the houses are empty most of the time and the new people pushed up the prices so locals can't afford them anyway," said Clancy. "They don't use the village except the cafe, the school might have to close because we don't have enough kids. It's happening everywhere, I know, but it's happening *here*."

She stopped and hunched her shoulders in a shiver, even though the sun was keeping the sea breeze at bay. She stared out to sea and Amanda stood beside her, watching unhappiness doing harsh things to Clancy's profile. Tentatively she reached out and placed her hand in the center of Clancy's stiff back and began to rub her palm in a circular motion between the rigid shoulder blades.

“It *is* happening, all over the world,” she said softly. “And it has been for a long time, but that doesn’t make it any better. The thing is, I actually believe things will begin to turn around before too long. If we can hang on long enough. And you know that more than anyone.”

Clancy snorted and pulled away from Amanda’s comforting touch. “Who’s ‘we’?” she asked, her eyes glittering gray and unfriendly. “Not Wall Street, surely?”

Amanda sighed took back her hand and grinned slightly. “No, I didn’t mean Wall Street, although that’s always looked after itself,” she said, her voice calmer than she thought it might be. “I actually mean my mom in her small town and you in yours. She’s facing the same kind of problems: the town is struggling, she doesn’t get as many guests and the ones who do come want more for their money, don’t want to stay as long. People are moving on and the ones who’re arriving aren’t really that interested in the community—yet.”

Clancy shrugged and smiled a tight little concession. “Yep,” she said grudgingly. “All that, but it’s the dairy too: milk costs more to produce than we get for it to be picked up by the tanker. And if my accountant hadn’t figured out how to offset the losses against my income as a journalist, we wouldn’t be here. But even that’s gone now that I’m not working full time in Sydney. The book got a lot of publicity; hostile reviews and press from the finance sector, paid a year’s interest on the loans. End of story.” Impulsively Clancy picked up a shard of sandstone from the cliff path and flung it violently towards the sea. They watched it twirl in the air as if in slow motion before disappearing from view.

“I hope nobody’s down there,” Amanda observed as she peered towards the cliff edge. Clancy chuckled, a strangled harsh sound.

“Maybe a gull or two, but nothing else. Sorry, I shouldn’t have done that.”

Amanda shrugged. “No matter. So where are you at with the economic hole?”

Clancy sighed, oblivious to the sparkling morning and flurries of small chirruping birds that flitted from one flowering patch of scrub to the next.

“Well, I don’t know what I can offset next,” she said flatly. “And I have absolutely no idea where to turn or what to do.” Clancy’s shoulders shivered once more and despite her sensible self telling her not to, Amanda again reached out and again placed her hand on Clancy’s back and rubbed gently in the circular motion that her mother had always used to soothe her terrors. This time Clancy didn’t move away but sighed, shook her head and almost leaned back into Amanda’s hand.

"I don't know what to do," she repeated softly. "It's lovely that Malcolm's come home, but I honestly don't know what he thinks he can do. And now this damned global crisis looks like it's going to push the country into recession, or even depression." She glanced at Amanda and shook her head.

"The truth is, the bank is pressing for bigger repayments. It's not our local bank manager any more of course, it's some hotshot pipsqueak in Sydney. And I think we're stuffed. I think we're going to lose everything in this town." For the second time that morning tears glittered in her eyes and this time she failed to suppress the flow. She turned away as they streamed down her cheeks. "I'm sorry—it's nothing to do with you, I don't know why I blurted all this out."

Amanda moved close behind Clancy and clasped the weeping woman in her arms, and despite the momentary stiffening of the shoulders and back, refused to let go.

"I'm Malcolm's friend," she said quietly to the back of Clancy's neck. "I'm yours too if you'll let me and it has everything to do with me because of that and because I asked you and you've told me—and I'm glad you did. You shouldn't be trying to deal with this by yourself."

They stood together, facing out toward the horizon where the deep blue of the Pacific met the cloudless bright blue of the early summer sky. Amanda rocked Clancy to and fro as if she were a child as her tears splashed onto Amanda's bare forearms and caught the chill of the breeze. She began instinctively to croon a lullaby of comfort and succor that had somehow surfaced from her childhood.

"Hush little baby don't say a word, Momma's gonna buy you a mockingbird..." She grinned to herself, her cheek resting on Clancy's shoulder, and remembered Eleanor rocking her and softly singing on a night when a nightmare had woken her. *Unto the generations*, she thought, and within the circle of her arms, Amanda sensed Clancy's unyielding limbs gradually begin to relax.

She hummed the tune after she ran out of words and finally Clancy's tears subsided. She took in a gulping, trembling breath and settled against Amanda, leaning close, the strong back moving almost imperceptibly against her breasts and hips, snuggled so that their lower bodies were perfectly spooned. Amanda kept on humming and swallowed on an unexpected ripple of pleasure; she made a mighty effort to ignore the heat and tingling in her crotch but it was difficult. Amanda took a

deep breath and tried to think about the more pressing matters of the global economy, rather than the physical pressing that was beginning to matter to her body.

“Obviously I don’t have all the answers,” she said, in a voice carefully neutral and not betraying the stirring inside. “In fact I suspect you’d say I don’t have any.” She thought about their exchanges to this point and snorted on a giggle. “Given that according to you I’ve singlehandedly plunged the world into economic chaos, you’d be aware that I *don’t* have the answers. But I’m a creative thinker and if we could all talk about all this, maybe we could all figure out a way of navigating through. That’s what banks do all the time anyway. It’s what I do—in a different context—but I do it. And a bunch of heads is way better than one or two. What do you reckon?”

Clancy said nothing but sniffed. Amanda dug down into her jeans pocket and found a handkerchief.

“It’s clean,” she said and pushed it into Clancy’s hand. They stood silent for another long moment then Clancy’s shoulders lifted in a tremulous sigh and she vigorously blew her nose. “Thanks,” she muttered from deep within the handkerchief. “I think you’re the only person I’ve ever known—aside from my grandmother—who actually carries a real, clean white handkerchief!”

Amanda grinned and gave Clancy a squeeze. “Then you obviously didn’t cry when you were visiting my mother,” she said and they both laughed. The moments ticked by and still they stood, Clancy clasped within the comfort of Amanda’s arms, as the Pacific rollers boomed and broke on the rocks far beneath them. Amanda breathed deeply of the sharp, salt-laden air and was thankful for the sound of the breakers, hoping it masked the pounding of her heart as she savored the ocean scent mixing with the honey-flower perfume of Clancy’s skin. Refusing to think or stop to consider her actions, she closed her eyes to the bright morning and rested her forehead against the back of Clancy’s head, surrendering to the twin sensations of peace and excitement that were coursing through her veins. She knew what she was doing was foolish and just asking for Clancy’s sharpest retort. But somehow the vulnerability she had been privy to had melted her caution and the underlying antagonism that always seemed to spark between them.

They stood on the sandstone bluff, so still and serene that, right by their feet, a dozen needle-beaked honeyeaters went about their foraging business. Flitting among the stunted she-oaks, banksias and melaleucas that covered the cliff top around them, the birds highlighted the peace of the morning. Then, Clancy shifted within Amanda’s

light clasp and began to turn within the circle of her arms. Amanda held her breath and loosened her grip, but Clancy did not pull away and Amanda did not step back. Then they were facing each other so close Amanda could feel Clancy's warm breath on her face; she stared into Clancy's teary gray eyes as they searched her own. Her heart began to beat harder and faster while Clancy slowly took Amanda's face tenderly between her hands. Amanda heard time stop and she watched Clancy's eyes as, with extreme deliberation, her emotional hunger was revealed. She slowly inclined her head to kiss Amanda and whispered, "We're both stone cold sober this time. If you don't want this to happen, now's the time to say something."

Amanda swallowed her shock. She opened her mouth to say she knew not what and heard herself murmur, "I have nothing to say."

Clancy held her gaze for another moment then kissed her uncompromisingly hard. The sensation was unnerving even as Amanda anticipated it and in a heartbeat, the sensual softness of Clancy's full, confident lips devouring hers sent fresh tremors coursing through her body. She heard, as if from afar, her own gasp of surprise as her lips opened further to Clancy's insistence and yearning. She exclaimed at the strength of feeling that sparked between them and she clasped Clancy's long body into her own until their breasts, their breath and their heartbeats melded. Without hesitation their tongues entwined and explored inner warmth and secret feelings. Amanda savored the heat that flowed into her through the touch of Clancy's hands and lips. In turn she greedily feasted on the sweetness of Clancy's mouth, the scent of her breathing, and delighted in the sudden freedom to caress the rippling flesh and muscles of her back. Amanda thrust her fingers through the silky thickness of Clancy's hair, cradling her head with ferocious tenderness.

"I've wanted this so long," she heard herself sigh and even as the words startled her, she knew it to be true.

"Oh I *bet* you have! Get your hands off her, you whore!"

Clancy and Amanda tore apart from each other as the furious shout ripped the morning to shreds. Standing on the path between them and the way back to the house, fists on hips and her pretty face twisted with rage and jealousy, a short, dark-haired woman was an oddly menacing sight. Amanda knew she was staring at her, open-mouthed and wide-eyed in shock; at the same time the southerly breeze teased open her unbuttoned shirt and the furious eyes blazed hotter as they settled on Amanda's breasts. "Oh cute," she spat. "Put your tits away, you slut!"

“For Pete’s sake Jane, stop it.” Clancy stepped between Amanda and the angry woman, her voice hard and cold. “Just stop it. What are you doing here?”

Amanda struggled to button her shirt with shaking fingers as the sexual craving that was still coursing through her veins rapidly curdled into the sourness of embarrassment and anger.

“What am I *doing* here?” Jane’s words were spat from between clenched teeth. “You were supposed to meet me in town for coffee this morning. But I can see why you forgot. I came to see if you were okay—and Jessie very helpfully led me here. At least *she* knows where her loyalty lies.”

At the sound of her name Jessie came bounding out of the undergrowth and snuffled at Clancy’s hand, whining and looking worried. Clancy rubbed her hand over the dog’s head, reassuring the worried brown eyes.

“It’s okay Jess,” she said quietly to the Labrador. “It’s okay.” She looked at Jane and Amanda and back again, shaking her head helplessly. “Jane, you’re being ridiculous. Amanda—I’m sorry—this is a mess.” She shrugged and couldn’t quite look Amanda in the eye.

“A mess! Damn it Clancy, I haven’t seen you since Malcolm got home and now I know why! When were you going to tell me, huh?”

“Tell you what, Jane? Damn it, I will not...”

“You will not *what*?” Jane yelled, arms akimbo and muscular legs aggressively spread. “Don’t come Lady High and Mighty with me, Ms Darling!”

Amanda put her hands to her ears and gulped down the beginnings of a treacherous sob. The rising bile in her throat was a harsh mixture of humiliation and disappointment—at herself, at Clancy and at this hideous turn of events. She pushed past Clancy and tried to sidestep around Jane whose sharp elbow jabbed her in the side and interrupted her progress.

“Let me pass, please,” Amanda muttered. *What is it that makes some women think they can bully me?* But still Jane blocked her path, glowering up at her like a rabid pit bull.

“Ooh! ‘Let me pass’? Who do you think you are, sweetheart?” Jane planted a fist on each hip. Her face was beet red and she peered up into Amanda’s face and growled, “And you can stop looking down your silly American nose at me.”

Amanda's mouth fell open and a small bomb went off in her head. "That's rich!" She spat, fury suddenly taking over. "I can't help it if you're a midget. The only way I can't look down at you is if I sit!"

From behind her she heard a stifled snort and knew Clancy was trying to swallow a laugh, but she was too crushed by embarrassment to enjoy it even when Clancy moved quickly to her side and took her arm. Amanda shook it off even as Clancy pleaded, "Amanda, wait, let me explain..." But Amanda didn't want explanations or a moment more of this downmarket catfight. She shook off Clancy's arm and shoved past Jane who looked as if she were about to explode. Without looking back Amanda fled along the track towards the farmhouse, leaving two strident voices floating in the breeze behind her, mocking the thrill and promise that still throbbed deep in her blood.

## ELEVEN

Amanda's thoughts wandered far and wide on the drive up to Sydney, but she tried hard to keep them away from Clancy. Malcolm sat beside her as she drove and proved his confidence in her ability to remember which side of the road to stay on by falling asleep before they had traveled twenty miles. On the hour she turned on the radio and punched the button for ABC news. *"... a spokesman for the Rudd Government says they have moved decisively to cushion Australia from the worst impacts of the global recession,"* said the newsreader. *"The Treasurer, Wayne Swan, has announced a \$42 billion Nation Building and Jobs Plan to invest in future long-term economic growth. Mr. Swan described the Plan as a temporary investment with lasting gains. Treasury estimates that the Plan will support up to 90,000 jobs in 2008-09 and 2009-10. Mr. Swan said that the initiatives will boost economic growth by about half a percent of GDP in 2008-09, and around three-quarters of a percent to one percent of GDP. The government is also guaranteeing \$1200 billion of bank deposits with, and \$200 billion of investments in, Australia's banks, building societies and credit unions..."*

"Sounds okay, doesn't it?" Malcolm's voice was sleepy but alert.

Amanda glanced at him and nodded. "It does, I think they've really got a

handle on the public confidence thing. Clancy was saying last night that she reckons Rudd and Swan have managed to tell people not to panic, that it's going to be okay and—guess what?—They're not panicking and it *is* okay. I've never really seen 'consumer confidence' working so clearly before. It's amazing."

"Well, let's hope." Malcolm shifted in his seat and stretched his long legs. "You looking forward to seeing your mum?"

Amanda's smile was spontaneous and wide. "I am. I really am. And she's so excited to be here. She's never had a Christmas that hasn't been snowy."

"True?"

That's what she said." Amanda rested her hand on Malcolm's knee and gave it a friendly squeeze. "And thanks for coming up to meet her."

"No probs. I'm looking forward to seeing her. And I've got a couple of things to do for Jonny anyway, so it's all good. I'll stay over with a mate and pick you up from Margo's in the morning."

"You won't come to her party?"

Malcolm's snort and chuckle were a curious mix. "Nah, thanks but no thanks. I'm not mad about those mega-dyke gatherings. They're a bit scary."

"They're not that bad, surely?"

"I'm just a simple gay guy; I can't keep up with those girls. But you'll enjoy them, for sure. And Margo is a killer party-giver, I'll admit that."

Amanda digested this information for a few miles and managed to overtake a massive truck and trailer without mishap. She glanced at Malcolm. His eyes were closed but he didn't look asleep.

Did Clancy tell you about my encounter with Jane?"

Malcolm didn't respond for another mile then he sighed and put his hand on Amanda's shoulder. "She mentioned you'd met and it wasn't friendly. But she didn't go into detail."

Amanda shuddered at the memory and touched Malcolm's hand gratefully.

"It was horrible. We...um...we'd taken a walk along the cliff track to talk about the bank problems and..." She swallowed and hesitated then plunged on. "I don't know how it happened but we're either arguing or..." She sighed. "Or we're not and we were kissing and suddenly this mini-banshee was there. And, oh God, it was awful. Stop laughing!"

"I'm not!"



“You are. I can feel it through your hand.” Despite herself Amanda grinned at Malcolm. After all, it *was* hideously ridiculous.

“I’ve never known two people like you and my sister. You adore each other. Why can’t you just face up to the truth?”

“That will be a steamy, tropical December in Maine before that happens, let me tell you,” Amanda said firmly and checked her mirrors before swinging out and around another big truck. “But why have you never told me she has a girlfriend? I thought she and Jane were history.”

“They *are*. But Jane won’t accept it. They only ever got together because Clancy was on the rebound—and don’t ever tell her I said that—and Jane is a total pain in the arse in my opinion. And don’t share that either.”

“Why didn’t Clancy tell me any of this?”

“Did you give her a chance?”

Amanda continued to stare at the highway ahead and didn’t look at her friend, knowing that he knew his question didn’t have a satisfactory answer. After a couple of minutes Malcolm lay back, sighed contentedly and was soon snoring again. Amanda was grateful that as usual he hadn’t pressed her to face an uncomfortable truth, but this time she faced it for herself. She had been painfully embarrassed by the fracas on the cliff top, but if she had thought further than the end of her own nose (her “American nose”) she would have realized that Clancy was just as mortified by it, perhaps even more so. An hour or more after Amanda had let herself back into the house and decided on a long, cool shower, Clancy had knocked on her bedroom door. Amanda set down her laptop on the bed and opened the door.

“I must apologize for that dreadful scene.” Clancy shrugged and could not quite meet Amanda’s eyes. “I don’t want you to think...”

Amanda held up her hand and shook her head. “It wasn’t your fault Clancy. Really, you don’t have to apologize, but I *do* wish I’d known about Jane. I would never have kissed you—ever. I don’t do that kind of thing, whatever you may think of me.”

Clancy shook her head, “No! I don’t think...I mean, look, Jane isn’t—we are not...” She sighed and ran her hands through her hair in obvious exasperation and chagrin, but Amanda was still smarting from the earlier episode and did not feel like being too forgiving. For once she felt more grown up than Clancy and she decided to make the most of it.

She took a deep breath. “Clancy, we have got off to a number of bad starts, by my reckoning, and this is the latest. It’s also the worst. You might like to think you and Jane aren’t girlfriends but she sure as hell does, so I think you better clear that up properly before you start kissing other girls, especially me.”

Clancy’s eyes rolled and Amanda saw a deep flush rise up her cheeks before she buried her face in her hands. It was beguiling, Amanda tried to resist, but felt a grin cracking her stern face. “I have to admit I like you. Malcolm is right—we could be good friends, I hope—but that’s it. I’d like to be friends, but I don’t want to kiss you ever again. I’m going to write a few emails now, after that I’ll come help you do lunch and we can talk some more about how to fix the town, okay?” And with that she had quietly closed the door in Clancy’s astounded face.

The steady rhythm of Malcolm’s breathing was like a meditation and Amanda found her thoughts drifting back to the maddening woman she had temporarily left behind.

After an awkward moment in the kitchen they had simultaneously got the giggles. After a few moments Clancy managed to speak. “You called her a midget. She will *never* forgive you.” And they had to sit down they were laughing so hard.

Finally Amanda managed to squeak, “She said I have an American nose, damn it. I don’t *care* if she doesn’t forgive me.” They laughed some more and Amanda wiped tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Anyway, what the hell is an ‘American nose’? What’s wrong with my nose?”

Clancy got up and tore off two sheets of kitchen paper from the dispenser, handed one to Amanda and blew her nose vigorously on the other. “I have no idea,” she finally managed to say. “You have a beautiful nose, actually. But you were looking down it at her.” She fell into another fit of giggles. “Coke? Coffee?”

Between her own hiccupping laughter Amanda was able to say, “Coke,” then she frowned. “Hang on a minute. I am two feet taller than damn Jane. And so are you. How are we supposed to look at her?”

Clancy peered over the fridge door and, as she broke up into a fresh bout of laughter, she managed to say “With respect. You’re supposed to look down at smaller people with respect.”

Amanda almost laughed aloud again at the memory. It had been the beginning of a happy time between her and Clancy. They had not sparred again until the “Welcome Home Malcolm” party and her first meeting with Margo Durham. It had

happened just weeks after the first awful encounter with Jane.

The entrance to the Two Moon Bay School of Arts was decked out in old-fashioned crepe paper streamers and bunches of balloons when Malcolm guided the Subaru into the crowded parking lot on a blustery October evening. The chapel-like cream-painted weatherboard building glowed in the radiance of a dramatic sunset and its multi-pane, multicolored windows twinkled with welcome light.

Clancy had left the farm early in the old truck with the back loaded up with cling-wrapped trays of sandwiches and cakes. She had refused Amanda's offers of help and nothing would budge her.

"You're a guest of honor," she said when Amanda asked for the sixth time. "Come in with Malcolm later." She was still unable to fully look Amanda in the eye and, in her turn, Amanda found it painful to be reminded of her own humiliation.

Amanda spent the rest of the day on her laptop, avoiding Malcolm's curiosity and checking jobs and the general state of the union. None of it had been promising and she was pleased finally to shower, change into sharply pressed black linen pants and a slinky black tank top that she hoped would pass for smart casual.

As they left the car Malcolm was leapt upon by laughing, happy friends who slapped his back, hugged him and made rude remarks about every aspect of his life and person. Amanda tagged along behind as best she could and tried to appear relaxed and at ease, but it was tricky and she was relieved to get inside the Hall and spy Clancy at the bar with a group of women. Clancy saw her and waved and beckoned. Her smile was friendly but neutral and Amanda returned her greeting in a similar fashion as she walked over to the group, quickly taking in the women as she did.

"Amanda, come and meet some Sydney friends," Clancy said, giving her a friendly peck on the cheek. "Merry Churcher has a house here." Amanda shook hands with a round faced, middle-aged woman who smiled warmly and looked somehow like her name. "Astrid and Valerie also have a place just outside the village on the north side and Margo Durham's just bought the old pub in Bay Street."

Astrid and Heather looked so alike Amanda could only imagine they had been together so long they had become mirror images of each other with their sharp as a razor haircuts and pressed black dress pants and shirts. They looked Amanda over

with mild curiosity and murmured welcomes, then stood back as Margo insinuated herself between Amanda and the rest and somehow managed to cut them out.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” she said, and her dark eyes sparked fire as she devoured Amanda. She was as tall as Clancy and as dark as Clancy was blonde. She took Amanda’s hand in both her own and didn’t let go. “I want to know all about you,” she said. And the intensity of her gaze made Amanda shiver with a weird mixture of fright and pleasure.

“There’s not a lot to know,” Amanda said, wondering instantly why she’d said such a pathetic thing. She wondered too why Clancy was watching so closely and with that flinty expression on her face. Margo also saw the look, smiled at Clancy and asked, sweetly, “Will Jane be here tonight?”

Clancy blushed and the animus that instantly flared between her and Margo should have set the School of Art’s decorations alight.

“No,” Clancy said crisply. “She doesn’t do this kind of thing.” And she turned away with great deliberation as Margo laughed.

“No, I suppose not,” she said as the air crackled around Clancy. “How is the old girl anyway, Clancy?”

Amanda watched Clancy’s shoulders and spine stiffen; she turned slowly back to face Margo and her gray eyes were a shade of arctic chill that Amanda already knew well; she shivered.

“Jane is fine, I think. Although you’ve probably seen her since I have. She’s in Sydney I believe.” Clancy turned an unreadable gaze on Amanda who felt an inward flinch.

“Would you like a drink Amanda?” The eyes flicked to Margo and back to Amanda. “Or are you taken care of?” Her smile was not sweet.

Amanda was grateful that her intake of breath was inaudible as Margo and her friends broke into sniggers and giggles. She returned Clancy’s smile, it was like playing ping-pong with glass shards.

“I’d love a drink, thank you Clancy,” she said and was pleased that her voice

was even and didn't betray the tremor of fear that fluttered in her belly. "White wine would be great, or a beer if that's easier." Clancy turned back to the bar and the other women jumped to local gossip that meant little to Amanda. Her mind wandered off into pondering the fright and where it came from. *Why do I want her approval? Why does she get under my skin so easily?* Amanda heard no useful answer and she sighed. At that moment Margo's arm slipped around her waist and squeezed.

"Take no notice of Miss Snake Eyes," she murmured into Amanda's ear, soft breath tickling her neck. At that moment Clancy turned, a dripping longneck beer bottle in her hand, and Amanda pulled away from Margo's encircling arm to take it. The expression in Clancy's eyes was disconcerting as the bottle passed from her hand to Amanda's and their fingers clasped on the cold glass for as long as it took to cause a fresh tingling flush to rise up Amanda's cheeks. *You are the most irritating woman I have ever met, and that's a fact.* She hoped her eyes were delivering the message, but as Clancy's smile widened to a real, happy grin; despite herself, Amanda knew she was grinning back.

"Thanks," she said and Clancy finally surrendered the bottle.

"A pleasure. Now you'll have to excuse me while I go and check the buffet." She turned her most beguiling expression on Margo and added, "You'll look after our guest, won't you Margo?" And she was gone, threading her way through the gathering throng of Two Moon Bay's finest. Amanda watched Clancy disappear and swallowed the mix of discomfiting feelings generated by the past few minutes. She turned to Margo and saw penetrating coffee berry dark eyes watching her and she forced a smile she did not entirely feel. Margo's intensity was exciting and at the same time unnerving, but Amanda didn't have time to think more about why that might be because the pint-sized but powerful Merry Churcher was in an organizing mood.

"Come on ladies," she said to the group. "I've put my bag and jacket on a table but it won't keep unless we grab it soon." Without waiting for any response she began shooshing them before her towards open double doors leading on to a veranda that ran the length of the hall. It was pretty with strings of colored lights beneath the eaves and tea light candles flickering in glass jars on each table. Amanda spied Malcolm leaning against the railing, beer in hand laughing with two older men and a

tall, bony-faced woman. He beckoned her over and she excused herself from Margo's attentive arm and prepared to be introduced to yet more locals. At that moment there was a deafening crackle and whine of feedback from the PA and the hall was suddenly filled with the vibrating snarl of the opening bars of "Satisfaction."

"Oh lordy," Malcolm groaned as he hugged Amanda. "That dopy Gary Sweetman is doing the music. It'll be the Stones, Stones and more Stones. I hope you don't mind moldy old rockers, Amanda!"

She hugged him back and smiled at his friends who were giving her a friendly but expectant once-over. "You did promise me Abba," she reminded him. "But as long as you don't expect me to dance..."

Malcolm grinned and shook his head, "No way. But look – I want you to meet Darren and Renee Martin; it's their cattle you've been smooching all week. They've got Mountainview Farm, next to us. And this is Darren's brother Jeff. He works with them."

Amanda held out her hand to Renee and it was gripped and shaken with vigor. "Nice ter meeche 'manda," Renee's blue eyes were sharp and twinkly in a weather-beaten face. "Glad yer brought 'im home."

