

Moguls & Mistresses

by anex

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Sex: There is reference to a romantic relationship between two women which is vaguely graphic. Go read something else if this is not your cup of tea or you are under 18. If it's illegal where you live then move somewhere else!

Violence & Language: Some F words like flip and fudge are here but it's not meant to offend. If you are easily offended by the word 'fuck' then read no further. One of the characters in this story is subjected to a violent attack.

Teaser: Torn apart by blackmail and deceit, Darcy and Cass struggle to find their way back to each other. But when Cass's past again catches up with her... can love conquer all?

Authors Note: This is the concluding story to Tycoons & Tearaways which first began with Heiresses & Harlots. If you have not already read them - SHAME ON YOU! Constructive feedback always welcome: anex@hotmail.co.uk.

Now on with the show...

"It's a boy!" The midwife proudly stated as she handed the newborn child over to his doting parents.

"You did it baby, I love you so much. He's just perfect." Darcy wept as she pressed her lips tenderly to Mel's forehead. Mel looked tired, exhausted in fact but at the same time overwhelmingly euphoric. They both marvelled at the tiny pink fingers and toes and his dark fluffy head of hair.

"Have you guys picked a name yet?" The young OB nurse asked so she could make up the tags and paperwork.

"Daniel" both women said in unison and smiled lovingly into each others eyes.

"Daniel?!" Shouting out the name Cass woke herself suddenly from an alarmingly realistic nightmare. Clutching her fist tightly to her chest she sat up, caught her breath and blinked deliberately several times trying to shake the disturbing images from her frantic mind.

She looked around confused, her brain taking a moment to register her whereabouts. Wailing police sirens, crying babies and the couple next door having loud angry make up sex reminded her she was in her old apartment.

The temporary confusion from awakening suddenly gave way to the crushing reality of her circumstances. She remembered why she was alone in her old bed instead of in the arms of the woman she loved.

'Love.' She snorted in disgust to herself.

'Why love, if losing hurts so much?' She had no answer except to think that the perhaps the pain she felt now was part of the happiness she felt then. 'Was that the deal? Well if it was, it sucked - big time.'

Raw with emotion from the dark nightmare coupled with her current state of affairs lit a fuse on her temper, and it was only a matter of time before detonation. For a brief instant she buried her head into the pillow and punched the mattress several times in a vain attempt to exorcise the misery she was feeling, groaning aloud to voice the agony of her tormented heart.

"Hey-Hey! Cass, you alright?" Shelly came into the room looking for all the world like a poster for fright night and sat on the edge of the bed. Cass stilled her frustrations and buried her head under the covers, not wishing to unleash the beast on her poor hapless roommate.

"Who's Daniel?" Shelly gently queried suddenly wishing she had stayed where she was by the looks of things. There was a terminally long silence.

Too late the beast was awakened... "Nobody." Cass finally spoke flinging the covers back she swung her legs out of bed and sat on the edge rubbing her gritty bloodshot eyes.

Shelly tentatively rested her hand on Cass's left forearm. "You need to talk to her - tell her how you feel. God Cass, look at yourself. I've never seen you like this before."

Cass took several shuddering deep breaths to try and quell her darkening mood.

"I'm OK, really Shelly go back to bed." She pulled back managing a more even and controlled tone. "Honestly, I'll be fine." She even forced a smile but it wasn't enough to convince her friend.

"You're hurting, and when you're hurting you get angry and irrational."

"Yeah? Well now I'm over it."

"It doesn't look like it to me. Does Darcy feel the same way?" Shelly persisted.

Cass snapped her head round and glared at her friend. "SHE made it perfectly clear how she feels, at least I know where I stand..."

Shelly watched in rapt fascination as the small blonde volcano suddenly erupted and spewed out such a larvical tirade of words she could barely decipher the language.

"...and another thing just stay the hell out of my life. You are not exactly the poster girl for successful relationships, so keep your advice to yourself!"

There was a sudden loud banging on the bedroom wall.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP WILL YA ITS 7am FOR CRISSAKE!" a gruff male voice carried through the thin dry wall.

"YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP YOU ASSHOLE. I'VE HAD TO LISTEN TO YOU BANGING YOUR HO FOR THE PAST HALF HOUR!" Cass screamed back at the yellowing woodchip wallpaper. Some things never changed.

Following that rapid surge of verbal fury Cass propelled herself out of bed leaving Shelly floundering in her wake.

Marching to the bathroom she slammed the door shut ending any further discourse.

Turning the light on in the small dingy room she leaned on the side of the tub and twisted the lever on the shower. She looked at her reflection in the mirror above the sink and barely recognised the haunted face staring back at her. Awkwardly shrugging off her shorts and vest top she stepped into the uninviting tepid water. She stood there for several minutes trying to cool her temper as the gushing spray did the same to her weary body.

Eventually she began to wash herself in a somewhat automaton manor, but this soon gave way to a more urgent almost manic action as she tried to cleanse the pain she was feeling by literally washing it away. She scrubbed her skin harder and harder until it physically hurt, until she felt it matched the pain in her chest and would hopefully take over; giving her heart some respite she welcomed the alternative. But it was no good, she couldn't mask the pain in her soul. Darcy... I feel so empty without you... Sinking to her knees she curled up under the oppressive spray and cried in stuttering sobs, hot tears mingling with the cool water.

Her mind leafed through the short history of their relationship making her run through the gamut of emotions again and again. As she got to the last chapter however, she thought about what Darcy had said in the heat of the moment back at La Boveda.

"You think everybody has a price and will just do as you say for the right amount of money!"

"You did..."

She remembered how Darcy's eyes had hardened, she had never seen them look so coldly at her, the memory of it literally made her shiver.

She had never been made to feel so used and worthless. Being picked up and screwed by five pissed up frat boys in a limo, then thrown out onto the street with no clothes or money for her trouble came pretty close. But she knew what she was back then, she expected it and dealt with it. Her alter ego helped her cope with situations like that. But Candy was gone, and in her place was a vulnerable young woman, naive in ways of the heart, hopelessly in love with someone for the first time in her life and defenceless to its emotional cruelty.

The words echoed deafeningly around her head drowning every other thought out. It was astounding just how much pain such a small careless remark could bring. A part of Cass wanted to believe that Darcy didn't mean it, but it didn't change the fact she deliberately reminded Cass of her former occupation to hurt her and put her back in her rightful place it would seem,

BITCH! She may as well have ripped my heart out and showed it to me before stamping on it - it would have been less painful.

Her thoughts rambled on and twisted around in ever decreasing circles, until they tangled themselves up in a heap, overwhelming, frustrating and confusing her.

And then suddenly like the flick of a switch her strong survival instincts kicked in overtaking the urge to wallow in self pity.

She felt her anger boil up and spill over again, now this was an emotion she was used to, she understood it and would allow it to feed at her breast. If she could nourish it and keep it alive then she wouldn't have to feel anything else she reasoned.

After showering she pulled on blue jeans and a plain black t. Shelly's bedroom door was closed to her

relief, she didn't want to face her again at the moment. Shelly was right about her temper, when she got angry she got irrational and lashed out. Her friend had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Their dynamic as friends had always been volatile. Shelly partied their rent away, Cass would get mad and Shelly would redeem herself somehow and so it would go on. Neither one would hold a grudge for very long. She'd make it up to Shelly later. But Darcy was a different prospect.

She needed to channel her wrath at the source.

She poked around in the excuse for a kitchen for some food. Her grumbling stomach had been severely neglected and was now reminding her with some persistent growling noises that it needed attention. A packet of Jolly Ranchers and half a can of flat Diet Coke were all that appeared to be edible. There was never anything to eat in this fucking place, she slammed a few cupboard doors venting more frustrations as she wondered just what the hell they used to live on - cheese balls and cocktail cherries had somehow lost their appeal.

That was something she would add to her to do list - buy groceries.

Willing her brain to stay focused on other less traumatic topics she set herself a number of tasks for the long day ahead. She had to call her tutor and the magazine to somehow explain her absence next week - the permanence of her situation was unclear so she decided to go with sickness to buy some time until she could figure something out.

Next she would clean out the apartment. Cleaning, though not her favourite activity, was something of a welcome distraction and god knows Shelly was allergic to domestic chores so there was plenty to keep her occupied. Doing a quick inventory of supplies she made a long and somewhat expensive list.

Fumbling around in the hurriedly packed holdall she found her wallet, it had about \$100 in it and two premium credit cards - she took the cards out and studied them - a sudden sickening thought occurred to her. She had no money of her own to pay for anything. She realised that since she met Darcy, money was no object and therefore had ceased to be a consideration in her daily life. Darcy had effectively given her an expense account. She had plastic money for the first time in her life which she charged everything to and Darcy simply picked up the tab.

