

A Reconciled Life
by Mary and Misha

Chapter One by Mary

Erica was studying a stack of proofs for Enchantment's new ad campaign when the sound of the doorbell pealed through the quiet house. Even though she had been engrossed in her work, she realized that she had been waiting for the sound. She put the glossy pages down on the desk and glanced at the clock. Four o'clock. Exactly on time as usual. She crossed the foyer to open the door, took a deep breath and willed her heart to stop pounding.

Not a chance, Erica thought to herself, as she swung open the door to reveal Jackson leaning casually against the doorframe. As always, he took her breath away. He was wearing a dark blue suit and striped tie that highlighted his blond hair and made his eyes a deep blue. Erica remembered when she used to be able to tell exactly what he was thinking whenever she looked into those eyes. Now, as he straightened up and walked in, she realized that she never knew what he was thinking when he looked at her anymore.

"How are you?" he asked politely.

"Fine. You?" She couldn't believe that they spoke like complete strangers now. In all the years that they had known each other, she couldn't recall a time when they had been like this with each other. Even when they had been at odds or estranged, there had never been this polite detachment between them.

"How are things at Enchantment?" asked Jack.

"Busy," she answered. "Montgomery Law Clinic?"

"The same. Busy."

The uncomfortable silence that followed was broken by the sound of footsteps clamoring down the stairs.

"Daddy!" the blonde-haired little boy jumped down the last couple of stairs and flung himself into Jack's arms.

"Hey, you're going to knock me over," Jack teased, picking up the boy and twirling him around in a big hug.

"No, I'm not. You're way too big," his son told him seriously.

Erica watched the two of them together with a bittersweet smile. She both loved and hated these moments. She loved seeing Andrew with his father and she knew how important it was that they spend time together but she dreaded the thought of the long weekend without her son. The fact that seeing Jack still filled her with a myriad of emotions just added to her confusion.

“Ready to go?” Jack asked, tousling Andrew’s hair.

“You bet!” Andrew said enthusiastically.

“Where’s your backpack, sweetheart?” asked Erica. “You can’t go without that.”

“It’s upstairs,” Andrew replied. “I’ll get it.”

He ran back up the stairs as quickly as he had come down. Marveling at the energy that only five-year-olds possessed, Erica turned and went back into the living room. Jack followed at a slower pace.

“I’ll have him back by four on Sunday,” he told her.

Erica picked up the proofs and started leafing through them. “Fine.”

“Reggie called,” Jack continued. “He’ll be home in a few weeks. He wants to see you.”

“I’ll make a point of it,” said Erica.

“How are your meetings going?”

Erica whirled around. “Don’t you mean ‘are you going to your meetings?’” she asked bitterly. “Don’t worry, Jack, I remember the conditions of the divorce decree.”

“Dammit, Erica, that’s not what I meant,” Jack ran his fingers through his hair. “I was just wondering -“

“Well, don’t wonder,” Erica said sharply. “Everything is fine.”

The silence weighed heavily in the room as they waited for Andrew to reappear. Finally Erica turned back to the desk and said the first thing that came to her mind. “I assume you’re going to Miranda’s pool party?”

Jack hesitated for a moment. “Yes.”

Erica could tell he wanted to say something else. “And?” she asked.

“And - I’m bringing a date.” The words came out in a rush and hung in the air between them. Erica gripped the proofs so tightly that the sharp corners dug into the soft flesh of her hand. She could tell that Jack was watching her intently. She took a deep breath and turned around. The look on his face was inscrutable, although she thought she saw a glimpse of something in his eyes.

“You hardly need to clear that with me, Jack,” she said evenly as Andrew came bounding back into the room, backpack firmly in place. “I’m ready, Dad,” he announced.

Erica walked over and kneeled down to hug her son. “Be good, Andrew. I love you,” she said softly.

“I know, Mom. I love you too,” Andrew replied. “I’ll call you before I go to sleep.”

Erica moved quickly past Jack to open the door. She knew that Jack’s announcement shouldn’t have affected her at all but suddenly she couldn’t wait for him to leave.

Andrew ran out ahead toward Jack’s parked car. Jack put his hand on the door as Erica went to close

it.