The two men tipped their hat brims to her before engulfing her hand in their own vice-like paws, pumping her arm until she wondered whether it might result in a dislocated shoulder.

"Let the poor girl go Darren," Renee said, chortling as she watched Amanda's efforts to stay upright. "You'll rattle her teeth clean out of 'er 'ead." She patted Amanda's back reassuringly, "Sit down with us for a bit, pet. I'd love ter hear all about that New York a' yours. Wouldn't you, lads?" The two men agreed in unison and Darren leapt creakily to pull out a chair for Amanda. His smile was gap-toothed and so eager she had no choice but to sit and submit to the friendly grilling from the trio. Then, when she managed to get a word in she threw questions back to the Martins. And she quickly discovered their experience of travel seemed to be an annual trip to Sydney for the Easter agricultural show. And that she had now met her first cheese-maker.

“Darren has had some nice wins with his soft cheeses,” Renee told Amanda proudly. “His Two Moon Double Brie got written up in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Although I preferred his blue, that was a corker.”

“And I wish you were still making them,” said a familiar voice behind Amanda. She jumped as a hand descended on her shoulder and Clancy murmured close to her ear, “You okay? Need rescuing?”

Amanda looked up and grinned, shaking her head as minimally as she could manage. “Come and join us,” she said, patting the chair next to her. “I’m learning all about what really happens in Two Moon Bay.”

“Oh boy!” Clancy laughed as she slid into the canvas chair and set her beer bottle on the table. “What *have* you been telling her? Malcolm?”

Malcolm shrugged happily and swigged from his own bottle. “Just a bit of local history and some essential dairy cow information. You know—the usual stuff.”

Clancy looked doubtful and still questioned Amanda with a raised eyebrow.

“I’ve learned more about dairy cows in the last ten minutes than I could have dreamed of,” Amanda said, smiling at Clancy. “I had no idea how smart they are.”

“Really?” Clancy’s eyebrow did its quirky thing again. “Smart isn’t the word I’d have used for a black and white moo.”

“Well you don’t know how wrong you are, Ms Darling. I have new respect and interest in those girls. In fact I’m going to help Renee with milking next week when Darren and Jeff go to the sales.”

This time Clancy’s eyebrows shot towards her hairline in unison. “Really?” She said again. “You never fail to surprise me. You sure you won’t make the milk curdle or something?”

Renee snorted into her long beer glass. “You wash your mouth out, young Clancy. You’re the one who tied their tails together and created blue murder for your poor uncle. Don’t think I’ve forgotten that!”

The little group around the table chortled and clapped their hands and Amanda

grinned happily at Clancy who wiggled her nose and groaned. "I was ten years old, Renee! What happens in the dairy stays in the dairy. Will you never let me live it down?"

"We don't plan to Big Sis," said Malcolm merrily. "You do the crime you pay—and pay—and pay!"

Clancy got to her feet and picked up her bottle. "Well, I can't stay here all evening and let you torture me, someone's got to make sure this damn party stays on track." She turned to Amanda. "Would you like to come and get something to eat?" Amanda rose eagerly and at that moment a strong arm twined around her waist and drew her close.

"Just about to go check out the barbie," said Margo. "Come with us, then Clancy can do her civic duty." Clancy and Margo smiled at each other and Clancy stepped away from the table.

"Good idea. Amanda—I'll catch you later." And she was gone, back to the hall, disappearing once more into the crowd of dancers. Amanda watched her, suppressing an urge to follow. Margo cocked her head to one side and grinned wolfishly. "Come on," she said, her hand sliding warmly up Amanda's back. "We'll be able to talk and I want to know all about you."

Amanda turned to the Martins and Malcolm. They were watching the interchange with unreadable expressions and she felt instantly awkward. She shrugged away from Margo's touch and smiled at the group. "Will you excuse me, I'll be back in a while." Renee nodded kindly although her sharp eyes flicked back and forth between Amanda and Margo. The Martin men looked at Margo and Amanda could see that although they were being polite, they were not pleased. Malcolm simply grinned up at her.

"We'll join you in a minute, kiddo," he said and winked, stretched out his legs and sat back. "Go have fun." Amanda ruffled his hair.

"Okay, see ya," she said then allowed Margo to lead her along the veranda, threading their way between tables of animated drinkers. They made their way to where the other women were waiting on the gravel path. It led to the torch-lit



barbecue area where they joined a queue of people expectantly carrying paper plates and plastic cutlery; and Amanda prepared her smile for another round of introductions.

By the time the evening tapered off into muffled laughter and quiet conversation among small groups at a few veranda tables, Amanda was exhausted and elated. She had met what felt like every adult and many of the children of Two Moon Bay. She had received invitations to go sailing, fishing, trail bike riding, horseback riding, bush walking and jogging; and to join a knitting bee, the choir and an art class. Then there was an invitation to a party in Sydney to be thrown in her honor by Margo Durham, who also offered to put her up overnight.

“Go on,” said Merry Churcher, “Say yes. She has the *most* fabulous penthouse. Why don’t you ever invite *me* to stay, Margo?” And she had fluttered her almost invisible eyelashes behind her spectacles and the friends laughed uproariously. As the wine and beer flowed Amanda had succumbed to a dozen blandishments to dance—even to the Stones—and finally Malcolm’s promise of vintage Abba came true. The two friends bopped like crazy things to “Waterloo” and almost fell over laughing. But then the mood slowed as the fabled Swedish voices soared into “Winner Takes It All” and Margo tapped Malcolm’s shoulder.

“Ladies’ choice, Malcolm,” she said with a grin and he immediately backed away from Amanda with his usual grace; but he gave his friend an enigmatic, narrow-eyed stare as he did so.

*What?* Amanda mouthed over Margo’s shoulder, but Malcolm merely shrugged as he disappeared through the crowd towards the veranda. Margo proved to be a good dancer and her sensuous and natural rhythm was appealing. Amanda relaxed into her hold and began to enjoy herself.

“Come up to Sydney,” said Margo after a friendly silence. “I’d love to introduce you to some friends—great women—your type. I’ll throw a cocktail party to welcome our new American friend.”

Amanda smiled down into the piercing blue eyes and made a question mark of her eyebrows. “My type?”

“Professional women—investment bankers, stockbrokers, lawyers, businesswomen, go-getters; really fun women. You must have had enough of Two Moon, surely? I mean, it’s good for a relaxing few days, but the hayseeds drive you crazy after that.”

The back of Amanda’s neck prickled as she thought of Renee, her “lads” and her genuine warmth. She shut her mouth on her immediate response, laughed and nodded. “I know what you mean. But the novelty hasn’t entirely worn off yet. I’ve been enjoying the change, after New York.”

“Well just say the word, I’d love you to come and stay. As Merry says, I’ve got a fabulous penthouse—and there’s a guest suite, so no strings.” Margo’s grin said otherwise and she continued, “Unless you feel like untying a bow or two, that is.”

Amanda laughed again. Loose strings sound like a good idea.” She gazed into Margo’s eyes, deliberately flirting, and felt the hand on her back tighten and the fingers splay and smooth over the swell of her hip. It was a good feeling and Amanda’s movements slowed and liquefied in response to the body that almost imperceptibly matched its tempo to hers. A shiver of anticipation shook her shoulders and Margo leaned back, amused concern in her eyes.

“Not cold, surely?” Her expression delivered quite another message. At that moment a prickling sensation caused Amanda to shiver once again, but its cause was different. Instinctively she glanced about, feeling eyes upon her, and found herself looking straight at Clancy as she stood in the veranda doorway. Her glacial mien and frigid gray eyes were clearly visible, even across the dimly lit hall, and despite the arousal that still pulsed deep inside, Amanda drew away from Margo’s hands.

“No, not cold,” she said, stepping back further from Margo’s outstretched hands and coquettish smile. “Just—you know.” She shrugged and tried to stop herself glancing once again in Clancy’s direction, but Margo caught the flicker of her eyes and followed their direction to the doorway where Clancy still stood, observing them.

“Ah,” said Margo softly. “So our Clancy is feeling a little proprietorial. Is that it?”

“Not at all,” Amanda said sharply. “We are...” She paused, wondering

momentarily what would be an honest description. She took a different tack. “She’s my best friend’s sister and my host.” Margo grinned wickedly. “And she’s giving you the evil eye. Or is it me?” She waved in Clancy’s direction, but it was too late. Clancy had already turned and was receding from view into the night.

Amanda swallowed the vague feeling of nausea that welled up in her throat. “Excuse me,” she said to Margo and backed away from the mocking smile. “I really do have to consider my hosts.” She had no idea where that came from and it sounded piously Pollyanna and silly. “Lord,” she said, with a wrinkle-nosed grin, “I sound like a Jane Austen character.” Margo smiled but Amanda could see she wasn’t really amused; she backed away before Margo could remonstrate or tease her further and headed for the doors and the veranda. Renee and her family were still sitting at the table where she had left them and the sun-craggy face creased into a welcoming smile when she saw Amanda. Renee patted the chair beside her and Amanda sank into it, feeling instantly safe and at ease.

“Enjoying yerself, love?” Renee’s blue eyes twinkled as she gave Amanda a sharp once-over.

“Everyone is very friendly,” Amanda said, looking around for Clancy, to no avail.

“Some’s more friendly’n others,” Renee observed. “Some’s idea of friendly can be on the tricky side; them Sydney girls are a bit too sharp for their own good, in my opinion.”

Amanda thought of Margo’s smooth charm and laughed. “I’ll watch out for them Renee, I reckon they could eat a li’l ol’ New Yorker like me for breakfast!”

Renee joined her in a throaty chortle then patted Amanda’s hand. “Don’t you mind me kiddo, I’m just a cranky old bitch who takes care of her own. Clancy and Malcolm are like kids to me and you’ve joined the family, whether you like it or not.”

Amanda laid her hand over Renee’s and gripped it, “Thank you Renee that means a lot—” But before she could say more Malcolm loomed over her shoulder and said softly in her ear, “Go grab Clancy for a dance. She’s stuck with Alan and Joy

Jones and that means they'll be on at her to go to church more often."

Renee's chortle was deafening. "More like the two of them are still trying to get into her knickers," she guffawed at Amanda's wide eyes. "They're our local swingers. Watch out for them Amanda, they're always on the lookout for a threesome."

Amanda goggled at Renee and back at Malcolm. "You are joking..."

Malcolm shook his head, "Afraid not. Joy will want to check out your chakras before the week's out. Anyway, go and grab Clancy, she'll be eternally grateful." He held out his hand and Amanda took it. Malcolm led her into the hall where the lighting had been dimmed to strings of multi-colored fairy lights and couples swayed and twirled to a Motown classic. Malcolm pointed across the room to where Clancy's golden mane caught the glow and shimmered. He leaned in to Amanda's ear, "Whatever you do, don't get caught up with the Joneses. They're piranhas, get her away and come dance." He disappeared into the crowd towards the stage and the disco set-up and Amanda went in the other direction, keeping her eyes on Clancy as she threaded her way between the dancers.

Although she liked the fun of the rescue plan a niggling voice said in her head, *Why didn't Malcolm come and save his sister's honor?* But she had no time to think about an answer before she was directly behind Clancy and tapping her shoulder.

Clancy spun around and smiled. In her eyes Amanda saw a simultaneous flash of relief and pleasure and she took the hand that reached for hers and squeezed it gently.

"Your brother says we have to go and dance because we'll be leaving soon and it'll be bad luck if you don't dance with the foreigner." *Where in hell did that come from?* She asked herself as Clancy's startled eyes silently asked the same question.

"Oh, absolutely," Clancy said solemnly. She turned back to the short, tubby couple whose eyes were devouring the newcomer, up and down and back again. "Alan-Joy-this is Malcolm's best friend from New York, Amanda McIntyre." She smiled at Amanda, still gripping her hand. "Amanda, Joy and Alan Jones are two of the more interesting people who've decided to live in Two Moon Bay. Alan is in real estate and Joy is a chakra analyst."

Alan and Joy eagerly stepped forward to grasp Amanda's free hand, their round faces gleaming with anticipation. They reminded Amanda of Tweedledum and Tweedledee until her hand was enveloped in two soft, sweaty palms. She took an involuntary step backwards but could not reclaim her hand.

"Good to meet you," she said, without conviction. Joy peered up into Amanda's face, her pale blue eyes serious. "Wonderful to meet you," She said in a breathless voice. "We've heard so much about you. I would love to balance your chakras."

Alan gave his wife the tiniest nudge so that he could claim Amanda's direct attention. "You really must let her attend you," he said in tones similar but a fraction deeper than those of his wife. "She has remarkable intuition and healing hands." He snuffled modestly and continued, "Actually, we both do."

Clancy's grip on her left hand enabled Amanda to nod soberly instead of bursting into the giggles that threatened to destroy her interested expression.

"That sounds wonderful," she said gravely. "I sure could do with some deep treatment because I picked up a really persistent urinary tract infection from my last total immersion chakra blessing ceremony and, I tell you, it's hellacious itchy and sore."

As if choreographed, Joy and Alan dropped her hand and took steps back. They looked at each other then back at Amanda. Joy attempted to speak but the words came out as a strangled squawk. Amanda continued to smile at the pair then turned to Clancy. "Shall we go dance?"

Clancy's face was scarlet and there were tears in her eyes as she struggled to suppress the laughter and disbelief desperately trying to explode out of her tightly closed mouth. She nodded at Amanda and waved weakly at the horrified faces of Joy and Alan Jones. Amanda avoided looking at her and led her away into the crowd of dancers as the unmistakable opening chords of "Take My Breath Away" boomed out across the hall. As one the two women turned to the stage and saw Malcolm, grinning happily as he stood beside the DJ. He raised his thumbs to his sister and best friend then jumped down and vanished into the crowd.

“What’s the male equivalent of a minx?” Amanda said into Clancy’s ear, “Because that’s what your brother is.”

“He is, but I forgive him. I’m afraid this is our tune and anyway, I want to know all about your urinary tract infection.” She slipped her arms around Amanda’s waist and drew her close. “Tell.”

For a moment Amanda had difficulty breathing as she settled once again into the shapes and sensations of Clancy’s body. She inhaled the citrus and flowers perfume of hair and skin and closed her eyes at the simple pleasure of it. The familiar sensual music wrapped about her and she allowed the dark, slow rhythm to enter her and melt her into Clancy’s movement. Amanda felt the muscles of the strong shoulders twitch as her fingers stole along the length of them to rest beneath the rippling hair and around Clancy’s neck.

“This is nice,” she muttered in her partner’s pearl-decorated ear.

“Nice?”

“Nice is a much maligned word.”

“Okay. If you say so.” Clancy’s arms tightened slightly and her forehead came to rest against Amanda’s. “But I do want to know about your previous chakra experience and the ...”

“Okay okay – the UTI. Jeez, I can’t believe we’re dancing to this song. Again. *And* you want to talk about jock itch.”

Much to the surprise of the crowd, Clancy threw back her head and roared with laughter. Her throat gleamed long and golden in the dim light and Amanda failed to resist the impulse to lay her lips in the hollow at its base. She discovered the skin was salty to her tongue and she also felt Clancy’s heartbeat quicken and her hands press on Amanda’s back so that the minimal space between their bodies became nothing. She was enveloped in curls as Clancy dropped her lips to Amanda’s ear and she began to speak, but was interrupted by Malcolm’s merry voice from close by.

“Woo hoo! Get a room you two!”

The two women pulled away from each other—slightly—and were gently

bumped by Malcolm and Jonny Sparrow as they waltzed around them. Amanda came back to earth and saw that they were attracting the attention of other curious dancers. She pulled back further from Clancy's arms even though there were couples of all sizes and gender mixes shuffling around the floor. Clancy did not let her go, however, but turned to her brother and put out a hand to embrace him and his dance partner.

"You have to hear this," she said, as the two men formed a huddle with them. "Amanda has a sexually transmitted disease that she's kept from us and she was just telling Alan and Joy Jones about it."

Amanda's protests were drowned by the whoops and snorts of laughter from Malcolm and Jonny. Finally she was able to get them to stop chortling and listen.

"I do not have an STD." She stopped again as Malcolm threatened to choke on his gurgling laughter. "In fact I do not have any kind of disease," she went on. "But Clancy, your brother told me to come and rescue you from the Joneses and warned me that they'd probably kidnap me for the white slave trade, so that's what I came up with."

"What? That you have syphilis?" Her three companions dissolved into more laughter and Amanda waited patiently even as a small thought crossed her mind that she would rather be dancing with Clancy to the old but sexy song than amusing them all.

"Malcolm, you remember when Marise Mack went to India?" Malcolm hooted and slapped his thigh. "Marise was a colleague at eFrères, where I worked in New York," Amanda explained to Clancy and Jonny. "She went to India to find herself and somewhere along the line she did this ceremony with a bunch of other women. It involved blessings and being immersed in water up to their necks and having their chakras looked at. Anyway, whatever happened to her chakras, there was something terrible in the water and she came home with the most god-awful infection and couldn't get rid of it for months. I just borrowed the story."

"Brilliant." Malcolm hugged her. "It'll be all around the alternative mob by tomorrow afternoon and you'll never get a massage or a Tarot reading in this town. But it does mean you won't be bothered by the Joneses' offers of threesomes. Fantastic."

“I think she’s got me off the hook too,” said Clancy and she too hugged Amanda. “Unfortunately we’ve been yakking so long, we’ve missed our song. Let’s go get a drink.”

## TWELVE

“Where have *you* been this early on a Monday morning?” Malcolm’s hair resembled Kramer’s even more than usual. He obviously hadn’t looked in a mirror since getting out of bed. His chin glittered with blond stubble and his eyes were sleepy but quickly became alert as he looked Amanda over.

She grinned at him and made her way to the kitchen sink to wash her hands and sluice her hot face with cold water. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” She stuck her tongue out at him and leaned against the counter, water dripping down her T-shirt. “If you’d been up earlier you wouldn’t have to ask.”

Across the table, from behind the morning newspaper, Clancy snorted. “And if you’d been home on Sunday instead of disappearing with Jonny Sparrow after the party you would also know, brother dear.”

Malcolm spluttered and a flush rose from his chin to his eyebrows as he looked from Amanda to Clancy and saw no mercy in either face. He took a long slurp from a steaming mug of coffee and finally a huge smile cracked his face.

“Okay, so now you’re ganging up on me and it’s not fair.”

“Well neither is a black cat’s butt Mr. Smartypants. So how was it?” Amanda poured herself a mug of coffee and sat next to him, reaching for the toast rack and butter dish. Clancy folded the newspaper, set it down and leaned forward, elbows on the table, propping her chin on her fists.

“Yes, spill it bro, is he as hot as he looks?”

“Clancy!” He looked at the two women and saw the determined set of their smirks and sighed. “Okay, okay, Jonny Sparrow is hot. Very hot and,” he held his hand over his face to block out the eyes that bored into him. “And I think I’m in love.”

In unison Clancy and Amanda let out piercing shrieks and from under the table Jessie leapt to her feet yelping and howling as she ran around the kitchen, tail waving joyously as she looked for the source of excitement. Then she skittered into the table



leg and coffee splashed from mugs and the toast rack spat its bread slices all over the table.

“Jee-zus,” bellowed Malcolm, exasperated. “Now look what you’ve done, you two. Jess! Shut up! Enough!” The Labrador leapt up and licked his cheek and Malcolm batted her away, “Jess—no! Enough! Stop!” She leapt again and slurped Malcolm’s ear.

Clancy clapped her hands twice and said sharply, “Jess! On your bed, now!” The dog instantly stopped leaping about and retired to the trundle bed at the far end of the room, grumbling and whining but grinning at Clancy, pink tongue lolling and button-black eyes shining. Although her outstretched arm and finger pointed implacably towards the bed, Clancy smiled back at the dog, the warmth in her eyes making Amanda shiver and smile.

Malcolm sighed gustily and chomped on a corner of toast. “Alpha bitch,” he remarked companionably and turned his attention back to Amanda. “So, okay, where’ve you been?”

“Cheese making.” Amanda spoke to Malcolm but her eyes were on Clancy who had gone back to the newspaper.

“Cheese making! Are you serious? *You?*” Malcolm goggled at Amanda, but before she could think of a retort the newspaper rustled.

“Probably more useful than knowing all there is to know about derivatives or the sub-prime mortgage collapse,” Clancy interjected from behind the broadsheet. She lowered the paper once again and her twinkling eyes belied the sarcasm of the remark.

Amanda stuck her chin out and glared at Malcolm, “I was talking to Renee at the party and she offered to show me the ropes in the dairy and we got on to cheese making. She’s going to teach me.”

“You’re pulling my leg! *You?*”

“Yes, me,” Amanda snapped at him. Irritation was beginning to scratch away at her hitherto happy morning and she glowered at him. “I can do a bit more than drive a calculator you know. I think we might have something that we could develop for the town.”

Malcolm snorted and looked at Clancy for back up, but Clancy was watching Amanda’s animated face and instead came to her rescue.

“She’s an expert with poultry too, Mal. Bet you didn’t know that. She’s a real chicken whisperer. And by the way, will you wipe down the table, the coffee spill won’t disappear without your assistance.”

Malcolm gaped at his sister and then at Amanda. “Now you’re pulling both legs!”

Amanda banged her coffee mug down on the table and glared at him. “Will you quit saying that? I had a life before Wall Street you know. And I aim to have a life *after* Wall Street.” She got up and went to the sink, rinsed out a blue cloth and cleaned off the table before throwing the cloth at Malcolm. He caught it and lobbed it over her head back into the sink and looked nonplussed for a moment.

“*After* Wall Street? Nah, you’ll be back playing queen of the heap by this time next year.” His tone was reassuring but Amanda found it grated on her already irritated ears.

“You’re wrong,” she said sharply, returning to her chair. “Whatever’s happening isn’t going to be over any time soon. You should have read Clancy’s book.” She carefully avoided looking at the author whose sharp intake of breath was followed by her carefully folding the paper and laying it on the table.

“She’s right,” Clancy said to her brother. “Not necessarily about reading the book.” She caught Amanda’s eye and grinned. “Although I’m flattered. I’d like to know what you think when we have some time.”

Amanda tried to stop the flush rising up her throat, but it reached her cheeks and the heat was only increased by the maddening twinkle in Clancy’s eyes. “There’s not much I could tell you,” she muttered. “I just wish more people on the Street had read it before they made all this mess.”

Clancy’s eyebrows rose and she shook her head, “They wouldn’t have listened. That’s the point in a way. Nobody ever does.” She closed her eyes and stretched her arms above her head and Amanda’s eyes were drawn immediately to the bare midriff revealed by the lifting T-shirt; the abdominals were clearly defined and tanned to a peachy gold. Amanda knew how taut they would be beneath her fingers and she shivered. Clancy opened her eyes and stared straight at Amanda. “It would be good to talk about it though,” she said, smiling. “Maybe we can figure out what’s going to happen next.”

Amanda could see no teasing or scorn in the gray eyes, but did wonder at the possibility of a double meaning and she nodded. “I’d like that,” she said softly, and then quickly added, “Personally I think there are going to be a lot of people doing what I’m doing.”

Clancy's eyebrows rose. "Getting the hell out of Wall Street and learning how to make cheese?"

Amanda laughed. "I hope not everyone has that idea, but yes—I think a lot of people are going to be looking for something new and different and better." She stared into Clancy's eyes and Clancy held her gaze as the words hung between them. Malcolm looked back and forth from his sister to his friend; finally he pushed back from the table and stood up.

"I think I'll go make a few phone calls and I'll check back later to make sure the kitchen hasn't spontaneously combusted," he remarked archly, and was gone before either woman could respond. But the twanging, crackling connection between them was broken and Amanda felt both relief and regret. She wanted to keep talking and said the first thing that popped into her head.

"When I couldn't sleep at two o'clock this morning I checked the news on my iPhone and it's even worse than yesterday."

"Catastrophic, I'd call it," said Clancy sharply. A frown criss-crossed her brow and her jaw perceptibly tightened as her lips clamped down on what Amanda saw was a panicky intake of breath.

"Let's talk," Amanda said, instinctively reaching across the table. Clancy drew back but stopped short of what her face hinted were going to be hostile words. She looked at Amanda for a long considering moment then shook her head.

Amanda resolved to persist. "Have you talked to the bank manager?"

Clancy's laugh was not humorous. "The same little prick who was so keen to lend is now telling us credit is tight and without regular income, of course, a lot of people don't qualify any more. The fact that we make prize-winning cheeses here and heaven knows what else and just need some extra capital to get it out there doesn't count."

Amanda was silent. Modern retail banking practice was not something she could make an argument for. "So, between you and the Martins—with the two farms, the herd and the reputation of Darren's cheeses, you still can't raise money?" Clancy shook her head and picked at a chip in the rim of her mug.

"It sucks," Amanda said eventually. "But there must be something we can do. Two Moon Bay is a beautiful place. People love coming here: they adore it. They should be spending money here. We need to get that message out to people who don't adore it yet."

Clancy pushed her fingers through her hair. “How? A multi-million dollar TV campaign?”

Amanda held up her hands in a gesture of submission. “I’m sorry, I’m sure you’ve thought of all this. I really don’t mean to tell you how to suck eggs, I’m just thinking aloud, I guess.”

Clancy shrugged and sighed. “Go right ahead. I’ll listen to anything just so long as it doesn’t cost money because we don’t have that.” She stood up and stretched. “Which reminds me, I’m going in to town, to the fish co-op and a couple of errands, want to come?”

Amanda nodded, got to her feet and began gathering the breakfast debris onto a tray.

Amanda and Clancy walked along Two Moon Bay’s main street towards the jetty and the fish co-op in something approaching a companionable silence, glancing at each other from time to time and smiling self-consciously when those glances collided. There was yet another a shift in the air between them and it made Amanda feel nervous and childishly excited. They reached the rambling tin shed where a faded painted sign across the eaves announced the Two Moon Bay Fishing Cooperative, and another roughly scrawled paper sign stuck to the glass pane of the door told them it would not be open for business for another half hour. They made their way between stacks of plastic seafood crates and broken lobster pots to the seawall and sat in the shade of an old and massively drooping pepper tree. The silence between them was good-natured and Amanda enjoyed the sounds of the morning and watching a mob of pelicans sunning themselves at the edge of the water. Finally Clancy spoke.