Without realising it she had accepted Darcy's lavish attention and she suddenly felt bought. She saw the plastic as symbolic in Darcy's control over her and angrily bent the cards in half trying to destroy them.

Do I have a price? Had Darcy bought me without me realising it?

Cass was not a material person, most of the time she had no concept of how much things cost apart from the basic essentials she herself could afford. Fendi, Hermes and Lacroix these were just names most of which she'd never heard of. And what had she ever given in return apart from her body. Had Darcy ever really loved her? Or was she just another paying customer. Once a hooker, always a hooker. The thought paralysed her mind.

Her eyes sadly settled on her watch, another 'reward for services rendered?' she now thought. Cass had never really owned a decent watch before and Darcy had given it to her a few days after she left hospital as a 'thank you for being there' sort of thing...

"No peeking!" Darcy said very seriously still wearing a devilish smile - and very little else.

Cass obeyed and sat cross legged on the bed. "Hmm, rustling... a paper bag... oooh you got me a paper bag! It's what I've always wanted!" Cass squeaked in delight clapping her hands together with her eye's still firmly shut tight. A huge grin plastered from ear to ear.

"If you're going to be like that..." Darcy then leaned in and whispered seductively against the blonds ear,

"then I might just give you... a paper bag."

Cass shuddered at the hot breath against her ear "I'll take anything if you whisper in my ear like that." She tilted her face up to receive the peck on the lips she knew was waiting to be delivered. Next she felt a square shaped weighty object placed in her palm.

"OK, open your eyes."

Opening her eyes she looked down at the 5 inch square black leather box in her hand, too large to be a ring box, she looked questioningly at Darcy.

"Well, open it." The older woman encouraged like she didn't know what it contained either.

Cass slowly teased the lid open then gasped in shock. There nestled in crushed blue velvet was the most beautiful watch Cass had ever seen.

"Oh my god! Its amazing!" Cass exclaimed hurriedly discarding its packaging she slipped the elegant but practical timepiece onto her wrist. The clasp was a complex deployment mechanism that Darcy helped her to close. It fitted her slender wrist perfectly.

It was Swiss made by Chopard and crafted from solid white gold with 12 diamonds encrusting the bezel, it had three loose diamonds encased by the round mother of pearl face that twirled around and sparkled as the watch moved.

Overwhelmed by the gesture Cass reciprocated in the only way she knew how - they made love.

Cass had no idea of the watches value until somebody she worked with at the magazine complimented her about it. To her shock she discovered that it was worth around \$20,000.

After she found out she chastised Darcy for being so extravagant but was quickly charmed back into line by Darcy's smooth persona. But that's how it was with Darcy, she was charming and generous and Cass found it hard to say no to her - in fact she couldn't recall refusing her anything ever come to think of it.

Clothes, jewellery and there was the question of the gleaming black Range Rover sport that turned up one day in the underground Garage. Darcy said they needed a more practical car than her AMG Mercedes sports coupe. Cass couldn't even drive but Darcy soon remedied that with a crash course of lessons - crash being the operative word. 'That'll just buff out' became a comical catch phrase after a while.

And so the list went on. Now, it wasn't exactly a chore to make love to Darcy, and she certainly didn't need rewarding to do so. But the mere possibility that she had loved her physically in return for gifts suddenly made her stomach churn. Had she? Was that how it worked with them? In fact the more she considered it the worse things seemed. She put that gruesome thought to one side for the moment.

It was the fate of the same watch she now pondered over. It was worth a lot of money, enough to start a new life perhaps. And right now its capital value meant more than its sentimental value to the apopleptic blonde. She therefore resolved to pawn it. Her decision finalised, she slipped it off her wrist and put it in her pocket.

The phone in Shelly's apartment was always disconnected, she never paid any bill on time 'it was against her religion' she used to say to Cass. She picked up the receiver just to check, the line was dead, a slight ripple of relief washed over her. At least Darcy could not call her. She needed time alone to think things through.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door, and her stomach launched itself into a spin cycle.

'Please don't be her, please don't be her' she repeated over and over like some sort of demented mantra as she peeked through the spy hole. To her overwhelming relief she saw a UPS delivery man standing there with a small parcel. Confirming her identity she signed for the package, thanking the delivery man she went back inside to see what it was.

There was no note, it was just a plain A4 size yellow padded envelope. She didn't need to guess who had sent it. Her hands trembled slightly as she held it like a ticking time bomb. She shook it a little feeling the weight and briefly trying to guess at the contents when all of a sudden the package started to ring to the strains of 'Don't cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me.'

"SHIT!" She cursed aloud startled by the noise; steeling herself she ripped open the envelope. Unsurprisingly she found her own cell phone with Darcy's pseudonym 'Francesca Dubois' flashing incessantly at her. A fleeting smile broke across her lips as she remembered happily why they used it. You're still mad at her remember, don't answer it. She immediately switched it off and just to make doubly sure she took the battery and the sim card out. The Pussy Cat Dolls were finally silenced as the phone lay in pieces on the arm of the tattered sofa.

She fought the sudden urge to re-assemble it again by grabbing her jacket and heading out of the door before her resolve crumbled.

The antidote Darcy had prescribed herself to treat all her personal crises' was work, work and more work. This particular course of treatment was proving futile to say the least. She had been sitting in front of her laptop since dawn with a pile of unread e-mails, financial reports and commercial contracts to review.

There was an executive committee meeting at 10am which she had not yet prepared for. And with the AGM only two weeks away, there were strategies to plan and dividends to forecast. Amy was now constantly fending off her senior executives including the vice chairman who was pestering for the budgets to be authorised. And to top it all there was an impending strike at one of her printing plants in France she had to deal with.

She employed a multitude of highly qualified and competent personnel to assist with the day to day affairs of her empire. But she was still at the helm and ultimately accountable to the shareholders.

The issues of running a multinational publishing corporation employing over 7,000 people, however seemed insignificant compared to her relationship issues with her seemingly now estranged girlfriend.

Darcy fondled the silver ring on her right ring finger. She concentrated on the Greek key design for a moment remembering clearly the time when Cass gave it to her.

It was San Francisco, last fall. They had taken a short weekend trip to see a brood mare that Darcy was thinking of buying...

They were standing at the end of the pier watching the sunset together. Cass's snow white linen shirt billowed slightly in the sea breeze, her wheat coloured locks fluttered around her shoulders and her form fitting vest top underneath didn't quite conceal the stiffened peaks of her soft full breasts.

"Are you cold?" The tall brunette observed with a slightly knowing eyebrow. She slipped her hands under Cass's shirt casually brushing the hardened tips with her thumbs before continuing to wrap her hands

around her waist pulling Cass gently closer.

"Not with you to keep me hot..." She purred then reached up and placed a slow lingering kiss against Darcy's soft yielding lips. A jolt of arousal coursed through their bodies making them both moan their desire.

Cass pulled back catching her breath, she looked up into those hypnotic electric blue eyes full of love that held her heart.

"Whenever you're feeling lonely..." Cass said as she produced a small box from the front pocket of her jeans. "And you're far, far away from me..." She opened it and took out the intricately crafted silver band. "I want you to feel this against your skin, and remember this moment..." Placing the ring on Darcy's right ring finger, she reached up and brushed her lips across the taller woman's, Darcy kissed her back with equal tenderness, moved beyond words at the simple gift she vowed she would wear it for eternity...

Cass had recently asked her if she had ever taken it off.

To which Darcy had given a long thoughtful pause, "No" she eventually admitted.

When Cass asked why, Darcy simply answered.

"Cos you put it there..."

She blinked rapidly to stem the flow of tears that threatened to spill onto her cheeks, and dialled the number again.

Darcy eventually gave up trying to call Cass when the cell phone she had sent her started to go straight to voice mail.

She was now staring at her own cell phone willing Cass to ring it with the power of Uri Geller, but to no effect.

Replaying the events of the last few days over and over was creating a vacuum of existence such that nothing else seemed real or meaningful outside of it. Hours passed by with no concept of time for Darcy. She just sat in her office waiting for Cass to call.

"If your face gets any longer I'm going to start calling you Seabiscuit again!" MJ had entered Darcy's spacious office unnoticed by her brooding friend.

Seabiscuit was a nickname she had been given by MJ in college for a variety of reasons, long athletic legs were only partly to blame but that was altogether another story.

"I've come to take you to lunch, I'm sick of seeing you mope around pretending to run a multimillion dollar empire. Then you are going to buy me something gorgeous and phenomenally expensive to make up for all the crap you've subjected me to recently. Deal?" The good best friend folded her arms waited for her answer.

