

~ Guilt ~

by Ali Vali

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If the thought of two women being romantically involved is not for you, then this story is one you won't want to read. But seriously if you are underage and live someplace where that is not allowed move on, literally.

Sit back and enjoy the story and if you have any comments you would like to share please write to me at terrali20@yahoo.com.

I want to thank my betas for correcting this for me. Jaden, Sue R, Lenore and Doc, you are all godsend. I bow to your grammatical knowledge.

This one, as always, is dedicated to the woman who is all my leading ladies rolled into one. When I write about love and everything that comes with it, I learned all of it from you. Thank God you have taken me on as a lifelong student.

Let me also take the opportunity to thank all of you that read these literary vacations my imagination takes every so often. Your wonderful notes and words of encouragement mean everything and I appreciate them all.

Happy Halloween!

**You're traveling to another dimension.
A dimension not only of sight and sound, but also of mind.
A journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of the
imagination.
There's a signpost up ahead, your next stop.
*The Twilight Zone.***

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The courtroom was packed. The trial had lasted three weeks and everyone that had been lucky enough to get a seat in the gallery was listening to the prosecutor give her closing statement. Even the defendant, who had watched the tall woman shred the credibility of every one of his witnesses, sat glued to her next word.

First Assistant District Attorney, Mordecai Sydney O'Shea had a reputation for grabbing the

attention of a jury and leading them with the facts to the verdict she was looking for. Her boss loved the news coverage after every murder conviction, and with her record, there were plenty of cameras always hanging around. Mordecai hadn't lost a case since coming to work for Gilbert Gilesby, the District Attorney, and everyone present was certain John Rohan wasn't going to be her first.

"Guilt. A one-syllable word that sometimes carries with it the most costly penalty for those that fall within its trap. For Mordecai O'Shea it's always meant victory. One more scumbag off the streets and headed for either life in prison or the needle, and at age thirty five she's piled up more than her share of kills for the justice system. But everyone who knows her is quick to defend her character and tell you about how noble she is - living life by the same code of honor with which she treats the law. You don't cheat, you don't steal, you play by the rules - always, and you don't kill."

"Sydney, as her friends know her, has finally chosen to settle down, and settle is how some of those closest to her would define it. For two years she's shared her life and her bed with Kay Millard, an uptown socialite who captured the Assistant DA's attention at one of the cocktail parties always being hosted in one of the mansions along St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans, Louisiana. Petite in stature, but not in personality, Kay put Sydney in her sights much like a lioness with a gazelle that's fallen behind the herd."

"Kay's main problem is that she doesn't live by the same code or rules that Sydney has set for herself. After twenty-four months, she's grown bored with the concept of a committed relationship and with monogamy. What she hasn't grown bored with is the O'Shea family money. As Sydney puts more notches in her gun belt for justice, Kay has started to accumulate her share of notches on other people's bedposts."

"So you ask yourself, is this a story about a love gone wrong where the end is predictable? Come on, we've read this a million times through history. A lover scorned and in the clutches of grief kills the one who has broken their heart. No, this is a different story, one which will explore the true nature of cruelty and of perseverance. In the end we will see how far greed will push one woman, and how far the other is willing to bend her principles in the face of pain. Mordecai is about to learn the lessons that can only be learned in *The Twilight Zone*."

"Ladies and gentleman, I want to first thank you for time and service. Jury duty is always something you think's going to happen, well never. You tell yourself that the day you march down to the courthouse to register to vote until that summons arrives. Then you take off from work to come down here and find out it's a murder trial, and the cherry on the 'I'm having a crappy day sundae' comes when you hear the word sequestered." The fourteen people in the box along the wall sitting in comfortable leather chairs laughed at Sydney's opening remarks. If they all admitted it, they would have sat through another three weeks of testimony just to watch the woman in action.

Sydney walked to the railing that separated the prosecution's table from the jurors, undid the

button of her jacket and put her hands on the old ornate wood. "You've been great listening to the facts that help you decide Mr. Rohan's fate, and that is what we're asking you to do, decide this man's fate."

The consummate communicator looked at all fourteen sets of eyes before she went on, making each one of the jurors feel like the center of the universe at that one moment in time. Each of them in return looked into the deep blue eyes; feeling like they could believe whatever Sydney had to say next. She turned and pointed toward the defendant, John Rohan.

"The defense will have you believe that Mr. Rohan's wife, Marie Rohan, just decided to walk out one day and into the arms of another man. Plausible enough story, this is Louisiana after all. Passion's in our nature." She stopped and turned back toward the chuckling jurors giving them the killer smile that had made women swoon for years.

"But let's review the rest of that story, shall we? Marie finds some hunk to replace her boring husband, so on a Friday afternoon she drives off into the sunset with this mystery man for a better life. She's so caught up in the rapture of new love she leaves behind not only her purse and the paycheck she'd picked up that morning, but most importantly - she leaves behind Bridget and Mollie, her two young daughters." Sydney ticked off the list holding up a finger for each point she mentioned. "She's so caught up in the rapture that she doesn't tell anyone. Not her mother, whom she spoke to every morning, not her children whose lives she cherished? No, ladies and gentlemen, the only person Marie told was her husband of ten years, John Rohan." She pointed now to the defendant and drew the jury's attention back to him.

"She sends John a 'Dear John' letter." Again the laughter came not only from the jurors but also from the gallery and the judge's bench as well. "Appropriate in this case I know." She picked up the letter she had referred to, sealed away for posterity in a clear plastic evidence bag marked 'State's Exhibit #42.' "Our proverbial red herring in this whole drama, the letter from Marie."

Sydney read parts of it again to strength her argument. "Tell the children I miss them but I'm not ready to come home. I've grown to hate you John. Your silence and anger are two things I can no longer live with. I've found someone else who fulfills the need in my heart and in my soul."

"I find it hard to believe that the one person Marie chose to contact after her departure in any fashion was John Rohan. The man, if this letter's indeed from her, she herself says she hates. She doesn't write to her mother or her sister or even her children. What I don't understand is why the only fingerprints the police and FBI labs were able to find on this page and on the envelope are Mr. Rohan's? Did she feel such contempt for him that she put on gloves to pen this letter?" Sydney held the letter up and walked back to the jurors' box. "No, ladies and gentlemen, this letter was written by Mr. Rohan to cover his tracks. It was hard for Marie to write anything under three feet of dirt concealed by the rose garden. A garden you could see from the window of the master bedroom she'd shared with her husband of ten years."

Sydney put the letter back on the table and picked up a polyester shirt next to it. Everyone had been amazed that after ten years of being buried, the shirt and shorts Marie had last been seen wearing were in remarkable shape except for a little dirt. "This is what really happened that

Friday night. Marie came home from work to find her husband sitting at the kitchen table. He told her he'd found someone new and wanted to make a life with this girl. An argument ensued in which Marie told him he was free to go, but the children were staying with her. That wasn't what John had in mind so he followed the upset woman into the den, where in a fit of anger he struck her in the back of the head with the poker from the fireplace. The medical examiner from LSU testified that was the first blow," said Sydney as she pulled the sheet back on the gurney that had first been rolled in during the trial. The staff at LSU had meticulously laid Marie Rohan's bones out after they had been recovered from the Rohan's backyard. Sydney picked up the fractured skull and pointed to the back. The gasps that had come when the police had first wheeled it in came again. "But it wasn't the death blow." She put the skull down and covered the bones as if to give Marie Rohan some of her dignity back.

The muddied shirt held the key to the murder they were prosecuting so Sydney picked it up again. "In a panic from seeing his wife moaning and bleeding on the floor, John went into a self-preservation mode. He did the only thing he thought would get him out of the situation, he shot Marie in the back to put her out of her misery and his." The back of the shirt showed the hole to support Sydney's story.

She put the props down and moved back to the people who would decide the case. It was time to tie up all the loose ends that would erase any doubt and any guilt that would come from giving John Rohan the punishment he deserved. "Had he stopped there and called the police, you could define this as a crime of passion. In the heat of a fight I struck and shot my wife, Mr. Rohan could have told you, but he didn't. No, this cold murderous bastard drove around for two days with Marie in the trunk of his car until he was able to bury her in their yard. Two days, ladies and gentlemen, think about that. Two days during which he went to work, visited his girlfriend and future wife, and went about his business while his wife was stuffed into the trunk of his car."

Some of the jurors shivered at the scenario and the rest glared at the seemingly unaffected John Rohan. The man looked like Sydney was talking about someone else as she spelled out his own macabre end behind the fences of the Angola State Penitentiary. "If it hadn't been for Mr. Rohan's arrogance we might've never heard from Marie again. Selling the house to someone who installed a new septic system was this sweet woman's chance to speak to you from the grave." The new owner had found the bones as he leveled his yard after the job was complete. Part of a jawbone led a team of police on a digging expedition in the Rohan yard for the rest of Marie's bones.

"She spoke to you in this courtroom as well when you saw her remains, her clothes and heard about her life. Marie Rohan wasn't somewhere living it up with a new man. She was dead. Had the defendant given her the chance she would have given him his divorce. She would've been happy to live out the rest of her life with her family and her children. This wasn't some loose woman who was out running the streets and hanging out in bars, this was a woman who did volunteer work for the church and drove her daughters to dance classes and Bible study. Go into your deliberations and give Marie what she's asking for, justice. The defendant, John Rohan is guilty of second-degree murder. Marie deserves no less than that verdict. Thank you."

Sydney looked at them for a second longer before turning back to her seat. The defense attorney

didn't have as much to say to explain away all the evidence the state had accumulated against his client. *If the idiot had only stayed in the house*, was his only thought as he sat down when he was finished.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you have heard from the defense and from the state. The court will adjourn giving you the time to weigh the evidence presented by both sides and we will meet here again when you have reached a decision. If there's anything I can do from answering questions to providing anything you need to reach that verdict, please inform the bailiff outside the door and I'll see to it immediately. Court is in recess." The judge banged the gavel once and the jurors were escorted down the hall to their new home until they came to a unanimous verdict.

Sydney and her two assistants watched as the jurors walked out. They stood and smiled at each person as a way of giving them a virtual pat on the back for a job well done. Unless the four men and eight women were brain dead a guilty verdict wouldn't take that long. The two alternates were on their way back to the hotel in case they were needed.

"Nice job, Ice," said Elwood White one of the assistant DAs who had worked on the case. All the new attorneys on staff wanted to second chair for Sydney. There was no better teacher with which to cut your teeth within the criminal judicial system than Sydney O'Shea. Win after win had earned her the nickname Ice, the other reason was her take no prisoners attitude during sentencing.

"Thanks, guys, it was a team effort. I appreciate all the long hours and weekends you put in. If the jury comes back early, drinks are on me." Sydney put the rest of her papers into the beat up leather briefcase as she talked, wanting to go back to the office to get some work done before heading home. She noticed the blonde sitting in the last row of the gallery when she turned from the table to go.

"I see Ice strikes again. Those women were creaming in their pants to give you what you want, Mordecai." Sydney laughed at the blonde's comment that had no doubt been said to get a rise out of her.

"Hey, darlin', I didn't know you were coming down here today. What's your verdict?"

Kay looked up into the blue eyes and smiled. It was times like this that reminded her why she'd fallen in love with Sydney. The power she exuded was intoxicating, but the black hair, dark tanned skin, blue eyes and classic features didn't hurt. At parties and political events they made a dashing couple. The tall dark idealistic avenger of the innocent fighting the good fight, and the diminutive fair maiden who spun words as a local reporter who did anything to get the full story.

"Guilty, baby. Isn't that what you always tell me?" Kay moved to the railing and leaned over for a kiss. "Are you free for lunch?"

"If we make it quick and we make it Chinese. The pile of wicked people in need of a spanking has gotten high on my desk while I was playing with Mr. Rohan."

"Come on, Captain Marvel, it'll be my treat." The small blonde grabbed the brown case on the table and handed it to one of the men behind Sydney. "Deliver this back to the bat cave if you would, I'm stealing her away for an hour."

"Are you just fishing for an exclusive?" asked Sydney.

"Would I do that, baby?"

"Yes, I think that's the only reason you live with me sometimes."

"You wound me, lover, but I'll let it slide since I do what I must so New Orleanians can get the news."

The steps of the courthouse on Tulane and Broad were crowded with people there for trial, attorneys looking for new clients and the police officers who kept everyone in line. One of the men in blue was busy watching the Mercedes roadster with the top down that was doubled parked. It was a toss up as to which got more looks, the car or the woman who drove it.

On a reporter's salary alone, Kay probably couldn't have afforded a nice bicycle much less the pretty import, but she had married well. Sydney's family had built a shipping company over four generations that was now worldwide. The O'Sheas were hard working and had millions to show for it. As the oldest of four from the fourth generation of O'Sheas that had founded the company, Sydney's money had been invested in blind trusts so there would never be a hint of impropriety with her job. Her three younger brothers had gone to work for her father, but the old man talked incessantly to anyone that cared to listen about his kid the ADA.

"Thanks, Wally, I owe you one." Kay hugged the large guy sitting on the hood of her birthday present.

"Anytime, Kay, and you," he pointed to Sydney. "Good job today. The guys were talking about you holding up that head, I'm sorry I missed it."

"Don't worry, Wally. You'll get to read all about it in tomorrow's paper," said Kay. The second her door shut the phone in her purse rang. "Millard here, talk to me." She turned away from Wally and Sydney a little as she recognized the voice on the other end. "I'll be there in fifteen. Thanks for giving me the heads up."

"News flash?" The nearness of Sydney's voice startled Kay into almost dropping the phone.

"You scared me, baby, and yes, I've got to go to work. Can you forgive me for skipping out on lunch?" Sydney just sighed and nodded her head. Their time together was getting to be a precious commodity. "You're the best, Mordecai." Kay drove off in the direction of the docks without another word or a kiss goodbye.

"Not the shoes, mama, not yet." Charlie Thompson looked like a little man in his school uniform.

The only thing missing from the navy blue shorts, shirt and socks were the black shoes the school insisted on to complete the ensemble. If Charlie got his wish, it would stay that way.

"Yes the shoes, Charlie, come on we're going to be late. It's just orientation today so I promise you won't have to keep them on long." The pretty blonde looked down at the little heart breaker and couldn't blame him. In an effort to speed up the process Blithe Thompson put on her own shoes.

The excitement of Charlie's first day of preschool was sharing time in her brain with the conversation Blithe had had with her friend Kay the night before. Even though their relationship went back to their first day of preschool, the two had drifted apart over the last few years. There were her responsibilities with Charlie, and Kay's relationship with Sydney and her work. Except for an occasional lunch and a monthly phone call to catch up, the two rarely spoke.

It was the absence of the closeness they had once shared that surprised Blithe about Kay's request. Sitting on her sofa the night before, Blithe had felt like she was in some twisted episode of the Twilight Zone as Kay spelled out the favor she was asking of her old friend. The light of morning still wasn't making it any less surreal.