“So, you never have told me how in hell a nice girl from Hokey-Pokey, New England ended up on Wall Street?”

Amanda hunched her shoulders and shoved her hands in the pockets of her long shorts. Clancy’s gray eyes were twinkling, there was no detectable hostility, but Amanda reminded herself that you could never tell with Clancy. She glanced again at her companion and decided a bear trap wasn’t being dug for her to fall into.

“Okay, Wall Street.” She leaned back and turned her closed eyes to the sun as she ordered her thoughts and fought to slow her heartbeat. It seemed to go into overdrive whenever she looked at Clancy now and it was hard to think. “I was really smart at school, graduated top of my year by a country mile got Ivy League offers

coming out of my ears and decided to go with the way of the future.” She sighed and grinned. “Eleanor wanted me to do humanities and be an academic—that’s what she would have liked for herself, I think. She didn’t pressure me though and my grandmother was so pleased she financed the whole deal and always included me when she visited her stockbroker. I liked all that. She and Mom spent a lot of their lives at loggerheads. As you know Mom’s a card-carrying Democrat and Grandmother was a Republican from way back—really big on Reagan.”

Clancy peered at her as if she were a strange specimen from another planet. “And you? Have you *really* never voted?”

Amanda shifted her shoulders awkwardly under the scrutiny and said, reluctantly, “That’s right, I’ve never voted. I couldn’t see the point, but I believe in free enterprise and the American way, if that’s what you mean.”

Clancy said nothing and stared out to the end of the jetty where three men were working on a fishing boat. The *plock plock plock* of a hammer on rust was the only sound to disturb the morning and Amanda watched her as Clancy chewed her lip. A muscle in the golden freckled jaw twitched and she recognized the tension of displeasure in Clancy’s face. She finally turned to Amanda and her smile was quizzical. “We have an awful lot of arguments to get through if we’re going to fulfil Malcolm’s dream and be friends,” she said.

Amanda found herself staring at Clancy’s mouth and the recollection of how those lips felt on her own caused a race of blood to her crotch. She shifted awkwardly, crossing and uncrossing her legs, trying to dispel the sensation of swelling heat that throbbed beneath her shorts. She wanted desperately to say something casual that wouldn’t give away the treachery of her body.

“I’ll look forward to that, I think,” she said eventually, pleased that her tone was even and calm. “What will be your first argument?”

Clancy grinned and turned back to face Amanda. “Voting. I can’t believe that an intelligent, responsible woman wouldn’t think it her basic duty as a citizen to vote.”

“You guys have compulsory voting, right?” Amanda tried to keep her voice neutral, although she felt belligerent. Clancy merely nodded in response. “So don’t you mind the government telling you what to do?” Amanda asked.

“The government doesn’t tell me what to do,” Clancy said sharply. “What I do when I get in the booth is my business. I can vote, I can write rude words on the ballot paper, or nothing at all, but I believe it’s my civic duty to turn out and be counted. *And*

it's a mark of respect for all the millions of people in other countries who either can't vote or who died fighting for the right to."

Amanda looked down at her Nikes and across at Clancy's battered canvas tennis shoes as she considered how out of step they were on most things. But she couldn't think of an adequate argument that would counter Clancy's words. "That's a good point," she finally said. "I never thought of that."

Clancy grinned and squeezed Amanda's knee. "Well that was easy. What's next?"

What's next was that Amanda's knee threatened to turn to jelly at Clancy's touch and she pulled away, laughing but disconcerted as she saw from the sparkling gray eyes that Clancy obviously didn't have the same reaction to the connection. Even worse, the latest exchange of hostilities made Amanda realize she was ever more unsure of how to behave around Clancy—a woman who was older and with all the mystery and maturity that Amanda recognized and didn't have.

Jonny Sparrow's bistro was jumping when Amanda and Clancy walked through its door just after eleven o'clock. Most of Two Moon Bay seemed to be there and Amanda was heartened to be greeted by friendly faces familiar from the party, even though she had difficulty putting names to most faces. Then she felt, rather than saw Jane. The angry woman's dark eyes ripped daggers up and down Amanda's bare legs. She shivered and moved away quickly to the counter, wondering momentarily whether she was unsuitably dressed for the café, but a glance around the room told her she looked pretty much like most of the women and most of the men: long shorts, short shorts, baggy shorts, old shorts or fashionable shorts were obviously the morning coffee dress code. She waited while Clancy negotiated her way through what looked like a tense and minimal exchange with Jane and the inevitable delays of friends and acquaintances; then she saw a hand waving madly in her direction from the back of the room.

As Clancy finally reached the counter Amanda touched her arm, "I've just spotted Renee. I'll catch you before you leave, okay?" Clancy frowned but nodded and waved to Renee.

"Can I get you a coffee? Cake?"

Amanda looked around the busy café and caught another fistful of daggers from Jane. "Wouldn't you like to hang out with your...friends?"

Clancy's frown deepened into a definite crease between her brows. "Renee is my friend, but if you'd rather not..." Something like a scowl darkened her eyes as she stared at Amanda who shook her head quickly.

"No no, I'm sorry—please, let's both go over. Let me get you a coffee—and cake and, well, and whatever else you might like. Icecream? Gelato?..."

Clancy's expression softened and she grinned. "Settle, Petal, it's fine. You go and sit with Renee and I'll get us some coffee. Would you like to share a slice of Jonny's lemon cheesecake? It's a mortal sin, but he'll absolve us."

Amanda's bubbling laugh attracted the attention of a number of women in the café, including Jane and Renee. One glowered at Amanda with poison in her stare and the other fondly watched the two so dissimilar blonde heads almost touch as they shared their joke.

And now Amanda was driving toward Sydney, away from the laughter and simple pleasures that she had begun to savor and look forward to in her newfound friendship with Clancy. It was still a puzzle, still teetered back and forth between affection and hostility but now, having inadvertently listened to the heart-to-heart between brother and sister the night before, she felt more able to understand Clancy's push-pull attitude towards her. And although it felt perilous, she also knew she wanted it enough to navigate her way through the rocks and reefs of Clancy's enigmatic responses.

She had been in her room, researching and compiling the documentation for her new scheme for Two Moon Bay's cooperative future when she decided it was time for a glass of wine and a handful of the little cheesy things that Clancy threw together and into the oven a couple of times a week. She walked barefoot through the quiet and near-dark house to an empty kitchen, poured a glass of chilled white wine and rustled three of the crunchy little savories from their jar.

Early evening on the front veranda was the Darling siblings' favorite time and place for chewing over the day's gossip and events. The birds were already in bed and the only sounds were the sighing of the sea breeze in the nearby stand of melaleucas and the distant boom of breakers. It was a good time to meet up and enjoy one another's company and Amanda had quickly come to look forward to it. But she stopped before setting foot on the veranda as she heard Clancy's voice raised and

cutting through the deepening dusk. Despite her misgivings about eavesdropping, Amanda remained in the shadow of the open doorway.

“I don’t think you should let Amanda drive that bloody highway and anyway, Margo Durham is a troll. Why is she going up there?” Clancy’s voice was dark with anger and something else that Amanda couldn’t identify. Malcolm’s response was gentle and measured.

“Is this about Amanda or about Lily?”

The silence that followed his question was profound and Amanda was convinced they would hear her breathing or thumping heart if it went on much longer.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Clancy eventually said, but her voice was softer and sadder as she went on, “If we hadn’t been having an affair...”

Amanda saw Malcolm hold up his hand, a silhouette in the deep twilight. “Stop it right there my sweetheart,” he said to his sister. “It wasn’t just an affair. You and Lily were *lovers*. You gave her probably the best days of her life, I’d guess. The kids adored you. I remember very well—I watched you all together and it was the loveliest thing. I promise you, they left here happy; they knew they would see you again soon. End of story. You cannot go on like this, Lily would be so, so sad for you. Think about that.”

“I don’t understand why this bothers me so much,” Clancy moaned. “You know, I’m doing fine, then she comes along and all this...” Amanda watched her with a cold lump in her stomach as Clancy gestured weakly at nothing in particular. “This—this shit gets stirred up. I hate it!”

Amanda still watched, aghast, as Malcolm gathered his sister into his arms and rocked her and stroked her bowed head. He muttered something into Clancy’s ear that Amanda couldn’t catch except for “care” and she had had enough. She silently backed away down the passageway, praying that she could do it without bumping into anything and alerting them to her presence. Finally she deemed she was far enough away to turn and tiptoe to her room, where she stayed in painful anticipation until Malcolm called her to the table for one of the more strained dinners the three had yet shared.

Amanda glanced across at Malcolm as he pretended to sleep and jabbed him in the ribs with one finger. He yelped and sat up straighter. “Where are we? Are we there yet?”



“You know exactly where we are, you haven’t been asleep since that last big truck blammed at me.”

Malcolm chortled, “Well you did cut it a bit fine, Danica Patrick, even by my standards.”

“Oh sure. The bastard speeded up.”

“True. You handled it very well, though.”

“Thanks, but I think you should drive into the city—only because it’ll be easier than directing me all the time. I’m pulling in at the next service area and I’m going to have a pee.”

“Good thinking. Glad of the information.”

“You can give me some, then. Why was Clancy so upset last night and who is Lily?”

Malcolm sighed a deep and wrenching sigh and after a long pause said, “I didn’t realize you’d heard.”

“Not everything and I couldn’t help it. Sorry—I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I did hear you talking about Lily. Is this *another* girlfriend?”

“Basically, Clancy has stayed away from any kind of involvement and sort of floated along pretty casually since this bloody dreadful thing happened like...” He frowned as he thought back, “...nearly twenty years ago now. She’s never really got over it and she certainly hasn’t forgiven herself for it. Although it wasn’t her fault.” Malcolm paused while he changed lanes and maneuvered across to a right turn off the freeway.

Amanda suddenly felt nervous about what Malcolm might reveal. “You don’t have to tell me any of this if it’s private for her...”

Malcolm shook his head. “You need to know. It explains a lot and anyway, it doesn’t do Clancy any good to keep it bottled up and secret. She wasn’t much more than twenty when she met Lily. And Lily was ten or twelve years older and had two kids. She was a sweetie but she was married to this prick of a property developer, guy called Dario Markus. He’s even bigger in business now and an even bigger prick. He likes to build very tall towers. I like to think he’s over-compensating. Back then Clancy was visiting aunty and uncle when Markus was looking for land down to turn into a golf resort.”

“God, not the farm?”

“Yep. But they weren’t interested, despite the money—and he kept upping the offer! Anyway, Clancy and Lily got friendly and the kids loved her. They started meeting up back in Sydney and—well—one thing led to another. Darius wasn’t around much and he thought Clancy was just a harmless little pal for his trophy wife and trophy kids.”

“Clancy...*harmless little pal!* Was he *blind?*” Amanda shut her mouth firmly, realizing how much she had just revealed. Malcolm proved he knew it too by chuckling and glancing at her before returning his gaze to the road.

“Yes. Well. He knows a lot about making money but not a lot about women.” Malcolm slid the car into a vacant space at the side of the road and stopped. “Now look, this is Margo’s street and she’s expecting you, yes?”

Amanda looked at the tree-lined avenue and the apartment buildings on each side. “Yeah, well she said to give her a call when we arrived and she’d be home, but Malcolm – you have to finish this story. You can’t leave me in the middle of it.”

“Okay, the short story is that Lily fell for Clancy and vice versa. It wasn’t easy, I don’t think, because it was a big secret. Back then Clancy was all youthful sweetness, believe it or not, and she and Lily were just great together.” He sighed and rubbed his eyes sadly. Amanda took his hand and squeezed it, trying to convey the sympathy she instantly felt for him and his difficult sister.

“It went on for a year or thereabouts and Lily managed to swing it with Dario that she and the boys would go down the coast for the summer holidays while he was tied up with some big wheeler-deal. What he didn’t know was that Clancy was going to join them. Unfortunately...” He sighed and shook his head and shivered. “No, unfortunate isn’t the right word. Tragically is more like it. Tragically, one of the kids said something on the phone to him—totally innocently—about Mummy and Clancy’s bed being great for cuddles in the morning.”

“Oh no.” Amanda put her hand over her mouth and gripped her thumb tight between her teeth as a wave of nausea soured her throat. “Oh no. They *must* have realized they would be discovered some time, surely?”

Malcolm shrugged and sighed. “Don’t know, Clancy was very young, Lily was naïve and probably just desperately hopeful that it would all pan out. I have no idea what they were thinking, if anything.”

The two watched a young man in pale blue shorts and a tight pale blue T-shirt flounce down the street with a bunch of fluffy dogs on leashes leaping gaily around him.

“So what happened? It’s not going to end happily, is it?”

“Horribly, actually,” Malcolm said, and scraped his knuckles hard across his stubbly chin. “Really horribly. Dario worked it out instantly and he *ordered* Lily back to Sydney right away. And he could do that. He was rich and a thug. Lily had no chance against him. Clancy wanted to drive up with her but Lily said no, she’d be fine. What we discovered later was that an hour after leaving Clancy at the shack, one of those really big trucks crashed through the center barrier on the highway and took out Lily’s Mercedes. She and the kids were killed instantly and, of course, Dario refused to allow Clancy to go to their funerals.”

“Jesus,” Amanda stared straight ahead but saw nothing. “Jesus,” she repeated quietly. “How totally, totally awful.” She let out a long, slow breath and shook her head and stretched out her hand to cover Malcolm’s. “Can I ask you why you’ve never said anything?”

Malcolm squeezed her hand and held it. “Because she would have hated me to talk about it, and it’s her story to tell you, and I wanted you to get to know her without that hanging over you both. She hates being pitied and she won’t do sympathy, empathy—anything. She went off the rails for a bit. Lots of drinking, some drugs, but then she got herself back together when she started at the *Herald* and after that it was just work, work, work. And dumb affairs like Jane, who’s a pain in the arse and won’t take ‘it’s over’ for an answer.”

Amanda let out a long, slow sigh and closed her eyes. “She makes more sense now—to me, I mean.” She reached for Malcolm’s hand again and patted it. “Thanks for telling me.”

Malcolm squeezed her hand. “Yeah, well, I’m not sure what use it is. If you let on I’ve told you she’ll murder the both of us.”

Amanda grinned, “I won’t let on, I promise. But...” She scrabbled in her tote bag for the phone and tapped the keys. Malcolm’s eyebrows did a question mark as she listened to the ring-tones and she grinned at him.

At the other end Clancy picked up and said suspiciously, “Hello, yes?”

Amanda swallowed involuntarily as her heart did a double beat. “Hi Clancy, it’s Amanda. I, um, I just wanted to let you know we’re in Sydney safe and sound even though Malcolm let me drive most of the way.”

The connection hummed and crackled for a moment then Amanda heard a long exhale of breath before Clancy said, “That’s great,” her voice smiling. “Thanks for letting me know. I...” She coughed. “Sorry, I appreciate the call. That road is...well, I’m glad you’re both okay.”

“Yeah, Malcolm was very good, very relaxed. He even pretended to be asleep.” Amanda heard Malcolm’s snort before he reached over and pinched her leg. She slapped his hand away. “We’ll all see you tomorrow evening.”

“Lovely.”

Amanda waited, wondering whether Clancy had anything else to say, but the silence hummed.

“Well, I better let you go,” she said finally.

“Okay, great. Have a good time – don’t ...” Clancy cleared her throat. “Don’t feel you have to rush back. It’ll be lovely having Eleanor here if you want to, um, stay in Sydney for a couple of days...”

Amanda looked at the phone, perplexed, and shook her head, but as a sneaky hot coal of irritation burned her gut she remembered that Clancy couldn’t see her.

“Are you kidding?” Was Clancy trying to get her to stay away? Push her at Margo? *Fuck that*, she thought. “As if! Like I said, we’ll be back in Two Moon tomorrow—late afternoon.”

“Fine, that’s good,” Did Clancy sound even a tiny bit relieved, maybe?

“Okay, well, I better go...” Amanda was reluctant to hang up but could think of nothing else to say.

“Sure, fine. Well, see you tomorrow then...”

Amanda punched in another number.

“Margo Durham.” The voice was sharp and clear.

“Oh hi, Margo, it’s Amanda—I’m downstairs.”

“See you tomorrow kiddo,” Malcolm said. “Have a good time. Margo throws quite a party, I believe.”

Amanda stood in the Art Deco portico of Margo’s building and made a deliberate effort to drop her shoulders as she took three long, deep, slow breaths. She felt shaky and uncertain—but uncertain of what, she wasn’t quite sure. Nine floors

above, Margo Durham was waiting to entertain her. Margo was attractive, rich and a woman whose life and work were familiar and comfortable; she inhabited a world Amanda knew intimately. Two hours south was Clancy Darling, exactly the opposite. She despised everything Amanda represented. She was also the moodiest and most annoying person imaginable and she was easily the sexiest woman Amanda had ever met. Why did either of them make her uneasy? She sighed again. It was getting to be a habit, it reminded her of Renee's placid dairy cows.

Amanda straightened her T-shirt and braced her finger to press "3" but hesitated and asked herself why she was here. To her surprise, the answers came quickly. *I want to meet up with Margo; I want to enjoy the party; I want to meet her friends. And I want to get away from Clancy and be with people I understand and who understand me – just for a change.*

The cool foyer smelled pleasantly of beeswax and lavender; the low sheen on the parquet flooring suggested its source. A cork-faced noticeboard, a large wall mirror and a double row of mahogany mailboxes were the area's only furnishings. From the lofty ceiling was suspended a Deco milk glass and chrome light fitting. It was elegant and understated; not ostentatious. Amanda wished she had worn something a little more structured than her T-shirt and cargo pants, but it was too late for that. She stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the tenth floor. As it lurched and began to rise, so did her heartbeat. With Margo waiting for her in the penthouse, she consciously set about clearing all thoughts of Clancy from her mind.

The elevator bounced once and stopped. The doors hissed open and Margo was standing in the entryway of her apartment, a wide grin lighting her handsome face.

Amanda shouldered her bag and took in the glinting eyes as they deliberately ranged up and down her body with clear appreciation. She decided right then to take whatever might be on offer.

Margo reached out and took Amanda's weekender from her. "Welcome," she said softly and leaned forward to lay a soft kiss on Amanda's lips. The elevator doors began to shuffle and Margo quickly put out her free hand to hold them open. They laughed as the tangle of arms, doors and bags forced Amanda into a longer kiss than was strictly the norm for a friendly greeting.

"I think you better come in," Margo said lightly. "I don't want you disappearing downstairs again." She stepped back and Amanda followed her, enjoying the warm tingle that remained on her mouth.

“Thanks,” she said as Margo ushered her through a pair of solid white doors; the only ones in the foyer. “This is really lovely of you to invite me. I appreciate it.”

“All my pleasure.” Margo’s voice was smoothly low as she guided Margo into the penthouse. She stood back with obvious satisfaction as Amanda gasped at what lay before her. The natural light of the midday sun filled a vast, glass-walled living area. The brightness was emphasised by the bare expanse of a gleaming white marble floor whose expanse was interrupted by a pale gray pattern that suggested a palimpsest of ancient Greek or Mayan geometric patterns. It was subtly beautiful and made the laying of any kind of rug superfluous. It also highlighted pieces of furniture that were placed like prize contemporary sculptures: a long block of white leather and chrome couch stood opposite two black leather Barcelona chairs. Amanda divined they were not reproductions and neither was the Wassily chair that stood apart beside an equally refined chrome and ebony floor lamp. An ivory glass dome shade hung over the chair in a graceful curve that was the antithesis of its stark angles. Beside the chair was a pile of magazines and large format coffee table books, the only slightly untidy feature of the room and the only reading matter too, Amanda noticed.

Beyond the tinted glass that stood in place of walls was an equally spacious patio where the rippling green water of a lap pool gleamed. The perfect geometry was broken by tall, spiky dark green leaves that grew in profusion out of slatted gray timber planter boxes. The planters perfectly matched the slatted timber surface of the deck and the effect was of yet more studied elegance and luxury. Beyond the patio the unmistakable white curves of the Opera House gleamed above the trees and roofs while the raucous blue sky and deeper cobalt harbor waters seemed almost an affront to the carefully modulated and designed living space.

“What do you think?”

Amanda turned and saw that Margo was watching her. Her expression was reminiscent of Thomas Cat after a successful mouse catch. Amanda dismissed the silly image and smiled, lifting her arms wide in wordless appreciation. Finally she came up with “It’s gorgeous. Wow.”

Margo seemed satisfied and moved away towards an open archway. “Let’s get you settled in the guest suite, then we can go out to lunch. I’ve organized a little group I want you to meet. I think you’ll like them.”

Amanda followed her through a black-and-white architectural photograph-lined vestibule. Leading off it was a spacious bedroom whose picture window almost

shared the outlook of the living area, but was fronted by apartment building roofs that tumbled down to the bay. A queen-size bed was fashionably draped in an oversize white abstract embroidered quilt. Six taupe-coloured pillows in three sizes stood to attention at its head. A wall of floor-to-ceiling mirrors concealed the room's storage space. Margo pressed one mirror and the door popped open but not before Amanda caught sight of herself: messily casual and colorful in pink stripes and khaki; a rumpled contrast to the glamorous penthouse. She grinned, abashed at her own reflection, and turned away to save herself from further embarrassment.

"I'll leave you to get comfortable, then come out to the patio and we'll have a drink before lunch."

Margo lightly squeezed her shoulder and left the room, but not before another long look that began at Amanda's toes and didn't stop until it reached the top of her head and was avid enough to make her shiver. As the door clunked discreetly behind her Amanda looked around and felt twin flutters of excitement and uncertainty. *Margo is sexy, good looking, extremely rich and speaks my language. She has a million dollar view and the luxury is fabulous.* And, she also acknowledged to herself, she was flattered and drawn by the attention and Margo's deliberately unconcealed attraction to her. But she knew she felt ambiguous about it too and couldn't put her finger on why. Except, of course, she could but did not want to admit it. Even though she did not want Clancy to be there and tried to ignore her, lurking constantly at the back of her mind was Malcolm's sister with her perplexing gray eyes and beautiful smile and infuriatingly contrary attitude. And, Amanda reminded herself, her rocky finances and down-at-the-heel farm and absolutely pigheaded and superior outlook on everything. It was an impossible combination.

Amanda unzipped her overnighter and began to unpack. She shook out her cream Armani jacket and pants and hung them in the nearest section of the wall of closet space. She looked at the jacket with squinting, critical eyes and wondered whether she ought to go shopping for something new and special. At that moment Two Moon Bay and the worried, strained faces of its citizens—her new friends—popped unbidden into her mind. And she thought about her idea and the plan she and Renee had talked about earlier in the week as they stood in the milking shed waiting for the girls to be relieved of their daily milk quota.

"Renee I think we should look at making Two Moon Bay sort of self sufficient and cooperative." Amanda had blurted the ridiculous idea and waited to see what the

older woman would say, whether she would just laugh. But Renee simply raised her eyebrows and looked mildly interested and just slightly surprised. Amanda decided to go on before she lost her nerve.

“Thing is, the fishing boats are rotting on the beach, the village is in the doldrums. The shops are struggling, and Jonny’s café is the only business that’s got any life. Everyone is scared by this global financial meltdown, especially the banks. I think the government has got it right: Australia is going to be okay. We just have to believe we can float and we will.”

Renee grinned at her with discernible affection. “We? You an Aussie now?”

Amanda’s cheeks flushed and she shrugged.

Renee put her hand on Amanda’s arm and gave it a squeeze. “Don’t mind me, love, I’m teasing. And that was a mean thing to say. Sorry. You’re one of us, for sure.”

Amanda touched Renee’s hand in turn and felt the clear liking for her rough-tough friend.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about how we can get all the different parts of the town and the people together and make them work together.” She paused again and checked Renee’s face; she was listening, there wasn’t a hint of a smirk. Amanda went on, “Two Moon Bay ought to be able to attract paying customers like it used to. It’s pretty, it’s got a cute harbor, it’s got all the bones to make it a real visitor magnet. I’ve been talking to folks and they remember when you couldn’t move on weekends for tourists. And I know that’s got its downside—believe me, my mom could murder the visitors sometimes, but we need ’em!”

Renee snuffled on a snorting laugh. “You’ve got that right, but the highway bypasses us these days—which is a good thing, I wouldn’t want to go back to the way the main street used to be. Still, people drive by and don’t know what’s here. And when they’re hungry they stop at the fast food joints on the highway.”

Amanda nodded eagerly. “Exactly. But if we could get the right sort of people coming back—I was making a list of all the talents we got here. Artists coming out our ears, Jenny and Jeff Carlile do that fantastic weaving, Darren and Margie Scott say they’ve always wanted to run a gift shop and tea room. Stephen and Jonathan could really make a go of the bed and breakfast if they had more guests and they wouldn’t have to drive an hour to go to other jobs...” She stopped as Renee’s face broke into a huge grin and laughter tumbled out.

“What?” she asked defensively. “You’re laughing at me.”



Renee shook her head. “No, love, not a bit. I’m just loving your enthusiasm and how you’ve been thinking about all this. I suppose it takes a fresh set of eyes to see what’s happening.”

Amanda relaxed and shrugged. “Yeah, well maybe, but I think if we could find some investors—at a decent interest rate and with a long-term outlook on what they’d get out of it—we could help all the maybe’s and if only’s and perhaps and possibly’s to get off their asses and get going.”

Renee shook her head and her eyebrows did interesting things on her forehead. “Well I’ll be...” she murmured, her eyes peering deeply into Amanda’s, apparently in search of something. “You really mean it, don’t you? You’ve really thought this through.”