Seabiscuit took a long defeated sigh. "Deal."

Darcy spent the majority of their journey from her office to their lunch venue listening to messages making calls and giving her PA a seemingly in-exhaustive list of things to do.

"The Regent!" MJ groaned in mock agony at Darcy's choice of eatery. She feared she was going to be subjected to a maudlin trip down memory lane and it seemed she wasn't to be disappointed. Their car pulled up smoothly outside the luxury hotel but instead of going inside, Darcy crossed the street to a nondescript looking bar.

MJ followed somewhat petulantly. "I know I said I'd buy you lunch but I was actually thinking of somewhere a little more upmarket than 'truckers and tarts'." She didn't know the name but christened it thus. "It's not exactly the Ivy." MJ was a bit of a snob when it came to dining out, she came from a long line of restaurateurs and regularly used words like *jus* and *roux* which Darcy found pretentiously endearing.

"Actually it's called O'Connor's and I am reliably informed they make a mean cheeseburger and chilli fries." She suddenly corrected herself. "Oh sorry, I meant to say 'beouf pate et fromage du frites avec chilli'." Darcy spoke with a heavy faux French accent to make her point.

"It's your colon honey." The attorney smiled politely as Darcy held the door open for her and they stepped inside.

The bartender looked up from reading the sport section and regarded the two women who just walked in with a strong sense of *déjà vu*.

Darcy scanned the relatively empty bar and picked her spot. They sat down in the booth she had occupied almost six months ago to the day. Everything was exactly as she remembered. It was a strangely comforting feeling. For a brief moment she felt contented, infused with a warm flood of nostalgic emotions evoked by the location. She fantasised that any minute now Cass would come bursting through the door complaining how hungry she was and order up a feast to sink a battleship.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" Darcy was rekindled from her reverie, vaguely aware that MJ had asked her a question.

"You've still not spoken to her I take it?" MJ looked up from the middle of a text she was sending.

"No... I think I'm just going to let her have some space." Self pitying now seemed to be the mode Darcy had set herself into.

Her dejected behaviour was beginning to exasperate MJ. She knew her friend well, Darcy would not subscribe to simple platitudes and optimistic philosophies. It was one of the reasons they were firm friends. MJ was always concise to the point of bluntness where her opinions were required. Darcy always sought clarity and honesty in her council and she was going to receive it in abundance over the matter of her tenuous relationship with Cass - and her reprehensible behaviour.

"Pull yourself together for god's sake!" MJ began with a verbal smack to the face for starters. "That attitude will get you nowhere. I've watched this fiasco unfold before my eyes and frankly I'm astounded at you for not being more resourceful and proactive in resolving it."

"I'm not giving up if that's what you're suggesting. But I think I'm just pushing her further away... if I give her some space maybe she'll calm down enough to understand why I had to do it."

"You see that's it, right there!" MJ threw her hands in the air in frustration.

"What?" Confused bewilderment spread across Darcy's face.

"Your expectations are all wrong, god you can be so thick headed sometimes. You can't expect her to just

understand and go happily along with your twisted plans, you've agreed to have another baby with your ex for Christ sake."

"I told you, I've got that covered. I just wanted to protect her." She emphasised.

"So you keep saying, and I believe you thought it was the right thing to do but it won't change her perspective, and you know I think she has every right to be pissed at you. She's your girlfriend and your soulmate - not your mistress. I don't think you get that concept too well."

"Mistress, what the hell is that supposed to mean?" Blue eyes widened incredulously.

"You've got to stop treating her like she's something you own and control."

"She's a free spirit..." Darcy banged her fist on the table making the other patrons turn around and stare. She offered each and everyone an icy glare in return before directing the penetrating gaze back to MJ.

"Is she really? It seems from where I'm sitting that freedom of choice is something you dispense at your discretion. Oh, and another thing, any more cheap shots about her former occupation and I'll smack you senseless myself." MJ's dark brown eyes flared menacingly at her friend.

"Ah-hem. Hi ladies, what can I getcha?" They were politely interrupted by the bartender. The heated atmosphere was unmistakable as he stood now rather awkwardly waiting for their order.

"A nice bottle of Chateaux Neuf Du Pape would be out of the question I suppose." She smirked at Darcy to defuse the tension who in turn snorted derisively and shook her head at her indignant friend. "There's not even a wine list," the attorney persisted with mock outrage.

"Two beers and two 'specials' please." The taller woman ordered for them. MJ would just have to slum it for once.

The bartender retreated to supply their order with a curious expression on his face.

They had fought and argued time and again over many things but there was always mutual respect and their underlying friendship was unbreakable. MJ was not saying these things to be hurtful, she had watched Darcy spiral into a pit of despair that she now seemed to be digging herself deeper into. A few large helpings of home truths would hopefully give her food for thought.

Beer and peanuts arrived and were placed on the table. MJ wore her best pout; Darcy merely shot her the 'stop complaining' eyebrow.

The attorney had made her point, the two women sat facing each other contemplatively.

Then MJ finally spoke. "You know, some people spend their whole lives searching for their soul mate, you could be sitting next to them in a traffic jam on the freeway and never know the difference. But you found yours and it is something rare and beautiful to behold when you see two people so obviously in love with one another." She watched the poignant expression grow on her friend's face.

"Lucy was your soul mate." Darcy stated sadly, she was feeling rather sorry for herself up to that point; then she remembered her friend's own tragic loss. Darcy had been too wrapped up in her own life issues at the time and had secretly never forgiven herself for not always being there for MJ.

"Yes she was." MJ swallowed a sudden lump in her throat and looked away, there was barely a moment went by when she didn't think about her. They had been together since high school. Lucy had been gone almost three years. She was killed by a roadside bomb whilst on patrol with her unit on the outskirts of Baghdad. MJ's broken heart and Lucy's dog Jody were all that she had left.

"I'm such a jackass, aren't I?" Darcy stared into her drink accepting the truth of MJ's words.

"Yes you are." Was the casual and almost conceited response.

"I should be grovelling on my hands and knees begging for her forgiveness right now shouldn't I?" She folded her arms on the table and rested her forehead on them staring down at her feet.

"Yes you should." MJ sampled a peanut, and then remembered why she didn't like them.

Darcy sat up newly invigorated and with an authoritative tone commanded. "Hurry up and drink your 'lunch' I've got some sucking up to do."

Cass wandered through her old neighbourhood towards the market. It felt odd to her being back here, she was a stranger in this community now. She didn't fit in anymore, the months she had spent living in Chicago had stripped away the tenuous hold this place had on her until it was all but a vague memory. In truth, she never really belonged here in the first place and now she wasn't sure exactly where she did belong.

She felt lost.

Texas was her birthplace, but even there she had no family to speak of save one person - her father - and he wasn't exactly on the top of her Christmas card list. He was probably still rotting away in the state penitentiary for all she knew or cared.

Growing up in a string of foster homes and trailer parks she had never really called anywhere home. There was only one place she had ever felt like she belonged and now that was gone too. She shook the thoughts from her mind and continued walking.

Eventually Cass made her way to a small pawn brokers she knew on the corner 4th and Vine. She stood outside looking at her reflection in the store window re-debating her decision to hock the watch Darcy gave her. She fondled the item in her pocket suddenly racked with indecision.

As she stood there struggling with her conscience she felt a presence... a feeling she was being watched. Her gaze was suddenly drawn over her left shoulder to a familiar statuesque figure across the street. She turned slowly round on her heel to see a tall dark haired woman standing there, watching her. She caught her breath and mouthed her name.

A bus rumbled slowly past blocking her view and she panicked as she lost sight of her. The street was bustling with people and traffic whizzed passed in all directions, her eyes frantically darted left and right but there was no sign of her. She ran a small ways up the street but she was gone.

"Pardon me, I appear to be lost?" Came the low smoky voice from behind her.

Cass jumped in surprise, spun round and stood speechless staring up at Darcy.

"I'm lost without you Cass." She removed her sunglasses and smiled hopefully, her shimmering sapphire eyes searching for any sign of forgiveness.

Tears welled up and spilled over onto fair cheeks, Darcy cupped her soft palm to Cass's face and wiped away the moisture with the gentle pad of her thumb.

They stood there in the middle of the busy street gazing into each others eyes frozen in time as the world

continued obliviously around them.

"Come back to me, please?"

Cass, unable to bear the weight of Darcy's imploring gaze any longer looked down at the pavement.

"I'm still mad at you." She muttered unsteadily.

"I know... but I'll make it up to you, if you'll let me." Darcy offered her hand, a few agonising moments passed until the young woman swatted it away and instead flung her arms around the taller woman's neck and held her in a crushing embrace. Darcy laughed aloud out of relief or surprise she wasn't sure. She buried her face in a mass of sweet golden hair as she twirled her around causing passers by to mutter their annoyance as they stepped out of the way - but neither of them could care less.