"Why do I hafta go, mama? Don't you want me around to play with?" Charlie cocked his head to the side to work on his mother's sympathies.

"You've got to go so you can learn to read. When I'm old and you're taking care of me, I don't want you giving me the wrong medicine because you wanted to say home and play with your trains instead of going to school. I promise you're going to love it, Charlie boy." She grunted when she picked him up to hug him. With any luck he'd be bigger than her five feet three inches. "I love you, buddy, and I'll be right beside you all afternoon."

"Thanks, mama, I love you too."

The phone rang as Blithe pulled the older model minivan out of her driveway. A social worker for children's services, she was almost always on call.

"Hello."

"Did you think about what we talked about?" Kay got off the interstate near the river and headed toward the back end of the garden district.

"It's hard not to, and I still can't believe you think it's going to work."

"Blithe, don't be such a prude. Sydney just needs a little push in the right direction then she'll see the light. If I'm not the only one guilty of cheating it'll be harder for her to pull that righteous indignation she does so well."

"And you get to keep trucking in style too. Isn't that what it's all about?"

"I love Sydney, silly. I don't want to lose her over an itch. This thing will be over in less than two

months, but I still need the security an affair of her own will give me."

Blithe heard the wind and engine stop from the other end signaling that Kay had gotten to wherever she was going. "As a mental health professional I can't begin to tell you how screwed up your thinking is. It's your life, Kay, find someone else to help you derail it."

"You owe me."

"Dream on, girl, I don't owe you anything. Why can't you just be happy that you found someone who loves you and thinks it's a bad thing to sleep with other people? If you love her this isn't the way to show her."

"Because I'm not even thirty, Blithe. I enjoy sex, but I don't think I should lose everything because of it. Think about it and I'll call you later." Kay ended the call before Blithe could put forth any more rational arguments. Her first caller stepped onto the porch of the old shotgun with his shirt off. Stuck in with the chest hair was a mixture of fresh and dried paint flecks from working that morning.

Matt Franklin had gotten an itch of his own in the middle of a canvas and was certain Kay was only a phone call away. The aspiring artist smiled when Kay licked her lips and bumped the car door closed with her shapely behind.

The two had met at a gallery opening six months before and after an evening of conversation, figured they had a few things in common. The most important being an attraction for each other that Kay had wasted no time acting on. With Sydney working such long hours, finding time with Matt hadn't been a problem. But it was days like today, when Kay gave her partner time to put that brilliant analytical mind to work with a sudden departure, that worried her. Blithe was going to be Kay's security ticket to keeping Sydney and her extra curricular fun.

"Get in here and get naked, I feel like fucking," said Matt holding the front door.

"It's nice when great minds think alike because so do I, baby." Kay moved to follow him inside never noticing the car across the street. The pad the man put back into his breast pocket had her license plate number and the digital camera that was worth more than the piece of shit he was driving had a series of shots of the kiss the couple had shared before going inside. His personal favorite as he reviewed them was the last three when a paint-splattered hand grabbed a hand full of ass.

Hugo wasn't the sharpest pencil in the box, but he knew the lady wasn't there to look at the guy's etchings. With the amount of fucking around this guy did, it was a wonder he found time to paint.

"I heard Vincent Carlotti's gotten through the feds net again. This is what, the fourth time they've tried him and lost?" Nick, the other assistant assigned to Sydney, came back to the table and put a cup in front of her and Elwood. The three had escaped from the office after news of the broken air conditioning system had been high on everyone's priority list of complaints when they got

back from court.

"They need to pull their heads out of their asses and fry this guy. I mean everyone knows he's the head of organized crime in the city; it's not a secret. So why can't the feebies figure it out? Vinny's been off limits to us because all those wiretaps and FBI tails haven't been able to prove murder, but we all know he's doing that too." Sydney rolled her sleeves up and grabbed the next folder on the stack they had brought with them as she listened to Elwood complain about the federal prosecutor's inability to close the deal on Carlotti.

The coffee shop was fairly empty and was far enough away so that the usual legal crowd that tried to push deals for their clients weren't going to be stopping by the table. If the Rohan verdict came in, three cell phones were sitting in the middle of the table ready to receive the call.

"State versus Larry Smith. Drug possession with intent to distribute and gun possession. Wasn't this dipshit in court two months ago facing the same charges? He's out on bail so he can finish moving his product, fabulous." Sydney read the folder seeing that Larry had two kilos of coke when the officer pulled him over for a broken tail light.

"His lawyer called me and said dear Larry's willing to plead to the drugs and give up some of his suppliers in exchange for simple possession. He's willing to do five to ten," said Elwood after looking at his notes. "There's a tape of his arrest by the way."

"How sweet of him. No deals on this one, Elwood. Mr. Smith's going down to the farm for life, and it's going to be you that's going to nail his ass there. I already know who his suppliers are, and did he think I'd forget he's on probation for an earlier offense? Last time I checked the law, gentlemen, carrying a gun while on probation's a crime."

"Next we have the State versus Gary Augustern," Nick held up the brown folder. "Poor guy was having a bad day so he shot and killed four people at a gas station last night. This one's hot off the presses, boss."

"Was it the crazy weather that made him do it?" asked Sydney.

"The crack cocaine he'd smoked and the fact they were out of Pringles drove him to commit multiple homicide."

"Can happen to the best of us. Did he ask for a cash donation while committing this heinous crime?"

"Yes, it was the least they could do since they were out of the chips he was craving," answered Nick.

"Start working the brief for the grand jury and make sure you're both at the bail hearing. This guy gets remanded. Don't let some pansy judge let this one lose on society. Gary's going down for first degree murder and tell his public defender we're going for the death penalty." Sydney broke the pile into four smaller piles and sent the two men back to the office to hand out assignments.

Capital cases took precedence so some of her colleagues would get the rest of the cases that had been waiting for her.

She pulled out her laptop and started looking for the case files that would be needed to start building a capital case. Behind Sydney the door opened letting in new customers in search of a chocolate malt to celebrate a successful first day of school.

"Can you believe we can make our own paint, mama?" Charlie held up the small container the teacher had given each child to take home to make a finger painting for the following Monday. The project had been easy but fun enough to build excitement in each student to want to come back the next week.

"And red too. That's your favorite color. Now go find us a table and I'll get us a treat." Blithe moved to the counter to order while keeping an eye on her son as he climbed into a chair and pulled a sheet of blank paper out of the new school bag she had bought.

Memories of her school days came back with a smile. The end of the summer always meant new pencils, crayons and notebooks. Blithe just hoped Charlie would love school as much as she had. Her trip down memory lane made Blithe miss little dexterous fingers open the finger paint and the beginning of Charlie's masterpiece.

Charlie poured some of the paint on one of the sheets he'd taken out so he could coat his hands. With that done he pressed them into the middle of the second sheet, pleased with the result when he lifted them off. Another coating brought forth another set of handprints, but no room to put another set. The little boy's laughter was drowned out by the blender the waiter was using to make the two malts. With a fresh coat of paint on his hands, Charlie looked for a new canvas. A quick look around the shop found him the perfect spot. It was stark white, broad and looked like it was in dire need of adornment. Leaving more than a little bit of paint on his chair when he climbed down, he lost no time in zeroing in on his target when his legs hit solid ground.

Sydney's head popped up when Blithe yelled, "Charlie, no!" She wondered why right before a little cyclone ran into her back. The attorney turned in her chair to find a contrite child holding up red tinted hands like they were frozen in that position. She guessed that the rest of the paint she was now on the Egyptian cotton covering her shoulders.

"Charles William Thompson, you're in so much trouble, young man." The reprimand Blithe started with reminded Sydney of her mother and the constant stream of fussing caused by her four children from hell.

"Are there two red hand prints on my back?" Sydney asked the little boy who was still holding his hands up in front of him.

"Yeah sorry." He turned and looked at his mother hoping not to find too mad a face from the woman still at the counter. In front of him, Sydney reached into her bag and pulled out a badge.

"I could place you under arrest for painting up an officer of the law, young man." The joke

backfired on her when the small boy's lip started to tremble with fear. "I'm kidding, come on don't cry. I think you might be in more trouble from your mother than you are from me." She pointed to the pretty blonde and smiled. Before there could be any other conversation her phone and pager went off at the same time. "O'Shea." Sydney answered the call. "All right, round up Frick and Frack and tell them I'll meet them at the courthouse."

"I'm so sorry for my son." Blithe had moved closer to the table in an attempt to calm any bad feelings down since she saw the woman was getting ready to leave.

"Don't be, we'll blame it on his temperamental artist side. I'm sorry to cut this short, but I'm due back in court."

Blithe looked at the good-looking woman and wanted to draw out the conversation. Since Charlie's birth sent her girlfriend packing, no one that had gotten past asking her name without striking out. This person seemed nice and didn't seem like some idiot that was just looking for a score.

"Can we make it up to you?"

"It's really all right. I'm sure Charles William Thompson didn't mean it and I'm guessing you don't let him play with oil based enamels so a good run through the heavy duty cycle should get it right out."

"I'm sure it will but we'd still like to make it up to you." Blithe knelt by Charlie and started to wipe the excess paint off his hands before he got into any more trouble.

"How about you two buy me a cup of coffee tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's Saturday so if you don't mind waiting until our park play date's over, we'll meet you back here at, let's say two."

"What's there to do at the park, Charlie?" Sydney asked him so he wouldn't feel like he was being left out of the conversation.

"Swings are my favorite but I don't have anybody to push me high like all the other kids do. Mama tries but Gabriel's dad does the best job. He's really big and my mama's really not."

Sydney stood up and looked down at the blonde and her black haired child. She and Kay had never talked about children but looking at Charlie made her regret never taking the time to have that conversation. If she ever had a son it would have been nice to look at such a small person who looked so much like she did. Charlie looked nothing like his mother with the black shiny hair and big blue eyes. Sydney shook her head and chalked her thoughts up to some innate drive to perpetuate her family line.

Charlie followed her trip from the chair to her feet and was in awe when the big body finally unfolded itself. This lady was a lot bigger than Gabriel's dad was, and he'd bet she was a

champion swing pusher.

"Wow! You sure are big."

Sydney laughed and knelt down as well to be on the level of the two Thompsons. "I'm hoping you meant that in a good way or I really will bring you and your mother in for insulting my workout plan."

"I just think you would be great pushing me on the swing. I could go higher than Gabriel if you were there to push me," Charlie explained.

Sydney's phone rang again before she could comment on his request. "O'Shea. Yeah I heard you the first time. Have someone outside waiting because I'm not going to have time to park the car. I should've just stayed in the sauna since I had a feeling they weren't going to be out long."

"Mama, you hafta get her to come tomorrow. Just once I'd like to beat Gabriel at the swings."

Blithe thought of the best solution for the both of them. If she talked the woman into coming to the park, Charlie would be happy and if she got to do the woman a favor maybe she'd feel indebted enough to make her happy too. "We could give you a ride to wherever you're late for, then when you're done we could bring you back here for that cup of coffee. Sound good?"

"I can't let you do that, Miss."

"It's not letting me when I offer, and please call me Blithe. You've already met Charlie."

"Well Blithe and Charlie the law abiding citizens of New Orleans will thank you if you could do that."

"I'll ask what you mean in the car and now that you know who we are, what's your name?"

"Mordecai O'Shea."

"What?" asked Blithe.

"Mordecai O'Shea's my name. You just asked me, remember?"

"But you're a woman."

"Last time I checked. I'm also the eldest of four and the subject of my mother's sense of humor, or maybe it was her love of Seuss. I'm still trying to figure it out."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't tell me you've never read Dr. Seuss. You have a small child, I thought it was a prerequisite."

"What book?" Blithe watched as Sydney kept packing her bag looking up only to wave at the guy behind the counter.

"So...

Be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray
Or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea,
You're off to Great Places!
Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting.
So...get on your way!"

The voice sounded like it had run through the lines more than once and it made Blithe and Charlie laugh. After hearing them they had in fact read the book Sydney was quoting and it had never occurred to Blithe that someone would actually name their child for it.

"Oh, the Places You'll Go! by Dr. Seuss, is that right?"

"That's right Ms. Thompson. I have to thank her though, I've gotten in more fights because of that name than I care to remember, and because of that I can hold my own in any situation. To cut down on the teasing after I turned ten, I go by my middle name."

The café worker brought out the two malts and gave Sydney a slip to sign. Blithe moved to pick up all of Charlie's things intending to give Sydney a ride. The busy phone made an appearance again as Sydney dialed her office.

"Sal, meet me in front of Judge Rose's court with a fresh shirt and please don't ask what happened to the old one." Sally had been her executive assistant since she had come to work for Gilbert. The old woman was an outcast in the District Attorney's office because of her attitude, but had loved Sydney from the first day they had been introduced. But just because she loved her didn't mean she didn't love giving her a hard time.

"You're late already, O'Shea. The only thing you got going for you is that it's after twelve noon, cause you know how much pleasure that man gets out of hanging people." Sally said referring to the judge.

"I'm on my way, beautiful. If I don't make it in time go on in and let him make doe eyes at you."

The young man behind the counter waved Blithe off along with her money. Sydney had put the two malts on her tab, which surprised him after seeing her shirt. "Are you going to tell me what your middle name is, or shall Charlie and I call you Mordecai?"

Only my mother and father call me that without me putting my fists up, and Kay but her calling me that is starting to work my last nerve. The thought went through Sydney's head as she looked at the twinkling green eyes looking up at her.

"Wait don't tell me, it's Ali Van Allen?" Blithe laughed and got a smile out of Sydney with her joke.

"It's Sydney, funny lady. I really do have to get going."

Another police officer was waiting for Sydney outside on the sidewalk, surprised when she got out of the minivan with peeling paint. Sally was waiting with him with a fresh shirt under her arm, retrieved from the drawer of Sydney's desk. Blithe sat behind the wheel and wanted nothing more than to drive off after getting over the shock of who she had accidentally run into. After seeing Sydney for the first time, Kay's favor didn't sound like such a gross proposition.

"Thanks for the ride. If you want you can go. I don't know how long this is going to take, and I don't want you and the mad painter to be bored."

"How are you going to get your car?"

"I'll get someone from my office to bring me back. Thanks for the ride over here."

Blithe watched as Sally stepped to the passenger side of her van and held up a new shirt. In the middle of the commotion of the Tulane and Broad streets corner, Sydney stepped out and stripped the dirty one off. If anyone headed up the stairs to the courthouse noticed none of them slowed down to stare. Blithe found herself unable to look away though. Why Kay would take any chances on losing the fabulously built Sydney was beyond comprehension at this point. Not that physical attributes should be the one deciding factor. Sydney had proved to have a wonderful personality, but the abdominal muscles she was gawking at were hard to ignore.

"Mind if we come in and watch?"

"Sure, I'm not sure how exciting it's going to be, but you and Charlie are welcome." Sydney made short work of the buttons on the new shirt before tucking it into her pants. The fine, almost linen, cotton garments with her initials on the cuffs were gifts from her mother.