Amanda nodded. “Yep. I have. I’ve written it all up as a proposal for a co-op venture and I was wondering whether you’d present it to the next town meeting.”

This time Renee’s silence was prolonged enough to make Amanda uneasy all over again. Finally she pursed her lips and gave Amanda one of her scorching looks.

“Why haven’t you talked to Clancy about this?”

Amanda sighed and shook her head. “She thinks I’m an airhead. She wouldn’t take it seriously.”

“You are kidding aren’t you?”

Amanda shrugged. “Not really. She thinks I’m a ditz – mostly.”

Renee snorted. “Well, I’m going to agree with you if you really believe she thinks that,” she said firmly. “I’ve never heard such a load of old cobblers.”

Amanda frowned and grinned simultaneously. “Cobblers?”

Renee returned the grin, “Rubbish, nonsense, crap...er...hogwash, baloney.”

Amanda laughed. “But I really don’t think she has a very high opinion of me, Renee.”

Renee sighed. “It’s not what it looks like from where I’m sitting. You just have to understand her, that’s all. Clancy is a bit of an oyster, really.”

“An oyster?”

“Yep, all tough and jagged edges on the outside and bloody impossible to get her to open up, but when she does, she’s sweet and lovely and a delicious human being. You wait and see.”

Amanda considered this unexpected description and Renee patted her shoulder and gave it a squeeze, “You think about that, my girl. Meanwhile, these girls want their teats out of the machines. Let’s get to it, eh?”

And they had gone to it, working quietly and happily to release the cows from the milking equipment and return them to the early morning sunshine.

As Margo had promised, the lunch gathering was small and when she and Margo arrived at the restaurant Amanda had a chance to talk to each of the six women and two men already at the table. Margo seated her in so that Amanda’s outlook was the gleaming white sails of the Opera House and the contrasting glittering blue of Sydney Cove.

“Wow!” Amanda exclaimed happily. “No wonder this place is called Aria, it makes you want to sing! That building really is as gorgeous as everyone says!” A wave of friendly laughter rippled around the table and each person acknowledged with pride the architectural wonder beyond the floor to ceiling glass wall. Then Margo began introducing Amanda to the group. There were two corporate lawyers, three merchant bankers, three venture capitalists and an arbitrageur. Amanda was shocked as they each expressed interest in hearing about what Margo fondly called “Amanda’s weird concept of ethical investment.” Margo had clearly been networking energetically on her behalf since their phone call of a week ago. She looked sidelong at Margo who sensed it immediately. She turned to grin and wink at Amanda before going back to telling the woman on her right what a hot property their visitor was on Wall Street.

Amanda tipped her champagne flute sharply enough to empty almost half its contents down her throat as she mentally crossed her fingers on Margo’s creativity. And lunch continued in a blur of animated conversation and a series of large plates. On them were exquisite and flavorsome works of art that they all set about eating with varying degrees of interest and appetite. Even though it was difficult to concentrate on each of the guests, Amanda became aware that thanks to Margo she was possibly onto an opportunity that could change her life and those of the inhabitants of Two Moon Bay.

**closely**

The party to introduce Amanda to her circle of power dykes and gay tycoons was a happening one. When Amanda left her bedroom after a final reassuring glance in the full length mirrored wall and a last squirt of perfume, she could hear from the music and voices that the gathering was large and lively. The rooftop garden and pool was an exquisite setting for a cocktail party, or any kind of gathering, Amanda thought as she looked about. The vast patio was aglow with the light of dozens of tall white candles whose flames burned straight and steady in even taller, simple glass tubes that were grouped sculpturally here and there. The light and shadows cast over the guests softly played on an elegant gathering—mostly women in sharply tailored evening suits, their partners in designer gowns with cleavages to match. And men in equally sharp and glittering garb.

Amanda was astonished by the almost absurdly decadent vision that greeted her as she stepped out onto the penthouse patio. A spunky young woman in gleaming Doc Marten boots, glitter-sprayed gym muscles, a black leather bikini and a spiky flat top appeared in front of her carrying a tray laden with champagne flutes. Beside her another, identically dressed, carried a magnum bottle of Bollinger and a third presented a tray of exquisite canapés.

“A drink ma’am?” The trio chorused the question and clearly did not expect her to refuse or demand something else. Amanda obliged and also took a tiny canapé.

She sipped the chilled Bollinger and caught sight of Margo as she beckoned to her. She was talking to a group of women who were laughing at whatever she had just said. Amanda took a deep breath and moved across the patio, taking in the throng as fifty pairs of eyes swivelled to eye her up and down.

Amanda was profoundly grateful for her Armani. Nevertheless, she felt almost under-dressed, although the high-heeled, black patent peep-toe Louboutins showed off frosty pink, freshly painted and tended toenails and lifted her to a reassuring elevation just under six feet. She needed that height as she walked across the terrace, with every eye upon her and a lull in the laughter and small talk that not even a glamorous blonde pianist at a baby grand beside the pool could fill. The expressions on the faces around her were curious rather than friendly as they appraised the newcomer; some were frankly predatory and others—the women in the sleek gowns—were suspicious and cool.

To her surprise, Amanda had a sudden vision of sitting in the kitchen at Two Moon Bay, in shorts, T-shirt and bare feet, a bottle of beer on the table; and she wished

she were back there this very minute. Instead, she smiled calmly as Margo detached herself from the group of women and came to take her hand.

“Come and meet the gang,” Margo murmured. “You look spectacular, by the way.” She brushed her lips across Amanda’s cheek and then pressed her mouth to the back of Amanda’s hand in a way that seemed clearly to suggest that this particular woman was branded and claimed.

It was a successful party in more ways than one. Amanda’s own networking and persuasion skills meant that as the soiree wound up, Margo laid her hand on the forearms of carefully-selected guests who were asked to stay for an informal dinner and hear about an exciting new investment opportunity.

When the last of the B-list stragglers had been ushered out the door and the trio of leather-babe waitresses had changed into street clothes and departed, the A-listers began helping themselves to fresh drinks and settled beside the pool on large cream velvet cushions that had materialized from somewhere. The chef and his assistant appeared from the kitchen carrying a tray of glossy marinated pork ribs and a platter of seafood. These were laid upon the marble counter that ran the length of one wall of the patio. The chef opened up the polished steel lid of an oversize barbecue unit that was fitted into the counter.

Amanda watched them idly as she sat beside the pool. She stretched her legs and twiddled her toes, freed at last from the glamorous constraints of her shoes, and was interrupted by Margo, dropping onto the cushion beside her and whispering in her ear.

“Hey babe, I think you should make your pitch before this mob gets too pissed. We’ll eat and then you talk, yeah?” She kissed Amanda’s ear and Amanda shivered.

“That’ll be great. Are you sure this is okay?”

Margo chuckled into her neck, “Of course, this lot know there’s no such thing as a free lunch—and anyway, I think they’ll go for it. Sydney loves novelty.”

With the last of the dishes of gnawed-clean ribs and lobster shells cleared away, the chef’s assistant returned with platters heaped with shining black cherries, then the two men made their farewells and were gone. Margo stood up and clapped her hands to gain the attention of her cherry-nibbling friends.

“You know why you’re here. I’ve got a very juicy deal for you and you know when Margo says it’s a deal, it’s a deal. You’ve all met the gorgeous Amanda McIntyre...” The light applause and more ribald sounds of appreciation bounced

around the patio and Amanda stood up beside Margo and smiled, feeling slightly on edge and a little embarrassed.

“So I want you to settle back and listen. All the documentation you need will be available and in your inboxes by the time you get home. Any questions and Amanda will be available to help you. But I don’t anticipate anything but an over-subscription here, quite frankly, my darlings. This is the deal for you and I’m not even going to throw in the steak knives.”

Laughter tittered around the patio and Margo gave Amanda a proprietorial hug and kiss on her forehead before returning to sprawl on a long cushion by the pool.

Amanda moved to stand beside a tall white leather and chrome kitchen stool, her laptop at the ready and wired to a portable screen that Margo had pulled out of its casing and erected. “You’ll have to come another time,” she had whispered to Amanda, “We have great porn nights. It’s so much fun.” Amanda had shivered and thought for the first time in weeks of Natalie. She had not responded to Margo’s giggle because her mind went into a sudden panicked race around the possibility that Margo meant lesbian porn. What if she were familiar with Natalie’s oeuvre? What if she had seen Amanda’s apartment? Amanda told herself to stop being such a dope.

She ran her finger across the mousepad and woke up the sleeping laptop. Immediately the opening image of three days of concentrated and surreptitious work leapt onto the standing screen.

In blue type on a pale grey ground were the words “*Two Moon Bay – ethical equity*”.

Amanda casually stripped off her jacket and hung it on the stool back. Her lightly tanned and muscular shoulders and swelling breasts were revealed and the silk, string-strapped cami she wore showed as much as it covered. Around the gathering she could feel rather than hear the response, and she smiled at them all in turn as they lay on their cushions, faces strobed gently by the light reflecting from the pool. It reminded her of a scene from an impossibly decorous Fellini movie. She smiled again.

“First of all I’d like to thank Margo for press-ganging you all into sharing this lovely evening,” Amanda smiled as snorts, hoots and muffled “hurrahs” rose around the pool. “I don’t know how often you’re summoned by her mysterious invitations, but I know you must be intrigued at the promise of making money and feeling good about it, all at the same time. With the global financial system in freefall and worse, it’s an interesting prospect, I’m sure you’ll agree.”

Amanda paused, wondering exactly what in hell she thought she was doing. These people wouldn't give a starving panda a stick of bamboo, never mind invest in a fishing village because it would make *them* feel good. She glanced down at her laptop's screen and as she saw the first words she had written, she squared her shoulders and began to speak.

"It's a myth that the value of assets will just keep on rising," she told her audience of skeptical professionals. "This current global financial crisis is proof of that. Bear Stearns, Merrill's, Lehmann's—Elleron Frères, my bank—they all forgot the downs because the ups had been so up for so long. And quite frankly, we got greedy, careless and lost sight of what the system should be about. Pardon me for maybe sounding like Pollyanna, but they forgot about truth, belief, trust and faith."

She swiped and clicked the touchpad and an image flashed onto the screen of a group of happy, laughing children on the beach at Two Moon Bay.

"To work properly, healthily and into the future, the system must ultimately be about people—and kids, because kids are the future." She looked around at the faces peering up at her and wondered how many had children. "If kids' parents don't have jobs and businesses, if the infrastructure of a kid's community isn't solvent and sound, then there's no future."

She maneuvered the cursor and clicked the touchpad again and as Mozart wafted across the patio, a slideshow filled the screen with depictions of Two Moon Bay's businesses and people: in a warmly colorful, rolling wave the screen was filled with the wharf and its resident pelicans, the fishing boats, the cafes, shops and the arts and crafts gallery. The deli and its suppliers whose smiling faces proffered their wares for Amanda's camera. There was goat's cheese, sheep cheese, Renee held up a traditional aged Cheddar cheese. An elderly woman stood proudly in front of a table that groaned under jars of jam, pickles, and chutney; slabs of quince paste, craggy loaves of bread, honey and wine vinegars.

A craggy-faced fisherman and his two peach-freckled kids stood beside a slab on which lay glistening silver fish and gleaming heaps of crustaceans. Two smiling women held up glasses of luscious looking red wine and it was obvious to the audience that they were lesbians and that the three children standing in front of them holding up a handmade sign that read "Two Moon Bay Barolo – come and try it!" were theirs. In the final image, a group of townspeople and their children stood on the point overlooking the beach and the children carried another home-made, rainbow-

painted banner that read “Truth, belief, trust and faith—Two Moon Bay—a great place to live. A great place to visit.”

As the screen image morphed into a dramatic image of storm clouds, edged in silver, looming over the bay and its little boats, Amanda moved to stand in front of the screen.

“Two Moon Bay,” she said slowly and clearly, is also a great place for investment. I have proposals and plans for all levels and requirements. And, what I believe you will find most exciting—in the current climate of mistrust and what I’m going to call ‘banker hatred’,” she paused for the nervous titters to subside, “this is ethical investment. It’s hot, it’s happening and it’s proven to be one of the safest places to put your money. It’s a different shade of blue chip and believe me, it’s a gorgeous shade of blue!” She paused for more laughter. “So I’d like you all to think very hard about giving yourselves a unique Christmas gift that will keep on giving—to you and to the people you’ve just seen here.” She gestured to the screen. “I think this could be the beginning of something very big and very powerful. And you have the opportunity—now—to get in at the start. Thank you for listening and thanks for being here.” She dropped her head in a sketch of a bow and the applause was, she realized with pleasure and relief, real and sustained. And Margo sat in front of her wolf-whistling with ear-splitting expertise.

When Amanda awoke, Margo was nowhere to be found. Instead a note lay on the kitchen counter, written in thick, bright blue ink on a sheet of pale gray notepaper. “*Darling,*” Amanda read, “*You looked too peaceful to disturb. Speak to you later. Had to dash—board meetings. You were wonderful. A really great fuck! Margo.*”

Amanda groaned and pulled a pillow over her face. Then she sighed, got out of bed and shuffled to the bathroom. She turned the shower jets full on and cold, took a deep breath and stepped into the blast and shrieked as it woke her fully and without mercy. Ten minutes later she read the note once again and couldn’t decide whether to be affronted or amused. She was still in two minds when her phone rang. It was Malcolm.

“Hi party girl, how’s it hanging?”

Amanda rolled her eyes and was glad she had dressed before exploring the empty penthouse.

“I’m fine Malcolm and as far as I’m aware, nothing is hanging that shouldn’t be. How about you?”

“I’m at a loose end. Finished my chores and wondered whether I could pick you up earlier. No worries if...”

“Fine, absolutely fine,” Amanda interrupted him. “I can be ready in ten minutes.”

There was a significant silence from Malcolm then a sigh, which sounded like relief.

“Ah, so Margo hasn’t seduced you away from us, then?”

Amanda squeezed her eyes shut and was glad he couldn’t see her as her skin prickled with embarrassment.

“Of course not,” she said brusquely. “Don’t be silly. Will I see you downstairs in ten?”

“Whenever you’re ready. I have to confess I’m parked right outside.”

“If we can get people to agree to sign up to this—on both sides—I think we can get Two Moon Bay salvaged and working again,” Amanda finished triumphantly. Malcolm had listened with his mouth open as she had described the cocktail party and the after-party for would be investors.

“Good Grief! You mean the global financial crisis isn’t going to get us after all?” He exclaimed, slapping her knee joyously.

“Not if I can help it.” Amanda grinned. She was happy that he seemed so enthusiastic and even happier that he had yet to ask her what happened *after* the after-party. She had no desire to talk about it, think about it or share it with Malcolm. Not now, not yet, maybe not ever. She nervously felt for her shirt collar, to make sure it was standing upright and covering her neck. The gesture mortified her all over again. What was she going to say to Eleanor? What was she going to say to Clancy? She shuddered and closed her eyes and prayed that Malcolm would neither notice nor ask questions. At least not for a while.

“I checked Eleanor’s plane,” Malcolm interrupted her thoughts, and she was grateful. “It’s on schedule and we’ve got time to grab a coffee at the airport before buying the pink helium balloons, toy koala and anything else we can think of that will mortify her.”



Amanda grinned and slid her hand along the back of the seat to give his neck an affectionate squeeze. “That was real thoughtful Malc, old son,” she said. “Thanks.”

Malcolm glanced at her. “You okay?” He sounded anxious.

“I’m fine, just a bit tired.” Instantly she realized what she had said and hurried on, “Selling Two Moon Bay to Margo’s high-powered hotshots was pretty full on, and I’m out of practice, frankly.”

“I bet,” he said and Amanda couldn’t tell whether or not he had swallowed her explanation. Malcolm drove in silence and Amanda closed her eyes and laid her head back against the headrest. It was a bad idea, immediately her thoughts returned to the previous night.

*It was a stupid thing to do, but somehow not possible to avoid.* As Malcolm negotiated the twists and turns and narrow streets and traffic lights through Darlington and Paddington she tried to analyze why that was. It wasn’t that she had felt obligated because of Margo’s hospitality; nor was it gratitude for her action in setting up the evening so Amanda could sell her Two Moon Bay wares, but more her sheer bludgeoning—if charming—insistence. Finally, after the last of the would-be investors departed, Margo had brought out a bottle of very old, very pale cognac and two brandy balloons. They’d resumed their companionable positions on the white cushions and Margo splashed cognac into the glasses.

“This is the best cognac,” she’d said, as she held up her balloon to the candlelight and swirled the viscous tawny liquor around it. “It doesn’t come out for just anybody.”

Amanda had smiled and held up her own balloon to gently clink it against the other.

“I’m honored,” she said, looking at Margo across the top of the balloon as she inhaled the mellow fumes. “You’re spoiling me.” She sipped the cognac and inhaled around her tongue to fully appreciate the smooth flavor and well-mannered bite as it slid down her throat. “That’s awfully good,” she commented and set down the balloon on the pool’s edge.

“I feel like spoiling you,” Margo said after a moment. She opened her mouth and poured in the brandy in a greedy, lavish gesture. “Drink up, we should have more and really enjoy it.” Without waiting for Amanda to take another sip Margo picked up the bottle and sloshed more cognac into the glass.

“Wait up!” Amanda laughed, “I don’t have much of a head for this kind of thing.” Nevertheless, she lifted the glass to her lips and drank; it was delicious in a fiery, somehow thrilling way.

“Would you like something else to snack on?” Margo slipped off her shimmering sharkskin tuxedo and flung it onto a handy sun lounger.

“No, I feel like a Strasbourg goose, I’ve eaten so much,” Amanda said, and smiled. The bronze freckles that covered Margo’s bare shoulders and biceps mesmerized her. A heavy, flat gold chain hung around her neck and was settled, snakelike, into the curves and planes of her collarbones. A body-hugging, low-cut tank top shimmered silkily in the candlelight and emphasized small, taut breasts and erect nipples that made Amanda’s breathing hasten a notch. Margo lay back on the cushion to pour more cognac into her mouth and revealed a heavily-freckled sinewy, swan neck and a six-pack that Amanda immediately wanted to reach out and touch.

“Like what you see?”

Margo’s breathless voice came from deep in her chest. Amanda looked away but it was too late. She smiled and drank deeply, swirling the cognac around her mouth in sensuous kindled heat before she swallowed and felt it going all the way down.

“I do actually,” she said softly as she licked her lips. Her tongue seemed to have absorbed most of the fumes and all the alcohol as the smoothly lethal cognac seeped through her veins. Before long it reached the point in her brain where disinhibition was lying in wait. She felt it happen and also knew that the result was that she didn’t care.

“Let’s have a swim before bed,” Margo said and got to her feet. Amanda watched, hazily, as Margo unclipped the band and laid her Piaget on her tuxedo; the diamonds around its bezel glittered in the flickering candlelight and Amanda stared at them, thinking of fireflies in Connecticut.

“Come on,” Margo said softly. “It will be gorgeous.” She held out her hand and Amanda stared at it for a moment before allowing herself to be pulled to her feet.

“I haven’t brought anything for swimming,” she said and it sounded stupid, even to her cognac-affected ears.

“We don’t need anything for swimming.” Margo smiled at her and reached for the cami and pulled it loose from her pants. “Don’t tell me you’ve never gone skinny dipping.”

Amanda giggled and shook her head. "No, I can't tell you that," she said. "But I haven't done it in the middle of a city." She looked around at the nearby apartment buildings and realized that when they were in the pool they would be invisible to most. *Even so I don't think I care.*

"Well I'm going for a dip and I'm hoping you'll join me." Margo stripped off her tank top, dropped it on the lounge and unbuckled her belt and unzipped her pants. They dropped around her ankles and she stepped out of them, hooked them with her foot and threw them on the lounge. All the while her eyes penetrated the shadows and skewered Amanda.

Amanda couldn't help but look at Margo. The definition of the abdominal muscles was even more acute on her unclothed body and a black thong concealed nothing. She slipped her fingers beneath it and dragged it down revealing a triangle of pubic hair that was both trimmed and black. Her thighs were as sinewy and muscular as the rest of her body and the bronze freckles were not interrupted at any point by paler skin. Amanda ran her tongue over dry lips and drank down the last of the cognac in two convulsive swallows. As if hypnotized, she began to undress, but her fingers fumbled. Margo stepped forward and tugged the camisole over Amanda's head and grinned at Amanda as she unhitched her belt and pulled down the zipper in one slow, deliberate buzz of tiny, disconnecting teeth.

"Want to keep your undies on?" Margo whispered and the grin, a slash of rich, dried blood lipstick, widened and she cocked her head on one side.

"No, that seems rather silly," Amanda said, her voice sounding firm and clear even though her tongue felt thick.

Margo knelt at Amanda's feet and looked up into her eyes as she carefully drew down the cream pants and held them as Amanda stepped out. Amanda heard Margo's intake of breath as she frankly surveyed the body in front of her. She knew she was nowhere near as buff as Margo, but it was a good body nevertheless.

"You're even better than I thought," Margo said softly and tossed the pants on the lounge. "Let's get these off," she pulled on the boxers and in the time it took for Amanda to close and open her eyes they were on the lounge with the rest of the clothes. "Cute bra," Margo commented as she stood and reached around Amanda's back for the fastening. Amanda's nipples tightened immediately as the night air and a perhaps unintentional brush of Margo's hands woke them to their free state.

For a long moment they stood, close and not touching, the sounds of the Sydney night not as loud as their breathing, then Margo's grin crinkled the corners of her eyes again. "Last one in's a wuss," she said and before Amanda could move, she stepped onto the pool edge and dived in making a splash that barely dappled the surrounding water. Without hesitation Amanda followed her and hit water that was as soft and warm as sun-baked silk. The feel of it on her naked body was both unfamiliar and natural and she surfaced, flicked the hair and water from her eyes and took off along the pool in Margo's wake.

They swam several laps, virtually ignoring each other as they exercised cramped sinews and enjoyed the sensation of the water and the rhythmic pull of their strokes; it was a new and surprisingly seductive experience. Finally Amanda turned on her back and floated, gazing up into the night sky as her blood, warmed by the effort and the cognac, pumped through her body. Her breasts broke the surface of the water and her nipples responded immediately to the night air; she was aroused and thought back to the last time she'd had sex. It had been with Natalie and was a long time ago and—she remembered it suddenly and clearly—it had been perfunctory and unsatisfying. And the ridiculous drunken kisses with Clancy just didn't count, she reminded herself, even though recalling them made her clitoris throb and burn.

Her head bumped lightly against the side of the pool and she let her body sink to the vertical until her feet touched the bottom. She looked around for Margo and saw that she was at the other end of the pool. She stretched out her arms along the smooth, cool edge of the pool and laid her head back until she could see the stars once more. Her body floated up and out and she breathed deeply and slowly, enjoying the luxury and pleasure of the moment and the rare sensation of the cognac in her veins. Then she heard the rippling splash of swimming arms and her body was nominally rocked by the tiny swell of an approaching body. She looked up and watched Margo watching her as she breaststroked slowly along the pool, her shoulders barely breaking the perfect surface of the water.

Amanda knew, as Margo swam ever closer, dark eyes focused on hers, that if her hostess's long fingers were to reach out, she would not stop her. Margo glided up to Amanda and slid her hands along her naked body. They were at the shallow end and Margo stood, flicking the water from her hair and slicking it back as she looked down at Amanda. As her heartbeat increased its tempo Amanda watched Margo through her eyelashes; the candlelight illuminated the rivulets of water as they ran down her body

and fell from her chocolate-dark nipples. Without thinking about it, Amanda floated, arms anchoring her to the slick wet edge of the pool; cognac burning her blood. As if by reflex, her legs parted and Margo slipped back into the water to reach for her.

“Oh baby,” murmured Margo eagerly. “You ready for me or what?”

Amanda closed her eyes, feeling the cognac and the way it made her flesh pulse. She felt her limbs moving as if they had acquired lives of their own and each leg reached out and curled about Margo’s waist. Amanda heard the moan rise in her throat and drift in the night air as Margo’s long, strong fingers slid up her thighs and massaged the long muscles that kept Amanda’s legs clamped about her.

“I want to fuck you, babe,” Margo growled and her hand pushed higher and higher, compressing the flesh as she drove for Amanda’s crotch. “I want to fuck you now, hard.” She leaned over and her lips were frenzied and rough as she consumed Amanda’s mouth and drove her fist up and into the spasming liquid softness. Amanda gasped and reared up as her body revolted against the sudden assault. “That’s it, babe,” Margo panted, taking Amanda’s response for excitement rather than shock. She grabbed for her and dragged her forward through the balmy water until Amanda straddled her thighs and she pumped hard, thrusting upwards with the strength of her legs, her thumb massaging Amanda’s clitoris in time with her own shuddering, grunting arousal. It was painful and at the same time physically irresistible and as if from afar, Amanda watched and felt her own body buck and roll on the ride of Margo’s surging, muscular thrusts. Unable to resist and overwhelmed by Margo’s ardor, Amanda lay back in the water letting it envelop her. Again she glimpsed the stars in the velvety Sydney night sky and felt her body clasping inwardly and rhythmically on Margo’s fist as the drenching weight of the pool ebbed and flowed about them. The sensation was brutal and exciting.

With a guttural sob Margo lifted Amanda and fastened her lips to the exposed breast. She tormented Amanda’s nipple with her tongue and teeth, gorging on the swollen aureole until Amanda grabbed at her head, gasping with pleasure and pain, pulling at Margo’s hair. She shook herself free and switched her attention to Amanda’s other nipple, teasing it into a swollen, surging response. Amanda cried out as Margo bit into the tender flesh then ran her satin-hot tongue up to Amanda’s neck. Finally she captured Amanda’s mouth in a deep, probing, cognac-scented kiss. Amanda’s breath came in short, choking gasps as a roiling, alcohol-fueled orgasm began to build deep inside her.