Darcy led the way as they walked hand in hand across the street to a waiting grey limousine.

Cass suddenly hesitated letting go of Darcy's hand. "Where are we going?"

"Home."

Inwardly Cass felt her heart soar into the heavens at the simple truth of the word.

Brian stepped out and moved around to the sidewalk to open up the passenger door. He gave a genuinely huge smile when he saw Cass which she returned with equal measure. Giving him a hug she slipped into the cool interior of the luxury car closely followed by Darcy after some perfunctory instructions to her driver. The door closed with a solid clunk and in moments they were gliding anonymously through the city towards the coast.

"Thirsty?" Darcy found she had no idea what to say, she felt like a stage struck actor who'd forgotten her lines.

Cass just shook her head mutely. The journey continued in a sort of strained silence. Darcy was obviously bursting with explanations and apologies but it somehow didn't feel like the time or the place to recite them. Cass now avoided eye contact, there was no way she could stay mad and convey to Darcy just how hurt she was when looking into those pools of blue.

After what seemed like an ice age both women spoke at once, Darcy laughed nervously and pressed Cass to go first.

"How did you know where I was?"

"I didn't, Brian spotted you... I was on my way to your apartment." She said rather sheepishly. Cass simply nodded and continued to stare out of the window.

The traffic on Ventura was heavy and the journey seemed to take forever. Cass was tired and she felt a headache coming on. Sensing her discomfort Darcy produced a chilled bottle of water from the cooler and two Advil which Cass silently accepted.

They arrived eventually back at MJ's. Darcy opened the door to be greeted enthusiastically by Jody. The excited K9 leapt up and bobbed about craving attention from both women.

"Where's MJ?"

"Working, she won't be home till after 7." Still apprehensive and uncertain about what to do next, Darcy decided to turn her attention to the dog.

"Hey girl, you wanna go for a walk, huh, do ya?" Darcy was unusually offering to take Jody out for a walk, she petted the exuberant animal and both were now gazing expectantly at Cass.

"How could I refuse." Cass stated rather dryly looking at both sets of beseeching eyes.

Darcy launched a tennis ball along the deserted shoreline as Jody raced ahead after it at full speed. The dog had no concept of the rules of 'fetch' and Darcy inwardly doubted they would ever see the ball again.

The swooping cry from the occasional gull and Jody's sporadic distant bark punctuated the silence as the two women walked disconnected side by side. It was cool even for January, around 12 degrees, and ominous ink coloured clouds boiled on the horizon heralding an approaching thunder storm.

Cass shivered slightly under the oversize Aaron sweater Darcy had given her to wear. She wrapped her arms around herself and tucked her chin under the neckline. Inhaling deeply she let the rich aroma of Darcy's scent on the creamy wool warm her thoroughly - oh how she had missed... still mad at her remember...

Darcy drew a deep breath and eventually broke the wordless deadlock.

"I really screwed things up didn't I." It was a statement not a question and it stopped both women in their tracks, Cass turned to face Darcy yet remained silently expectant looking up at her. "I never meant to hurt you Cass, I'm so sorry, I was being selfish and controlling and..." All the words jumbled out of her mouth at once and she internally cursed herself for sounding so pathetic.

Two small fingers placed themselves lightly upon Darcy's animated lips stemming the torrent of apologies.

"I can accept the deal you made with Mel... I don't have to like it but I can accept it." She removed her hand from Darcy's mouth and her expression grew stern and hard. "But if you ever - EVER speak to me like that again... you won't get a second chance." Cass emphasised the word 'EVER' with such a fierce intensity to her voice that Darcy fairly jumped to attention. Then her tone changed, tremulously she whispered. "Do you have any idea how cheap and used you made me feel?"

Shaking her head shamefully Darcy closed her eyes tightly at the rebuke squeezing the first droplets of water out from under lustrous dark lashes.

She forced herself to open her eyes seeing the hurt and pain she had caused reflected back at her. She silently prayed never to be the cause of that look again as long as she lived. Hesitantly she bent, relieved when Cass didn't move away, she softly kissed the side of her temple whispering "I'm truly sorry Cass." The words sounded completely inadequate to Darcy as she spoke them. She pulled away and bowed her head wishing for the ground to swallow her up.

"C'mere." Cass reached up with both hands gently framing Darcy's face; she knew in her heart her girlfriend was truly sorry.

Drawing those indelible lips toward her own, she breathed against Darcy's expectant mouth "I don't want to spend another second without you," then she placed an infinitely tender kiss upon her lips that could have melted the polar ice caps and ignited a dying sun.

"Wow." Darcy said as she drew back and lightly stroked the soft hairs at the base of Cass's neck.

"Wow indeed" replied Cass slightly breathless.

Thunder rumbled in the distance and the sea breeze stirred up the surf that now crashed in symphony all around them. Random droplets of rain began to fall as they resumed their exquisite kiss unmindful of the closing storm, consumed as they were in their passionate embrace.

Eventually and reluctantly they broke apart and hurried with their arms around each other back toward the beach front house with Jody in hot pursuit (minus the tennis ball as predicted).

By the time they made it back to the house they were laughing, breathless and soaked to the skin. Tumbling through the sliding glass patio doors into the living room they continued to kiss, but by this time it was more urgent almost desperate with unbridled desire.

Blindly they discarded chance items of clothing leaving a haphazard trail of wet rags and shoes through the hall that ended inside Darcy's bedroom.

Heavy pellets of rain peppered the windows and drummed off the roof and decking outside. The storm gathered pace and raged all around them.

Cass worked frantically at Darcy's button fly jeans. Giving up after the first two she simply yanked the saturated denim past the point of no return along with her white cotton briefs. Darcy obligingly stepped out of them in a sort of comical rain dancing motion.

They both giggled at the absurdity of their dishevelled states.

Darcy distractedly flicked on the cd player in case MJ came back to mask any sounds of passion. 'Wounded Bird' an old Charles & Eddie song aptly began to play.

The mood became more serious as they finished divesting each other.

Lightening flickered like a strobe illuminating their naked forms in the darkening room.

They admired one another's bodies with reverence as fingertips touched and mouths tasted, exploring, worshiping and loving each other.

Cass suckled hungrily all over Darcy's long elegant neck. "I need you Darcy, I need... everything!" she hissed as she felt Darcy's short well manicured fingernails scrape the skin down the length of her back, drawing slowly around to her belly until eventually her hands cupped Cass's sensitised breasts.

"I'll love you forever." Darcy whispered tenderly into Cass's ear, her hand slid around the nape of her neck as her mouth feathered the soft pale hairs at her temple. They held each other closely moving almost imperceptibly together to the slow sensuous rhythm of the music.

The younger woman closed her eyes soaking in the feeling and the sentiment as her body flooded with desire.

"Show me." She breathlessly requested.

Scooping her up like she were made of air Darcy carried her with ease laying her down gently onto the middle of the large soft bed. She covered the small blond with her tall leanly muscular frame. Cold damp skin soon became hot and steamy. Cass stretched her arms above her head blindly grasping at the chrome bars on the stylish head board to anchor herself for the wild ride ahead.

Darcy drew back from a very long heated kiss, her lips pleurably tingling and swollen tasted of nothing but Cass. It was glorious. God how she loved her - it was a form of insanity; she had to see her face, to

drink her in and absorb every nuance in her expression as she pleased this gorgeous young woman. "So beautiful." She murmured.

Cass looked up into those mesmerising cobalt eyes, hooded with longing, thick tendrils of dark hair plastered to her damp skin. Her lips bearing perfect white teeth as her body shocked her with little jolts of pleasure. She relished Darcy's wild need and groaned loudly begging for her touch.

The desperate throbbing in her clit matched the pounding of her heart and it was driving her insane. Every erotic image she had of Darcy fucking her was suddenly alive in her mind. It was all so utterly hedonistic; her sounds her scent her touch "I-want-you-so-fucking-much," she cried desperately before claiming Darcy's mouth again in another bruising kiss.

Reaching down with her right hand Darcy caressed the inside of Cass's smooth thighs then she applied gentle pressure and parted her lovers legs. The tips of her fingers traced languidly upward until they reached the soft wisps of moist hair at her apex. Cass ached to feel the touch from her dark goddess and pushed her groin into her probing hand.

She moaned in pleasure as Darcy lightly grazed her knuckles against her smooth slick labia. "Open wide." Darcy husked with a slightly untamed curl of her lips.

Cass willingly complied, "Yesss, fill me." She groaned feeling Darcy's own wet heat begin to slide rhythmically against her thigh as she begged for her lover to enter her.