Gracelia O'Shea's full time job was taking care of her family. She still shopped for all four of her children as well as her husband and joked with her friends that the five O'Sheas were under the impression they had a magic underwear and sock drawer. All of the girlfriends and then wives knew when it was time to throw in the towel to the small Italian woman's shopping sprees. The one thing the women were grateful for was that Grace had not added them to her list. The other thing that was perfectly clear was when you riled the Irish and Italian ire in Grace's children by saying a cross word about her, all four of them came out swinging first without asking questions. The two women that had married into the family could only hope to instill such family loyalty in their future children.

"If you're good enough, maybe Charlie can bring you to show and tell."

"I'm good enough, don't worry about that. If that jury comes back with a not guilty verdict I'll trade cars with you."

"Mighty confident."

"I'm just sure about this one. Mr. Rohan has no one to blame for this unfortunate afternoon but himself. I'm a firm believer that everyone is free to make their choices in life, with that comes the responsibility of owning up to those choices."

"Spoken like a true attorney."

"I don't expect anything less from myself, ma'am."

"And polite too. Go on before I make you any later. Charlie and I'll be right in as soon as I find a parking spot." Sydney took the permit Sally was holding up without asking how she knew she'd need one, and handed it over to Blithe.

"Just put this on the dash and pull up a little." Sydney pointed to the curb ahead of them. "Good bye, Charlie, I'll see you in a little while." The attorney walked at a fast pace up the stairs followed by her staff. Blithe looked at the long legs and groaned.

"Maybe she won't notice, Charlie."

"Please rise." The bailiff yelled over the din in the large courtroom.

Judge Jude Rose situated his robe before banging down the gavel. "Be seated. Madame Forewoman, you've informed my bailiff you have reached a verdict?"

"Yes, sir your honor." The judge looked over the form his bailiff had taken from the woman with the tag Juror #3 and read it over.

"Everything seems to be in order, officer, if you would," instructed the judge.

"We the jury, in the above entitled case find the defendant, John Rohan, guilty of second degree murder."

Screaming from both sides of the families involved started the moment the bailiff had finished, prompting the judge to start banging his gavel from a standing position. "Sit down and shut up. This is a court of law, people, not an episode of the Springer Show. One more outburst like that and I'll have the room cleared." The noise stopped so abruptly it seemed like someone had flipped a switch.

Sydney was hiding a smile behind her hand as she sat back down. When the screaming had started she had stood up and faced the gallery. It was a reaction she'd learned when an unhappy family member in a previous case had flung a concealed rock at the back of her head. Six stitches had taught her to be vigilant ever since.

"And, Ms. O'Shea, care to tell me why you have two lollipops stuck to the back of your pants?" asked Jude getting a small laugh out of the court staff. If there was one thing you could count on from Sydney, aside from always being prepared, was her immaculate appearance.

Sydney swung around again to find two sets of innocent Thompson eyes staring back. "I apologize for my appearance, your honor, it won't happen again."

"Mr. Rohan, I'll see you in three weeks for sentencing. Bailiff, take Mr. Rohan into custody please. We're adjourned." The gavel wrapped against the small block it sat on once again, turning the noise back on when the judge stood. "Sydney, a moment please."

"Yes, sir?"

"I hear you caught the Augustern case."

"Yes, sir, and don't worry, no deals on this one. I'll be ready to go to trial by next month."

"Just like your father, Mordecai, that's what I love about you. I just wanted to check my facts. One of the people killed in the convenience store was a friend of Victoria's, so you'll have my wife to answer to if you cut any deals."

"Don't worry, Mr. Jude, deals aren't in my nature on cases like this."

"Give your parents my best and tell them we'll see them at the end of next month for their anniversary." The old O'Shea family friend patted Sydney on the back and headed for his chambers.

"I'm so sorry." Blithe was standing by the railing holding Charlie. "I wanted to call you back from the car, but you were already running late."

"You saw two suckers sticking to the back of my leg and you let me come in here like that?"

"Um...yeah?"

"I meant that thing about having people arrested that I told Charlie earlier."

"How about we take you to dinner to celebrate your victory, then I'll give you the name of my dry cleaner for all the crimes Charlie and I've committed against your clothing?"

"Is there anything else hiding under your seats?"

"I have a three year old, I'm not making any promises. What's the matter, you've never gotten dirty in your life?" Blithe held the gate open for Sydney hoping she would walk through and accept her invitation. They had only just met but she was guessing the attorney was kidding about being mad.

"I haven't been messy since the early nineties, it's not a look I do well. As for dinner, I'll have to take my chances. Do you mind waiting while I make a quick phone call?"

"Please take your time, it's early yet." Blithe sat in the first row and watched the elderly couple wait until Sydney had finished her call. The DA was frustrated when Kay didn't answer her cell phone and the newsroom told her they didn't know where she was or that they were aware that she was working on a story.

"Ms. O'Shea." The old man got up and helped his wife off the bench seat. They had sat through the testimony and watched as the charismatic woman defended the dead Marie Rohan's honor. They had waited so long for this day and could only thank God they had lived to see it.

"Mr. and Mrs. Bailey, I'm so sorry about your daughter. I hope that today's outcome has brought some sense of closure with all this. That seems like a trite thing to say in the face of your pain, but I'm glad we could do our part to punish the person responsible for Marie's death."

"You will be in our family's prayers from this day forth, Ms. O'Shea. My Marie deserved better than she got in her life but she couldn't have found a better champion from the grave." The older woman stepped forward and hugged Sydney to her as her way of saying thank you. The simple act showed Blithe the other side of what people suffer through and what set them on the path of healing. She tried to do that everyday with the children she saw, but Sydney had done it with a good case.

"Thank you, ma'am, I can't get enough of those."

"Is this your son?" Mrs. Bailey pointed to Charlie.

"No, ma'am, he's my friend though, and if you and Mr. Bailey will excuse us, he and his mom were taking me out to dinner. If there's anything you need from me, please just call me at home or at the office. You still have the numbers right?"

"Yes we do, and you all have a good night."

"Silly, will you come to push me on the swings?" asked Charlie as they walked out of the empty courtroom and took the back stairs to avoid the press. Gilbert and Sydney's two assistants on the case were doing a good enough job talking to them without her.

"Silly?"

"He tried to pronounce Sydney and it hasn't worked out yet," explained Blithe.

"Charlie, can you say Cai?"

"Cai," he faithfully repeated after his new hero.

"Let's go with that then."

It was after nine before the three new friends got out of the pizza parlor that Blithe had driven to from the courthouse. The one thing that struck Sydney as she carried the sleeping Charlie to the van was that it had been forever since she had laughed as easily as she had that night. The new shirt that Sally had brought out to her was now covered in sauce along the sleeves where the little boy touched every time he wanted to get her attention, but the neat fanatic didn't seem to mind.

Blithe turned in the driver's seat when they arrived back at the coffee shop so Sydney could get her car, and looked at her passenger. She had a feeling that the exuberant Charlie had broadened the scope of Sydney's orderly life after just one afternoon.

"Can I confess something to you?" asked Blithe.

"Sure."

"I know Kay."

"And?"

"You've never heard of me?" Blithe found it hard to believe that one of her oldest friends hadn't mentioned her or her son to the person she lived with.

"I'm sorry but no. If she had, I'd have said something when we met this afternoon. I can't explain Kay's actions, but she likes to keep her secrets every so often, and I'm afraid I'm so busy most of the time I don't take the time to question why."

"I just thought you should know that we know each other."

Sydney smiled and tried to decipher what Blithe was talking about. "I'll mention it to her when we get home if it'll make you feel better. Thank you for dinner and celebrating with me. You and your son were great."

"You'll make his day if you show up tomorrow to push him on the swing."

"I'll try, Blithe, but I can't make any promises. I've got a big case coming up, which means my time is going to be wrapped up in that for weeks to come."

"If you get a chance it's the park before you get to the university. I'd like it if you came."

"If you know Kay, then you know that we live together."

"And? What's your point, counselor?"

"I don't cheat, Blithe."

"I'm asking you to push my kid on a swing, not sleep with me."

"Sorry, I just didn't want there to be any misunderstandings if I do show up tomorrow."

The van pulled away leaving Sydney behind wondering why Kay had never mentioned Blithe. She disarmed the alarm on the Lexus and popped open the trunk to put her briefcase and laptop in. On the way home she called Kay again to see if she needed anything before she drove to the uptown apartment they shared. Grace had been after Sydney to buy a house, but she'd resisted not yet ready to admit Kay was the one.

Why can't you stop asking what else is there, counselor? The voice in her head asked. Whenever she had time to herself, Sydney crossed examined the part of her brain that had perpetual cold feet in making the final plunge into commitment. *Your mother hasn't put the screws to you so it must mean, like you, she doesn't think Kay's the one.* "Maybe it's time to take Kay somewhere and try to regain those feelings that we seem to keep putting off for career and other commitments." Sydney addressed the empty car when the answering machine at home picked up instead of Kay.

"Where've you been?"

"Are you questioning me, District Attorney O'Shea?" Kay walked passed the chair Sydney was sitting in smoking a cigar. "I told you I was working."

"It's not smart to keep your phone off when you're working."

"Your honor, I think the prosecution's being hostile."

"I'm just curious, Kay, or am I not allowed to ask what's keeping you busy these days and nights you disappear on me?"

Kay turned on the lamp next to the chair and looked at the casual outfit Sydney had on. Sweat pants and a t-shirt replaced the usual pressed expensive suits. Kay was curious herself when she had stopped finding such a gorgeous creature attractive.

"Not when you ask it in a tone that infers I'm doing something wrong. Now how about we get naked and go to bed, it's late."

"I would think you've had enough for one night."

The statement was delivered with Sydney's usual calm tone of voice. The same tone she used in the courtroom when she had a fist full of your short hairs and was getting ready to start pulling just for the pleasure of hearing you scream. It made Kay stop moving toward the bedroom and clench her fists. Had she been facing Sydney, the attorney would have seen her pale.

"What in the fuck's that suppose to mean?"

"That you should put on pajamas and go to bed, darling. All this working you've been doing has to tire you out." Kay did turn after hearing the answer, taking a scalpel to it to see if she could dissect an accusation out of it.

"I'm never too tired for you."

"I have to work, Kay, go to bed. In the light of day maybe you can tell me what's got you so spooked by a few questions. Vulgar answers were never in your repertoire before, must be a fascinating subject your working." Sydney couldn't help herself. She pushed Kay a little further knowing now something was wrong. The only time Kay lashed out was when she felt trapped by something she wasn't saying.

"Good night, Sydney."

"One more thing."

"What? I'm tired."

"I ran into a friend of yours today. Or should I say her son ran into me."

Kay looked at the ceiling and fought the feeling of wanting to run out of the room. How did Sydney know Blithe was a friend of hers? "Really, who?"

"Blithe Thompson and her son Charlie. Ring any bells?"

"Of course, excuse me." Kay left after that not wanting to sound any more suspicious than she had already made herself sound. She would have to call Blithe in the morning and find out how the legal genius had figured it out. Looking toward the den one more time, Kay saw Sydney blow a smoke ring in her direction and smile. "Fuck me, she knows." Sydney's smile got bigger when Kay's lips moved mumbling something to herself before she turned and walked toward their bedroom down the hall.

"You fucking told her you knew me?"

"Kay, what do you think she would've thought had she found out later? Sydney seems like a nice person and Charlie hasn't stopped talking about her all morning. I'm not going to seduce her so you can keep the condo and the car, but I wouldn't mind being her friend. Count me out of your plans, I don't want any part of it." Blithe packed a lunch for her and her son in preparation of heading out to the park to play. The Saturday outings weren't her favorites but the social worker would try anything to get the shy Charlie to come out of his shell.

"Blithe, you screw me and I'll make sure your life becomes a nightmare. Don't think of going to Sydney with this."

"Going to Sydney with what?" asked the subject of the conversation from behind Kay.

On Kay's end she almost smashed the phone into Sydney's face after the woman scared her. The black Lexus had driven away, she had seen it, since it was what she was waiting for to dial Blithe's number.

"What in the fuck is the matter with you?" Kay screamed as she disconnected the line.

"When did the word fuck become your favorite?" countered Sydney.

"I just saw you drive away to the office."

"And I forgot something, I didn't realize it was an offense to return for something once you've left the house. Just like I didn't know it was wrong to inquire about why someone's talking about me when they think I'm not here."

"Sydney, if you want to accuse me of something, spit it out. And you don't own me so my vocabulary is my concern. Try and remember that."

Not in the mood to fight with Kay, Sydney turned and walked to her study. The files she had downloaded the night before were on the disk that sat at one corner of the desk. The two attorneys that would be helping her with the upcoming capital case were waiting for her at the office. That morning she had left Kay sleeping when she got up to shower and get dressed. After the conversation the night before she wasn't anxious to think too much about what was taking up Kay's time. The subject wasn't going to be forgotten, but Sydney didn't have time to think about more than one crisis at a time.

"Wait, Sydney. You just walk out all the time. Don't you think we need to talk?"

"What would you like to talk about? If it's this irrational anger you pull out every time I ask you a question, then I'm all ears. If not, I have somewhere to be."

Kay knew if she let her lover walk out the door it would only add to the gulf that was building between them. Had she known how hard it was to juggle her emotions between a live in lover and a part time one, she would have been content to admire Matt from across the room the night they met. The sex was incredible, but the man gave new meaning to the term starving artist. With Sydney, the attorney was predictable between the sheets, but there was the security her bank account provided.

"If you put as much priority on us as you do to the scum of this city, we'd be the happiest couple in the country."

"Really? So this is all my fault because I work too much, is that it?"

The opening she was looking for came and Kay took it. If she couldn't count on Blithe to even the score then the next best thing was guilt. "Yes, Sydney. If you came alive here the same way you do for the juries you pick, we wouldn't be having these problems. I never know when you'll

have the time to spare for just me."

"You know where I am all the time, Kay. I'm just a phone call away and my nights are spent here, waiting for you lately it seems. All these secret stories you're working on sound so trite when I read them in the paper. Your last story was on how wearing white after Labor Day was now acceptable. What about that took four nights of research? Is there some underground group waiting to kill people who dare wear the color after the first Monday in September? I'm busy, sweetheart, not brain dead. If you want to look for someone to blame for what's happening or not happening at this address, take the day and ponder what you're doing wrong." Before Kay could dispute the allegations, the back door had slammed behind Sydney. At the beginning of their relationship the attorney wouldn't have made it to the corner before turning the car around and coming back to smooth things over. Today Kay watched as the Lexus drove down the streets without the brake lights coming on once.

"I'm not so easy to get rid of, Sydney."

The drive downtown gave Sydney time to think. *Had she settled for Kay because she had grown tired of the dating scene and the small blonde had been the easiest solution to that?* If she had, she was paying the consequences now for that laziness. It should have been her first clue that losing the two-year relationship wasn't upsetting her.