“Come for me, baby,” Margo rasped. “Come baby come,” and she half rose from the shallows, water streaming from her sleek body. With ungovernable dexterity she turned Amanda so that she could mount her from behind. Despite a violent cough as she inhaled water before regaining her legs, Amanda absorbed and felt Margo’s forceful thrusts and kneading thumb and she gasped as an even deeper connection and wrenching pain ground deep inside her. She bit down on her lower lip, desperate to swallow the scream that threatened to burst from her chest. She understood in a flash of fist-deep agony that Margo was beyond her reach, unaware and indifferent to Amanda’s feelings. At the same time she felt her body heart pulsating and her clitoris throbbing as a dark, racked orgasm approached and as Margo’s swollen, hot clitoris rammed into the cool flesh of Amanda’s butt. The waves of intense physical excitement and torment intensified and receded over and over as pumping blood collided internally with the outward sensations of hearing Margo’s gravelly moans and the sucking, slurping rush of water on, in and around their heaving bodies.

“Ah, I’m coming babe, I’m coming,” Margo rasped. Desperate to relieve the stabbing pangs as Margo’s fist thrust into her, Amanda reached back with one hand and grabbed for Margo’s crotch. “Feel me, yeah,” Margo gasped and thrust her clitoris convulsively into the searching fingers. Amanda gripped the pulsing flesh and squeezed in time with Margo’s thrusts. At the same time, Margo reached around Amanda and as she pounded into her from behind, she took her clitoris and stroked around it with exquisite tenderness. The dual sensations of pleasure and pain turned Amanda inside out and she writhed and gasped, beyond control and reason, until her own orgasm and Margo’s rampaging lunges crashed into each other. Margo bit down into the flesh of Amanda’s neck and let out a gruff cry as they sank onto the wide steps of the pool, bathed in the warm water and cooling night air, spent and panting, so caught up in the carnality of the moment neither could speak.

“Hey, you still on this planet?” Malcolm’s hand on her knee brought Amanda jolting back to earth and one of the overcrowded parking lots of Sydney’s international airport. She blinked away the memories that were at once arousing and disturbing and blinked.

“Lordy, we’re here. I must have nodded off. Sorry.” She grabbed her tote bag, tumbled out of the car and followed Malcolm between the rows of cars.

“Must have been a hard night,” he said over his shoulder. His normally placid tone was gone and in its place was a terse voice that Amanda barely recognized.

“It was a late one,” Amanda said, breaking into a jog to catch up with him. “I told you.” But the dull ache deep inside and the soreness between her legs made her hope that he had no idea how right he was.

“Yeah yeah. Whatever. Looks like Dracula’s been at your neck, by the way.” Malcolm continued to stride ahead and Amanda’s mood plummeted as a hot sweat of discomfiture popped on her upper lip. Angrily she brushed it away with the back of her hand and groaned to no one in particular as she followed Malcolm on leaden legs. *This is not going to be easy after all. If Malcolm knows everyone will know.* And by “everyone” she knew she meant her mother and, even worse, Clancy.

“Shit,” she muttered aloud, stomping after Malcolm, once again trying to make sure her shirt collar was up high around her neck and cursing Margo and the cognac. And her own lack of whatever it was that she clearly lacked. *Character*, she reminded herself. *You are lacking in character.* That’s what her great-aunt Emily had once said anyway, although her grandmother had immediately slapped back at her younger sister: “Horse feathers Emily, what in hell would you know about character?”

“Mom!”

“Eleanor!”

The yells rang out across the hubbub of the arrivals area and Amanda watched as an exhausted but comfortably chic-looking Eleanor McIntyre surveyed the mass of faces in front of her. Amanda waved both arms and leapt in the air, beside her Malcolm did the same as he stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled hard enough to cause people in the crowd to turn around and smile. As her mother caught sight of her, the transformation of her face made Amanda’s heart soar. The weariness dropped away and was replaced by a beaming smile that could have lit a lighthouse.

“Mom!” she yelled again, and darted forward, pushing through the crowd as fast and politely as she could, followed by Malcolm whose bunch of three pink, heart-shaped helium balloons bobbed and wove in his wake. Eleanor’s sparkling eyes were shot through with unshed tears as she held out her arms to her daughter and Amanda burst into tears and grabbed her mother into her arms.

“Hey honey! Sweetheart, it’s okay, it’s okay,” Eleanor murmured, her fingers threading through Amanda’s hair, gently placing the strands as if she were a child again.

“Aw Mom, I’m sorry,” Amanda laughed shakily. “I’m just so pleased to see you. I’ve missed you such a lot.”

Eleanor crushed Amanda in a fierce one-armed hug as she put out her other hand to Malcolm and pulled him close.

“Hi Eleanor,” he said, a wide grin contrasting with his own teary eyes as he watched his friend with her mother. “Great to see you. Welcome to Australia!”

“Great to see you, my gorgeous boy!” Eleanor planted a smacking kiss on his cheek and nuzzled her face into his neck. “So good, so good,” she murmured happily, hugging them both as hard as she could. Travelers bumped and swirled about them and finally Malcolm pulled away from the two women and grabbed the handle of Eleanor’s wheelie.

“Let’s get going,” he said, “Before we get trampled.” He looked at Amanda and his eyes were warm and seemed to be saying “sorry.” She reached over and pecked him on the cheek, relieved that they were still friends.

“Yes, we’ve got a bit of a drive. Mom, but it’s easy and we’ll be home in time for you to have a shower and get yourself sorted before dinner.”

“Get yourself sorted! You’re turning into an Aussie already.” Eleanor smiled and touched Amanda’s face. “And you’re looking well. But a bit tired?”

Amanda’s hand moved instinctively to her shirt collar and her laugh was just on the wrong side of nervous. “I went to a party last night and it was also a bit of a work thing, so yeah, I’m tired today.”

“Work?”

“Yup, it’s a new idea.” She glanced at Malcolm and grinned when he winked at her. “I’ll tell you all about it in the car.” She took Eleanor’s carry-on bag, hoisted it onto her shoulder and led the way out of the arrivals hall.

To Eleanor’s evident surprise, Amanda got behind the wheel of the Subaru wagon and Malcolm stowed the bags in the trunk and climbed in the back seat where he stretched out happily. Conscious of her new knowledge of Clancy’s fear of the highway, Amanda was more circumspect than was her usual habit as they traveled southwards and when Eleanor stopped clutching her purse and placed it instead on the



floor at her feet Amanda knew she was relaxed and beginning to enjoy herself when she yawned and began to snuggle into her seat.

“Eleanor we’re going to keep you awake no matter what,” Malcolm said, leaning over from the back seat and giving her shoulders a squeeze. “If you can stay awake until this evening you’ll be better for it. So tell me what you’ve been up to since we ran away Down Under.”

And so the journey back to Two Moon Bay was easy and uneventful as Malcolm concentrated on making sure Eleanor stayed alert and talking and Amanda listened to their chatter. They shared easy laughter and news of Heron Creek and New York gossip but all of it was soon displaced by Eleanor’s pleasure and curiosity at the new sights that unfolded in front of her.

“It’s so different but it’s so familiar too,” she said as Amanda took the exit lane off the highway, following the signs for Two Moon Bay. “This landscape is so beautiful.” Her head swiveled back and forth as she struggled to take it all in. “I guess it’s the trees that make it different. All this greenery—no bare branches.”

“We don’t really do deciduous in Australia,” Malcolm said, “unless the trees are immigrants. We’ve got a few Japanese maples around the house—their leaves turn red and gold and drop every winter, but that’s in June.”

“Amazing,” said Eleanor, “And look at this darling little town. Oh sweetie, no wonder you love it.” Amanda tapped the car horn a couple of times as she drove slowly along Two Moon Bay’s main street and caught sight of people she knew; they waved and she waved back. It was a good feeling and she liked it.

“Here we are,” Amanda said as she slowed to turn in through the white gates. “Two Moon Farm—your home away from home. Welcome, Mom.” She reached over and squeezed Eleanor’s hand.

“Thank you darling. This is gorgeous. These trees! It all looks so cool and would you look at that house, oh my goodness. Is this yours Malcolm?”

“Me and Clancy, it was left to both of us.”

Amanda swung the car around on the crunching white gravel beside the house and turned off the engine. Eleanor hurriedly got out of the car and stood beside it, her eyes closed and face turned up to the sun as she savored her first experience of the scent of eucalyptus trees. Then she looked around, gardener’s eyes taking in unfamiliar shrubs and flowers while Malcolm hoisted her bags from the trunk and stood beside her in the bright sunshine and grinned at her obvious delight. Amanda sat watching for

a moment, smiling too at her mother's reactions and Malcolm's pleasure in them; then she got out of the car and grabbed her own bags. She stood apart from her mother and Malcolm, listening to the bossy chirruping of lorikeets in the angophora trees. In that instant she knew she was glad to be back and wrapped in the tranquility of Two Moon Bay.

*However glamorous and exciting Sydney might be, this funny little town has a charm all its own and it's got me.* And, she registered, with Eleanor's arrival Two Moon Farm made her feel at ease in a way that reminded her of Heron Creek and nowhere else. The breeze rustling the trees, the late afternoon sun and the joyous squeaks and shrieks of the bold-as-brass rainbow-colored parrots that had immediately caught Eleanor's open-mouthed attention wrapped her in gladness. It released the much-needed warmth of wellbeing through her sore and weary body and she sighed and shouldered her bag. And the good feelings rose and swirled about her heart as the familiar bark and sound of madly scrabbling claws on timber heralded the arrival along the veranda of a joyful dog.

"Steady Jess, steady!" Malcolm laughed, as the Labrador leapt and hooted her relief that her people had returned yet again. "Eleanor, meet Jessie," he said and Eleanor bent to offer the back of her hand to the overjoyed dog.

"Hi Jess," Eleanor murmured. "And you are the most gorgeous girl, hey?" Jess's long, feathered tail threatened to knock over anything within reach as it wagged her understanding and agreement.

"Flattery will get you everywhere with that wretched dog." Clancy's voice was as sunny as the afternoon as she and Thomas Cat watched from the open doorway the scene of greeting before them; then she stepped lightly across the veranda and skipped down the steps to envelop Eleanor in a hug. Thomas Cat stayed right where he was.

Amanda watched, feeling that she could reach out her hands and be warmed in her turn by Clancy's evident pleasure at Eleanor's arrival. The two women clasped each other in a long, rocking hug as Jessie continued to leap and squeak around them. Amanda smiled as she waited and relished the moment. Then Clancy lifted her face from Eleanor's shoulder and looked straight at Amanda. But the tenderness of a moment before had vanished from her eyes and been replaced by something else: speculation and suspicion.

"Hi," she said coolly, as Eleanor released her. "Didn't expect to see you back already. Sydney not agree with you?"

Amanda took a deep breath and determined to swallow her disappointment and the instant flash of pique that flared in her gut. “Hi yourself,” she responded. “I said I’d be back with Mom and Malcolm. You couldn’t have heard, or maybe you weren’t paying attention.”

Clancy’s grin was fleeting. “I guess not,” she said. “Or maybe I thought you’d be seduced by the pleasures of the big city.”

“Really?” Amanda was vexed that heat was beginning at her throat and already rising up to her face. “It would take more than *that* to seduce me, I can assure you.”

*Not quite true*, said her inner voice, *actually I was very easily seduced*.

“Well well,” said Clancy as if she’d heard. “I am surprised. But it’s good that you’re here.” She turned back to Eleanor, “And really good that you are. Now how about I take you to your room—yes?”

Amanda suddenly became aware that her mother had been watching the exchange with an expression halfway between amusement and chagrin. It did nothing to ease her unease. But she was saved from whatever Eleanor might have been about to say by Thomas Cat. He chose that moment to leap down from the veranda and wind himself in a figure eight around Eleanor’s calves.

“Oh! You beautiful boy! You’ve decided to speak to me, have you?” Eleanor bent to scratch beneath his chin and around his ears. The black Burmese purred and twirled, his tail twitching with delight.

“He’s easy for you to remember, Eleanor,” said Clancy. “He’s another Thomas Cat.”

“Perfect. How sensible,” said Eleanor massaging the cat’s spine down to his quivering tail. “What a darling he is too. Not like our cranky beast!”

“You just don’t understand him,” Amanda said. “He’s very sensitive. Now go with Clancy, Mom. She can give you the five-buck tour. I’m going to take a shower and get changed. See you in the kitchen?”

Her question was directed at Clancy who nodded and grinned at her in a way that was enraging. Amanda took the veranda steps two at a time and into the house, trying hard not to stomp as she went.

Struggling to control the burst of temper, Amanda slipped through the quiet house to her room. She laid her overnighter on the bed and her laptop on her little desk. The room smelled familiarly of beeswax and lavender. Amanda sniffed the air and her

shoulders relaxed. "Damn you Clancy," she muttered, then grinned as she said out loud the thought that had just crossed her mind, "Home."

She took off her shirt and tailored long shorts, kicked off her sandals and walked barefoot into the bathroom. The flagstones were pleasantly cool to her hot, sticky feet; she undressed and dropped her clothes into the laundry basket. Then she peered in the mirror to decide whether she ought to shampoo her hair. Her eyes widened in horror as she saw a bite mark on her breast and the other on the side of her neck. Both were edged purple and blue with bruised skin and blood; she had forgotten them but they instantly reminded her of the soreness and ache of rough sex.

"Oh no," she whispered, fingering the mark on her neck. "How tacky." She groaned and looked herself in the eye. "Shit," she muttered, furious and chagrined. Inevitably her thoughts turned to Margo and the night they had spent together and she shivered.

"Amanda! You decent?" Clancy's peremptory call from the courtyard brought Amanda thudding back to the present and the immediate problem of hiding the bite mark on her neck.

"Bathroom! Give me a minute," she called back and began frantically searching through her makeup bag for the tube of heavy foundation that she specially kept for zit crises. She unscrewed the cap with suddenly clumsy fingers and realized instantly that it wasn't going to work: her skin had lost its northern hemisphere pallor and the circle of pink-beige looked exactly what it was: an inept attempt to hide something. "Shit!" Amanda muttered. "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

"No worries," Clancy called. "Your mum will be in the room across the way from you, we'll dump her bags and I'll show her where everything is."

Amanda tiptoed back into her bedroom, pulled on the shirt, carefully flicked up the collar, dragged on her shorts and pushed open the screen doors. Clancy and Eleanor were in the courtyard and Clancy and Thomas Cat were watching her mother who had already knelt to pull weeds from the herbaceous border. Amanda took a deep breath, then another, in an attempt to slow her racing heart and made her way across the grass.

"Hi," she said brightly. "What *are* you up to, Mom?"

"Hi sweetie, you know me! Australian weeds are just as pesky as our New England variety, I can already see that." Eleanor stood up and brushed her hands together and looked from Amanda to Clancy.

“I’m going to learn a lot from Eleanor,” Clancy said, looking Amanda up and down. “If it weren’t for Renee the garden would be a sad jungle. I’m not exactly green-thumbed.”

“Me neither.” Amanda grinned. “Mom once told me I had black thumbs. That’s after I’d weeded up a bed of lettuce seedling because I thought *they* were the weeds.”

“Oh honey, you were only nine,” said Eleanor reassuringly, but she laid her hand on Clancy’s forearm and continued in low tones, “But don’t ever let her loose with clippers unless you really want to cultivate dead stumps.”

“Mom! I only killed *one* camellia.”

“And the others are still in shock and that was five years ago.”

The laughter that bubbled between the three women miraculously dissipated the lingering animosity between Clancy and Amanda and once again, they looked at each other with pleasure.

Amanda backed away, still enjoying the sparkle in Clancy’s eyes. “If you don’t mind getting Mom settled in her room I really must shower and change...”

Clancy nodded. “Sure. We were on our way, but I thought you’d like to see Eleanor getting her hands dirty within five minutes of arriving.”

Amanda leaned forward and gave her mother a kiss. “Typical. See you in ten.” And she returned to her room and closed the screen doors before stripping off her shirt and shorts once more.

Fifteen minutes later, Amanda padded barefoot through the house, listening for voices. She pushed open the kitchen door and saw Clancy at the counter chopping an iceberg lettuce into long, crisp shreds.

“Hi, can I help?” Amanda said cheerily.

Clancy turned and looked her up and down, taking in the hand-me-down scruffy denim cut-offs and even scruffier, rust-stained pale blue denim shirt. The sleeves had been removed and the shoulders were wet and dark from dripping, slicked back hair.

“Woo hoo, very chic,” Clancy said, her eyes laughing into Amanda’s. “Something tells me you’ve been in an op-shop.”

“No shit Sherlock, I got these last week. I figured it was time I quit looking like a visitor.”

“Excellent disguise, or maybe assimilation. Which is it?” Clancy’s sardonic eyebrow rose as she continued giving Amanda her full attention.

“Not a disguise,” Amanda said quietly. “Definitely not a disguise. This is me.”

Clancy nodded. “Okay,” she conceded. “Nice.” She turned back to the lettuce, scooped it up in handfuls and dumped it into the big teak salad bowl. “You want to make salad dressing? This plain iceberg is good with balsamic and olive oil.”

“I’m on it.” Amanda took a china bowl from the cupboard and reached for the vinegar and oil bottles.

“Thought we’d have a barbie, make Eleanor feel at home,” Clancy went on as she began slicing beefsteak tomatoes in thick rounds. “We’ve got a load of prawns and I thought fish would be better than steaks after the plane—lighter and easier on the digestion.”

“Wonderful, that’s really thoughtful.” Clancy glanced at her, her nose wrinkled in her “aw shucks” gesture. Then her expression changed as she noticed the chirpy red kerchief tied around Amanda’s neck. Her gray eyes darkened perceptibly and Amanda saw her calculating its meaning.

“Fun in Sydney?” Her tone was cooler.

Amanda took a deep breath as her heart sank. “It was really productive. Really exciting possibilities,” she said and added quickly, “Business possibilities, I mean. And Margo was very hospitable. Fabulous apartment.” She clutched the edge of the bowl and began fiercely whisking the vinaigrette with a fork in a struggle to withstand an overwhelming need to check that the kerchief was still in place.

Clancy’s smile was now as icy as her tone, “Yes,” she said slowly, “Margo certainly knows how to entertain. Good party?”

Amanda’s lips twisted in a grimace. “If you like that sort of thing. Believe it or not, it’s not really my scene. But I did make some serious contacts for us. It was fantastic for that.”

“Really? ‘For us’?” Clancy’s chill was not thawing any.

“Yes. Two Moon Bay, of course.”

“I see.” Clancy’s drawn out way of saying the two words suggested to Amanda that she either did not, or was seeing something else entirely. “So you partied with the power dyke set and somehow found time to network too...”

Amanda could not help feeling like a naughty schoolgirl, caught smoking by the head of house, and it riled her. “Are you going to interrogate me for the rest of the

evening or is there something else you want me to do?” Amanda was surprised by her own tart response and from her reaction, so was Clancy. She abruptly stood back to squint at Amanda; this time her eyebrows rose together and the hint of a grin flitted across her face.

“Sorry,” she said grudgingly after a moment of silence that seemed to stretch and contract the space between them. “It’s none of my business what you do with your time and I didn’t mean to give you the third degree.”

Amanda sighed, and the thought crossed her mind that she didn’t mind if Clancy wanted to know what she’d been up to. That she would like her to be interested, but actually not about Margo; definitely not about Margo.

“Maybe it’s time to say ‘pax’ again,” she said, holding out her hand to Clancy.

This time Clancy’s grin was wide and genuine. “This is as bad as the Middle East peace process,” she said, taking Amanda’s hand and giving it a formal one-two shake.

She got to her feet and peered quizzically at Amanda, head slightly on one side. “Definitely pax,” she said and warmth had returned to her voice. “I really am sorry, but to be honest, I’m not that fond of Margo. She’s just not my type.”

“I know what you mean, I don’t think I’m that fond of her either. In New York I was a banker and you know all about that, but I was never in a power dyke set. They’re pretty scary, that lot.”

Amanda’s words came tumbling out in a rush and her true feeling about her new “friends” was news to her as well as to Clancy. So much so that she reached to touch the kerchief before she could stop her hand as a memory of being fist-fucked by Margo crossed her mind. And that was it, she instantly understood; there had been no element of lovemaking in their coupling—she shuddered at the truth of the word—it had been just sex and nothing more.

“Pleasant daydreams?” Clancy wicked eyebrow had risen once more. Amanda tipped the bowl to pour the dressing into a jug and grinned sheepishly.

“No not really, in fact no not at all. Just a passing thought that’s now completely passed.” She shoved her hands firmly back into her shorts pockets, causing the cut-offs to slip even further and reveal her lightly tanned belly and the almost invisible blonde hair that ran from below her navel to her pubic hair. She noticed Clancy’s glance and quickly hitched the shorts back up her hips. “Bit big,” she said awkwardly. “But they’re so comfortable. I promise I won’t wear them in public.”

“They’re fine. They look cute,” Clancy said, smiling once again. “In fact they make you look like a naughty teenager—quite fetching really.” She turned away and set the salad bowl on a large tray that already held a crusty loaf, a butter dish, a jar of mustard, a bottle of ketchup and cutlery. “Let’s have dinner on the veranda, hey? Malcolm can do the barbecue.”

She took Amanda’s jug of salad dressing and placed it on the tray beside the bowl and picked up the tray. “Will you do the doors?”

“Sure,” Amanda hurried in front and opened and held each door for Clancy on the way through the house. Amanda followed her out onto veranda, groaning inwardly. The last thing she wanted to look like was a naughty teenager, especially at thirty-two and rising and in the eyes of Claire Nancy Darling.

## TWELVE

A little after ten the next morning Jonny, Malcolm and Eleanor got up from the breakfast table to go into Two Moon Bay and show Eleanor the sights. Amanda felt guilty that she had elected not to go with them, but emails from potential investors were waiting in her inbox and she wanted to firmly establish the contacts and their money before Christmas and summer intervened and diverted everyone’s attention.

By the time the breakfast gathering had formed she and Renee had already done the milking. She’d introduced Renee to Eleanor who had severely wounded her pride by warmly embracing her friend and saying, “My goodness Renee, I don’t know what you’ve done with my designer daughter. I’m wondering whether she’s been abducted by aliens and they’ve left someone else in her place.”

“Thanks a lot, Mom,” Amanda said grumpily. She tugged at the kerchief around her neck. It was really too hot to wear it, but the bite mark was still livid on her skin and she could think of no other way of concealing it.

Clancy laughed as she poured herself another coffee and sat back in her chair. “She’s very good with chickens, Eleanor, did you know that?”

Eleanor laughed along with the others. “Actually I do but I had forgotten, to be truthful. I’m very glad she’s using her real talents these days.”

“I’m outta here, I have work to do,” Amanda snapped. “Malcolm, I’ve ordered pork ribs from Mr Shearman. If you could pick them up on your way home, I’ll



marinate them this afternoon.” She sniffed at him, “If it’s not too much trouble, of course, if you’ve finished laughing at me.”

More laughter followed her out of the kitchen and she grinned to herself as she made her way back to her bedroom and her desk. Despite, or maybe because of the teasing she felt light-hearted, energized and charged with purpose. It was a good feeling.

She opened the first email, it was from Josie Chandler, the owner of Two Moon Bay’s art gallery.

*“Hi,” Amanda read. “Been talking to a mate in Sydney. She’s a graphic designer. She came up with this. (See attachment.) Talked to Renee last night and she’s been in touch with Ralph and Jean Morris. Part of their land is beside the highway and they’re volunteering a site for the billboard. Check it out!”*

Amanda opened the attachment and up popped a mock-up of a billboard. It read: “Eat real food in a real place with real people. Visit Two Moon Bay. Take the next exit and follow your nose!”

Amanda laughed happily and wished she could show it to Clancy that very minute. The Two Moon Bay Co-op was almost a reality, she realized.

The motto the town had adopted was “Belief, trust and faith”. A few thought it sappy, but most of those at the town meeting had applauded, there were tears in some eyes, joy in others. Still others looked hopeful and some hugged their children and laughed as if they hadn’t done that for a while.

“And it will work, we’ll get through this,” Renee had said to the meeting. She had grabbed her role of elected chairwoman of the Co-op with both hands and was transformed by it. Amanda had sat beside her on the platform and said little. There had been antagonism from some. “She’s a bloody American and she’s responsible for the whole horrible mess we’re in,” one man had said morosely. But Renee gave him the sharp end of her tongue and asked whether the meeting wanted to hear what Amanda had to say or not? She had stared down the open dissenter and the rest of the gathering had muttered until a groundswell of “Let her speak,” filled the School of Arts hall.

Amanda was an experienced and persuasive presenter and her PowerPoint display with its easy graphs and bright colored pie-charts had been quickly grasped by most people, especially the kids, as it turned out. Even the dissenter eventually sat up and looked interested in what she was proposing and slowly they began to think she might have something. It had been one of the better nights that Amanda could

remember, her feeling about it even better than when she had brought in an \$88 million deal for eFrères, she had acknowledged to herself.

She opened another email. It was from a handsome lawyer friend of Margo's whose opinion it was, in answer to a question from Amanda, that *"If you can put up billboards on farmland belonging to sympathetic landholders the fast food people will be furious, but there's nothing they can do about it. The council or other authorities could give you a hard time, but as long as you play the media card right, you'll get away with it. And I'll make sure you get away with it. Great to meet you BTW. Would love to see you when you're in Sydney again. Maybe we could have dinner and see a movie, or go to the theatre. Carol."*

Amanda copied and deleted the last three sentences before saving the remainder of the email to the Two Moon Bay file on the desktop. She debated whether or not to paste and save the personal message to a Sticky, but did not.

At midday Amanda got up from the desk and stretched her arms high, trying to relieve her cramped back. She dropped forward and touched her fingertips to the floor and groaned at the stiffness in her thighs.

"That's it. Got to have a break," she muttered. She slipped on her sandals, went into the bathroom to have a pee and check her neck covering then went in search of a glass of water and Clancy. A minimal search revealed her to be in her own study and in the middle of stretching the kinks out of her own back.