"UUURRGH!" Darcy cried out and suddenly jerked bolt upright.

"Oh baby, did you... already?" Cass managed to form coherent words at last after her brain dimly registered the sound.

"No...! Jody's licking my foot!" She said somewhat incredulously.

"Jody GET OUT!" Darcy tried to shoo the little k9 voyeur but for some reason the mongrel was not willing to leave. Cursing several choice expletives she climbed off her very amused lover.

"Oh c'mon you dumb dog!" Jody pranced around avoiding capture until Darcy finally managed to drag the senseless creature out of the room and closed the door properly flicking the courtesy lock on as she went.

"You think that's funny do ya?" A dark un-amused eyebrow slid up in question.

"Well you do sometimes make some... strange noises," Cass said apologetically but couldn't quite stem the peels of laughter that followed.

In three long strides Darcy was back kneeling astride the slender hips of her tormenter pinning her wrists above her head.

She leaned in seductively brushing her lips past the soft peach texture of her young lovers cheek letting her mouth feather the curve of her ear she spoke, "I thought I sounded like... 'UNGH... YESSSS... OH CASS BABY DON'T STOP...!'" she did her best impression of herself at the peak of ecstasy.

"Nah, that sounds like you're fakin' it!" Cass judged after a moment or two.

Darcy's mouth shot wide open in mock indignation.

"Like you'd ever know what that sounds like!" And she proceeded to remind Cass for real just what she did sound like - several times.

Pale moonlight flooded the room bathing everything in an eerie blue glow. The storm had passed. Cass lay sound asleep, sated and peacefully cradled in the arms of her lover.

Though exhausted from the emotional turmoil and subsequent marathon lovemaking session, Darcy found sleep illusive, she felt something tickle her ear and reached up only to realise a tear had slipped unnoticed from the corner of her eye. She blinked several times to check for more but mercifully they were gone.

She carefully extricated herself from Cass's embrace, threw on an old LA Galaxy soccer shirt and slipped out of the bedroom heading toward the kitchen.

Darcy grimaced as she caught sight of herself briefly in the hallway mirror, her hair was like an explosion in a spaghetti factory and she smelled of rain and sex, yep she definitely needed a shower.

"Hey there stud." Slightly startled, Darcy spun round to see her friend in the living room. "It's good to hear you two finally patched things up." MJ was sitting on the couch reading something and munching on chips; she looked up and wiggled her eyebrows appreciatively at her friend's prowess in the bedroom - to Darcy's obvious embarrassment.

"Oh... er, yeah sorry about that." She'd only come in to get a couple of beers and something to snack on and was now painfully aware they hadn't exactly been too discreet in their lovemaking.

"Aw, aren't you just cute and cuddly when you get all coy, some afternoon delight eh - you dawg." MJ got up and playfully pinched Darcy's rosy cheeks as she moved passed her toward the kitchen. "Although Jody may never be the same again - she's very impressionable you know." The dog looked up at Darcy from her armchair like she was scarred for life. The brunette just scowled back at the silly beast.

"You know you live vicariously through me, if I weren't here to inspire you I swear you'd never get any action." Darcy said mockingly following MJ into the kitchen.

"I'm getting too old for that kind of action; I'll just stick with 'Roger'." She said as she took a couple of bottles of Miller out of the fridge and handed one to Darcy.

"Who's Roger?" For a shocking moment Darcy thought her friend had gone straight.

"Roger the 'rabbit', who else?"

"I'll remember to get you plenty of triple A's for your birthday then." She winked knowingly and tipped the neck of her bottle against MJ's, "Cheers" she said then added more sombrely. "Thanks for putting up with me."

"Anytime pal, anytime."

Darcy returned to the bedroom with two freshly delivered pizzas and a six pack of beer. The aroma of baked dough balls and pepperoni pizza with extra mushrooms awoke Cass as predicted.

"Dinner is served madam." Wearing a brilliant smile Darcy laid the feast out on the bed sitting down next to the hungry blonde. Within seconds the lid was open and in minutes the contents devoured without a crumb to spare, whereas Darcy had barely begun her second slice.

After she finished Cass sank back into the pillows, patted her full belly and thanked whatever deity for the divine gift of Domino's pizza.

Darcy took a slug of her beer then declared provocatively, "Care for some desert?" She donned that lazy sexy-as-hell grin that Cass found utterly irresistible.

"I dunno, what have you got in mind?" Cass purred as she pulled Darcy in by her shirt for a gentle kiss. Darcy's libido ignited again.

"How about something warm, sticky and very moist." She took Cass's hand and guided it to her sex.

Cass dipped her fingers deeply into Darcy's heat, coating them in her glistening wetness before bringing them up to lips to relish the taste.

"Who needs a rabbit?" Darcy groaned.

"Huh?"

"Never mind..."

Early the following morning Cass felt a soft warm presence next to her on the bed stirring, then a rapid thumping sound and then a snuffling nose followed by a big wet tongue licking her face.

"Urrrgh! Jody, you smell like dog food!" She cried as the manic mongrel greeted her bed mate enthusiastically.

A low chuckle rumbled from somewhere else in the room as Cass suddenly noticed Darcy sitting on the chaise reading a newspaper.

"Wakey, wakey, hands off snakey." Drawled the brunette.

"Ha, ha, very funny." The canine advances of the overly friendly Jody were defused as Cass rolled out of bed. She shuffled groggily over to where Darcy was sitting and cupped her face tilting her chin up she placed a good morning kiss followed by a happy lazy smile.

"I have to pee." She shuffled off yawning in the direction of the en suite then seated herself on the porcelain throne. "Aaaah." She sighed in relief as her bladder emptied itself somewhat noiselessly into the basin.

"How'd you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Pee without making a noise?"

"As opposed to you, you mean?" Cass laughed and shook her head. "It's truly like listening to Seabiscuit."

"HEY, where did you learn that name?!" Darcy asked incredulously, curse MJ and her embarrassing college stories. She then made a mental note to try and pee more quietly in future.

"Oh, I have my sources." The loo flushed and then she heard the noise of the shower being turned on.

Darcy peered over the top of her paper toward the open door of the guest bathroom; through the crack in

the door, she could just make out Cass lathering herself all over with foam from head to toe with a natural sea sponge. As she caught a faint waft of coconut shower gel and heard Cass lightly humming to herself.

Lucky sponge! Geez Edwards, when did you become such a perv! She swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry her heart rate now matching the thumping pulse of arousal between her legs.

In a flash Darcy was up, stripped bare and in the shower nuzzling Cass's creamy neck.

"Well... I almost had to wait!" Cass said sarcastically.

Later that morning, Cass arrived back at Shelly's apartment courtesy of Brian to collect a few belongings and to say goodbye to her friend. They had stopped by the market on the way after dropping Darcy off at her office. Cass figured she would buy her a few essentials as a small token of her appreciation for letting her stay.

With the large grocery bag in one arm she pulled her keys out of her pocket and moved to open the front door, but to her surprise she saw it was already slightly ajar, the lock appeared to be broken. She pushed it fully open without stepping inside and peered in.

Something wasn't right.

The room was empty but there was a strong smell of cigarettes. Her eyes settled on a packet of Red Apples on the arm of a chair next to a familiar Zippo lighter with a confederate flag emblem on it. A smouldering cigarette butt fumed in the ashtray on top of the busted TV. Feeling uneasy, she slowly placed the grocery bag down on the floor just inside the door and silently moved into the middle of the small living room.

"Shelly?" Suddenly she heard the toilet flush in the bathroom and as she turned towards the noise she saw him come out.

"Hello Candy." Her heart stopped, instantly she felt her blood freeze over. That all too familiar voice sent violent chills through her seemingly hollow bones.

Jimmy was her pimp. Cass hadn't seen him since the day she met Darcy. The day that changed her life.

"W-what the fuck are you doing here, where's Shelly?" She felt physically sick with anxiety as her stomach lurched up into her throat.

"Well that's no way to greet an old friend now is it?" Jimmy moved from out of the small bathroom across to the TV to casually finish the last drag of his cigarette. His pout turned swiftly to an evil leer as he immediately recognised the shock and fear his appearance instilled in his former 'employee'.

"You're lookin' good sugar, you missed me?" He reached out to cup Cass's face with a large rough hand but found his advances were curtailed by a swift smack as she rebuked the revolting gesture.

"You never touch me again - I don't work for you anymore - got it." Her voice betrayed just a hint of fear above her anger. Cass turned away back towards the door trying to put some distance between them whilst giving herself an escape route in the process.

A blinding jolt of pain jarred her senses as she felt his vice like grip on her upper arm as he spun her round.