Stopping for a traffic light, Sydney looked to her left and saw the playground Blithe had mentioned the night before. The petite blonde was standing in the standard swing pushing position talking to the husky man next to her. Charlie had been right, the kid next to him was going much higher than he was. On impulse, Sydney turned and parked the car.

Blithe didn't see her as she walked up from the rear entrance to the park. When Sydney got closer she noticed Charlie was right about something else, she was taller than Gabriel's father. The first smile of her morning came when with one good push Charlie shot a little higher than all the other swings, which was met with a heartfelt laugh from the toddler.

"He's been moping around all morning waiting for you to show up. Thanks for not disappointing him." Blithe moved to stand a little behind Sydney so as not to get clipped by the swing now flying over her head on Charlie's return trips.

"I'm a public servant, ma'am. I just drove by and saw some public in need of serving." The joke got Blithe to smile, which went unnoticed by Sydney who had turned her attention back to Charlie.

The tall expert swing pusher was like a dream come true for Charlie. He had to ask her to stop instead of her getting tired. When she lifted him out of the bucket seat Charlie hugged her leg before leading her and his mother over to one of the benches.

"Hey, Charlie, how'd I do?"

"That was great, Cai. Would you play with me?"

"Don't you want to play with your friends?"

Blithe butted into their talk before Charlie started stuttering from nerves. "Charlie's working on winning these guys over. Right, Charlie?" The little boy looked toward the jungle gym before looking at Sydney and nodding. In every generation there was one kid the others took pleasure in picking on. For these set of three-year-olds it was Charlie. The nervous speech impediment had been what had set him apart.

"You know something, Charlie?" asked Sydney.

"Wha..wha...what?"

"The other thing I'm pretty good at is pulling the merry go round." Sydney pointed toward the empty piece of playground equipment. She just hoped she could get some traction going with loafers on. "Want to go and give it a try?" He held his arms up as his answer and smiled from his new high perch on the trip over.

"Not too fast, I get motion sickness." Blithe warned as she sat in the middle holding her son. The look she got from Sydney was like the gauntlet of challenge being thrown down. "I mean it. You aren't going to like it if I throw up on that nice cable knit sweater and the chinos with the creases from hell." Sydney rubbed her hands together before grabbing onto the bar and started a slow trot. The scream Blithe let out when she really sped up made everyone in the park look over just in time to see Sydney jump on with them.

"Are you ok?" Sydney was starting to feel the cool air through her shirt when she'd had to strip off her sweater. She didn't think the blonde was serious about getting sick. The one good thing was that Charlie hadn't gotten caught in the return of Blithe's pancakes from that morning.

"Sorry about your sweater."

"It's not like you didn't warn me. Either that or you and Charlie have something against someone with a neat appearance. You aren't looking too good. You want to lie down?"

Sydney buckled Charlie into his seat and Blithe into the passenger side of the van before driving them to her office. An hour later Charlie was sitting on Sydney's desk coloring while his mother took a nap on the leather couch at the back of the room. The attorney would look up from her work to smile at Charlie every so often liking the company of the quiet child. Blithe slept through the pizza the other attorneys ordered for lunch, but Charlie soaked up the attention the adults doled out without hesitation.

At two, Blithe woke up to a strategy session that concentrated on anticipating all the motions the defense would most probably file. The sight of a sleeping Charlie in Sydney's lap made her smile more than the picture now hanging off the attorney's filing cabinet. She sat still listening to Sydney call out case numbers from memory complete with where in the file the assistants would

find the arguments needed. The quick mind was the downfall of more than one defendant when they reached the trial stage.

It wouldn't be the last time Blithe spent the afternoon in Sydney's office so Charlie could spend time with his new best friend. The friendship between the adult and child grew as the weather grew colder, and Blithe couldn't help but get swept away by Sydney's generous nature. Nothing romantic had grown between them, and the social worker wasn't going to encourage anything for fear that Kay would use it against Sydney. The problem now was too much time had gone by for Blithe to confess what Kay had asked her to do, less Sydney shut her and Charlie out of her life.

Sydney never talked about Kay during their Saturdays or during the nights they took Charlie to dinner. A few calls from Kay let Blithe know she was still in the house but Sydney was growing more suspicious. The itch as Kay had put it, had grown into a full-grown obsession, and no request from Matt was refused. The more that happened, the more distant Sydney became.

"How about hamburgers tonight, Charlie? Think we can talk your mother into that?" Sydney looked at the little boy sitting at the small desk next to hers that Sally had found and set up for him. Blithe sat on the sofa finishing the mound of paperwork that had accumulated from the fieldwork she'd done. With Sydney not minding sitting with Charlie during some of her confirmed afternoon office hours, Blithe had been able to take on a larger caseload. She was saving for a new van since Sydney had shied away from the current vehicle after the lollipop incident.

Charlie nodded his head, which wasn't surprising since he was agreeable to anything Sydney suggested. After five Saturdays on the playground he was the envy of the other children with his non-tiring playmate. "Sounds good, Cai. How about you, mama, sound good?"

"Are you letting me pay?" Blithe asked Sydney.

"No."

"Then I'm not going."

"Not even if I asked you real nice?"

"No, I'm not going unless you let me pay. I don't want you to think Charlie and I are freeloading off of you."

"It's not freeloading if I ask you to go. Isn't that what you told me before you bamboozled me into a ride so you could stick old candy on my suit pants?"

"That was different."

"How do you figure?"

"I wasn't asking you to dinner and I offered to have the pants cleaned."

"You offered to take me to dinner and did you know bubblelicious lollipops tear fabric when you try to pull them off of fine wool?"

"They didn't, did they?"

"They did, but they made the most attractive shorts I own. Only if I try to wear them in the summer I'll die of heat exhaustion, so, my lovely friend, you owe it to me to take you and my little buddy out to dinner."

"Since I ruined your pants, it's the least I can do," said Blithe blushing at the compliment.

"That's better then. Pack it in, buddy, I'm tired of looking at these walls."

The case she was working on was finished and Sydney wasn't going to miss working for the next two weekends. Her parents' anniversary party was the next Saturday, and the whole family was going up on Friday afternoon. The summer home the elder O'Sheas had purchased ten years prior was going to be the location for the family reunion and Sydney was looking forward to some down time on the beach and on the golf course. Grace had picked Biloxi, Mississippi as the second home's location claiming the two hour drive was far enough away to leave job stresses behind, but not too far to make it a pain in the ass to get to.

"Doesn't this look cozy." Kay stepped in with out knocking wanting to see if Sydney was free for dinner. She had given the attorney long enough to calm down and now it was time to reel her back in.

"Hey, Kay, it's nice to see you again." Blithe stood up and put her shoes back on.

"Blithe," said Kay without any further greeting.

Charlie didn't know who the lady was but she was making his mom sad. "Ca..Ca..Cai, can we g..g..g..go?"

"Sure, buddy, can you and your mom give me and minute? Blithe, why don't you and Charlie go sit at Sally's desk and I'll be right out. She has some M&M's out there special just for Charlie." Sydney picked up Charlie's bag and handed it to Blithe then closed the door to her office.

"I thought I'd come to the mountain since you're never home anymore." Kay sat on the corner of Sydney's desk and crossed her arms.

"Pining away for me at home were you? Funny, if you missed me so much you should have returned my calls. There were five today alone."

Kay smiled thinking the cold shoulder she'd given her partner was working, and finding her with Blithe was an extra-added bonus. "Did you miss me, darling?"

"The dealership called, it's time to service the car and they couldn't get in touch with you. But now that you're here, I'd like you to set aside some time for us to talk. Things can't go on like this, Kay. Life's too short to be this miserable."

The small blonde exploded off the desk and stuck a finger in Sydney's chest. "Funny you weren't so miserable with me before you started fucking your new little whore."

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

"Come on, Sydney, little Blithe with her pathetic little kid. Tell me you're not fucking her."

"Get out."

"I'm not done. God, I led you to water and like the predictable ass that you are, you helped yourself. So much for all those principles you love to go on about."

"I don't think you heard me. Get out." Sydney moved closer to her and Kay took a step back. "Get your screwed up ideas and get the hell out of my office. You may think a good offense is to become defensive, Kay, but don't push me. Since you like the word so much, I'll fucking make your life miserable if you ever talk about Blithe and Charlie like that again. They're my friends, so don't cheapen that with your twisted fantasies."

Sydney grabbed her briefcase and chose to leave instead. Two anxious faces looked up when she opened the door and she smiled to make them feel more at ease. The frosted glass panel wasn't the best sound barrier when she raised her voice. Anything Kay had said was forgotten when she saw Charlie's lip start to tremble. That night was the first time in weeks Sydney had heard him stutter. Going down on one knee, Sydney opened her arms and scooped the child up when he ran into them.

"Sorry about that, little buddy. I didn't mean to yell." Sydney spoke quietly to the child in her arms but looked at his mother as a way of apologizing to her as well for what was said.

"You're not going to be our friend anymore? I promise t..t..t...to try be...better, Cai."

"Oh, sweetheart, you didn't do anything wrong. Take a deep breath for me. I love being your friend, Charlie, don't ever think differently."

"Pinkie swear?" He held up his little finger the way Sydney had taught him, getting his mother to smile. Unlike Charlie, she'd understood the whole argument in Sydney's office. The attorney put up her finger and Charlie wrapped all of his around it and shook.

"That's a binding contract, buddy."

Charlie took a nap in the new child's safety seat in the back of Sydney's car. Blithe had insisted on the large towel it sat on, saying it would take her getting a second job if something happened

to the leather seats. They headed to a restaurant Sydney frequented in college, and the word joint popped into Blithe's head when the attorney shifted the car into park.

"I can smooth it over with Charlie if we're causing you too many problems." Blithe kept her head forward and tried to sound sincere. If the only way she could have Sydney in her life was as a friend she'd take it, but not at the expense of the prosecutor's piece of mind.

"I don't think I could come up with a suitable explanation for not seeing Charlie again and it's what I do for a living. Unless you think I'm doing him and you more harm by being in your life."

"No, you've found the little boy I knew was always trapped in there. I was only trying to do the right thing."

"You really have got to stop doing that. Think of yourself for once and go after the things or the person that's going to make you happy."

If only you meant that, thought Blithe as she put on a forced smile and nodded her head. "I have to tell you that I'm pretty happy with my life now."

"Blithe, I can't promise you and Charlie anything until I've cleared up the mess my life has become, but if you give me time...."

"You take all the time you need, Mordecai O'Shea, I'm not in a hurry. Don't you want an explanation on what Kay said earlier? I'm ready for my cross examination."

"I know what Kay's after, sweetheart, I don't need to hear it from you. I spend my life dealing with people who have perfected the art of lying, which has made me an excellent judge of finding the truth no matter how hard people try to hide it from me. Charlie and you can't hide what you two are, just like you can't fake your feelings because it would go against your true nature. Mine is to bring the best person I can into a relationship and give the person I'm with the honor of my word backed by my actions."

"I can't ask for more than that, and if you want the truth from me just ask."

Sydney opened the backdoor and released Charlie from his seat. The restaurant's looks didn't detract diners from filling up most of the tables and the entire bar section. Fabulous aromas were coming from the kitchen and Blithe was sure there was an inch of grease on the walls, but she trusted Sydney's judgment. They seldom ate at the same place twice and all the places they'd tried had been kid friendly, so what was a little food poisoning if Charlie was comfortable.

"I know what you're thinking and I promise the oil they fry everything in is hot enough to kill the black plague."

"Comforting thought, counselor."

"Mordecai, is that you with a little Mordecai?" The booming voice was coming from a table

toward the back where a big man sat with a young child. Next to them was a table of four men who watched the door and the other patrons but didn't have any food in front of them. The thing that made them seem out of place was they were all wearing suits.

"Vincent, don't tell me you've gone and taken the plunge? I thought I would've heard a wail coming from the eligible women in the city the day that happened." Sydney told him when they moved closer.

"Mordecai, meet my little sister, Alicia Carlotti. Alicia's named for my father's mother."

The elder Carlotti had lost his wife five years prior in a car accident and had taken another trip down the aisle two years later with a woman that was younger than his daughter. Sydney hadn't realized the union had produced more children. Vincent Carlotti III and she had gone to school together from high school onto to college. The future head of the Carlotti crime family was smarter than his father, which made Sydney think he would no more get caught by the feds than the old man.

"Vinny, this is Blithe and her son Charlie. Blithe, this bum is Vincent Carlotti an old school pal of mine." Blithe looked at her after the introduction and thought Sydney had lost her mind. Unless there were a lot of other people running around the city named Vincent Carlotti, they were talking to a gangster.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am. Don't worry, the feds outside only start looking into your background if you're seen with me more than two times in a row," joked Vinny.

"I'm glad you have a sense of humor about it."

"You get so used to those guys you start to forget they're there sometimes, only sometimes though. You heard about the old man?" Vinny asked of Sydney.

"Dodged another bullet is the story on the street. Tell him to stick to the feds, Vinny, he shows up on my doorstep I'm not going to be so nice."

"It's the one thing he thanks God for every night, that you decided to stay making the chump change down at the zoo on Tulane working for Gilbert. The day they put federal in front of that prosecutor's title of yours and stripes might be a new family look for us." Vinny signaled one of the guards who brought over three more chairs. Sydney waited for Blithe's nod before sitting down.

"Flattery will get you no favors if the day should come, Vinny. Tell me about this little beauty."

"Alicia's dad's final masterpiece as he likes to say. This beautiful girl as you put it, is what makes him want to get out of bed some mornings. It's my job to take her out to dinner every so often so she can learn what it's like to be a Carlotti. Not to mention she has me wrapped around her little finger. I'm having so much fun I might just find a girl and have a couple of my own."

"Don't teach her too much. I'm glad you're father's happy. Despite his colorful past, I always liked him. I used to smile in law school when we studied old case files and his name came up over and over again. Made me feel like I'd grown up with someone famous. The media missed the boat passing out the name 'The Teflon Don' too late. Gotti beat three convictions to your father's five."

"He's going to be sorry he missed being here tonight to listen to you say that. I'm not just blowing smoke, Mordecai, he really likes you. You three go ahead and order while Alicia and I go and pick out some stuff on the jukebox."

"I thought only your mother got to call you Mordecai?" Blithe looked over the menu written in grease pen on the wall and tried to sound miffed.

"If you're in the family business that has a tendency to kill people, I don't have a problem with whatever they want to call me."

"So he's that Vincent Carlotti."

"Yes, and his father's even more of that Vincent Carlotti than Vinny is. Vinny's just learning, his father's committed more sins than Al Capone and then some."

"You're one fascinating character, Mordecai." Blithe looked at her and arched a blonde brow daring Sydney to fuss at her for using her given name.

"I'm glad you think so, Ms. Thompson. Might I suggest the swamp burger, it's the best thing up there."

They ate as Vinny told Blithe about some of their more risqué adventures on campus when they were in college. At one point Blithe laughed so hard that coke shot out of her nose making the social worker turn red from the blush it caused. She waved good bye to Vinny and his little sister when they all got up to leave and laughed again when Sydney waved to some of the agents that were sitting across the street watching the activity around the cars getting ready to depart.