Amanda stood in the doorway and knocked. Clancy swung round and grimaced. "Ouch, that hurts. I think I need a swim to get the knots out. Is that why you're here?"

Amanda shrugged and grinned. "I need to do something. I'm stiff as a tomato stake."

"That's very gardener-ish," Clancy commented. "Must be having your mother around." Her smile was wry and Amanda wondered whether she was thinking of her own mother.

"Well I hope you're enjoying her too," she said gently. "Because she thinks you're Christmas."

"Must be the season," Clancy quipped, but her eyes betrayed pleasure. "Let's go for a swim and maybe we could get the kayaks cleaned up so we can take Eleanor out—make an expedition of it when the tide and wind are right. What do you think?"

“She’d love it although I think we should put her in the double with someone else for her first go.”

“Of course. Okay, see you out the front in five. Go get your cozzie on.”

Back in her bathroom Amanda plastered her neck with the cover-all foundation and hoped for the best. Wearing the kerchief with her swimsuit would draw more attention to her neck and she decided there was nothing for it but to put up with whatever happened next. She found Clancy on the lawn loading the bird feeder with sunflower seeds. She hurried to join her and followed as Clancy led the way to the track down to the cove and the beach.

“If you feel like helping out, that would be great,” Clancy said over her shoulder. “I checked the kayaks earlier and they’re filthy. If you don’t mind cobwebs and getting dirty, I’d love to take them down to the water and give them a bit of a sluice.” She snorted and added, “Malcolm said he do them but I’m afraid everything’s gone out of his head since Jonny Sparrow came to town.”

Amanda laughed, “He’s been carrying on like a teenager. I’ve never seen him so happy and moony.”

“True, I hope it works out. He deserves a good guy.”

“Yeah, and for once you can say that a good guy deserves him. He’s a lovely man, your brother.”

Clancy made a sound that was half sigh, half laugh and they continued on down the winding path, between the outcrops of sandstone and increasingly scrubby vegetation until they reached the rough-hewn stone steps that led to the beach, jetty and boatshed. It was an absurdly pretty setting and Amanda loved it and said so.

“Why don’t you make more use of it? The boatshed is just gorgeous and so romantic, I bet people would pay a fortune to stay here. You could let it, maybe?”

Clancy said nothing and her back was turned towards Amanda as she unlocked the padlock. It clasped the two ends of a heavy chain that was threaded through cast iron rings on each of the shed’s double doors. Clancy’s silence and the set of her shoulders seemed to mean something and Amanda wondered whether she had inadvertently trespassed in a no-go area. “Of course, it’s wonderful to keep it private too,” she amended quickly. “Damn tourists don’t have to have all the best bits.”

Clancy unthreaded the chain with a clatter and left it hanging from the bolt. Finally, she turned to glance at Amanda and pulled open one of the doors, its hinges

complaining as the timber scraped across the stones of the jetty and stood slightly askew but open.

“This has always been a bit of a getaway for me,” she said, finally. “Dad used it as a workshop and I liked to help him—or watch anyway and hold the hammer, that kind of thing. I sort of took it over. Mum and Malcolm were never interested.”

Amanda followed her into the cool gloom of the boatshed. It was the first time she had been inside. Where they were standing was a small kitchen area with a twin gas burner on a metal counter. On a shelf beneath sat a small fat gas canister. On one of the burners was an elderly whistling kettle, blackened and dented. Hanging from a row of nails were three equally hard-used pots and pans and other battered utensils. Beside the counter was a small fridge whose door was pitted with rust. In the middle of the kitchen space was a table covered in blue and white checked oilcloth; tucked in beneath the tabletop were two chairs.

On the other side of the space was a shower stall shielded by a mouldy white plastic curtain, beside it a deep white china laundry tub. A shriveled cake of soap sat on the windowsill above it and a grubby towel hung on a cup hook screwed into the window frame. A shallow wooden ladder led up to a platform above the kitchen where a mattress looked to take up most of it. This minimal apartment was separated from the workshop and boatshed by a heavy canvas curtain that was pushed back against the wall revealing woodworking tools neatly hung on a rack and a bench where a router and circular saw stood. Beyond that were the kayaks, six yellow hulls stacked on a wall rack. Clancy pushed past the curtain and Amanda followed her through. The building smelled of old rope, salt, tar and the sea. It was pleasant, but it reeked of neglect and—*was it fanciful?*—unhappy memories. At the seaward end was another set of double doors, on the floor was a clutter of old boating gear and the graceful hull of a sailboat, the name “Lily of the Valley” painted on its transom.

“Welcome to my lair,” Clancy said and her smile was a fair facsimile of the real thing.

“Are you sure you don’t mind me being here?” Amanda asked, now aware of the deeply personal nature of the boatshed.

Clancy frowned. “Of course not, don’t be silly. But I know it’s a bit cobwebby so if it creeps you out, you don’t have to stay—or help. I mean you probably *will* chip your nail polish.” She began throwing scrubbing brushes and a few tatty looking rags

into two buckets and failed to see the expression of resignation that crossed Amanda's face.

Amanda sighed. "Clancy, I said I want to help and I meant it. I just asked because, well, because this seems like a very private place and I don't want to tread on...anything."

She thought it sounded lame, so she ducked her head and checked her nail polish, which was chipped already. "And anyway, I'm going to take the damn nail polish off and not bother, so you can stop digging at me on that score."

Clancy's head dropped as she bent over the buckets and she took a deep breath before standing up once more and facing Amanda.

"I seem to spend an awful lot of time saying sorry to you," she said and the quizzical grin was back on her face. "I'm sorry, I'm a bear with a sore head and I don't know why."

"How about worried about business, the global financial crisis and the future of the world? That'll do it every time." Amanda said shortly. "And now you have your brother's silly friend from New York stomping all over the place interfering and driving you nuts. That'll do it too."

The two women stared at each other, arms akimbo, mirror images of belligerence. The silence was another long one. Finally Clancy smiled, reached out and touched Amanda's cheek and said softly, "You're not silly." She sighed, "You're right, though, I am worried about all those things, and you *are* interfering but I think you're doing a fantastic job. There, I think that's better than sorry. What do you say?"

Amanda grinned and could not hold the direct gaze; instead she stared at her pink toenails. "Much better. I'd say it counts as a fulsome apology on the international diplomatic scale." She shoved her hands in the pockets of her cut-offs once more, desperate not to touch the spot on her face where Clancy's fingers had caressed it. And again her shorts slid down her hips, revealing just a bit more than was ladylike. She tugged them back up but not before Clancy had again frankly eyed the fluff of fine blonde at the base of her belly.

The eyebrow did its thing and as she very deliberately turned back to the buckets before remarking, "You *are* right about not wearing those around town. Someone will either jump your bones or have a stroke."

Amanda was glad she couldn't see Clancy's face as she checked her shorts and touched the sticky patch of cream on her neck. "I'll bear that in mind," she said casually. "Good advice. She we do the kayaks and then have a swim?"

"It would be sensible," Clancy said and offered Amanda the old plastic buckets. "I'll open the doors and pull the boats out."

Amanda put down the buckets and walked over to the rack of kayaks. "You open the doors and we'll both get the damn boats out," she said firmly. She stuck her hands on her hips again and inclined her head towards the door. "Go on, I don't have all day."

Something resembling a giggle came out of Clancy's grinning mouth and she did as she was told.

The breeze coming off the water almost tempered the sun and the afternoon cleaning the kayaks at the water's edge was companionable, if sweaty. Amanda was happy and could see that Clancy was relaxed. They were having a good time, she knew. Just talking and enjoying each other's company was the easiest and longest time they had been together, ever. Amanda liked it, she thought as they slung the last cleaned kayak back up on the rack.

"Swim?" She asked Amanda. "The water is still chilly, but it's all relative, about sixty-eight to seventy Fahrenheit, I think. Fancy it?"

Amanda licked the salty sweat from her top lip and nodded. They returned to the beach and stopped by a jutting rock in the middle of it.

"This is where you leave your clothes. I usually just strip off and go in, that's the best thing about this cove," Clancy said, looking Amanda right in the eye. "Our land surrounds it so we can't be overlooked and it's a bit of a treat. I won't mind if you don't mind." Clancy grinned and began to take off her tee shirt and shorts.

After a moment's hesitation Amanda slowly did the same and also pulled off her swimsuit. She had no time to feel self-conscious because Clancy had already run down to the water's edge, waded out two or three steps and dived in, straight and flat. She came up twenty feet out in a whoosh of spraying water and a wild whoop as she whipped the hair out of her eyes.

"Come on in, it's great!" she called, then flipped a somersault and began swimming, long powerful freestyle strokes, away from the shore.

Amanda followed, tentatively tiptoeing to where the idle slack water wavelets lapped at her feet. She gasped as the icy water nipped her hot skin then she too took two or three leaping, wading steps through the water and cut a shallow dive into the frigid green, following Clancy's wake. The shock of it was like fire on her skin and she propelled her body fast through the water with broad, strong breaststrokes without breaking the surface, expelling air in a string of bubbles that tickled the bare flesh of her breasts and belly as she swam. Clancy was right, being without clothing, even a swimsuit, in the ocean *was* a treat. She thrust and kicked with her legs and was marginally aware of the aching pull of strained inner thigh muscles and the sting of her chafed vagina, but she opened her eyes into the translucent green-blue and pushed any thoughts of the night with Margo from her mind as she chased hard after Clancy.

They floated twenty yards out from the shore and Amanda puffed hard with the effort of catching up.

"You're a good swimmer," she gasped, keeping a careful distance from Clancy but at the same time aware of the lithe limbs and the play of light and water on a body that was an even golden brown all over.

"You're not so bad yourself, for a city slicker," Clancy said, casually blowing salt water from her nose and again slicking her curling hair back from her face. "Not too cold for you?"

Amanda scooted a handful of water at Clancy. "You have to get over this idea that New York City was it for me," she said. "Where I grew up the river freezes solid in winter and the ocean is really cold ten months of the year."

"Ah, of course, New England." Clancy flipped on her back and began slowly heading for the beach using her arms like paddles beneath the water's surface and with her legs floating loosely in the water. The shadowy triangle at the confluence of her long legs came into focus as her body broke the surface and became curly black hair, glistening wet in the sun. Amanda's eyes widened and her heart thudded as a charge of blood flooded her with a strong urge to reach out and touch, to sink her face into the curls and probe what would be hidden there with her tongue. She spluttered and coughed as she inadvertently inhaled a mouthful of salt water; she understood she had been gaping at Clancy's crotch and that Clancy's expression meant she had not missed it. Again she coughed, although this time it was with self-consciousness.

Clancy turned, tapped her on the arm and said, "Come on, race you in, last one in is shark bait." And she was off, churning through the water with the spare strokes

Amanda had admired on the way out. Amanda peered about, frantically scanning the horizon; the sea glittered and revealed nothing, and a couple of gulls wheeled and glided high above them. It seemed tranquil enough, but the magic mythic word was enough to galvanize Amanda into action. She set off after Clancy with her most forceful and economical kick and stroke. Within five yards they were neck and neck and Amanda felt the exhilarating stretch and roar of her muscles and heart as she slipped effortlessly through the jade-smooth water. Alongside her, as she rolled her head to grab a breath, she saw Clancy's arms windmilling even faster and she knew she had won as she maintained her steady but powerful pace. She dug deep and filled her lungs, put her head down again and striking out hard, hauling herself along with the familiar long, loose pulls on her arms and a slow tempo of kicks. Her body felt at once effervescent, alive and relaxed; the elation fizzed and frothed through her frame and she knew she was swimming like she had not swum since college.

"You're a rotten cheat," Clancy gasped as they lay side by side on old beach towels on the warm white sand. Amanda's chest was heaving and her limbs were tingling with exertion. She could see that Clancy felt the same.

"You can *really* swim." Clancy struggled to get out the words. "Or was it just the thought of a shark biting your bum?"

Amanda laughed and fought for air at the same time; she lifted her legs to her chest, the easier to catch her breath. "I was on track for the Olympic team when I was in college," she admitted. "Didn't have the will to go all the way."

"God damn! You could have said. That is *so* unfair." Clancy rolled on her side and squinted at Amanda from beneath black, wet eyelashes. They were very close, close enough for Amanda to feel the panting breaths and naked presence. She closed her eyes, not daring to look again, and continued to breathe hard. She also held two fingers to her throat, checking her pulse, and suddenly remembered the mark of Margo's teeth. She choked on an extra breath and sat up, desperately keeping her fingers in place, hoping against hope they were covering the bruise. Then she remembered the second bite on her breast and turned slightly away from Clancy and summoned a cough.

"You didn't ask and you didn't give me a chance to say anything before you took off—like a goddamn rocket, I might add." Amanda looked around for her clothes; they were yards away on the rock.



Clancy sat up and laid a cool hand on her shoulder, “You okay?” Her voice was full of concern. “What’s wrong with your throat? Can I do anything?” Her cool hand rubbed Amanda’s bare shoulder. She shivered convulsively at the sensation of it and let out an involuntary groan that she could not disguise as another cough.

“Okay, what’s wrong? Tell me, how can I help?” Clancy was kneeling in front of her, a vision of wet, golden nakedness; her hands clasped Amanda’s shoulders in a way that was at once reassuring and unbearable. It was all Amanda could do to keep from leaning forward and laying her head on Clancy’s breast. Instead she shook her head helplessly and the expression on her face was pained and bewildered.

“Tell me, for heaven’s sake,” Clancy said softly and she stroked a strand of sea-darkened blonde hair back from Amanda’s forehead. “Come on, what is it? Let me help...”

Amanda dropped her eyes and hung her head in shame, “You can’t...it’s nothing, I’m okay, it’s just...” She looked up into Clancy’s eyes and to her surprise and distress saw only affection and warmth. She shivered once again and let out a long and tremulous sigh. Before she could think further she made up her mind and sat up straight. She took her hand away from her neck and looked Clancy right in the eye with no equivocation.

“I was very stupid,” she said quietly. “Unbelievably stupid, actually. I...um...I had far too much to drink at Margo’s and...well...” She gestured at the bite mark on her neck and breast. “I behaved very badly and I’m sorry. I’m embarrassed and...*please* don’t think too badly of me. Please.” She knew she was pleading and she dropped her eyes to the sand between them.

The silence between them was exaggerated by the souging eddies of wavelets on the sand. Amanda remained sitting bolt upright and vulnerably naked, unable to decide whether to try to cover herself, look at Clancy or pray that a giant squid would rise up out of the ocean and drag her away to the deep. Finally, just as Amanda thought she might faint with apprehension, she heard Clancy sigh, a long shuddering sigh, and her heart sank. She looked up and Clancy was watching her. A baffling series of expressions crossed her face as she searched Amanda’s eyes. Amanda looked back as levelly as she could, trying to divine what was going on in Clancy’s mind. Eventually Amanda found the silence was unendurable and reached out her hands in supplication.

“Please say something, anything, Clancy. I can’t bear it if...” She stopped, unable to continue with the all too revealing knowledge that she couldn’t bear it if Clancy didn’t like her all over again.

Clancy sat back on her towel and stared out to sea for what seemed like the longest minute in the history of time. Out of the corners of her eyes Amanda watched her, admiring the profile, the slim, muscular arms and lean torso and the golden perfection of her small breasts. Again Amanda sighed, this time in helpless admiration and a feeling that she recognized as longing, pure and simple. Eventually Clancy straightened her back, arched and stretched and let out a long, slow breath, her unselfconscious movement and nakedness unendurably attractive. Amanda swallowed on a dry mouth and thumping heart.

At last Clancy turned to Amanda and her eyes and smile were sad. She reached out for Amanda’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“I’m sorry too,” she said softly and Amanda’s heart sank even further, to the pit of her stomach and beyond. “I’m sorry I didn’t warn you about Margo,” Clancy went on in low tones that Amanda had to sit forward to catch. “But I didn’t think it was any of my business.” She twisted her fingers through Amanda’s, smiled tentatively and went on. “She has a bit of a reputation as a man-eater–woman-eater, I suppose—in fact she’s notorious, to be honest. And I’m really sorry she’s given you her trademark stamp of ownership, it’s a bit juvenile...”

“She does *not* own me,” Amanda burst out. “And it’s more than juvenile. It’s...it’s... pathetic. And I’m *so* embarrassed.”

Clancy half smiled and still clasped Amanda’s fingers. “You must be. I’ve been wondering about the, um,” she gestured at her own throat, “I didn’t have you pegged as a kerchief kinda girl!”

Amanda giggled weakly and shook her head. “I’m not. I didn’t know how else to cover it.”

“It’s a rotten thing to do and I’m afraid she’s famous for it,” Clancy said ruefully. She looked away, out to sea. “It’s none of my business, but are you...do you fancy her? Are you in a relationship?” She glanced back at Amanda, “It’s not my business, except that you need to be careful, she...”

“I’m not!” Amanda said firmly. “I am *so* not.” *And*, she added silently, *I want it to be your business, I want you to care. Please don’t stop holding my hand.*

Clancy let go of Amanda's hand and squinted up at a passing fluffy white cloud that momentarily shaded them and somehow focused the afternoon shadows. "We should be getting back to the house," she said. "Malcolm will need some help for this evening. And your mother will think those aliens have got you again." Her voice was brisk, her tone friendly but noncommittal.

"Yeah, we better," Amanda said and couldn't help but feel a twinkle of hope that Clancy had not dismissed her forever. She got to her feet, suddenly aware of her nakedness; the back of her neck prickled with self-consciousness as she made her way to the rock to retrieve her shirt and shorts. She glanced back and Clancy was watching her, head to one side, a smile on her lips that seemed to be both amused and perplexed at once.

"You sure you wouldn't rather be in Sydney?"

Amanda had pulled on her shorts but paused in the middle of buttoning the fly. She stuck her hands on her hips and looked hard at Clancy.

"What part of 'no I don't fancy her, no I am not in any kind of relationship with her' don't you understand?" She demanded. "I made a mistake. I will probably never drink again. Well, not for at least a couple of hours anyway. I will have to have some dealings with Margo because she really was incredibly generous with her investor friends, but I have to tell you, if she comes calling, I would like for my mother to tell her I'm washing my hair for the next decade. Or that I've been abducted by the damn aliens. Is that clear?"

Clancy had already pulled on her shorts and her arms were above her head, holding up her tee shirt. She waved her fingers through the armholes making peace signs. Her breasts were taut and pretty, Amanda could not help but notice as Clancy peered at her from inside the T-shirt.

"Okay, okay," she said, half laughing. "You and Margo are not an item, but you don't have to do anything this evening, you should spend some time with Eleanor. That's what I really mean."

"Oh no you don't," Amanda said impulsively. "You weren't talking about me helping out this evening, it was about Margo, admit it."

The words hung between them like the midges spinning in the lowering shafts of late afternoon light. Amanda drew in a breath and held it, wondering whether she had taken a step too far. That she had pushed into the open what she herself longed for, and what had nothing to do with Clancy's feelings and thoughts. Blood pounded in her

ears with the effort of holding the breath and she stared at Clancy who stared right back. Another long moment passed in thrumming tension, then Clancy's face melted from the eyes to the mouth into a smile that reached right down into Amanda's heart and started a smoldering fire. Then Clancy shrugged her salt-sticky body into the T-shirt and ran her fingers through her long, water-darkened blonde curls.

"Okay, you win this time," she said airily. "You're right. I don't like the idea of you being involved with Margo. But," she held up her hand, "I don't want you to think I'm being an interfering old hen. It's none of my business and you can tell me to get lost." She started up the beach, walking away from Amanda. "Would you like me to fix your kerchief when we get back to the house?"

The words floated over Clancy's shoulder as Amanda watched her, mouth open, dual feelings of elation and disappointment vying for first place in her heart. It was a curious sensation. *She does like me. She does care. But there's a 'but' and there's always a 'but' with Clancy.*

"Wait for me!" she yelled after Clancy as her legs suddenly stopped being paralyzed and began to obey her once more. She ran through the heavy sand, struggling to catch with Clancy who showed no signs of slowing. As Amanda reached her at the foot of the steps, she panted, "I want to remind you how much I like hens and how good I am with them, even interfering old ones."

Clancy laughed but kept going upward. Amanda stopped to catch her breath and to watch the neat ass wiggle and the muscles in the long legs ripple as Clancy ascended each steep stone stair. Amanda groaned aloud at the sight then set off after the maddening woman, wondering whether it would always be one step forward, two steps back between them.

"How about we crack open your duty free gin, Mom?"

Eleanor smiled up at Amanda from the veranda couch where she and Jessie were deeply ensconced and unwilling to move.

"I thought you'd never ask, honey. Malcolm bought a six-pack of tonic water this morning and it's in that dinky little bar fridge. I'm going to get us one of those for Heron Creek. Imagine that sitting on the porch in the corner, filled with goodies and waitin' to be loved!"

“It is amazing that you’ve never thought of it before, Mom. Would you like a long one or what?”

“I’m easy but don’t you go giving me a floater, okay?”

“You are going to explain that, aren’t you Eleanor?” Clancy pushed her way out the screen door carefully shepherding a laden tray in front of her.

“It’s a family joke,” Eleanor said. “Except I didn’t think it was funny. Still don’t.”

Amanda snorted as she went about the makings of Eleanor’s drink. “It was Andrew’s idea of being the big man,” she said tersely as she sloshed Bombay Sapphire onto ice cubes in four long glasses.

“Oh hush up Amanda, your brother meant well. But,” she patted Clancy’s knee as she wriggled into the small remaining space beside Eleanor, “he can be a real pain in the ass. And that’s the truth.”

From the lengthening shadows at the end of the veranda Malcolm looked up from his painstaking tending of the barbecue and chimed in, “I’ve only met him once, sis, and Eleanor is speaking the truth. He’s a pain in the ass. Sorry Eleanor.”

“Honey, don’t be sorry. I’m afraid it’s true. Anyhow, getting back to the floater. It’s really one of his lesser crimes, but it was damned annoying. Andrew thought I was drinking too much and—”

“And he thought a gin *before* dinner and a bottle of wine between us *with* dinner was the slippery slope to alcoholic perdition,” Amanda said snippily as she brought her laden small drinks tray and offered it to her mother and Clancy.

“And you would definitely know about alcoholic perdition, am I right?” Safe under the protection of Eleanor’s encircling arm, Clancy looked up at Amanda and grinned wickedly.

“Grab one of these before I empty the whole damn lot over your head,” said Amanda, smiling sweetly at Clancy.

Eleanor and Clancy each took a glass from the tray and Eleanor sniffed hers appreciatively.

“Smells good, honey,” she said and took a sip. “Mmm, excellent. Now,” she said, and ruffled Clancy’s curls. “A floater is when you give your lush of a mama a glass of tonic water with a splash of gin on top. It floats and the poor old fool isn’t supposed to realize she’s been dealt a dud.”

“Pure bastardry,” said Clancy in between a giggle and a slug of her drink. “Does he know you know?”

“Darn tootin’ he does,” said Amanda tartly. “First time he did it to me I took a sip, figured it out and poured most of the bottle into my glass. It was undrinkable but I did it.”

“They’ve always clashed,” said Eleanor with a sigh. “But I guess you’ve worked that out by now.”

“She’s good at clashing,” said Clancy, a beguiling smile lighting her face as she looked up at Amanda.

“Who’s for piping hot chilli prawns? And I’ve got shrimp for you, Eleanor, of course!” Malcolm appeared out of the veranda twilight and set down a platter heaped with steaming, fragrant crustaceans on the low table in front of Eleanor and Clancy. “What else do we need?” He surveyed the table. “Got drinks, plates, bowl for the shells. Paper napkins?”

“Here,” Amanda dropped a pile of napkins on the table and held out her tray to him. “And have a floater, why don’t you.”

Eleanor chortled and choked on her drink and Clancy patted her back solicitously while she regained her breath.

“I have never known such a bunch of bickering children,” Eleanor gasped. “I can only suppose you really do adore one another or you wouldn’t be such horrors.”

The silence that followed was suddenly broken by a cicada and then another and another, then Malcolm pulled up a chair, sat down and said, “We do, Eleanor, we do. More than some of us will admit.”

Amanda and Clancy said nothing and avoided each other’s eyes, then Clancy whacked Jessie’s paw where it lay on Eleanor’s lap. “Move up, damn dog,” she said briskly. “Or better still, get off the couch.”

Jessie withdrew her paw and turned tragic eyes up to Eleanor who stroked her head and murmured in her ear, “Don’t you pay her any mind, Jess. You stay right where you are. Shame on you Clancy, this dog is *exhausted*.”

Clancy groaned her disbelief. “I suppose that cat is knackered too. He’s only slept fifteen hours today.”

“Sleep deprivation is a serious condition for felines,” Amanda said as she carefully scooped Thomas Cat to the side of the spare chair and snuggled in beside him. “There now, Thomas, you just be comfortable.” The cat stretched out his four legs

against Amanda's thigh and yawned widely before curling into a perfect round black mound once again.

"That cat's got ignore down to a fine art," Clancy said, but her eyes were on Amanda.

"So what's going on with you, honey?"

Perched on the end of her mother's bed, her bare legs curled beneath a crocheted shawl, Amanda knew Eleanor was watching her from her carefully constructed nest of puffed up, sun-scented pillows. She fiddled with the shawl while trying to come up with an answer to the question and eventually looked up and smiled into her mother's straight-shooting gaze. "I'm having a good time, Mom," she began. "It's weird, but I've got myself involved with the community and you remember I wrote you about my idea for a co-op and investment in the town?" Eleanor nodded. "Well it's happening. I really think it all could work and Two Moon Bay will be somewhere people will know about for all the right reasons. The global meltdown seems to be affecting Australia quite differently than it is back home and that's really helping."

"So does that mean this government intervention I've been reading about is working?"

"It is. And I think it's really affecting the way people think about what's happening. They're not scared, and Australia hasn't got itself in the sub-prime mess either."