"Aw baby I missed you." He said in a childish teasing voice.

Cass glanced at his arms; they were covered in scabby needle tract marks some of which were festering. His grime encrusted fingers relaxed only slightly but Cass already knew he had left bruises.

"Hookers don't get pink slips, you're still mine and there's the small question of the \$3000 bucks you stole from me." He pulled her smaller body closer to him taking in her new clean 'girl next door' sort of look. He slammed the door shut with the heel of his boot.

'Shelly had a big mouth' she made a mental note to deal with that once she'd dealt with this situation.

"I never saw the money Jimmy, she bailed on me." Cass calmly tried to talk her way out of this but could already see he was not buying it.

A feral smile crossed his thin mouth. "You think your so fucking smart don't you bitch."

Reaching round and grabbing a fistful of blonde hair he viciously yanked her head back as he simultaneously produced a flick knife and held it across the taught sinews of her quivering throat. He stared menacingly into terrified green eye's. "I know where you've been and who you've been with." He stated slowly and deliberately. "Fucking that rich bitch must have paid well, I'm only asking for my cut. Then I might just let you go."

"A-alright" Cass hissed as sharp needles of pain pierced her scalp where she could feel the hair follicles beginning to rip. "I can get you the money," she swallowed convulsively as she felt the cold point of the blade scrape threateningly against her pounding jugular. "J-just give me a few hours OK?"

He appeared to consider her offer for a moment, still holding her in an iron grasp, she could see his grey lifeless eyes were glazed and staring at her in a half demented drug induced haze. But there was something else far more sinister, far more disturbing lurking behind his dead eyes - and to her horror she recognised just what it was... lust.

"No, please Jimmy... STOP!" Cass tried to pull away again.

Suddenly he pressed his mouth to hers in a savage and brutal kiss. His thick slimy tongue and stale tobacco breath forcing its way into her mouth would have made her wretch were she not already trying to scream her lungs up.

Cass whipped her head to the side gagging for air and trying in vain to escape his foul clutches. She once more tried to yell but her cries were again smothered by his violent caress. Her fingers, clawing and pulling frantically at his shirt then at his greasy brown hair managed to tear his head back. He snarled at the pain then started to laugh at the pathetic attempts to fend off his advances, he relished the struggle. She felt his hardness pressing painfully into her hip and it sickened her to the core. She fought on but found her limbs slowly constricted of movement, like a snake he coiled himself around her small body.

"You wanna play rough with Jimmy?" His face grew dark with wrath.

"Oh god, please Jimmy don't!" Cass screamed and pleaded with him to stop, she knew only too well what he was capable of...

A deafening crash stopped the crazed man in his tracks. In a blur of motion he whirled around to see a tall figure lunging at him with blind fury. Cass cried out as she was flung to one side whilst her attacker and would-be rescuer wrestled to the ground. A howling flurry of fists, tangled limbs, muffled grunts and crashing furniture ensued.

Picking up the heaviest object to hand Cass swung at Jimmy with the base of a brass lamp. She connected with a sickening crack to the back of his skull. He instantly went limp and slumped unconscious to the floor in an awkward heap.

Brian got to his feet unsteadily and dusted himself off wiping his bloody nose with the back of his hand.

Cass raised the lamp again to strike another blow, her mind had temporarily flipped and she was no longer in control of the rage and panic that surged through her. Brian grabbed her wrist halting her actions. "It's over Cass, your safe now." He soothed and with his free hand took the heavy object from her grasp.

She looked at Brian then back at Jimmy and blinked, trembling with shock, she would have killed him - she wanted to kill him.

Brian took out his cell phone and shakily dialled 911.

"What in all that is fucking holy happened here?!" Shelly stood disbelievingly in the doorway at the carnage in her living room.

Two police cars were outside Cass's apartment block when Darcy arrived by cab. An ambulance with lights flashing and siren blaring was just pulling away. Brian had explained to her briefly what had happened over the phone, after assuring his panic stricken boss that Cass was OK. She rushed up the stairs and down the corridor pushing past the rubbernecking residents in the hallway, until an over zealous cop standing outside the door stopped her from entering the apartment.

Aggravated and anxious, Darcy tried to explain who she was, protesting so loudly that he threatened her with arrest if she didn't calm down. Then the door opened and a plain clothes detective appeared with two more uniform officers in tow.

"All done Gerry, lets go." He said as they filed out.

Darcy barged passed them all virtually bursting through the front door and immediately scooped Cass into her arms. She held and squeezed her tightly mouthing words of comfort to her.

"Did he... touch you?" Darcy could barely stand to hear the answer as she searched her soul mates eyes for the truth. Cass merely shook her head unable to find her voice. Overwhelmed with relief that Cass was safe and unharmed Darcy clung to her as if she were about to be swept away by a raging flood.

Jimmy 'The Snake' Coltrane - so called after the snake tattoo on his chest (that Cass always thought looked like a coiled turd) was well known to the LAPD. Drug dealing, pimping and racketeering were but a few of the endearing qualities they recognised in him. His sudden departure from this mortal coil would have been a service to society as far as the police were concerned.

Detective Baranski would be chalking this one down to self defence. Jimmy would be arrested for assault with a deadly weapon amongst a catalogue of other offences when he eventually came around; and it would be a long time before he saw the outside of a prison cell - much to everyone's relief.

Darcy drove Brian back to his small house in Burbank. It was a first for him being chauffeured by his boss. His swift actions and bravery would be well rewarded, the heiress would see to that.

Shelly was also impressed by Brian's heroism and slipped him her cell number just in case he felt like 'rescuing' her.

Cass stood gazing out over the calm Pacific Ocean from the deck of MJ's Malibu beach house, lost in her

thoughts. She had been crying.

"Hey." Darcy appeared, holding two healthy measures of Napoleon brandy VOSP.

"Hey." She returned flatly.

Darcy handed Cass her drink and she took a large draught of the dark amber liquid gasping as it burned her throat.

"Go steady with that." Darcy gently chided, it was 70% proof and was purely meant for medicinal purposes in this case. "It's only meant to calm you down not put you out cold." She smiled.

"I sometimes think I'm more trouble than I'm worth." Cass snorted a small humourless laugh and swilled the drink around the glass before necking the rest back in one go. She felt the effects of the alcohol almost immediately as if fire coursed through her blood warming and relaxing every muscle in her body, numbing and soothing her.

Darcy took the empty glass from her hand and placed it on the table along with her own full glass.

"There's certainly never a dull moment with you Cass. But I definitely think you're worth it." She gathered her young girlfriend to her and simply held her for a long time listening to her sobbing quietly at her breast. "Ssshhh, we'll go home tomorrow and soon we'll put all this behind us, I promise."

Though Darcy was secretly not looking forward to the week ahead, she still had to go to the fertility clinic on Monday with Mel. But right now she needed to focus on Cass and getting them both home and settled was her priority.

Chicago was enjoying a relatively mild spell although there were still remnants of deep snow and ice piled up the sides of buildings and open parkland bore the traces of a winter still far from over. It was a bright blue afternoon but high cirrus clouds foretold the signs of a change in the weather soon to come.

It felt like forever since she had seen her daughter, in fact it was just short of a week, though she spoke to her everyday on the phone Darcy had missed her terribly. It had been their first port of call on the way back from the airport. She was picking Gabriella up from Mel's and taking her home with them for the whole week before she had to go to Europe on business afterwards.

Their car pulled up outside a grand entrance where heavy ornate electric gates opened up to reveal a block paved driveway lined with neatly manicured privets. Cass's eyes widened as the car pulled up to the multi-million dollar property, this was the first time she had been to Darcy's old home and she was stunned at the stately nature of the place.

The house that Darcy had once called home was now up for sale. It was Mel's decision; Darcy had, after all, given her the house outright in settlement when they broke up. She did it for Gabriella more than anything and in a way she wasn't too concerned what Mel did as long as they didn't move too far. Mel wanted to live further out from the city, with fresh air and more space. Mars would be a good place Darcy thought sardonically when Mel had told of her plans over the phone the previous day.

Cass briefly considered waiting in the car but decided to confront the demon that had tormented her so. She reconciled that if you get bitten by a poisonous snake often enough, eventually you become immune to its effects.

Mel was unusually courteous as they entered the grand two story Georgian style town house. She even

offered them both a drink, Darcy declined however, stating that they were eager to get home.

"Aunty Cass!" Squealed the little girl as she came racing down the huge sweeping staircase virtually knocking Cass over in a fierce hug.

"Hi sweetie, gosh you're getting tall!" Cass laughed as she picked up the little facsimile of Darcy.