Sydney pulled up to Blithe and Charlie's house promising to come back in the morning to drive Blithe to her van that was still in the courthouse parking lot. "I wanted to ask you something before you two went in. You don't have to answer now, but I'd like you and Charlie to come with me next weekend to my parents' anniversary party. We could stay the weekend if you like or we could just go for the Saturday night party and come back."

Blithe just looked at Sydney like the attorney had asked her to walk naked down Canal Street at noon. In all the time they'd known each other, the young mother had not met any of the members of Sydney's family. The only time Sydney had ever rescheduled time with her and Charlie was when a last minute dinner invitation had come from Grace. But not ever meeting them and not knowing who they were was ludicrous.

"Are you sure?"

"That it's my mom and dad's anniversary?"

Blithe hit her in the arm to make Sydney get serious. "No, that you want me and Charlie to go with you?"

Sydney thought she understood some of the hesitation and for the first time put her palm against Blithe's cheek. "You're a beautiful woman, Blithe, you should know that without me telling you. If you don't want to go because you have other commitments I'll understand, but don't turn me down because you feel like you aren't good enough or you won't fit in."

"Thank you for saying that, I didn't think you were interested in anything besides spending time with Charlie. Not that that's a bad thing."

"I'm sorry I gave you that impression, I love Charlie, but I've noticed his mother too. You promised me time to get my affairs in order. Not that we're having an affair but you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean. And you'll help me by telling me what I'll need to bring, right?"

"I'll do something even better."

Blithe waited for Sydney to go on but the attorney just stopped talking but hadn't removed her hand from her cheek. "What?"

"Go to bed, Blithe, and take the shrimp with you. What I said will make sense to you tomorrow."

Sydney pulled into her own driveway after seeing her friends inside their house for the evening. She sat in the car for ten minutes trying to calm her emotions down when she saw Kay's car in its designated spot.

The clank of Sydney's keys on the kitchen counter brought Kay to her feet in the living room. The fight she'd started at the DA's office was now, she realized, pushing Sydney too far. With a few glasses of wine for company, she'd practiced her apology since she'd gotten home. The silk nightgown wasn't lost on Sydney when she walked into the room; unfortunately for Kay it was too late for reconciliation.

"The apartment lease is in your name so keep it if you want, same goes for the car. The movers are coming in the morning for my grandfather's desk in the study along with the bookcases and cabinets in there that belong to me. The rest you can keep." Sydney moved to the study and bolted the lock she'd had installed knowing what Kay's temper was capable of.

"It's not that easy, Sydney."

"Sure it is. This isn't a divorce, Kay, it's a break up of something we both don't want anymore. I would've loved to have parted as friends but I don't like you all that much at the moment."

"Who takes care of me now?"

"The same person who put the hickey on your neck, lover. If that wasn't a rhetorical question, my answer is I don't care."

"So it's all right for you to run around and screw some pretty thing, but when I do it I get tossed aside. Is that how it works with the high and mighty O'Sheas?"

"I'm not sleeping with Blithe, if that's what you're implying. You wanted me in a committed relationship and that's what you got, Kay. The one that stepped out on that arrangement was you, not me." Sydney moved to the bar and poured herself a scotch from one of the decanters.

"Please, Sydney, I asked her to come on to you so I'd have some leverage if the need should arise."

"Smart of you to do that. Always be prepared, eh? You must have been one hell of a scout."

Kay laughed despite the rising anger that was taking over her reason. "So you're telling me you fell for the act? The kid was a nice touch the first time she ran into you. I'd just gotten off the phone with her, so you're being there playing the caped crusader couldn't have been better timing."

"I live to please, but that's not important now. What you're saying is you did all this for me because you love me? You cheated so I should be given the same opportunity. I must say your sense of fair play boggles the mind."

It was Sydney's calm demeanor that drove the reporter insane. No matter what the situation Sydney could be counted on to keep a cool head. When the attorney sat in one of the wingback leather chairs in the room and crossed her legs, Kay had the urge to rip Sydney's eyes out. The yelling she'd gotten earlier had surprised Kay but this was the Mordecai she knew, the persona known in the courtroom as Ice.

"I do love you." Kay stopped when Sydney put up a finger.

"You love the money more. Sad thing here is, it's my money, so when I go it goes with me. If you wanted to keep the money and me, you should have kept your panties on. You're going to blame me I'm sure, but take it from someone who knows guilt, Kay. You're guilty. In court it wouldn't have been hard to prove."

"I'm guilty of what, you bitch?"

"Greed." Sydney put her glass down and stood up. She had wasted enough time playing games with Kay. Looking at the reporter now, there wasn't anything that remotely reminded Sydney of what had attracted her to the woman in the beginning.

"Does it matter to you at all that I planned Blithe coming into your life?"

"Yes, congratulations, your plan worked beautifully." Sydney heard the scream and the shattering of the heavy crystal glass against the door when she stepped outside. It was done.

"Sydney, George's on line one. Said he's returning your call." Sally told her from the outer office.

"Hey, George."

"Should I have a pad and pen ready?"

"You know me so well," Sydney told her accountant and financial manager. "Have Kay's cards cancelled as soon as possible and review all the financial contracts and make sure that our name doesn't appear together on anything. Then cut her a check for twenty five thousand dollars and deposit it in her account. By the time she's run through that she'll be on her own."

"It'll be done within the hour. Should I send a letter with the money?"

"No, I think we covered all the bases last night. If you need me I'll be at mom and dad's until I go house hunting. Thanks, George."

"Sydney, Blithe's holding on line two for you." Sally put the call through as soon as the top line light blinked off.

"Do you know someone named Grace O'Shea?"

"Will I be in trouble if my answer's yes?"

"She just called me and said she'd be by at ten to take me shopping. It seems that someone forgot to tell me that we're attending a formal dinner on Friday night and a costume party on Saturday. Mrs. O'Shea offered to help me pick something out."

"My mother offered to shop for you?"

"That answers the question on if you know her, and yes she did."

"Stay out of the engagement rings section of whatever store Herbert drives you to."

"She didn't say anything about bringing someone named Herbert. I thought you said your father's name was William? Who names their child Herbert?" Blithe was babbling since she was a little overwhelmed with the morning.

"The same people that think Mordecai was a good choice, and no he's not my father. The other thing is she isn't bringing him. It's more like he's bringing her. Herbert's my mother's driver, God bless his soul."

"Your mother has a driver?" Blithe sat on her sofa and felt like if she'd been an adult in the sixties and taken acid this would definitely qualify as one of those flashbacks the authorities always warned you about.

"Let me explain something about Gracelia O'Shea. She's barely five feet, has flaming red hair, which makes no sense since my father is the Irishman and she's Italian, and she doesn't drive. She's never had the inclination nor the desire to learn, so my father hired a driver. Herbert has been her faithful traveling companion for forty years and if my mother got some wild hair up her butt to learn now I think it'd break his heart. The most important lesson you must always remember when you spend any time with Grace is don't believe anything she tells you about me. The woman got married on Halloween night, that's always made me question her sanity."

"She told me you're quite the catch and she does all your shopping. As a matter a fact she said the last time you were in a mall, Gerald Ford was president."

"How long did she keep you on the phone?"

"Never mind about that. Do you want me to find a sitter for Charlie for this weekend?"

"Did you tell Grace about Charlie?"

"I thought I'd ask you first about the sitter." Blithe got up when she heard the front bell. The walk and talking to Sydney on the phone was taking her mind off her nails which she'd been chewing since the woman from her first call of the morning had introduced herself. "Hold on, someone's at the front door."

"Hello, dear, is that Mordecai on the phone?" Grace walked in and took off her gloves.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Please, dear, call me Grace. May I please have the phone?" Blithe handed the phone to the short attractive woman in her living room trying to take a discreet look at her watch. Grace had said she'd be there at ten and unless she'd slipped into a coma, Blithe was sure it was before nine. Now she looked like an idiot standing there in her pajamas.

"Mordecai?"

"Yes, mother?"

"Unless you're in the process of putting some dreadful person in jail. I expect you over here in thirty minutes to make proper introductions and take Blithe and me out to breakfast." Grace pressed the off button and handed the phone back to Blithe. "Now, dear, before the grumpy one gets here and turns you against me, I'm Grace O'Shea."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am, I'm Blithe Thompson. Would you like to make yourself comfortable

while I go and change? If Sydney's going to be here in a half an hour I'd rather not look like something the cat threw up."

"Nonsense, it's good to keep Mordecai waiting. She's like her father like that, the longer the wait the better they think the prize is. And please, dear, don't call her Sydney."

"You don't like the name Sydney?"

"I named her Sydney, so I'm not opposed to it, but her family calls her Mordecai. It's a status symbol if you like."

"I'm not a part of Sydney's family."

"Blithe, she's talked more about you than she did the red bike she wanted when she was seven. I've always judged how excited she is about someone or something against how much she wanted that bike. You, she hasn't shut up about for six weeks. Funny thing is, I don't think she realizes she's doing it."

Blithe blushed thinking about Sydney talking to her mother about her. Not just Charlie, but her. "She didn't tell me."

"You're smart, Blithe, you've won her heart without the genius figuring it out. That bloodsucker she's lived with for too long did it with just the physical aspect of their relationship, if I can speak frankly. I never have seen the look of adoration that comes over her face when she talks about you and your son when she talked about her." Grace couldn't bring herself to say Kay's name. "Don't worry about Mordecai now; I'll help you wrap up the rest of the package. So where is Charlie, I'm dying to meet him."

Blithe walked her to the little boy's room where he was still sleeping after being up late from the excitement of the upcoming trip with his beloved Cai. His mother didn't understand Grace's tears when the tiny woman sat on the edge of his bed and pushed a strand of hair off his face. From her designer purse Grace pulled her wallet out and turned to a picture of Mordecai when she was the same age as Charlie was now. To Blithe's amazement the faces were almost identical.

"You carry baby pictures of Mordecai around with you?" Blithe whispered looking at the photo Grace had handed her smiling at the beautiful little face captured on the glossy finish.

"I know what she looks like now. I like to remember them when they weren't such a pain in my ass." Blithe decided then that no matter what happened with Sydney, she and Grace were going to be great friends.

Sydney walked in earlier than she was expected and sat in the kitchen to wait with Herbert. She figured Grace was somewhere in the house with Blithe telling her, Sydney was sure, some story or another about her younger formative years. The escape from her office was welcome after fielding a dozen calls from Kay that morning. She was demanding another meeting with Sydney at their apartment and was going to keep calling until the attorney caved. From experience

Sydney could tell she was pissed, like a child that had been deprived of their favorite toy. *And to think she hadn't gone out and try to buy something*, thought Sydney.

Buy something with the cards that Kay had treated like play money since the bills went directly to Sydney's accountant. Sydney had never been interested in what Kay did with them but after George's report from that morning she should have kept better tabs on her live-in's spending. The prosecutor was almost tempted to meet with Kay again to demand all the art her money had bought over the last six months. None of which was hanging in the apartment.

The temptation and anger died when Blithe and her mother walked into the kitchen laughing and making a fuss over Charlie. Sydney smiled when she realized she could move on with her life and if she was lucky this woman her mother was joking with would be willing to share it with her.

"Good morning. Did you heed my warning?" asked Sydney.

"About?" Blithe answered as she combed Charlie's hair back as he tried to squirm out of her arms to get to Sydney.

"Listening to this woman you so readily let into your house."

"Mordecai, behave or I'll have Herbert turn you over his knee." The older gentleman laughed at his boss's suggestion knowing if he tried Sydney would wipe the floor with him. "I had to introduce myself, since you were late, but don't worry, we've been having a delightful time."

Sydney got up from the table so that she could give her mother a kiss. "Thank you for coming over, mama."

"Come on, Charlie, show me where your coat is and then your Cai's taking us out to eat." Grace led the child and her driver out of the kitchen leaving the two young women alone.

"You look nice." Blithe took in the dark suit, perfectly cut for Sydney and felt almost frumpy in her presence.

"Thank you, you look beautiful this morning, but instead of talking about the merits of why I think so, I want to talk about something with you for a minute. I promise tonight we'll take as long as you want, but knowing Grace we have five minutes tops before she gets restless."

"You've changed your mind?"

"About you and Charlie?" Blithe nodded yes. "No, I just wanted to tell you I left Kay last night."

"Because of me?"

"No, because of me. I expect certain things from the woman I love, Blithe, and I discovered two things about myself last night."

Blithe couldn't help it, she moved closer to Sydney wanting to know what her hands felt like.
"What was that?"

"That Kay isn't the woman I'm in love with, I don't think I ever was, and I don't think I have to expect anything if I choose the woman I am in love with. That's because I think she'll give without me asking for the things that I think she wants from me in return."

"What do you think I want?" Blithe took the chance that it was she Sydney was talking about.

"To be loved, to have me come home to you and Charlie, to share my thoughts with you and to never have to worry if I'm sleeping with someone else."

"You're right."

"That's what I want too."

"And that's what you'll get, for as long as you want it."

The motley crew filed out of the house with Sydney bringing up the rear. Her mother was holding Charlie's hand and from the look on his face, the little boy was becoming quickly won over by the elder O'Shea. Sydney was sure if Grace could get away with it, the attorney would be drawing up adoption papers over brunch.

"Mordecai."

Sydney took Blithe's hand when the blonde got a look at her mother's car. Grace's world was about as far removed from the social worker's as you could get and still live in the state. "Yes, mother?"

"Whose van is that?" Blithe blushed at the sight of the maroon and white jalopy sitting in her drive way. It was two toned only because much of the dark red paint had started to flake off. Grace turned to the two women and noticed Blithe's condition. "Don't be embarrassed, dear, my husband says I'm a bull in the china shop of life all the time. I just can't have my Charlie riding around in something that looks so unsafe. Mordecai, I trust you'll handle this today."

"Yes, mother."

"Would this be a good time to ask if I can say no?" Blithe looked up at Sydney wondering when she'd lost control of what used to be her life.

"You could, but she has your phone number and address now."

"Meaning?"

"That you can deal with me or the Italian Stallion, your choice. All I can say is, I'm much more amenable to suggestion than Grace." Thus began the initiation of Blithe and Charlie into the O'Shea clan. By lunch time the two had the entire new wardrobe they would need for the weekend except for the Halloween costumes for the Saturday night party, which Grace left up to the Thompson's to pick out.

Blithe got all of her work done by Thursday afternoon so that she and Charlie would be ready to leave the next morning. The only disappointment was Sydney, or Mordecai as she'd come to refer to her, wouldn't be able to leave with them. Blithe had offered to wait but when Grace found out, she informed the young woman she and her husband William would be by at ten to drive them down. Her argument had been that just because Mordecai was chained to her job didn't mean Blithe and Charlie should suffer for it. The explanation made more sense when they drove through the gates of what Grace kept referring to as their small summer home.