"Why's that?"

"Their banks aren't affected like ours are because government regulations made it impossible for them to get involved."

"Regulations, hey? That sounds like big government to me." Eleanor smiled wryly at Amanda who squirmed and grinned at her mother.

"I know, I know. All this is anathema to the way I was taught and the way I've worked, and you know what? I prefer it this way and I'm really proud of what I hope we might be able to achieve here."

Eleanor reached out and squeezed Amanda's foot through the multi-colored shawl.

“And guess what, honey? I’m really proud of you for figuring all this out for yourself and for having the guts to say so.”

Behind Amanda the door creaked and opened as Thomas Cat pushed his way into the room. He leapt on the bed, rubbed his chin on Amanda’s outstretched hand then made his way daintily up to Eleanor and buffed her chin with his forehead.

“That creature is faithless,” Amanda remarked, happily.

“He’s a cat, what do you expect?” Eleanor drew the animal into a hug and he flopped back in her arms and closed his eyes, his purr sounding like a buzz saw in the quiet night.

“And what about the rest of you, sweetie? Have you heard from Natalie?”

“No, and I don’t expect to. She took the money and I have no idea where she is now.”

“Does that hurt?”

Amanda stared into space and considered the question for a moment before a sigh escaped and she shook her head. “I’m afraid not. No Mom, it doesn’t hurt a bit. Maybe my pride is dented, but not my heart. It wasn’t a good relationship, I know that now. And I *know* you knew it, but...” She smiled and shrugged.

Eleanor returned her smile. “We all have to make our own mistakes, sweetie. So what’s with you and Clancy?”

Amanda’s eyes widened, but Eleanor’s expression was one of her specialties and Amanda knew without her having to say so that it meant, “Don’t even think of pretending you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

Amanda played with the shawl some more. *I don’t know what’s with me and Clancy*, she said to herself, but couldn’t say it aloud.

“You seem to get on so well in a weird way,” Eleanor eventually said. “But then you don’t. And she’s such a gorgeous woman. I don’t understand you. Are you attracted to her?”

Amanda wriggled helplessly, feeling like a butterfly stuck through with a pin. She ran her fingers through her hair and swept it back from her face, took a deep breath and opened her mouth, unsure what was about to come out of it.

“If I’m honest, and that’s hard, I’ve been attracted to her from the moment I first saw her.” Impulsively she uncurled herself from the end of the bed and began pacing the room. “She also drives me nuts, she’s so...I don’t know, she’s so...”



“Like a slightly older, much wiser version of you,” said Eleanor softly. “It’s why you clash and why you’re drawn to each other—in my opinion.”

Amanda stopped her pacing and peered at her mother. “Really? You think so? God, that sounds pretty disastrous. And what do you mean ‘much wiser’?”

Eleanor chortled. “I knew you’d pick up on that. She is, honey, but you’re getting there fast. And you and she really sparkle together, you know that?”

“We do?” Eleanor’s eyebrows rose at the foolish hopefulness of the question. “Okay, we do. But she makes me feel like a mosquito—she keeps swatting at me like I’m a pest.”

“So when you get too close she pushes you away, is what you’re saying.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s it,” Amanda said and sat back down on the end of the bed. “And I have a confession, Mom.” She dropped her face in her hands, and then peered up at Eleanor from between her fingers.

Eleanor groaned and smiled, “Oh no, *now* what have you done?”

Amanda sat up straight and squared her shoulders, hesitated and then caught the look in Eleanor’s eye. “Okay, but I have to tell you I am really embarrassed about this. Like really, really embarrassed and I think it might go in the too-much-information for a mother basket.”

“So should I stick my fingers in my ears and go ‘la la la la’?”

Amanda giggled. “No, but you should probably cover your eyes.” And she unwound the scarf from around her neck and took a deep breath as she turned so that her mother could see the bruise. She knew from her bathroom mirror that it was well on its way to yellow and purple, but it was also a long way from fading.

“Oh lord, Amanda, that’s gross.” Eleanor’s voice was softly neutral; Amanda knew that meant she didn’t approve one little bit.

“I told you I’m embarrassed,” she said, trying to keep defiance out of her tone. “Actually I’m ashamed too.”

“I’m not surprised, frankly,” Eleanor said and this time her voice was acid. “I’m glad to hear it, too. Really honey, what *have* you been up to? Does Clancy know about this?”

“She does.” Amanda closed her eyes, recalling Clancy’s reaction. “She was pretty good about it, actually. She sort of took the blame for introducing me to...” she sniggered, “the perp.”

“Amanda McIntyre, last time I checked you were thirty-two years old. Unless you’re saying you were the poor little helpless victim, there was no perp!”

Amanda held up her hands in surrender. “Sorry Mom, bad joke. I brought it on myself and I am truly sorry I did.”

The silence was broken only by Thomas Cat’s contented purr. Finally Eleanor sighed. “I suppose we should look on the bright side. If Clancy is still talking to you after *that*,” she waved a finger in the general direction of Amanda’s neck. “then I guess there’s hope for you yet.”

Amanda giggled. “Mom!” she exclaimed. “It’s not like that between us.” Her shoulders slumped. “There’s a spark, for sure, but Clancy isn’t looking to get involved with anyone any time soon.”

“Doesn’t look like that to me,” said Eleanor, and her tone was resolute.

“No really, Malcolm thinks she’s still carrying a torch for a woman who was killed in an accident years ago. She was only nineteen then and he reckons she’s never got over it.”

“Nonsense,” Eleanor said, so firmly that Thomas Cat jumped in her arms and put out a paw to her chin in protest. “I don’t believe that romantic rubbish. Absence does *not* make the heart grow fonder; it makes it forget. That’s how we survive and get on with living. If there’s been no one in her life it’s because she hasn’t met the right one. Yet.”

Amanda’s opened her mouth but nothing came out. Her mother was good at rendering her speechless on occasion, always had been. She unwrapped herself from the shawl and stood up. “I guess it’s bedtime, Mom,” she said softly. “Thank you for not putting me over your knee, I know I deserve it.” She leaned over and placed a kiss on her mother’s forehead.

“Good night, honey.” Eleanor reached up and patted her cheek. “Get a good night’s sleep and let’s see what tomorrow brings. My bet is this particular cloud will turn out to have a silver lining.”

Amanda hugged her, trying to convey how much she loved her mother in ways that words could not. “I’ve heard that before, mom, and I’m looking at dark clouds quite differently these days.”

### THIRTEEN

After ten days of weather that couldn't make up its mind whether to be benign or unfriendly, Christmas Day dawned hot and perfectly, cloudlessly blue. Eleanor was enchanted at the idea of being on the beach in mid-December and was like a child on the sand, examining the unfamiliar shells and collecting bits of driftwood that caught her fancy. And while Clancy and Amanda swam hard out to their unmarked turning point and back to the beach, she watched them while leaping happily in the cove's sweet-tempered breakers.

"Who's ready for breakfast?" Three hands shot up and Clancy laughed. "What a surprise. I thought we could eat in the boatshed or on the dock, it's too hot to sit out." She led the way up the beach and unlocked the double doors.

"Oh let's eat out here," said Eleanor as she stood on the sandstone flags. "Please. And I want to take photos to send back home: me on Christmas Day, they'll never believe it otherwise."

Clancy brought an oversize salt-pocked, pale green umbrella out of the shed and slotted its pole into a hole drilled in the stone.

"Not too much sun, Eleanor," she said firmly. "You're not accustomed to it and it'll get you if you're not careful."

Amanda smiled and wagged her finger at her mother. "She's right, Mom, this is Australia. Now you get over here in the shade."

Eleanor pouted and lowered herself onto the folding chair Amanda set before her in the shelter of the umbrella.

"Don't sulk, open this." Amanda held out a chill-dripping bottle of Moët & Chandon. Eleanor's smile returned instantly and she grabbed the bottle without further prompting.

"We don't have champagne flutes, these will have to do," Clancy said, setting three tumblers on the sandstone. "I'll bring out the table and then we can have a drink while I get breakfast."

"What can I do?" Amanda saw a cardboard carton of supplies on the floor beside the kitchen counter.

"How about whisking up some eggs for scrambled? I've got smoked salmon and capers – sort of traditional Darling Christmas breakfast. Is that okay?"

Amanda saw anxiety in Clancy's eyes and that she wanted to make this a special day for Eleanor. Her heart leapt with pleasure and gratitude.

"It's fantastic," she said softly. "Thank you."

Clancy's nose wrinkled and she turned away, a pink flush climbing her cheeks. Behind them the champagne cork popped. "Come on girls," Eleanor called. "Time for a toast."

Clancy set up the rickety folding table, placed a chipped yellow enamel bowl in the middle and upended a paper bagful of shiny black cherries into it.

"Oh my," exclaimed Eleanor. "Where is my camera!"

Jonny Sparrow's café was alive with sparkling, twirling streamers, and a gold-draped fir tree in a half wine barrel filled the room with the unmistakable scent of the forest. As Amanda opened the door Bing Crosby was crooning "White Christmas" on the sound system and the older customers were singing along.

From the doorway she saw Malcolm spot them from his post beside the tiny bar and his face lit up as he raced towards them.

"Merry Christmas girls!" he yelled over the hubbub and his arms opened to engulf all three in a hug. "It's so good you're here," he said to Eleanor, landing a smacking kiss on each cheek. "Darling sis, you're looking wonderful." He kissed Clancy's forehead and turned to Amanda. "And you too baby best friend. You've all been out in the sun, I can tell. Look at you!" He stood back and admired them. "Just as well, by the way, the forecast for the rest of the holiday is ratshit. Pardon me Eleanor! We're going to get a big southerly this arvo and that's the end of beach weather for a few days."

"Never mind, we'll light a fire and Eleanor will feel right at home," said Clancy, waving at Renee and her men across the room. "My God Mal, this is amazing. Half the town is here."

"I know," Malcolm crowed delightedly. "But why cook when you've got Jonny Sparrow to do it for you? That's what all the wives have been saying!" He took Eleanor's hand to lead her over to the tree and where the only empty table stood waiting. It was a slow trip as almost every table had to be stopped by for Christmas greetings, kisses and hugs. Clancy and Amanda followed, reaching out to hands and smiling faces as they went.

“You’ve done this Amanda, you realize that, don’t you?” Clancy said right in her ear. Amanda jumped.

“What do you mean?”

“You and your co-op. It’s turning this town around. I have honestly never seen anything like it. I promise you.”

“Oh rubbish,” Amanda said, frowning. “What have I done?”

Clancy laid her hand gently in the small of Amanda’s back and urged her on toward the table where Eleanor and Malcolm were waiting. “This room, this day, this atmosphere. It wouldn’t be like this if you hadn’t walked in, Miss Yankee Doodle We-Can-Do-It, and lifted the whole town off its sad bottom. This is the best thing you’ve ever done. Believe me.” As they reached the table Clancy pressed the lightest of kisses on her cheek and grinned. “Thank you.”

Amanda gaped at Clancy until Eleanor put out her hand and patted her arm. “Shut your mouth, honey, you’ll catch a fly.”

Amanda sat down, aware that Malcolm and Clancy were grinning at her from across the table and that people were applauding. She could feel a glow of happy self-consciousness deep inside and at the same time, there were tears in her eyes that had nothing to do with sadness. “Wow,” she said. “But we’ve hardly done anything yet.”

Clancy laughed. “I know. That’s the scary thing. Now who’s for a mimosa?” She lifted her arm and one of Two Moon Bay’s recently employment statistics came over to take their order.

“Hi Janice, how you doing?” asked Clancy as the shy young woman stood beside her.

“I’m good thanks, Clancy.” She turned to the table, her hands neatly clutching a notepad and pen, and recited, “On behalf of Jonny Sparrow’s café I would like to wish you all a very merry Christmas and a pros...um...happy new year. And would you care for a drink while you decide what you’d like for lunch?”

“Bravo Janice, you’re doing great!” said Malcolm. “This is so cool. I have to go tell Jonny.” He leapt up, squeezed Janice’s shoulders and was gone.

“Mimosas all round, please Janice. I think that’s the aperitif of the day, isn’t it?”

“Yes ma’am—Clancy,” said Janice as she almost bobbed a curtsey and turned bright red.

“This is so lovely,” Eleanor said, looking about the crowded, festive room. Malcolm had returned, and she said to him, “I hope Jonny will be able to join us in a while—what do you think Malcolm?”

“He’ll be out later.” He patted her hand reassuringly then leaned across the table and beckoned Amanda to do the same.

“What’s up?” she said, seeing the anxious pinch of his eyes.

“Just thought you should know that Margo is here with a bunch of Sydney girls. They’re at the other end.”

“Ah. Thanks.” Amanda’s heart lurched and she swallowed on a spasm of alarm. “I better go and say hi, some of them are probably investors.”

“Probably.” Malcolm glanced at Clancy. “I’d go now before the party get too...you know, rowdy?”

Amanda’s fingers reached instinctively for her neck, but the bruising was gone.

“You’re right,” she murmured to Malcolm. She stood up and squared her shoulders, and seeing her mother’s surprise and Clancy’s frown, offered “Just going to say hello to a few investors. I’ll be back in a minute.

It was a long minute. Margo was hosting a table of six corporate women and their girlfriends, and by the way they looked her over, Amanda knew each had her own story about who she was. Margo leapt to her feet and her face lit up even as she squeezed the bare shoulder of the glamorous and sultry looking woman with a mane of deep chestnut hair in the seat next to her. She bent and kissed the red painted lips and said something in her ear that made her smile and pout at once. Then she left the woman and came around to greet Amanda.

“Great to see you babe,” she said, kissing Amanda hard on the mouth. “Merry Christmas and all that.”

Amanda put her hand up to Margo’s chest to keep a little distance between them and smiled. “Merry Christmas to you, Margo. Good to see you. How long are you here for?”

“Back to Sydney day after Boxing Day. I have a big New Year’s Eve party—you should come. We get a great view of the fireworks.”

Amanda watched the flame-haired woman eyeing them suspiciously and took a step further back from Margo.

“That sounds wonderful, but I think I’m going to be busy here. I’ve got involved in a party for all the kids—it should be fun—there’ll be a bonfire on the

beach..." She stopped as she saw Margo's expression turn to amusement that had a sardonic edge.

"Kids aren't really my thing," Margo explained. "So it's not for me. I'm surprised you'd get into it." Amanda shrugged and decided explaining why the idea was enchanting was all too hard.

"Why don't I say hi to your friends and then we can get on with Christmas," she said, smiling as warmly as she could.

Margo examined Amanda's eyes as hard as she had previously kissed her lips and finally nodded and bestowed a smirking grin on her. "Sure, that'd be nice. You here with Clancy?" Amanda nodded.

"And my mom who's come over from the States for the holidays--and Malcolm and Jonny," Amanda said resolutely.

"Nice happy families eh?"

Amanda took Margo's hand in hers and held it firmly. "Margo, I really appreciate you getting behind the Two Moon Bay co-op. I really do. And I know you're doing that not only because you think it might be a good business deal. And I'd like for us to be friends..."

Margo pulled her hand away from Amanda's grasp. "Uh oh," she said and the guttural laugh was derisive. "The old 'let's be friends' routine, eh?"

Amanda grabbed her hand again and did not let go. "Margo, we could be good friends, good business colleagues too. But we're not going to be anything else and you know it." She looked down the table to where the redhead was glowering at them. "And I think your new squeeze knows it too. If she *is* a new squeeze, that is?"

Margo glanced down the table and grinned at the scowling woman. "Ah, that's Becky," she said. "We go back a long way."

"I'm sure you do. Now come on, let's do happy holidays and be friends. What do you say?"

For a moment Margo's eyes were hooded and displeased, then she followed Amanda's gaze down the restaurant to where Eleanor was laughing at something Clancy was saying. Margo sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

"Whatever," she said ungraciously. "I don't know what you see in that long streak of misery, but so be it. Call me when she gives you the shits. And she will, you know."

Amanda smiled and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “Don’t worry, we’ve given each other the shits from the minute we met. Have a wonderful New Year and we’ll talk, okay?”

By mid-afternoon the promised southerly had blown in, fierce and chill. The sun disappeared behind scudding banks of dark cloud; birds and leaves twisted and twirled in the wind and Two Moon Bay was transformed into a cauldron of sharp whitecaps on a choppy, dead gray sea. Clancy looked out of the window from the warmth of Jonny Sparrow’s Christmas party and was anxious.

“I think I’d better get back to the farm,” she finally said. “I was stupid enough to leave the boathouse open and I want to make sure Jessie and Thomas Cat are okay.”

Malcolm groaned from where he sat beside Jonny. “Don’t worry about it, Clancy, everything will be fine.”

“No, I don’t feel right,” Clancy said quietly. “I notice Renee has gone, so she’ll be checking on the cows. I better go.”

Amanda stood up. “I’ll come too.” She held up her hand as Clancy began to protest. “No arguments, you’re not going on your own.”

Clancy shrugged. “Suit yourself, but it’s going to be cold and wet.”

“So? Do I have to remind you again? I’m a New Englander. You don’t know the meaning of cold and wet.”

Eleanor broke into giggles. “For heaven’s sakes, you two. Get out into that storm, go save the animals, and quit arguing. Malcolm–Jonny – I’m staying here. I have no intention of getting wet, or cold.” She held out her glass to Jonny who refilled it with his best Shiraz.

The short drive back to the farm was a blustery ride with the car buffeted by the wind and pinged by flying twigs and leaves. The sky was a mass of ominous, racing clouds and slashing rain that fought with the windshield wipers, even at full speed.

“This is a cracker,” Clancy commented as they pulled into the driveway by the house. “Come and get a raincoat and then we’ll see what’s what.”

By the time they got into the house raincoats were pointless, their hair was plastered to their heads and they were both shivering.

“Bloody hell,” said Clancy as she looked Amanda over. “If I’m as wet as you are, we needn’t have bothered. You sure you want to do this? You can stay inside.”



“You are joking, aren’t you,” said Amanda flatly. “How about I check the chooks and shut them in and meet you back here when you’ve found Thomas and Jess and shuttered the house. Then we can do the boatshed.”

Clancy hesitated only a moment, “Okay, good. That’s sensible. See you back here in ten.” She reached for Amanda and kissed her hard before turning away and vanishing along the rain swept veranda.

Amanda’s mouth tingled and burned and she stared after Clancy into the raging gloom, then she shook herself and ran through the rain to the chicken yard.

Half the birds were tucked away in their warm, dry coop clucking and crooning without a care in the world; the rest were in the yard confused and terrified by the wind and deluge. Amanda let herself into the enclosure and quietly began to round them up towards the shed entrance. Some were only too pleased to take instructions, others were spooked out of their minds and fluttered and flew into the wire fence and each other. Bird by bird Amanda persuaded the wretchedly sodden hens in through the door of their refuge where they were at least comfortable enough to decide not to make a break for it back to the yard.

“Come on chooky chooky chooks,” she crooned to the final five birds. Her teeth were chattering and the rain was slashing at her bare legs and stinging her skull and face. “Come on damn fool birds, this is really not funny.” A bolt of lightning lit the sky and must have hit the ground perilously close by. Amanda leapt out of her skin just as the hens did the same and she laughed uproariously as the thunderclap followed and made the earth shake and quake.

“Goddammit, get in there,” she yelled, past caring about being sweet and gentle. Four made their way gingerly in through the shed door as if the big bad wolf were definitely waiting for them. Amanda flapped her arms behind the last recalcitrant bird and it squawked and fled into the shed. She slammed down the sliding door and ran for the house as another lightning bolt illuminated her path brighter than any day.

“Gaaaaaaa shiiiiiiit!” she yelled as she leapt the steps onto the veranda and banged right into Clancy as a second clap of thunder caused the window frames to rattle. Clancy grabbed her as they stumbled along the veranda and they began to laugh. “Holy crap, sorry!” Amanda gasped as she found her feet once more. “I didn’t see you and I thought the thunder monster was going to get me.”

“Yeah well, me too!” Clancy laughed and fought for breath as she slicked back her saturated hair. “I think maybe we should forget the boatshed.”

“Oh no! It’ll be ruined. It’ll get horribly wet and surely this wind could wreck things if we don’t get the doors shut...” Amanda peered at Clancy through the gloom and the blur of rainwater that trickled down her face.

Clancy sighed gustily and turned to look out at where the sea and the horizon had become one. “Oh lord,” she observed mildly. “I suppose you’re right. Ready to run?”

“After you.”

And they set off, jogging across the sodden grass to the suddenly mud-slick track and down toward the beach. A lightning bolt hit the ocean in the middle of the cove and lit the landscape in fierce blinding white and silver. Amanda and Clancy yelled “Shit!” simultaneously at the heavens and ducked and wove as thunder crackled in the air around them.

“This is fucking crazy,” Clancy shouted over her shoulder. “If we get killed I’m blaming you!”

“Typical!” Amanda shouted back. “Will you *ever* take responsibility for *anything*?”

Clancy’s wild laughter and two finger salute was her answer and they upped their pace, skipping and slipping perilously down the last section of the track to the stone steps and onto the dock. They found the umbrella on its side and blown inside out; the table was on the beach and one chair was smashed and stuck against one of the double doors as it banged dangerously on its hinges.

“Let’s try and shut the doors and get inside, forget everything else!” Clancy yelled as lightning cracked across the cove once more. “This really is risky. We could get struck. We shouldn’t go back to the house until this blows over.”

Amanda nodded and grabbed the right hand door, pulling it against the wind until it scraped across the dock and she had to get behind it and push hard to prevent the ferocious gusts ripping it back into the boatshed. Clancy wrestled loose the broken chair and dragged the left hand door in and Amanda held both steady as Clancy fought with the bolts and slid the horizontal bar through its eyelets. Suddenly it was almost quiet. The howling wind and lashing rain were outside and inside the boatshed it was calm and dark.

“Phew,” Clancy said. “That was close. I don’t fancy doing that again in a hurry.”

“Me either. I can’t see a thing.”

“Hang on, I hope the power isn’t out, otherwise I’ve got candles.” Amanda heard a switch click and light flooded the space from within a cobweb-decorated round paper shade that had once been white but was so old the light shining through it was golden.

“That’s better.” Amanda blinked and looked around. The floor was puddled here and there and the table was on its side at the back of the room. Enamel plates and mugs lay on the floor, blown off their hooks and rack by the ferocity of the wind.

“Just as well I don’t keep the heirloom china down here,” Clancy remarked as she began to pick up the crockery.

“Absolutely.” Amanda could scarcely respond as her teeth began to chatter.

Clancy turned around and stared at her. “That’s *you* making that noise! You’re freezing.” She turned the table upright and set it back in its place. That made a large metal cabin trunk accessible and she lifted the lid. “I’ve got some ratty old gear here—mostly for sailing and mucking about. But it’s dry.” She rummaged around and found an ancient hoodie that may once have been navy blue. “Try this for size.”

Amanda grabbed it, pulled off the waterlogged raincoat and her Christmas party blouse. *I am beyond being modest*, she thought as her teeth clattered uncontrollably.

“This is ridiculous. I’m from Connecticut,” she managed to get out. “The river...”

“I know, it freezes solid in winter,” Clancy recited. She took off her own raincoat and a silk shirt that was clinging so tight to her body it was like a second, wet skin.

Another lightning bolt lit up the boatshed and was followed within seconds by a rolling crash of thunder.

“This is a really big storm,” Clancy said and her voice was nervous. “I don’t like it when they’re this bad.” She ferreted in the trunk again and came out with a pair of thick track pants with a hole in one knee and paint streaks down both legs. She handed them to Amanda. Then she took out two rough towels. “Come here,” she said matter-of-factly, “I’ll give you a rub down and you can do the same for me. Then we can put on dry clothes and I’m going to make hot chocolate. Luckily we’ve got milk left over from this morning’s coffee.”

“Woo!” Amanda laughed. “Now you’re talking.”

She tiptoed across the space, avoiding the puddles and stood obediently in front of Clancy who looked at her quizzically and said, "Take your wet pants off please, can't dry you with them on."

"Ah. Sure." Amanda became instantly conscious that although she was now pretty well accustomed to stripping off in front of Clancy, it had always been in the context of the beach, a fiercely competitive swim and then back to the oddly asexual beach again. This was different. Her naked breasts obviously didn't bother Clancy, and while she objectively appreciated Clancy's erect nipples and the perfect breasts on which they sat when they were out in the sun, something about the cosy confines of the boatshed and the violent tempest outside made her breathing speed up and her heart begin to thump.

"Come on," Clancy said impatiently, shaking the towel at her. "You're not the only one who's freezing." Her tone was so disinterested it was like being doused in even more cold water and Amanda immediately stripped off her long linen shorts as quickly as the sopping fabric would allow. Then she tried desperately hard not to put her hands in front of her crotch and stood while Clancy wrapped her in a towel and rubbed her down in a way that seemed to be how she might tend to a wet pony or dog. It was very pleasant and Amanda's heart went back to its normal placid lub-dup, overlaid with a tinge of disappointment.

*You're wrong, Mom,* Amanda thought as she raised her arms at Clancy's command and allowed her to dry her chest and sides. *Clancy isn't into me at all. Whatever it was, it's over.* She sighed and turned, on orders, so her back and butt could get the vigorous towel treatment.

"Your bruises are gone," Clancy remarked out of the blue, and Amanda's hand flew instantly to her neck and then to her breast.

"Yes, thank heaven," she muttered and was glad she was facing away from Clancy.

"Okay, you're done, now it's my turn."

Amanda took a deep breath and turned around to find that Clancy had also turned and was presenting her dripping back and butt to Amanda. For a second Amanda took in the freckle-dusted planes and undulating spine and the muscles of Clancy's shoulders. She could hardly bear to look at the curve of buttocks and the twin dimples in the small of Clancy's back and when she did her intake of breath was audible.

“Damn it Amanda, I’m bloody freezing,” Clancy complained. “Dry my back or else!”