"Hey there, don't I get a kiss?" Darcy said acting slightly perturbed at being so outrageously snubbed. Gabriella leaned over and quickly pecked her mother conciliatorily on the cheek. It warmed her heart to see how her daughter loved Cass so. They were so good together, Cass was adorably goofy and had seemingly endless amounts of patience for the inquisitive little girl.

"Well don't you all look a picture together." Mel said cheerfully but it didn't match the sour expression on her face.

She turned pointedly to Darcy. "You haven't forgotten our appointment tomorrow I trust?" Figuring that Darcy had not told Cass about their agreement, she planned to stir things up between the two of them purely for her own amusement.

But whatever Mel had hoped to achieve by the comment it clearly had the opposite effect as it was Cass who confirmed they would both be there at the clinic. Darcy was surprised by this revelation but her expression remained neutral. After all, they had not really discussed the matter in any detail and now it seemed Cass was firmly lending her support.

This clearly irked Mel and her amicable mood quickly changed.

"Well, won't this be a cosy little tryst." She said in a clipped voice and eyed Cass surreptitiously for any signs of emotional weakness, but Cass remained impervious to Mel's attempts at rallying her.

Darcy noticed the exchange too and was very impressed with the way Cass was now handling her ex.

"Bonsoir Darcy, vous sont comment?" Constance appeared from the sitting room and immediately moved to kiss Darcy on both cheeks as they greeted each other like old friends.

Constance, Gabriella's French nanny and private tutor would be accompanying them for the duration of her stay.

"Très bien Constance, et tu?" Darcy replied in perfect French, genuinely pleased to see her.

Constance was almost as tall as Darcy, she was elegant with classic features, long chestnut hair and eyes to match - she reminded Cass of a young Audrey Hepburn. It was hard to gauge how old she was but Cass figured she was in her late twenties.

The rest of their exchange continued in fluent French and given that the only other person in the room capable of understanding them was Gabriella, they could speak freely to each other.

"I'm as well as can be expected given that harpy over there I have to put up with." Constance complained to her employer about Mel; masking the sentiment of her words with a happy sounding lilt to her strong Parisian accent.

"You have my deepest sympathies. At least you never had to sleep with it!" Darcy smiled amiably as if they were simply chatting about the weather.

Conversing in this way was always a source of amusement to them both and provided a great outlet for their frustrations concerning the truly incomparable bitch that was Mel.

Cass too picked up on the joke although she couldn't understand she sensed they were being subversive regarding Mel. She also thought briefly about letting Darcy whisper sweet nothings to her in that dulcet language... She shivered slightly at the prospect.

The only persons seemingly oblivious to this conspiracy were Mel and Gabriella.

"You want to share the joke?" Cass said once they were safely inside the car and on their way home.

"Later, not in front of the K.I.D." Darcy promised looking over at Gabriella; she was happily placing pony stickers into a book Darcy had given her.

They arrived home soon after to be greeted by Darcy's housekeeper, Angelica, who had prepared a veritable feast for their evening meal. The house was immaculate as always and Darcy thanked the portly Brazilian woman for her services before bidding her a good evening.

After dinner Cass bathed Gabriella, tucked her into bed and read her a story. Darcy came in to kiss her daughter goodnight and took a long moment to relish their togetherness. It was all she ever wanted or dared to imagine - they were her love and her life.

Closing the door softly on the sleeping child they headed for their own bedroom.

"Thank you, for today I mean with Mel." Darcy said as they were preparing for an early night by themselves.

Cass was brushing her hair at the dressing table as Darcy slid her hands around her slender waist and cradled her gently. She smiled faintly as she looked at Darcy's pensive reflection in the mirror.

"You're welcome, guess I'm learning to deal with her, slowly." She continued to brush her long blonde strands inattentively.

"You don't have to come tomorrow... I can do this on my own." Darcy began to pull away, Cass stopped what she was doing and put her brush on the table.

"No, we do this together." She stated holding Darcy's hands firmly in place around her waist.

"Together." Darcy echoed in relief, she turned Cass in her arms and they stood toe to toe, mere inches apart.

"I love you Darcy, no matter what happens, always remember that."

For a moment Darcy thought she read fear in those peppermint coloured eye's. She touched her lips softly to Cass's mouth and drew back to look again.

"Et je vous aimerai jusqu'à ce que le monde cesse de tourner et le soleil gèle plus de". Crooned the dark beauty.

The young woman melted at her words then added lightheartedly, "did you just ask me to take out the trash?"

They both collapsed about the floor in fits of giggles.

The following day they arrived at the McKinley Clinic to find Mel already talking to Dr McKinley herself. Perfunctory greetings were exchanged as the doctor led them all into a private consultation suite.

The meeting lasted around half an hour as the doctor explained the procedure. Darcy was familiar with the protocol having gone through this process once before, she assured Dr McKinley that she could handle the daily hormone injections herself.

Dr McKinley then examined Darcy drawing a blood sample before she administered the first of Darcy's injections.

Former and current lovers regarded each other throughout with an air of contempt so thick one could scarcely breathe.

And when it was over Mel left unusually without a single curt remark.

"Mel isn't going to get pregnant." Darcy calmly guaranteed her very subdued girlfriend as they rode the elevator alone down to the lobby. She pulled the band aid off the crook of her arm, checking to make sure there was no blood before rolling her shirt sleeve down.

"You've paid off Dr McKinley, haven't you?" It was the obvious solution and Cass was again reminded that with the right amount of cash you could pretty much do what you wanted. Darcy didn't need to answer that, instead she just looked at her as if to say 'what did you expect'.

"I don't understand, why are you still going through with the treatment?" Cass tried unsuccessfully to mask the jealousy, anger and insecurity she was feeling at that moment.

"I'm not, Dr McKinley gave me a vitamin injection." Darcy again assured.

"Then what is Mel going to get impregnated with?" She growled with irritation at being forced to join the dots up herself in this twisted scheme.

"Saline." Darcy replied almost matter of factly, and was that a slight smirk Cass detected?

They drove straight home after that in silence.

When they arrived back at the house, Constance and Gabriella were out at the movies.

Coats were removed and things put away wordlessly. Darcy was sure Cass was just brooding over the clinic visit. So she resolved to keep a low profile until she sensed her girlfriend had calmed down enough to talk about this whole affair.

She went into her office to lose herself in some work closing the door behind her.

After half an hour of staring out of her office window, Darcy decided to go talk to her girlfriend.

It was late afternoon and all around the house was sinking into darkness. She went into the kitchen and made two cups of steaming fresh tea, then automatically headed towards the lounge assuming that's where she'd find Cass.

Gazing out over the sprawling city Cass stood in silhouette, arms folded across her chest with her shoulder leaning against the window frame.

Darcy cleared her throat softly. Cass glanced over her shoulder to see Darcy standing there holding two cups of tea.

Is this a peace offering?

Darcy didn't want to fight anymore, she stepped forward and offered Cass a genuine smile that was like the morning sun. "Hey." She said happily. "I brought you some tea."

"Thanks," Cass accepted the cup.

"Are we OK?" She said hopefully, slightly relieved that Cass was at least still speaking to her.

"That all depends..." Then Cass said the most unexpected thing.

"Do you want to have more kids, one day... with me?" The young woman turned away from Darcy's restrained expression to face the window again. She took a sip of her tea then placed the mug down on the ledge.

They had never had a conversation about having children together.

"I suppose, yeah I would." Darcy answered truthfully though not entirely sure where this was going she asked. "What about you, do you want kids?"

Cass didn't answer the question directly, instead she turned to face Darcy taking her cup away then gathering her hands in her own took a long slow breath. "I never want any secrets between us ever again Darcy... I, I need you to know something."

She led Darcy by her fingertips and gestured for her to sit with her on the large black leather chesterfield. Darcy sat down quietly and waited for Cass to continue, a strange sense of foreboding started to ferment and she could sense the butterflies taking flight in the pit of her stomach.

Cass paused momentarily trying to organise her thoughts before she put them into words. She had not been able to rehearse for this, somehow she could never bring herself to picture this moment in her mind simply for the fact she feared it would be unbearably painful. But if they were going to move on, there were things Darcy needed to know, sooner rather than later.

Better to get this over with Cass, just like pulling off a band aid...

"I had a son." Cass said in a sobering whisper.

"He died... shortly after birth." Her eyes never left the anchor of Darcy's gaze. But the sun that had risen in Darcy's smile just moments before was slowly beginning to set.

"When?" Was all Darcy could choke out.

"Almost five years ago." Cass then turned away unable to look at her girlfriend any longer.

Darcy slowly pulled her hands away and Cass suddenly felt like she was falling into a black void. The tall dark woman stood up smoothly and like a ghost walked a few steps toward the window, she placed her hands along the ledge as if to steady herself. Cass watched helplessly unable to budge in case any sudden movement made Darcy's apparition vanish into thin air.