A deep lawn with a huge collection of oak trees obscured the house from the road that separated it from the Gulf of Mexico. The eight-bedroom home was a beautiful example of an antebellum style structure with a large porch that wrapped around much of the house with a matching veranda on the second floor. Blithe counted at least twenty matching rockers, which made her suddenly crave a mint julep. William explained that in the backyard Grace had put in a pool for those that didn't care for the beach, and the seventeenth green of the country club's golf course was about twenty yards from their property line.

"I'll have Sylvia put you and Charlie in the room adjacent to Mordecai's, dear. Why don't you take some time to take a rest and freshen up before the mob gets here. That drive up here can be tiring. Please relax and don't hesitate to ask us if you need anything." Grace walked up the steps to the front door using her hands to accentuate what she was saying.

Blithe hung onto Charlie so he wouldn't break anything in the house she was sure was stocked with valuables if the one in New Orleans was any indication. After two dinners there that week with Mordecai, Blithe was starting to relax around Grace and William. Except for things like the new Sequoia that had been delivered to Blithe's driveway, the O'Shea's didn't flaunt their wealth, or make her feel any less because she wasn't in their tax bracket.

"Thank you, Grace."

"Charlie boy, get in a good nap because we're playing golf tomorrow." William, Mordecai's father, told the child that was trying to pull out of his mother's death grip. The patriarch of the O'Shea family was taller than all his children, but they had all inherited his looks. Jet-black hair that was graying at the temples, blue eyes and a big sturdy build made for an overall attractive looking man.

Charlie watched as Herbert took out a big golf bag from the trunk first before retrieving a smaller version to put beside it. The small but very real clubs had been a gift for Charlie from William. The shipping giant was a fanatical fan of the game and liked to encourage new players along whenever he got the opportunity. All Charlie had needed to hear was game and the fact they wanted him to play. In the morning William would give the little boy the rest of his surprises,

including the smallest golf cleats he'd ever seen.

At three in the afternoon a caravan of cars came up the winding bricked drive, the lead one blowing the horn to announce the arrival of the O'Shea boys. All three worked for the family business and the two oldest boys had gotten married, leaving Mordecai and the baby Franklin as the only eligible ones in the bunch.

"Blithe and Charlie, I want you to meet the rest of our family." Grace had them line up out by the pool when the blonde and her son had come downstairs to investigate what all the noise was about. "This is our eldest son and his wife, William and Nicole. Just call him Will so as to not confuse him with his father. Next to them are John and his wife Stella. The forlorn looking one on the end is Franklin, my baby." Grace pointed to each person as she went along giving them a chance to shake Blithe's hand. "Everyone, this is Mordecai's friend Blithe and her son Charlie."

In New Orleans, Sydney put the last set of instructions for her staff on the memo she was drafting. The defendant Augustern facing an unwinnable trial had chosen to plead guilty in hopes he wouldn't get the death penalty. The district attorney's office wouldn't have to go through a trial but they still had to prepare for the penalty phase. In between getting the staff their assignments, Sydney had called all of the victim's families to inform them of the latest developments. All the fears they had voiced over the telephone of the man getting off lightly had been put to rest. Sydney didn't make deals with killers; it went against everything she believed about the law and justice.

The sound of her office door opening didn't make the prosecutor turn away from her computer screen since she assumed it was Sally. "I'm not taking any calls, old woman, I don't care who it is. I'm already about four hours late."

"This won't take long, I promise." Kay stood in front of her desk with an apologetic Sally standing behind her.

"It's ok, Sally, pack it in we're leaving in a minute," Sydney said to her assistant. "Unless you're here with pertinent information for any case we're working on, I don't have time," she addressed Kay when the door closed again.

"I wanted to catch you before you went running to mother for the weekend, Mordecai. Thanks for the down payment on what you owe me. My bank statement arrived today, but it'll take more than that to buy your freedom."

"I am free, Katherine. Free to not have to see you again, free to love someone else and free to keep the rest of my money. Isn't America a great place? The deposit was so you wouldn't be homeless by the end of next month. That's the end of my obligations to you." Sydney stood and packed her briefcase signaling she would walk out when she was done.

"We'll see. One more thing, I'm thinking of taking out your gift in ten-dollar bills and spreading them on Matt's bed when I fuck him tonight. Think about that when you're sitting around Grace's big dining table this evening. Maybe finding out the truth about what I've been doing will help you face the fact that you're about as exciting between the sheets as a dead fish. You're going to

be the loser in this in more ways than one."

"I'll have to try and remember that, Kay, but any sexual refreshers I may need I'm sure Blithe will help me out, if I'm lucky. On the flip side, send my luck along to whoever this Matt person is, I'm sure he's going to need it."

"Don't play the idiot, Sydney, it doesn't suit you. You've known all along since someone's been watching his studio and not being overly covert about it."

"Get your facts straight, lady, or you'll never be an investigative reporter. What in the hell do I care who you were sleeping with? The fact you were, was the relationship breaker. The outcome would've been the same had I known who it was or not. What would I gain from having this man watched? Go forth and be slutty with my blessings."

"I want and expect what's coming to me, Sydney." Kay watched Sydney put on her coat and grab her briefcase. There would be no response forthcoming to her prophetic statement.

The house was quiet when Sydney drove up. Not because she'd missed the festivities but because everyone had retired to their rooms to get ready for the family traditional anniversary dinner for her parents. Sylvia's husband Michael came and got her golf bag to put with the others but was waved off by Sydney for the rest of the bags. The older couple had come with the house and lived there full time. The only bedroom on the first floor was theirs and Grace, unlike the previous owner, gave them the run of the house even when the family was in residence. Some of the O'Shea guests through the years found it surprising to find Grace and William sitting in the den with the maid and handyman enjoying the fire and reading a book.

"Miss Grace's a little put out with you, Mordecai. You kept Miss Blithe waiting all day on you." Michael took her car keys to park it once he'd stowed the clubs.

"Miss Grace's always a little put out with me, so I've come to accept my fate. Did Blithe seem overwhelmed today?"

"Your brothers and sisters spent the afternoon talking with her and playing with Master Charlie, so she looked like she was having a good time. But I did catch her looking down the drive a few times. I like her."

"Thanks, I like her too."

Grace walked into Sydney's room, as her daughter was finishing tying off her shoelaces. The room was the last of her stops to perform the same task. Because of Charlie, Grace had added another stop to her short visits to the four she made every year on this night. The task she was there to do was her way of reaffirming her love for the four greatest and most valuable assets that had come from her thirty six year marriage to William, her children.

"Congratulations, mama." Sydney stood and hugged the petite red head and kissed her temple so

as not to mess up the perfect make up.

"You were my first angel, Mordecai. The one I learned all my lessons from for the three that came after. Thank you, baby, for making my life as a parent so full and so fun. I'm proud of you and I hope with Blithe you find the same love your father and I share."

"Don't go running to the church just yet. Give me a chance to try and woo the girl into liking me." Sydney sat down so her mother could fix her bowtie. Grace went about tying the sixth perfect bow of the evening just like she had done for William, Will, John, Franklin and Charlie. When she was done she held up the jacket and brushed it off when Sydney slipped it on. With a loving pat to the chest the job was done for one more year.

"Mordecai, I say this because I love you. The girl in the next room cares deeply for you so don't screw this up."

Sydney stepped out to the veranda to find Blithe leaning against one of the pillars with her eyes closed. The strapless green silk gown she had on was covered by a matching wrap, which she held closed under her chin to ward off the cold air coming off the Gulf. The attorney stood motionless so as not to disturb the other woman. Sydney was certain she had never seen a more beautiful sight.

"Are you joining me, or trying to avoid me?"

"I was just admiring the gorgeous view out here."

Blithe opened her eyes and looked out toward the water across the road. As the moonlight reflected off what was visible through the trees she had to agree that it was beautiful, but when she turned around Sydney wasn't looking at the water. She was looking at her.

"Would it be all right if I kissed you?" asked Sydney.

"I've been waiting forever to hear you say that." Blithe stood up straight and opened her arms pulling the wrap away from her body. She didn't feel the cold when Sydney took her in her arms and held her close. The first kiss they shared started slow but soon grew passionate enough that Blithe felt her feet leave the ground.

Charlie's voice announcing him before he barreled through the door to join them was what parted their lips. The smile he was sporting was almost cuter than the tuxedo he was wearing thought Sydney when she looked down at him not letting go of his mother.

"Hi, buddy, are you having a good time?"

"Can we come back here when it's not cold?"

"We'll be coming here a lot if Miss Grace gets her way, and she always does. Why do you ask?"

"Uncle Will said it was too cold to swim in the pool. He said the picture guy's here too."

Sydney offered one hand to Blithe and the other to Charlie. "Then we'd better get moving."

The rest of the family was lined up along the staircase being put into position by the professional photographer that had arrived. The official yearly family portrait would join the rest of the ones hung along the stairwell walls.

"Charlie and I'll wait in the den," said Blithe when she realized what was going on.

"And have the wrath of Grace on my head, I don't think so. She invited you, Blithe, that means you and Charlie are in the photo."

"Charlie, come down here with us," instructed Grace. He wasn't tall enough to be seen over the banister if he stood with Blithe and Sydney so he would stand with her and William at the bottom. When they were done, Sydney was right; Grace always got what she wanted.

Dinner was, despite the formal attire, a casual affair with them all sitting around the largest table Blithe had ever seen. After laughing through all the funny toasts that the O'Shea siblings offered for the momentous occasion, Blithe watched William and Grace walking up the stairs with Charlie to put him to bed. She'd accepted an invitation from Sydney to sit on the porch for a drink before retiring so Blithe was glad her son was so comfortable with the anniversary couple.

"Cold?" Sydney asked Blithe as Sylvia set up two glasses of Grace's best port on the small table in between the rockers the girls had picked.

"Just a little, but it's not unbearable. Do you come here often?" Blithe nodded her thanks to Sylvia who smiled back and headed back into the house.

"Not as often as I'd like when there's some big trial on my docket, but in the summer it's nice to come and play a round then head over to the multitude of new casinos that have opened up around here. Maybe when the weather gets warmer we can bring Charlie back to try out the pool?" Sydney didn't miss the shiver the blonde let loose when she picked up her glass as she looked over to see Blithe's reaction to the timeline of the question she had asked.

"That'll give me plenty of time to go on a diet before you see me in a bathing suit, but if you asked him, Charlie would be ready to go with you now."

"I'm not a big fan of cold weather swimming and you don't need to go on a diet. You look great now." The jacket Sydney had on came off when she stood so that she could drape it over Blithe. The second her knees hit the floor in front of the blonde, the attorney said a quick prayer that it wouldn't take losing fifteen pounds on the blonde's part before she could shed her clothes in her presence.

"Mordecai, you're going to get your pants dirty."

"The way Sylvia cleans this place constantly. Impossible. I just wanted to come over here and tell you I missed you this evening."

"You've been with me all night."

"True, but if I had done this in front of my family this soon I'm thinking you would not have been too comfortable." Sydney leaned in for another kiss tasting the strong liquor that Blithe had just taken a sip of. This time there was no hesitancy and both of them turned the heat up just a notch.

Blithe ran her fingers through the straight thick hair that Sydney kept fairly short, enjoying the texture of the strands. It reminded her a lot of Charlie's hair. "I'm not sure why I'm here or why it is that you want me in your life, but I'm glad. Are you sure that you want me in your life?" She pressed her fingers to the lips she'd just kissed knowing there was a protest about to be expelled by Sydney, but Blithe had to be sure. "I'm not saying I'm doubting you, I don't want this to be some fling that'll get you over Kay. There's Charlie to consider and if I fall any further, I won't be able to imagine the pain."

"Two months ago if someone had told me that I'd come to like a child sitting on my desk most afternoons telling me the merits of finger painting and swing pushing, I would have laughed. As much as I love that relationship with Charlie though, had the same person told me I would fall in love with his mother, the joke would've been that much funnier. But here I am two months later and all that's happened. The only thing I find funny now is that for someone that makes a living stringing words together I can't find any that are adequate enough to tell you how happy you make me. Words that would get across how adorable you are when you blush, how fast you talk when you get excited about something, and how flattered I am when I see you looking at me when you think I don't notice."

Sydney kissed Blithe again before standing up and pulling the smaller woman out of her rocker. "This has nothing to do with Kay, my love, but it does have everything to do with what I feel about you. Today may be the first day I've kissed you but that doesn't mean I haven't memorized your lips and everything about you. I look at you and I see so much of my future, I want the days to come faster so I'll have just one more memory of you by my side. I look at Charlie and I see someone I can help you teach and mold so that our memories of him will only add to the pride and love we feel for him now."

"If you were any better at expressing your feelings, I would've fainted by now. Thank you for saying all that. I trust you, Mordecai, just as much as I love you. You really don't mind that Charlie comes as part of the package?"

"Are you serious?"

"I'm just asking because I lost a relationship over him even when having him was a mutual decision. I know you love him, but is that going to hold when he lives under the same roof with you and all your shirts?"

"Honey, we'll talk about all this I promise, we don't have to iron out every detail tonight." Sydney looked at the almost defeated slump that came to Blithe's shoulders. "What I mean is, when the day comes, and it will be soon, when Charlie you and all my clothes live at the same address, the fact that you two will be there will outweigh any damage to my shirts." The answer got Sydney another kiss and a smile from Blithe.

The next morning Blithe slept through Sydney coming in to get Charlie ready for their morning golf game. In an outfit that was very similar to what the O'Sheas had on, Charlie climbed into William's cart ready to begin his lesson. The game progressed with Charlie teeing off then one of the siblings helping him out with the next shot to advance it down the fairway.

Grace and the girls were sitting around the breakfast nook enjoying a snack when the golfers returned. They all laughed when Blithe had to get Charlie to take deep breaths to get the little boy to calm down when Sydney sat him on his mother's lap. He was on overload and it was only going to get worse when he saw his costume for the party that night Sydney suspected.

"How about a nap, Charlie?" Sydney grabbed a juice bottle from the refrigerator after opening one for the toddler. She loved playing with her father and brothers, but the six in the morning tee off times were a killer.

"I don't wanna sleep, Cai."

"Then how about you watch me sleep while I take one?" Blithe was amazed when her son jumped off her lap and started to follow Sydney out of the kitchen area after her question. The only way she would have gotten Charlie to sit still would have involved a tranquilizer gun. The two stopping at the door and looking her way got Blithe up and moving to follow them to Sydney's room.

"There's just all kinds of perks being with you," said Blithe. Charlie had taken two seconds to fall asleep between the two of them once they had settled into Sydney's bed. "Though this isn't what I had in mind for what we'd be doing the first time I got you into a prone position."

"If you believe Kay, you're not missing much."

"There isn't much I'd believe Kay on, sweetheart. The ones I do tend to believe are some of the stories I heard about you before Kay came into your life."

"Ah, heard some of my war stories have you?"

"Does the name Camille Lagree sound familiar to you?"

"That's a loaded question, Ms. Thompson. If I say yes you'll think I'm a dog and by the same token, if I say no you'll think the same thing."