Amanda shook herself and began to scrub with the rough towel and at the same time tried to think of the beautiful body as favorite pet; and to her surprise, it did make it easier.

Dry if slightly musty smelling clothes were comforting; thick fishermen’s socks were even more so and when Clancy heated milk in a pan on the gas ring and poured it over chocolate powder in two tin mugs, Amanda decided it was the best smell ever and she could want for nothing more. Except that the wind whistled in under the doors and around their ankles and the storm showed no signs of abating. They clutched the warm mugs and blew on the hot chocolate as they sat on the two remaining chairs beside the table.

“Bit of a weird Christmas afternoon,” Clancy remarked as she licked chocolate from her top lip. “And I think we’re stuck here for a while”.

“Have you got a TV?”

Clancy grinned. “Fresh out of entertainment, I’m afraid, although I’m thinking we’d be more comfortable on the mezzanine—out of the draft. And actually, I think there might be an old Scrabble set or cards...”

Amanda glanced up to the open platform in the roof above them and saw only the mattress. She swallowed on a mouthful of the hot drink and her eyes watered at the heat. She swallowed again and knew this time it was a nervous reaction. A gust of wind rattled the double doors and howled around her ankles; it was a horrible kind of cold and she shivered.

“I think upstairs out of this awful wind sounds peachy,” she said and stood up.

Clancy looked at her speculatively and then grinned, “Okay, lead on Macduff. Or maybe that should be McIntyre.”

“Ha ha,” Amanda said. “You can go first, just in case there are spiders.”

Clancy turned to her, one foot on the first tread of the steep steps. “Actually, just so you don’t worry about it, I actually have the whole shed treated for spiders and creepy horrors every year. I don’t like them either.” And she mounted the stairs, one hand clutching her mug, the other on the rail and Amanda followed.

In contrast to the wet and windy lower level, the mezzanine was warm. The single light hanging below cast a glow upwards that glittered and gleamed on the silver insulation sheeting that turned the roof into a kind of Aladdin’s cave.

“This is lovely,” Amanda said, peering around into the shadows and eaves where she could see books and another metal cabin trunk. “It’s like a kid’s hidey hole.”

“That’s exactly what it was,” Clancy said as she set down her mug and picked up the quilt to give it a shake. “I used to come up here to sleep in summer, my uncle did it for me and it’s where I got away from Malcolm and his mates. Believe it or not, when he got together with his friends he was a total pain in the arse.”

“Huh, don’t talk to me about brothers.” Amanda wondered where to sit, until Clancy flopped down on the quilt-covered mattress and patted it.

“Come and get comfortable.” From below the doors rattled as another ferocious gust of wind shook them and the sound of the rain on the roof just above their heads was a rolling roar. Carefully holding her mug and watching its contents remain level, Amanda lowered herself onto the mattress and scrambled forward on her elbows so she could sip at the hot chocolate.

“That’s better,” she said and heard that her voice was tight with nervous tension again. *This is ridiculous*, she told herself. *We’ve been naked and now we’re dressed for the Arctic, what’s wrong with me?*

She glanced at Clancy over the top of her mug and saw, through the steam of both mugs that she was being watched with amusement and speculation.

“Would you like to play Scrabble, if I can find it?” Clancy’s question sounded detached, but the look in her eyes was not.

“Why are you laughing at me?” Amanda asked bluntly and gulped on the hot chocolate.

Clancy looked shocked. “I’m not!” she said. “Really. I’m just...” She shrugged and frowned. “You’re so...” She sat up suddenly and crossed her legs, rested her elbows on her knees and bent forward to look hard at Amanda and then said, equally forthrightly, “What do you want? I mean, what do you want from me?”

Amanda turned on her side and hitched herself up on one elbow. Her shadow cast a strange pattern across the quilt and onto Clancy. She looked at it as she tried to formulate an answer. Finally she shook her head and said, “I don’t know. I guess I want...you to like me.”

Clancy set down her empty mug beside the bed and looked at Amanda, her head on one side and with a crooked grin to match. “I do,” she said quietly. “That’s why we fight all the time.”

Amanda giggled. “That’s what Mom says. She reckons we’re alike—but you’re more grown up.” Without thinking further than her fingertips she reached out her hand and laid it on Clancy’s knee. “And you’re beautiful, of course.”

Clancy’s warm hand held Amanda’s where it lay and she smiled. The soft light somehow heightened the lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth. Amanda’s heart turned over as she studied the signs that this woman was older and even more bewitching than she remembered from seconds before.

“You really are,” she whispered and there was wonder in her voice.

Clancy’s nose wrinkled but her smile remained. “Well thank you,” she said as she ran her thumb gently over the back of Amanda’s hand. “So, what else do you want? Why are you here?”

Amanda frowned and stalled. “In Australia? In the boatshed?”

“Here now, with me.”

Amanda looked at their two hands and then deliberately and slowly drained her mug right to the last thick, dark dregs. She placed it on the floor beside the mattress and brushed her lips with her free hand, and then she turned back and looked at Clancy who was still watching her intently. She took a deep breath but the leap in her heartbeat would not be stilled. She wiped her mouth again and then listened as words came out of it.

“I’m here because I want to be with you. I don’t want to be anywhere else. I don’t want to be with anyone else. And I don’t want to admit it because I know you think I’m an idiot and a spoiled brat and politically naïve and heaven knows what else, but I’m not anymore. Well not so much and I’m learning, and the real truth is...” She breathed deep and knew her voice would be tremulous with hope and fear when she finally said, “Actually, I just want you.”

The words hung in the air between them as the storm dashed itself against the roof and the beams creaked and groaned. Then Clancy tugged gently on Amanda’s hand and said softly, “Come here.” And after a split second she added a smile and—“Please.”

Amanda slid across the bed, her heart almost drowning out the sounds of the storm as it pumped roaring, thudding blood through her veins. She knelt in front of Clancy, her knees wide apart, and they looked at each other in a new light of need and desire.

“You’re very polite,” Amanda whispered.

Clancy grinned. "As are you. But if one of us doesn't do something not so polite and quite quickly I am going to explode."

Amanda snorted and giggled. She reached for Clancy's face and with exploratory wonderment, touched her fingers to her lips. Clancy took two fingers into her mouth and Amanda gasped at the warmth of her tongue. Amanda bent low and replaced her fingers with her own lips and ran her tongue over Clancy's mouth as it opened to hers. Their tongues met and danced and they fell back on the bed in a tangle of hands and legs. Amanda climbed up Clancy's body and with a sighing whimper of delight, she sank into the shapes and curves she knew so well and had so longed for.

Clancy's answering moan was smothered as she gripped Amanda by the hips and they kissed again, revelling in the heat and eagerness of their bodies.

"Should we take this slow?" Clancy whispered against Amanda's ear as she nuzzled and kissed her way down to the hollow at the base of her throat.

Amanda managed to laugh as she gasped at the sensation of Clancy's tongue on the tender skin of her ear. "Sorry, but that's not one of your better ideas."

Clancy began to tug at the hoodie and Amanda backed off her to pull off the thick garment herself, then she kicked off the track pants as Clancy's hand cupped her breast and her tongue massaged the areola. Then her teeth fastened on the tender nipple and the rush from the tight bud to Amanda's clitoris was direct and powerful.

"I can't wait," Amanda whispered in a voice she barely recognised as she dragged on the waistband of Clancy's track pants. Clancy lifted her hips and Amanda yanked them off. Clancy sat up, her abs crunching in taut ripples of muscle; she pulled off her sweatshirt and reached for Amanda's and drew it up and over her head. Then they gazed at each other, eyes glowing, chests heaving and gleaming in the soft light. In the moment that hung between them their bodies were new territory and they looked and looked, eyes caressing each familiar part as if for the first time.

"*You* are beautiful." Clancy's simple words were vehement as she reached for Amanda and then they were flesh on flesh, skin on skin and breathing that was fast and harsh and passionate, oblivious to the rain and the wind and the world beyond the boatshed. Clancy's lips left Amanda's mouth and again tracked a soft trail along her jaw and down her throat as strong subtle fingers sought and cupped the firm mounds of her breasts. Amanda gasped and pushed against her palms, willing Clancy to touch her nipples and relieve the throbbing that was growing with each heartbeat and sharp inhalation. She felt her legs tremble and weaken with desire and some other yearning,



burning sensation that she was unable and unwilling to identify. She laid her own hand over Clancy's and pressed it hard into her breast. "Please," she whispered, "Please..."

The muted sound of Clancy's sigh of pleasure and longing flowed through Amanda from tingling ears to the swollen throbbing between her legs; and as Clancy pressed her thigh into her groin Amanda urgently opened up to the pressure and heard a whimper rise from deep inside her own throat. Frantically she sought Clancy's lips again, desperately responsive to the tongue that instantly found her own in a clashing confluence of tenderness and raging need. Amanda slipped her hand between their bodies and into the wet warmth between Clancy's legs and she groaned at the pressure Amanda applied with her searching fingers.

"I want you," Amanda whispered against Clancy's neck. "And I want you to want me. Now. *Please*."

"You've got me." Clancy's smile was like sunshine on Amanda's skin. "You had me at our first argument."

Amanda kissed the smile and sucked in the soft tongue that met hers tenderly and with plainly unstoppable will. She sighed and circled her fingers around Clancy's clitoris in a rhythm that matched their tongues in heat and intensifying touch. Clancy fought for breath and whimpered as her legs parted wide to invite Amanda to enter her and her hips moved in the same tempo. At the same time she mirrored the rhythm with her hands on Amanda's breasts, teasing and squeezing the burning nipples until liquid fire coursed through Amanda's veins and began to pour from her into Clancy.

"I'm coming..." Amanda heard the sweet words from afar as she plunged powerfully into the silken spasms that were souging deep and deeper through the long body, into her sweet supplicant mouth and Amanda drank deep of the sensations. And as she lost herself in the undulating frame beneath her she heard and felt Clancy's desperate wonderment and they began to moan and cry out the orgasm that flooded their hearts and minds and blood.

Clancy lay on her side, her head propped on her bent arm, gazing at Amanda. What she was looking for Amanda couldn't tell, but she barely recognized the molten dark that had transformed the familiar gray eyes. The scrutiny gave off such heat and promise that she shivered.

"Have I been asleep?" she asked, knowing from the dryness of her mouth that she had. Clancy smiled and nodded. "Five minutes, ten max."

Amanda groaned. "Oh no, how uncool."

Clancy kissed the tip of her nose. “Au contraire, very cute. Very sweet. Very...” she thought for a moment then nodded as if to herself, “very reassuring.”

Amanda reached up and stroked Clancy’s cheek. “Really? Tell me this is okay.”

Clancy turned into the caress and kissed Amanda’s palm. “Well this old mattress is pretty...um...unforgiving don’t you think?” She grinned sidelong at Amanda through dark, long lashes.

Amanda almost choked on a laugh and gasping breath as Clancy’s tongue tickled her palm. “Who said anything about forgiveness?” She took her hand away from the tickling mouth and leaned in to kiss the bruised, pink lips that drew her like a magnet.

“I shouldn’t tease you,” Clancy said against her mouth; her voice fondly shaky. “But what do you mean—‘Is this okay?’” She sucked on Amanda’s fingers where they were sticky with her own orgasm. “What do *you* think? I haven’t done this for ...” Her eyebrows quirked as she thought back. “Well, frankly, I haven’t felt like this in years.” She peered at Amanda through squinting eyelashes, her expression verging on shy. “Probably never...”

Amanda gasped and closed her eyes, feeling the embers that still smoldered deep inside begin to flare again as she savored Clancy’s admission and the sensation of her fingers moving with the hot tongue that caressed them.

“Oh,” she murmured, as Clancy’s thigh pushed gently between her legs once more. “I don’t think I could do this again for a while.”

“Oh yes you could,” said Clancy. “Because you won’t have to do anything.” Her knee pushed at Amanda’s leg until both were spread apart, then she withdrew Amanda’s fingers from her mouth and kissed each fingertip, then she slid down the body that trembled beneath her as her tongue snaked a wet track across Amanda’s belly. It was a path that was at once hot and chill as Clancy’s breath blew on it.

“Clancy...” Her voice came from somewhere far away; she lay back and closed her eyes as Clancy kissed and licked her way down the streak of fine blonde hair below her navel. “Oh, Claire Nancy *Darling*,” she murmured and smiled at the emphasis she had placed on Clancy’s last name. But her amusement was short-lived as Clancy’s teeth sank into her mons and nipped hard.

“Ow! Shit, that hurt!” She thrust her fingers through Clancy’s cascading curls as they tickled her belly and thighs and lifted her head so she could see the wicked grin that started from her eyes.

“Unless you want an instant clitoridectomy you won’t call me that again,” Clancy growled and slid down and took Amanda’s bottom in her hands to knead the quivering flesh as she licked and nipped the agitated and tender flesh of her inner thighs.

“But they’re such lovely names,” Amanda protested and squeaked helplessly as Clancy’s shoulders wriggled under and pushed against Amanda’s legs, spreading them until her sex was open and vulnerable to cool breath and searching eyes.

“So pretty,” Clancy whispered. “It really is like a flower.” She breathed in Amanda’s scent. “Smells like a flower too.” Amanda clasped her lower lip between her teeth and exhaled silently as Clancy’s mouth descended upon her, as light as a butterfly, swathing her clitoris in a soft swirl of lips and tongue.

“Ah, Clancy, Clancy, oh!” Amanda sighed, her breathing reduced to shallow gasps as the probing tongue slipped lower and into the depths where she suddenly wanted more.

“More.” The whisper came from her lips and from somewhere deep inside her mind. “I want more of you,” and she cried out and her back arched into the long strong fingers that replaced the hot softness of Clancy’s tongue.

Amanda’s hands momentarily convulsed in Clancy’s shimmering hair, then she grabbed at the quilt, clutching fistfuls of it, grabbing for anything as the supple tongue delicately probed the swollen and sensitive bud of her clitoris and the fingers tenderly curved and caressed and filled her, over and over, echoing the sweet-aching roll of Amanda’s pelvis until she felt her body beginning to float away on a surging swell of sensation.

“Oh Clancy, Clancy darling, darling darling...” Her whisper was a pulsating mantra of delight and awe as the breaking wave of another orgasm rippled and roiled from her cunt to the tips of her toes and tingling skull. The synchronous push and pull of her inner muscles reached her heart and voice at once as she called Clancy’s name again and again until she whimpered, “Enough! Enough! Come here, please come here,” as she tried to get a grip on Clancy’s shoulders and pull her up to cover her trembling body.

Clancy held her fondly and crooned nothings into Amanda's ear as gasping, wrenching sobs tumbled and bubbled in an incoherent stream of tears as she clutched Clancy to her as if fearful that she might disappear.

"Hey, hey..." Clancy kissed her eyebrows and nose. "Come back to me, little one. It's all good. We're good; it's all good. Hey..." She touched her lips to Amanda's wet eyes and then kissed her as if she were fragile and might break. But Amanda grabbed at her lips, tasting her own salt juices on them as they mingled with tears and their seeking tongues.

"Oh, Clancy." Amanda opened her eyes and searched the gray ones that looked down into hers. "I have never—never—come like that before, ever. Not ever. Never not ever."

Clancy grinned, the crows' feet at the corners of her eyes crinkling in a way that turned Amanda's insides upside down. "I think I get it. You liked that, yeah?"

Amanda groaned and rolled her eyes, hooking her legs around Clancy's so she could hug her harder and feel their breasts meld and cream between their bodies.

"Like? Like? Clancy, I don't like it, I don't like you. I..." She stopped on the edge of the precipice down which she was about to slide, her eyes wide and alarmed. But Clancy's smile was caring and patient; she lowered her lips to the tip of Amanda's nose and kissed it.

"You what?" she asked, sweetly.

Amanda stared up into her eyes; her breathing was harsh with fear and anticipation. She ran her tongue around her suddenly dry lips, took a deep breath as if she were about to dive from a high board and said, quietly and simply, "I adore you."

Clancy's arms trembled as she raised herself infinitesimally off Amanda's body and her pupils widened so fast her eyes turned black.

In a momentary panic at what she had just said and at Clancy's apparent reaction to it, Amanda grabbed at the broad shoulders looming above her and burst out, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I can't help it. I know it's all wrong and..."

Clancy's mouth descended on hers and stopped the tumble of fright with a long, kiss. She seemed to be trying to convey something that made Amanda's toes tingle with a strange and undetermined warmth. She returned the kiss with growing passion as the heat reached her lips and heart; finally Clancy pulled away and looked down at her again.

“Don’t ever be sorry,” she whispered. “I know how you feel and despite your best efforts to piss me off, I feel the same way. I love you too, Amanda.” She kissed the mouth before more protestations could come out of it. “You are...” She frowned as she considered for a second, then she grinned. “You are my love. You are the one.”

Amanda touched Clancy’s cheek, wonderment sparkling in her eyes. “Am I hearing right?”

“I hope so.” Clancy rolled off her and clasped her in the warmest of embraces. And at that moment, the doors to the boatshed rattled as someone knocked hard on one of them. Clancy and Amanda jumped out of their skins and looked at each other as if they’d been shot before bursting into giggles.

“That’s torn it,” Clancy whispered. “We’re sprung.”

“Clancy! Amanda! Coo-ee! Anyone in there?” Malcolm’s call was stentorian and slippery with bonhomie and Christmas brandy.

“Oh well,” said Clancy softly, sitting up. “If you’re my Christmas gift, I think we’d better go give Malcolm his. He’s been hoping for this for about two years, as far as I can tell.” She leaned over Amanda and kissed her fleetingly.

“Be down in a minute Mal, give us a moment!” she called to her brother as she reached for her sweatshirt and pants.

Amanda realized the sudden silence was magnified by the absence of wind and rain; some time in the last little while the storm had blown itself out. She scrabbled around for her substitute clothes and pulled on each garment before following Clancy down the stairs. Before she reached the still puddled floor Malcolm spoke again.

“Us? Did you say ‘us’?” he called.

Clancy unhitched the bar across the doors, lifted the bolts and swung open the doors. “I did,” she said as she ran her hands through her tousled locks.

Amanda stepped out behind her into the dazzling sunshine of late afternoon and blinked as she tried to straighten her hoodie and hair.

“Oh. My. God,” Malcolm said and his voice was hushed. He looked from his sister to his best friend like a cartoon character at a tennis match. “Should I believe the evidence of my eyes?” he asked, a wide grin creasing his craggy face.

Clancy reached for Amanda’s hand and squeezed it. Amanda lifted their two hands to her lips and kissed Clancy’s sex-scented fingers. “Visual evidence is quite reliable, I think,” Clancy said, smiling at her brother and then at Amanda.

“Oh. My. God,” he repeated and scrubbed his stubbly chin with both hands as he shook his head and beamed at them.

“I know it’s Christmas, but have you suddenly got religion, Malcolm?” Amanda asked him as she slipped inside the haven of Clancy’s arm and snuggled in close.

He skipped a couple of dance steps on the spot and then held out his arms to the two women. “This is my best Christmas present ever,” he crowed happily.

Clancy looked at Amanda. “What did I tell you?”

“Right as usual.” Amanda leaned in to Clancy and laid a kiss on her smiling lips.

Malcolm shook his head, disbelief and joy mingling in his eyes. “Jonny and Eleanor are up at the house,” he said, his smile wide enough to crack his face. “We thought maybe you’d got caught in the storm or something, but...well, holy Aunt Flahoola, I didn’t dare imagine it would be ‘or something’!” He hugged them to him, tears in his eyes. “Wow, you certainly know how to give a guy a good time. Jeez!”

Clancy pressed a kiss to his forehead, carefully avoiding his mouth. “I’m glad you’re glad little brother,” she said happily. “But do you think you could do us a favor?”

“Anything—pretty much,” he said.

“Go up and sort of prepare Jonny and Eleanor a bit. I don’t think I can quite walk into the house and have to deal with this from scratch.”

Malcolm threw back his head and roared with laughter. Amanda got the giggles and, as Clancy watched them both she began to laugh too. The sound echoed around the rocks and the walls of the boatshed, it matched the return of the sun and blue sky after the thunderstorm.

Amanda followed Clancy up the cliff path, remembering when she had done this before, waiting at the foot of the track to better admire Clancy’s legs and butt. This time her clitoris swelled and she touched it hungrily through the thick soft fabric of her pants. She ran after Clancy and stopped her at the flat sandstone outcrop that marked the halfway mark of the track.

“You’re short of an orgasm,” she whispered and laughed at the look of surprise and arousal that flashed in Clancy’s surprised eyes. She grabbed Clancy’s arm and swung her round, tugged roughly at the waistband of the pants and pushed

her back against the rocky platform. Then she knelt at Clancy's feet, ignoring the muted protest as she dragged the pants down in one sure movement.

"Oh wow," she exclaimed when she saw the wet-dark gold curls at the apex of Clancy's thighs. She glanced up into hungry, hazy eyes as gentle fingers stroked the hair back from her forehead. The scent of Clancy's heat and skin and sex filled her nostrils and she inhaled deeply. She smiled up at the smoldering gray eyes.

"If you don't want this to happen here, now's the time to say something," Amanda whispered, smiling up at the eyes that were once again black with craving. On a heartbeat the long fingers froze and fastened in Amanda's hair. Clancy moaned almost inaudibly, her eyes closed and she tipped her face back to the bright sun and Amanda sank her face and tongue into the dark, wet secret place that Clancy opened to her as she spread her legs and cried out with raw pleasure.

Amanda's lips found Clancy's clitoris and as it throbbed and swelled to the drive of her tongue, and intuitively she sucked hard and rhythmically on the tender bud. As Clancy gasped and murmured her pleasure, the taut muscles of her thighs fluttered and she swayed back against the rock and her hands clung to Amanda's head as her hips thrust in the same rhythm. Amanda grasped Clancy's legs to support her and steady her as her body's response to the searching, surging tongue became ever more tumultuous.

Revelling in the sweet wetness that coated her cheeks and chin and the salt-musk taste and scent and Clancy's gasping, panting breathing, Amanda parted her own legs as she knelt, slipped one hand inside her pants and into the liquid heat that Clancy's body had generated again and which threatened to turn her inside out. Under her knees the sandstone was harsh but she was past caring. She squeezed and stroked on her own clitoris until her body was shuddering on a fast-approaching orgasm.

Withdrawing her mouth from the honey-bud hidden in the burnished curls, Amanda heard Clancy's gasp and plea of "No, don't stop!" She glanced up into the frantic, glazed gray eyes that fiercely appealed to her and with slow deliberation, ran her tongue over her gleaming lips. Clancy's tremulous sigh and suddenly wide eyes sent shock waves through Amanda's blood and it was her turn to draw a sharp, thrilled breath.

"I need you to come," Amanda said with ferocious intensity and she saw surrender flicker in the gray eyes as she returned to feasting on Clancy's pulsating clitoris, thrusting her tongue fast and hard in time with her own rising demand. As her

fingers plied the quivering flesh Amanda groaned and she heard the echo in Clancy's feverish response. Powerful, unstoppable tremors began to course through their two bodies, between their bodies and beyond their bodies into the realm of unguarded emotion. Intense orgasm shook Clancy and Amanda to their cores and as the final undulations began deep in their bodies, the rush of pleased exultation melted something indefinable that had both drawn them together and kept them apart.

"Amanda, oh God, Amanda," Clancy whispered as she gazed up at the sky and tenderly cradled the golden head to her belly.

Amanda shivered with gratification at the unmistakable sound of deep satisfaction. She kissed the smooth skin in a series of tiny touches that began at Clancy's navel and followed the line that led down to the mound of coppery curls. She tracked her hands up from Clancy's still fluttering knees, up the long, tautly-defined muscles to her groin and belly and she inhaled the sharp fresh scent of sex, sun and sweat. It was shockingly good, shockingly new; she loved it. But there was a problem.

"Clancy, I have to move, my knees are killing me," she murmured and was rewarded by a throaty laugh.

"Oh my poor girl! You won't have any skin left on them." Clancy yanked up her pants and zipped and straightened herself back to a semblance of normalcy. She put out her hands to Amanda who gratefully took them and, with a series of ouches and heartfelt groans, slowly got to her feet. Beneath the long pants the skin of her knees was pitted with the indentations of tiny pellets of rock. She rubbed gingerly at them and decided she would live.

She stood up and took Clancy's hands between her own. "I have never wanted someone so much and never done anything quite like that. It was..." She shook her head trying for a word that adequately described the voluptuous excitement that still coursed through her veins. "It was wonderful. *You* are wonderful." She grinned at Clancy who was looking at her with quizzical warmth, head cocked slightly to one side.

Around them, the aftermath of the storm was evident in the trilling of birds, relieved to be able to forage for food before dark. Out to sea, the ocean was still dark, uneasy and topped by white horses, but the sun shone again and it warmed Amanda and Clancy as they stood clasped in each other's arms beside the flat rock. The air was crisp and clean, the vegetation glistened and the scent of wet earth was



intoxicating. It was like a new world and Amanda kissed Clancy with joy in its newness.

“Merry Christmas,” she whispered. “I love you with all my heart.”

Clancy sighed happily and clung to her, eyes drinking in everything she wanted to see.

“My heart is yours,” she said softly. “Always.” She kissed Amanda on both cheeks, “Merry Christmas and a happy new year.”

Amanda laughed and threw back her head to breathe in her gladness and her eyes widened as she saw what was happening in the sky behind them. She clutched Clancy and whooped at the sight.

“Look!” she exclaimed joyously, pointing to the west to the towering formations of still threatening rain clouds. They were all shades of purple, black and baleful as the sun shone behind them and the edges of the formation dazzled and shimmered with light and the sun’s rays.

“Oh my lord,” Clancy said, wonderment and euphoria in her voice and eyes. “It’s going to be okay, my darling. It’s all going to be good. That is the silver lining we’ve been waiting for.” She grabbed Amanda’s hand and started up the track.

“Come on, let’s go tell your mum and the boys everything. I want to get home in time to show them our silver lining.”

**The End**