The soft murmur of the traffic and a siren from a passing fire truck seemed to be her only response. Darcy's face had now formed a neutral mask. So she continued, drawing another long shaky breath she kept her eyes fixed on Darcy, trying to decipher any reaction, but it was difficult.

"He was premature, just 27 weeks." Cass was now struggling against her uneven breathing and pounding chest to get her words out.

Darcy remained motionless.

"Mike, the guy I told you about, he was the father." She sniffed and wiped her face clumsily with her fingers. "I planned for it to happen. You see... I'd always felt guilty about having an abortion." She swallowed hard fighting back the tears and convulsive spasms that threatened to overwhelm her.

"But Mike was angry when I told him. He said I was trying to trap him. The irony was I didn't care if he stayed, I would find a way of raising my baby with or without him.

One day we had a furious argument, he started hitting me saying I'd ruined his life. Then he... he kicked me in the stomach. When I got to the hospital I was haemorrhaging, they had to induce me because I couldn't carry him any longer and I was bleeding to death.

He weighed less than a bag of sugar... he was so tiny," a faint smile crossed her lips as she remembered seeing her son for the first and last time. "The doctors said he would've had severe health problems if he'd survived, I guess these things happen for a reason."

The seconds ticked away like years and eventually Cass could bear her partners silence no longer. She stood up on very shaky legs and somehow managed to cover the infinite distance between them. She too gripped the ledge now alongside Darcy, and stared unseeingly beyond the park below at the sprawling grey cityscape stretching out before them.

It was like they were both beginning a new journey and this was the starting point. They would either walk in opposite directions or stick together on the same path. Cass, after what seemed like an eternity, let go choosing the direction she wanted to walk in and turned to look at Darcy in profile.

Her silvery eyes, pensive and sad sparkled with unshed tears, tendrils of dark hair framed her flawless complexion that now paled slightly from lack of sun or shock she could not tell. However, Cass could never remember Darcy looking more beautiful than she did at this moment and silently she wondered if she would ever look upon her beauty again.

Closing her eyes, Darcy clenched her jaw together tightly feeling a rush of pure anger roll through her. The thought of that bastard laying a hand on Cass before was bad enough. But this, she could almost taste the hatred.

She had to take a moment to think whilst everything clicked into place. It all made sense to her now, how Cass had behaved around Gabriella and the things she had said and done. Her mind went into virtual freefall at the thought of it all.

"I'm sorry Darcy, I meant to tell you sooner..." A steady stream of tears, cooled now unchecked on her face as she fought the will to sob openly. "I love you and if this changes the way you feel about me, then I guess I'll have to accept that and move on." She managed to finish her sentence before clutching her hand to her mouth and giving into the emotions that crashed through her.

In the next instant she was cocooned in a strong embrace feeling Darcy's open hands spreading warmly across her back in a soothing rubbing motion.

"Oh Cass sweetheart, I'm so sorry." Darcy cried, holding on even tighter. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know... I didn't want you to feel any kind of pressure... I didn't want you to feel 'trapped.'"

Those words stung Darcy more than she could ever have imagined.

"I love you, I love you, I love you." Darcy hushed into Cass's soft flaxen hair. Cass let go of every feeling she was holding until there was nothing left but Darcy's embrace and the strong reassurance it offered.

They held each other speechless for a long time letting the revelation swirl around them freely in the open before allowing it to absorb itself into the fabric of their lives.

"What was his name?" Darcy eventually asked softly.

"Daniel." Cass spoke it fondly.

"Daniel, that's a nice name." Cass looked up into the most compassionate and forgiving eyes, she attempted a small smile and was happy to see it reciprocated.

"I didn't mean to upset you Cass." Darcy brushed fine spun gold hairs away from Cass's teary eyes. "It was just... unexpected, that's all. And it doesn't change the way I feel about you one bit." She said with added emphasis and again pulled the small woman into a fierce hug to re-assure her. "Nothing ever could." She whispered.

The rest of the week passed by without incident as life in the Edwards household slowly returned to normal. By Saturday Darcy was getting ready to leave to go to Tokyo for 6 days on business. Cass was not going with her, mainly because she had to work and there were exams she was preparing for at college.

This was going to be the longest time the two women had spent apart since Darcy's accident; and it could be just bearable knowing they would speak to each other regularly each day on the phone.

Her internship at the magazine was coming to an end and Cass was starting to look for full time employment. Although a permanent job at 'The Look' was a sure thing Cass was determined to find something else that didn't involve her partner's influence. She felt determined to stake out some independence for herself and Darcy tried respectfully to stay out of it.

They all spent that afternoon at the park across the street from where they lived. Although it was cold they were wrapped up warmly. Cass and Constance were sitting on a bench watching anxiously as Darcy wheeled Gabriella up and down on her bike for the first time without training wheels. They built up a head of steam and with shouts of encouragement Gabriella wobbled her way along the path on her own. The three women whooped and jumped in the air shouting and clapping as the little girl managed to do a solo lap without putting her foot on the ground.

Darcy took them all out to dinner that night to celebrate her daughter's momentous achievement.

As they were finishing a desert of hot fudge covered brownies and ice-cream. Gabriella suddenly and very seriously turned to her mother and said. "Can I have a little brother for my birthday?" All three women stopped chewing and looked at each other in surprise.

"Well, princess, you see, babies..." Darcy attempted to explain, stumbling uncharacteristically over her words.

Cass took up the response. "What your momma is trying to say is that you can't just go out and get one just like that. Babies are very precious things and only two people who love each other can have them." She looked over lovingly at Darcy who was still reeling from the question.

"I think you and Auntie Cass should have a baby." She looked hopefully between the two women.

"We'll see, sweetheart, we'll see." Darcy managed to conclude before excusing herself to go and cough out the marshmallow that was wedged down her windpipe.

It was late when Darcy finally slipped into bed next to a snoozing Cass. Sliding her long arms under and around her small soul mate she spooned up to her. Cass shivered slightly as she felt her partners cold hands and feet come into contact with her warm bare skin.

"Cold." Cass grumbled.

"Warm me up then." Darcy replied gently into the blondes small ear adding a light kiss to test her response.

With a soft contented sigh Cass turned around to face Darcy, their noses almost touching.

"You never did answer my question." Darcy said rather indifferently as she twirled a lock of Cass's golden hair between her fingers.

"What question?" Blond eyebrows drew together slightly.

"Would you want a baby with me?" Again casual.

"Are you serious?" Cass lifted her head off the pillow now wide awake.

"Deadly." Darcy looked up into sparkling pools of jade.

"Then my answer is definitely... YES!" Cass bent and placed a kiss so loving and tender that Darcy felt her soul soar from her body and float away to heaven.

"Then I have just one more question." Added Darcy when she regained some composure.

"Try me." Cass was beginning to like this game of Q & A.

"Will you marry me?" Aegean eye's radiated hope.

"Hmm, that's a tough one... Let's see, you're gorgeous, funny, charming and incredible in bed... I think I'd have to say... I will!"

Epilogue (AKA - Closure):

Darcy & Cass were eventually married in San Francisco in July of that same year. The following May, just before she turned 40, Darcy gave birth to a baby girl, they christened her Danielle Morgan Edwards. Today Darcy and Cass live permanently at La Boveda - their vineyard in Napa Valley with Gabriella and Danielle. Darcy is now semi retired and loves to spend her days training polo ponies and changing diapers.

Which is just as well...

Cass is currently editor in chief of Napa News - a regional newspaper and entertainment guide for local residents and tourists alike. She is expecting their third child - a boy - Lucas Justin Edwards at Christmas.

Mel never did have another child. Instead she met and married a wealthy plastic surgeon from California, and now lives just a two hour drive from Darcy. She is still a galactic bitch but thankfully most of it is directed at her long suffering husband, Miles. In a divine act of karma recently, Mel suffered a severe allergic reaction to a collagen injection in her lips and now looks like a trout.

Shelly got offered a small part in a pilot show about a group of women who lead double lives. By day they are normal housewives but by night they are super sexy strippers with deadly assassin skills. Don't hold your breath to see this show in the fall schedule.

MJ fell head over heels in love with Constance and the two are currently on vacation in Bora Bora. Her postcard simply read 'Bye Bye, Roger Rabbit!!!!'.

Jody is still sitting out in the Edwards' yard wondering where she buried that tennis ball.

NOW THAT REALLY IS THE END.

If you enjoyed my stories then please remember to feed the bard. I don't even mind if you didn't like them, just don't be too mean or I might start to cry.

Thank you for reading.

Love anex xxx

anex@hotmail.co.uk