"We'll go with the yes part of that statement, which makes the sex in the back seat of your car true."

"I was in college at the time. Everyone should do crazy things like that when they're in college. Gives you stuff to talk about when you're trying to court new women in your thirties and trying to prove your sexual prowess."

Blithe laughed and reached over Charlie to run her fingers through Sydney's hair. "You forgot to mention it was noon and you were parked in the dean's space at the time."

"Did I?"

"You did, but you're right."

"About?"

"It proves your sexual prowess, to me anyway. I love you and I can't wait to take you out for a spin. I may not have as many adventures to talk about, but that doesn't mean I'm not willing to add a few."

"For now you can add a nap to your list. Once my parents' friends get going it always turns out to be a long night." Sydney pushed up and leaned over to kiss Blithe before closing her eyes to get some rest.

"I trust you got us something to wear, or am I going as a social worker with a child?"

"Grace won't let us go without a costume, so not to worry, the caped crusader got her two side kicks all fixed up." It was the only hint Sydney was willing to give before sleep took over.

Grace smiled and closed the door softly when she checked on the three twenty minutes later. Charlie was now lying sprawled on top of Sydney and his mother was snuggled up and using the unoccupied shoulder as a pillow. Her thought as she walked to her own room for a nap was it would be a night to remember.

On that Halloween night the older woman's thought manifested into a wish that would indeed make the night memorable. The call for blood would make it so.

"Batman, Catwoman and Robin, that's our costumes?"

Sydney looked down on the rented suits then back at Blithe. "What's wrong with that?"

"Catwoman's a villain."

"Are you telling me you couldn't be a bad girl if you really tried?" Blithe went willingly when Sydney pushed her down on the bed and covered her with a long strong body. "All that blonde hair and green eyes screams all American, but you start to scratch the surface and there's a hellion waiting to cut loose." To accentuate her words Sydney ran a finger across Blithe's nipple

and felt it stiffen under the shirt and bra.

"What are you doing, Cai?" Sydney's head snapped up and she found herself eye to eye with Charlie. Obviously the toys in his and Blithe's room had lost their appeal.

"Um," started Sydney as she looked from Charlie's smiling face to Blithe's smirking one.

"Charlie, could you go get mommy's hair brush please? It's on the bed next door." Without questioning why, Charlie walked through the door that connected the rooms to do his mother's bidding. "Before you ask, we have children because they will someday be big enough to cut the grass. And now that my nipples are ready to go to the party, I do feel a little frisky, Batman."

The anticipation of having a good time increased when the mask to the costume slipped into place. With a few extra gadgets attached to the suit's belt the caped figure neared the door.

A frustrated blonde came to the door after the persistent knocking wouldn't stop. "Aren't you a little old to be trick or treating? Freaks like you should've gone back inside after the kiddies went home. What or who are you supposed to be anyway?"

The figure standing before her flicked out the long cape and smiled showing off perfect white teeth. "Death." The gun resting inside the belt came out and was pointed at the woman's head. "People like you always seem so surprised to see me. No time to make up for the transgressions that have marked your life. Where's your lover?" The blonde slowly lifted her arm and pointed to the next room. The action made the robe she was wearing flair open revealing a beautiful and toned body.

"Please."

"Such a waste really," the deep voice said looking at the expanse of flesh on display. "It's nothing against you, sweetheart. You're just here on the wrong night. Move along and please can the begging." The hand with the gun motioned for her to go into the room where she had pointed.

"Please." The blonde tried begging again since the costume was make believe but the gun looked very real. "Let me go."

"Don't worry, sweetheart, I'm going to let you go. I'm not here because of you, so I'll set you free when we're done."

"What in the hell?" the bed's other occupant sat up and stared at the 9mm held firmly in the gloved hand. Its presence prevented any other movement but to watch the hand motioning the blonde toward the bed.

"On your knees, bitch. I want to see for myself what all the allure's about when it comes to your fuck buddy here." The woman moved closer to the person sitting on the bed intent on doing whatever it took to get out of the situation alive. The first shot roared through the house when her

lips touched skin. Her lips stayed pressed to the body she knew almost as well as her own despite the fact she could feel the warm spray of blood on her back. A whimper escaped when the gun was pressed to the back of her head.

"Please, you said you'd let me go free," begged Kay.

"I'm sorry for the misunderstanding, I meant in the spiritual sense would you gain your freedom." The rich voice uttering those words was the last the reporter heard before she joined Matt in death. The artist's penis was almost severed by the bullet that came screaming out of Kay's mouth by way of the back of her head. Her purse being at the scene was the only way the police would be able to identify her. Dental records would be of no use now.

The killer heard the approaching sirens but didn't panic. One final look to the bed was almost savored before the gun went back to its place in the belt. The blackness of the yard swallowed the self-professed 'Angel of Death' just barely missing the two patrol cars pulling up to answer the neighbor's call.

"I may give up my bat ways and turn to a life of crime," said Sydney from the door. Blithe had filed up the Catwoman suit in the most erotic way.

"Is that a sock in your cod piece or are you just happy to see me?"

"I'll take you back to the bat cave later and let you check out the hardware. For now I'm here to introduce you to my side kick and go down to the party." Sydney moved aside so Blithe could see Charlie in his Robin costume pressing his fists into his sides like Sydney had taught him.

"Holly smoke, Batman, it's the cat lady." Blithe had to fight the smile that was threatening to take over her face.

"Good job, Robin, let's go downstairs so you can see why Grace got married on Halloween."

"Holly smoke?" whispered Blithe to Sydney.

"We were going for holy kitty cat, but my side kick needed more practice time so I think the fact he remembered holly is all right."

"You're good for him, baby."

Sydney smiled at the endearment. "Just wait till next year when I've got months to plan."

The house was full of guests when the three descended the stairs. Most of them smiling when they saw Batman carrying Robin and Catwoman folded under one side of the long cape. Blithe laughed when she spotted Grace wearing a wedding dress complete with veil. William was just as dapper in his top hat and tails following his wife around as she welcomed their friends.

"She gets to be a bride every year," said Blithe.

"She gets to be a bride who wears her wedding dress every year. The one she wore the first time they had a party or should I say reception," corrected Sydney.

"She can still fit into her wedding dress?" Blithe saw years of dieting in her future if Grace was going to be her role model.

"There was talk that I ruined her figure for months after my birth, but yes she still fits into her wedding dress. My grandparents certainly got their money's worth out of the purchase."

When the bride noticed them she led them to the front room to pose for another picture. Only this time it was just the three of them. The new couple stayed for a couple of hours then retired up stairs when Robin fell asleep on Batman's shoulder while they were slow dancing with Catwoman.

"Thank you for asking us to come with you. Your family has been great at making us feel welcome." Blithe gently stripped Charlie of his costume being careful not to wake him. Her date for the evening was sitting on the bed wearing a t-shirt and sweat pants after stripping off the hot Batman suit.

Piercing blue eyes looked at Blithe as she went about taking care of her son. For Sydney it became something she wanted to see more of. This beautiful woman with her sweet child were starting to fill places in her soul she had lived a lifetime not knowing were empty. *How strange to not have a craving for this in my life before now.* The thought occurred to the attorney when she saw Blithe kiss Charlie's forehead and pull the blankets up to cover him. It was like the two had answered questions Sydney had never had the presence of mind to ask.

"I hope this isn't the last invitation you accept from me to come here."

"Mordecai, we want the same things, so I don't think you have to worry about us turning you down for anything." The music from downstairs was filtering up through the floor enough for Blithe to recognize one of her favorite songs. "Want to try a dance, just the two of us?" She laughed when a big hand yanked her off the bed before the offer could be retracted.

They stood just swaying together and kissing even after the song ended. Blithe didn't refuse when Sydney led her to the next room and laid her down. With the door to the next room open in case Charlie woke up, they kissed goodnight and went to sleep in a tight embrace. In the morning Grace found them in the same position as she had the previous afternoon, with Charlie on top of Sydney and Blithe pressed close to her side. As much as she didn't want to, Grace shook her daughter awake.

"Honey, the phone's for you, and they said it was important."

Sydney blinked her eyes open then looked down confused to why Charlie was sleeping with them. She wasn't coherent enough to ask who would be calling her on a Sunday morning with an

important message.

"If anything this will teach you to invest in pajamas," teased Grace as she lifted the baby off Sydney.

"Mama." Sydney dragged out her word not missing the fact it was the first time her mother had teased her about her sex life. Grace's teasing and sense of humor only appeared around people she liked. Kay and she had been at odds on just about everything from the moment they were introduced. Sydney was glad that Blithe and her mother would share a different type of relationship.

When Sydney moved off the bed Blithe immediately opened her eyes missing the warmth of the body next to hers. "Where are you going, it's early?"

"I've got someone waiting on the line, I'll be right back. Go back to sleep and keep Charlie company." Sydney had moved out of the way so her mother could put the still sleeping child back down back next to his mother.

"Don't take long," said Blithe.

Sydney moved out into the hall and picked up the main line to the house. Having phones installed in all the bedrooms had always been against Grace's thinking, so every house they had ever owned had a phone in the hallway leading to the bedrooms, in the den and in the kitchen. Her thinking was if you were trying to relax or sleep the last thing you needed was something constantly ringing in your ear. It always brought a frown to the petite woman's face when she visited Sydney's apartment and found not only a phone but also a cell on the nightstand.

"Hello."

"We got him, boss." The voice of Elwood White one of her assistant's came over the line giving Sydney no clue as to what he was talking about.

"Got who?"

"Vincent Carlotti, he finally committed a crime the state can prosecute and Mr. Gilespy wanted me to get in touch with you so we can start working the case."

Sydney exhaled thinking about the tremendous amount of work that awaited her when she drove back into New Orleans. *Damn I hope Blithe is more understanding when I disappear for the next four months or so than Kay was when something like this happened.* The excitement of wanting to bag someone like old man Carlotti was taking a back seat to spending time with Blithe and Charlie. *It's a good thing she finds that sofa in my office so comfortable.*

"What did our mob friend do?" Sydney asked already thinking of her closing arguments. As much as she liked Carlotti's son Vinny, she knew his father had to finally answer for his crimes.

"Killed two people last night in cold blood. You aren't going to like the next part of this story, boss."

"Elwood, just spit it out. Nothing you can tell me is going to surprise me."

"Mr. Carlotti went to the home studio of some guy named Matt Franklin and killed him and the girl he was with."

"Is this supposed to mean something to me?"

"I thought you might recognize the name, but anyway. Matt was naked in bed with Kay, your Kay, Sydney. Mr. Carlotti obviously didn't like where Kay had her mouth and shot her through the back of the head blowing this guy Franklin's pecker almost clean off." Elwood stopped as if realizing who he was talking to and the relationship she had shared with the woman that was dead.

"She isn't my Kay anymore, El, and not just because she's dead, but you're right, I'm surprised. What I don't get is why Vincent Carlotti would take the chance of blowing his freedom on two people he doesn't know. Why kill Kay or this guy Matt Franklin?"

"That's why they pay us the big bucks, boss. I've called together our top investigators for a meeting this afternoon at two. I figured it would give you enough time to drive back into the city, if not let me know and I'll move it back or keep them entertained until you get back."

"Thanks, man. I'll get packed and be at the office in about three hours." Sydney hung up the phone and turned to face her mother, who at the moment didn't look all that happy. "It's important, mama. Vincent Carlotti's in custody for a double homicide and Gilbert threw my team the case."

"Are you taking Blithe and Charlie with you?"

"I'm going to offer them a ride unless they want to ride back with you and papa. If it was anything else I'd have said no, trust me."

Grace reached up and put her palm on Sydney's cheek. "I do trust you, baby, I just don't want you to work yourself into an early grave. I worry about you but that's a mother's prerogative."

"Duly noted, Mrs. O'Shea."

"The other Mrs. O'Shea awaits your return, Mordecai." Sydney just rolled her eyes at her mother's persistent nature.

The mother and child on her bed looked so comfortable under the covers that Sydney couldn't resist joining them if only for a little while. She moved Charlie to the other side of Blithe, confident that he wouldn't fall off the big bed. Blithe opened her eyes again when the body next to hers pressed up against her length and then some.

"Hiya, good looking."

"Good morning to you, beautiful." Blithe snorted at the compliment sure that her hair was sticking up in a million different directions. "You do look beautiful, don't argue with me. You keep forgetting that I could have you arrested if you're a bad girl."

"Disagreeing with you makes me a bad girl?"

"Most of the time, so it's a good thing for you that I happen to like bad girls." Sydney kissed her before telling her they had to leave earlier than planned not wanting to take the chance Blithe would cut her off when she told her what was waiting for her when they got home.

"I love waking up with you, Mordecai O'Shea. Your mom was right naming you that. You make me feel like I'm off to great places and today's my day when you look at me like that. It's how I felt when I saw you for the first time in that coffee shop. It seems so trite to say but I just knew when you didn't scream at Charlie for messing up your shirt that you were the one for me. I love you."

Sydney kissed her again and held her tight so that when she rolled onto her back Blithe was lying on top of her. "I love you too, and had I been a smarter camper I would've gone home and left Kay that night. Then we wouldn't have wasted two months tap dancing around how we felt."

"Do you think we have a chance?"

"Honey, we're going to make this work. It won't be hard loving you and Charlie, and I promise I'll try my best to make us a family."

"We already are."

Sydney lifted her head and stole another kiss before she went on. "You may not think I'll be pulling my weight when I tell you who was on the phone." Sydney explained what was going on and why they had to go back. She did give Blithe the opportunity to stay and have brunch with her family if she wanted to and just get together later on that night if she was done at the office.

"Would it bother you if Charlie and I came and hung out in your office? He loves it there and I can get a head start on the week's paperwork. The bonus is I get to look up and make goo goo eyes at you every chance I get." An example of goo goo eyes was shot at Sydney making her smile.

"How can I pass up an offer like that?"

"You can't. I'm going to work hard at making you not think about anyone but me." Blithe teased before caressing Sydney's cheek. "I'm sorry about Kay, sweetheart."

"I'm sorry too. There's no logical explanation as to why he would've killed her. Kay did fluff

pieces for the paper so it couldn't have been that angle. The editor's not a guy that would have moved her from fashion etiquette to the inner workings of the wise guys society in that short of period of time."

"Well come on, Batman, the scales of justice await, and if there's anyone that can find Carlotti guilty it's you."

Sydney studied the crime scene photographs that were spread out over her desk. It was days like this that she longed for the days when the CSI unit used black and white film for this kind of stuff. The bright red stains splattered everywhere in Matt Franklin's bedroom was glaring up at her like some sort of sick art that the late artist had drying in the other room of his studio. Blithe and Charlie had gone out with one the investigators for some ice cream for this part of her investigation. There was no way she wanted Charlie accidentally getting a look at what she was staring down on.

Kay's face was as unrecognizable as the man that had fallen in a haphazard way on the bed when the bullet had blown off the back of his head. If Vincent Carlotti had indeed done the two people in the pictures in, he wanted to inflict the most amount of damage as he could. No matter what had happened between she and Kay, Sydney would fight to give her the justice she deserved for what had happened to her. She would make Carlotti pay for what he'd done, and the price would be a needle in his arm. The prosecutor just hoped that Vinny would understand she was doing her job.

"Can I come in?" Blithe asked from the door. She was alone having left Charlie in the company of Sydney's staff in the conference room. Her son was entertaining them with stories about how great his Cai was at pushing swings.

Sydney moved away from her desk and took a lick of Blithe's cone. "Hey did I say you could have some of my ice cream?" The short blonde asked.

"I thought we had gotten to the point in our relationship where your cone was my cone."

"You want to ravish my body then I'm game, Mordecai, but my ice cream cone is another story, bucko." Blithe pushed her toward the sofa and pushed Sydney down as soon as they were close enough. "You want to talk about it?"

"It was a gruesome end, he made sure of that. The thing that's puzzling me is what his connection to Kay or the guy she was sleeping with is. With two shots he stole not only their lives but their dignity."

"I have confidence in you, honey, you'll figure it out. Help me eat my ice cream and then I'm taking you home." Blithe moved to Sydney's lap and held the cone up to her lips for a taste. When the tall woman did Blithe held the cone away and moved in for a kiss. "Now this is the way to enjoy an ice cream."

When Sydney moved in for another more intense kiss, Blithe tossed the ice cream in the trash and pushed Sydney down on her back. "When we get home I want you to touch me and I can't wait anymore," demanded Blithe. Sydney covered her mouth and entered her mouth with an insistent tongue as she pulled Blithe closer by cupping her backside. Blithe made the prosecutor feel alive, and she needed that after looking at the pictures of death on her desk for so long. The small blonde was like a safe haven away from the ugliness that Sydney's job often was. Only this time the passion for both of them was entwined with the love they felt for each other.

The buzzer on her desk was the last thing Sydney expected to hear. "Boss, I hate to bother you but the jail's on line one."

"I'm sorry, baby, hold that thought until we get back to your place and put Charlie to bed." Sydney left the frustrated blonde on the sofa to pick up the phone. "Yes." She listened to the caller and didn't say anything for the longest time. Blithe watched as she blew out a frustrated sigh before answering. "Tell him I'll be there in twenty minutes." The caller must have asked something else when Sydney stopped talking. "No don't set up the cameras until tomorrow. I'm sure the feds want their chance to observe my official conversation with him so they can take their chance again once we're done."

"Do you want me to wait for you?" Blithe knew that Sydney needed to go. She wasn't going to ask where she was going, but she had a bad feeling about letting the attorney out of her sight.

"That's sweet, but no. Take Charlie home and I'll be there as soon as I can. Vincent Carlotti asked to speak to me and as a friend I owe him at least one meeting off the record. After tonight all bets are off."

"Promise me you'll be careful." Blithe moved closer and put her hands on Sydney's chest.

"I promise, baby. It's a jail, he's not going to kill me."

"I love you, Mordecai." Blithe said it with such conviction that her eyes filled up with tears.

Sydney cupped Blithe's face and kissed both lids in an effort to keep the tears from falling. "It's ok, honey, I promise I'll be all right and I love you too. Having you and Charlie in my life means so much that I won't do anything to jeopardize that." Sydney kissed her with the same passion she had put into the kiss on the sofa before the call. It left both of them wanting more and Blithe hoped it would make Sydney hurry home. They had a life to get on with.

"Mordecai, thank you for coming."

"Mr. Carlotti, it's been a long time."

The old man looked distinguished even in his prison orange jumpsuit. He shook Sydney's hand before waving to the chair across from him. "Please call me Vincent, Mordecai. I think we're passed the formalities that held you in your youth when we first met. I told my son a long time

ago that you were someone to watch out for. Sit with me and let's talk awhile." For thirty minutes the mobster talked to her about her family and his, acting as if they were having lunch at his favorite restaurant to reminisce about old times. When Sydney was about to ask what he wanted, there was a knock on the door and the guard let in another man that looked more like a prisoner than Vincent did.

"Can I help you?" asked Sydney.

"I'm here to deliver something to Mr. Carlotti."

"Hugo, stop being an ass and introduce yourself," Vincent said with a bite to his tone.

"I'm sorry, Ms. O'Shea. I'm Hugo Lepski; I work for Mr. Carlotti. These are all the ones you asked for, sir. Let me know if you need anything else." Hugo dropped a thick yellow envelope between the two of them and turned to leave.

"Mordecai, I'm an old man. An old man that's committed his share of sins in this life and I'm sure one day I'm going to answer for them. But I'm thinking if you listen to my story, that payment to the piper won't come today."

Sydney looked from the envelope to him and smiled. "I don't mean to insult you, Vincent, but there's nothing you can tell me that will explain what you did. If you admit it in open court I might be willing to take the death penalty off the table but that's as far as I'm willing to go."

"My wife died some years back." Vincent continued as if he had not heard her or had just chosen to ignore her. "I married again because I'm not a man who likes being alone. A year later my new wife gave me Alicia and I knew joy again, but then I found out something that challenged my love for my daughter." He stopped and took a deep breath as though he needed it to calm his emotions.

"She's not mine. Not by blood anyway and for so long I got caught up in what that meant because of my upbringing. I know now that she's mine in spirit because I love that little girl so much, but Alicia was sired by Matt Franklin. My wife will pay for her sins soon enough but not by me. I won't kill my child's mother, but anger led me to kill the one person that helped her betray me. The fact your castaway was in his bed when I got there was an unfortunate circumstance, and now I'm asking you to look beyond your honor and understand." He pulled the envelope closer and moved to open it.

"My son tells me you fucked more women in college than he did. That tells me you have in you the understanding of what a woman can do to your senses." He pulled the first picture out and Sydney looked down to find Kay standing on the porch of Matt's house pressed into his body while he stuck his hand in the back of her skirt.

"You understand the passion that they can stir in you to avenge your honor." The next picture was obscured some by the blinds but she could see Kay straddling the artist as he was caught in an upward thrust into her.

"This scum had more women than the two of us put together. I'm not a man to be cuckolded, Mordecai, and I don't see you as someone that would put up with that. Not from someone like this." Vincent tapped on the next picture that showed Matt standing up and Kay on her knees in front of him.

Sydney looked at the picture under Vincent's finger and felt her anger rise a notch. "I didn't put up with it, Vincent. I left the bitch and I'm thinking that's what you should have done too. This little picture show won't sway me to drop the charges and let you go."

From his pocket he pulled a tape recorder and pressed the play button. The voice that filled the integration room was unmistakable. It was Kay's.

"She turned me down, can you believe it? We need Sydney's money, Matt, and Blithe's our ticket to getting it."

"What do you propose we do?" The male voice, Sydney had to guess, was Matt Franklin. She watched the wheel of the recorder advance the tape wondering what in the hell had happened to Kay.

"You, lover, are going to wait until the two meet and get to know each other. Then I want you to get that big cock of yours hard and pay a little visit to Ms. Blithe while she's working in one of those bad neighborhoods she frequents. I want you to make it last and I want you to enjoy yourself. The aftershocks of the rape should send Blithe into Sydney's arms and the pathetic do gooder will fall all over herself to make her feel better. If that happens, even if Sydney leaves me we'll hold our first little plan over Blithe's head and the good life just keeps rolling in."

Vincent turned off the tape and put it back in his pocket. "Good night, Mordecai. I'll see you in court tomorrow."

Sydney drove to Blithe's finding the house dark for the night. It was almost a relief not to have to face the woman she loved and explain what Kay had in store for her. The next stop was the little house Matt Franklin lived in and used as a studio. Yellow police tape was still strung up in the yard sounding like party favors in the wind when she exited the car. With a quick turn of the key she was in the house standing in the bedroom where the two coconspirators met their end. The dried blood looked different from the pictures she had studied that afternoon and like Vincent had done, Sydney almost savored the stains for what they meant.

Sitting in the chair where Hugo's camera had captured Matt sitting in one of the pictures as Kay put her mouth to good use, the first assistant District Attorney for Orleans Parish mentally prepared for the next days arraignments. The longer she stared at the stain, the more Sydney detached so Ice could take over. It was that part of her personality that was needed now even if it meant losing everything she held dear and believed in.

"I missed you last night." Blithe sat on the big desk right in front of Sydney. Charlie was happy

at the O'Shea's home playing with William and Grace for the morning.

"I'm sorry it took so long, but you must have been sleeping when I passed by."

The flat tone of Sydney's voice started to concern Blithe. "You ok?"

"Yeah just waiting for court." Sydney exhaled and ran her hands down her face. The evil plan Kay and Matt had worked out kept playing in her head almost like Vincent had kept pressing the rewind button.

"I wish I could be there when the judge denies Mr. Carlotti's bail. Good luck, baby, and remember that I love you."

"You promise."

"Of course I do. I love you and I'm going to forever, Mordecai O'Shea."

"I love you too, and I'm going to hold you to that no matter what."

The intercom going off stopped Blithe from asking what Sydney meant. She just helped Sydney on with her coat and kissed her for luck. Sydney gifted her with one of the smiles she didn't use often making the blonde's knees weak. In those crinkles around Sydney's eyes was where she would find her future happiness. To make the attorney smile like that would become a life's quest.

Jude Rose listened to the defense attorney drone on about the virtuous Mr. Carlotti and his ties to the community. The man finished right before the judge was about to shut him up. He motioned with his gavel for Sydney to put on the prosecution's objections as to why Vincent should rot in jail until his trial date.

"Your honor, the people would move to drop all the charges against Mr. Carlotti." The motion created complete silence before complete pandemonium broke out.

"In my chambers now." Jude slammed the gavel down as Gilbert Gilesby slammed through the gate in the railing.

"Your honor, there's no evidence that Mr. Carlotti committed these crimes. There are about two hundred witnesses that put him at a party from nine that night until three the next morning. They include people from his wife to the mayor of the city. The federal officers said the assailant they saw in the next block from Matt Franklin's house was masked and couldn't say with certainty that it was the defendant. The last piece that doesn't fit is Mr. Carlotti doesn't have any connection to the victims. Why would someone who the authorities have been chasing for years leave a party and kill two people he doesn't know?"

"Mordecai, are you sure about this?" Jude asked. He looked at her and waited knowing in his gut

she wouldn't lie to him. He tuned out Gilbert's sputtering in the background complaining about the missed press opportunities this would cost him.

"I'm sure, judge. He wasn't the one." She never blinked or changed her expression.

"Mr. Carlotti, you're free to go."

Sydney watched Vincent walk out of the courtroom with his son and his young daughter. With him he took every oath she'd promised to uphold and every principle she'd believed would never be compromised. She followed them out and sat at the top of the courthouse steps. Over her head was carved a likeness of blind justice holding her scales. Sydney knew now that justice wasn't blind. It could be bought by devils that lived by their own rules of ethics or lack of them, and she'd lied to help him get away with it.

Vincent loaded his family in the long black car and turned to look up at Sydney. He walked up the steps and sat beside her. Across the street the federal authorities began again with their surveillance and picture taking.

"She isn't worthy of your guilt, Mordecai."

"Is she worthy of yours?"

"In a way yes. Would I change it if I had it to do over? No I wouldn't. There are people in this world who deserve death and almost embrace it with every day they live their lives. Funny that it comes as such a surprise to them when it comes to them holding a big gun."

Sydney just looked at him not sure as to what to say next. Vincent smiled and patted her knee leaving the tape he had let her listen to the night before resting there when he took his hand away.

The attorney looked at it for a long time before looking back up at Vincent. "A gift?"

"My way of saying thank you for the time you've given me with my daughter."

"It seems we aren't all that different."

"Why do you think so?" Vincent cocked his head to the side and smiled.

"I want to thank you for the time you've given me with my son and his mother without the pain of what could've happened hanging over our heads. You pulled the trigger and I'm glad. If I had today to do over again I wouldn't change the outcome either." Sydney looked down the street and then at Vincent as he walked back down the stairs to his car. "Thank you."

A woman that was entering the building looked at Sydney when she had spoken thinking she was talking to her, but hadn't heard what the good looking attorney had said. She stopped walking and looked down at Sydney saying, "I'm sorry," as a way of starting a conversation.

"What?"

"I said I was sorry about your shirt. Charlie didn't mean it." Blithe stood before her holding two malts she'd just retrieved from the counter. Beside her Charlie's hands were still frozen in the air. Red finger paint ran down his arm, or at least the small amount that hadn't been left on the back of her shirt.

Sydney looked at the two trying to figure out how she'd ended up in the coffee shop. She had closed her eyes for a moment when Vincent's car had driven away, and found herself back in the coffee shop when she'd opened them again. "It's ok, really. I guess I dozed off and he startled me." Her laptop was opened to the case she had been working on. The name at the top was Augustern. To add to her confusion her phone on the table rang and Sally told her that the Rohan verdict was in and she was running late.

"Must have been some dream," said Blithe.

"Interesting but nice. Must be all the caffeine." Sydney didn't know what had happened so she stood up and went about doing the things she was sure of. She started packing her briefcase stopping her actions when she felt those green eyes on her.

"I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

"My name's Mordecai O'Shea."

"Like the Dr. Seuss book?"

"One in the same, only my middle name's Sydney, but you can call me Mordecai."

Blithe looked at the smiling woman and she looked so familiar. The fact the woman was packing to leave made her wrack her brain to find something to make her stay. When the two little red hand prints showed up on the white shirt and the body in the chair whipped around, Blithe was sure if the counter hadn't been there she would have fallen on the floor after getting a look at Sydney.

"Can I give you a ride somewhere to make up for your shirt?"

"You can do better than that." Sydney finished her packing and turned to face Blithe. Without fear of being shunned she took the malts out of Blithe's hands pulled her closer and kissed her. "Let me get this trial finished up and then we can go to dinner. Once we get the formalities out of the way, we can take Charlie to the park tomorrow." Sydney let her go and picked up her stuff. "Ready?"

Blithe was the one looking stunned now but she picked up the malts and followed Sydney out the door. Later she would have to remember to ask how Sydney knew so much about her and

Charlie. And why the attorney had been so certain her kiss wouldn't be rejected? When Blithe reached her van to unlock it she heard the last of Sydney's telephone conversation.

"It's over. I know about Matt and it's over."

"Are you ready?" Blithe asked her.

"For whatever comes next." Sydney smiled and put her hand in her pocket to take out her sunglasses when she felt something there. She pulled out a small tape that had the words 'Sincerely Vincent' on the title line. With a quick toss she threw it in the trash and held her hand out to Blithe. "I'm definitely ready for whatever comes next."

"What do you do when the devil offers you a deal? Mordecai O'Shea found that she could live with the guilt if it protected those she loved. Because she was able to so readily admit it, she was given another chance to do it right."

"How is that possible you ask? It's just another lesson learned in *The Twilight Zone*."

The End

Comments to: terrali20@yahoo.com