“Look, I don’t want this to be a problem -“ he said.

“It’s not,” Erica said shortly. “See you Sunday.” She closed the door firmly and leaned back against it until she heard him walk away. A few moments later she heard the car start down the driveway.

Slowly she crossed the foyer, the sound of her heels echoing through the empty house. She sank down on the bottom step, thinking how only a few short years ago the house had been bursting with love and laughter. Now the ticking of the grandfather clock was her only companion. As she often did when she was alone, she closed her eyes and thought back to how it had all gone so horribly wrong.

It was always so difficult to pinpoint exactly when everything started to unravel. After the nightmare with Josh and Greg Madden, Erica had tried to resume life as if nothing had happened. Looking back, she realized that had been a mistake. Whenever Jack suggested that she seek counseling, she was always too busy and insisted that everything was fine. Erica had always been able to pretend that something hadn’t happened if she really wanted to and this time was no exception. She hated that the pretense forced her to shut Jack out to some degree but she was determined to handle things on her own.

Then, miraculously, there was Andrew. Erica could still remember the day she told Jack she was pregnant. She had arranged for him to meet her at the yacht and surprised him with the news. Even now, the memory of the look on his face had the ability to sustain her through some of her darkest nights. The pregnancy had been difficult, especially when she had to stop working and put New Beginnings on hold, but the joy of Andrew’s birth was a memory the entire Montgomery family would cherish forever.

When Andrew was six months old, Erica returned to New Beginnings but couldn’t regain her old enthusiasm for the program. Now that she was experiencing the joys of motherhood again, the show had lost its appeal for her. The thought of being away from Andrew for hours each day was unacceptable but she had little choice until her contract was over. The only bright spot was that she could bring Andrew to the studio with her and wouldn’t have to miss a single moment of his childhood.

The pressure was on for huge ratings after months of reruns imposed by Erica’s pregnancy. Unfortunately, luring the audience back again was proving to be difficult and the stress was getting to Erica. She wanted to share her fears and insecurities about the show with Jack but he was busy starting up Montgomery Law Clinic and there never seemed to be enough hours in the day for them to really talk anymore. Small disagreements began to flare up between them on a more regular basis. Arguments had never been a real problem for them though. In the past, they had always made up as

passionately as they fought. This time, however, more and more arguments were left unresolved and Erica could feel the increasing distance between them.

Erica couldn't quite remember which day or which show it was when she took the first sip of wine. She did remember that she had been up all night with Andrew and hadn't had time to prepare for the show at all. Adding to that was the argument that she and Jack had had that morning. When she first walked past the fruit basket and saw the bottle of wine, she hardly gave it a second thought. After the latest ratings report and a phone call from her main sponsor, she found herself standing in front of it. Just a sip would steady her nerves, she remembered thinking, just a sip...

It was amazing how easy it became after that. A drink before the show made her witty and charming on air. Another drink helped her prepare for the next day's show. Then there was the drink to help her relax before Jack got home. She remembered thinking how well she was controlling it this time. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she became convinced that she had never had a problem in the first place. However, she knew that Jack wouldn't see it that way. Of course, he knew her so well that she had no choice but to create even more distance between them. Sometimes she would catch him watching her when she wasn't looking but she was sure he didn't suspect.

As the months went by, the drink before the show became two or three drinks and suddenly she didn't feel so witty. Most of the time she couldn't remember the questions she was supposed to ask her guests or what time she had promised to be home. It was becoming difficult to keep track of how many drinks she was having but she decided she didn't need to anyway. After all, it's not like she had a problem, she told herself. One afternoon, after a particularly bad taping, she grabbed the remainder of the bottle and sank down on the couch in her office. When she awoke, it was dark. Looking at the clock, she realized she should have picked Andrew up from Bianca's over an hour ago.

Erica raced to her car and started the drive to Bianca's condo. Realizing she was still groggy, she rubbed her eyes and opened the window a crack. As she approached the first intersection, there was a sudden blaring of horns and the screeching of brakes. Horrified, she realized that she had gone straight through the red light. She quickly pulled over to the side of the road and rested her head on the steering wheel. For a long time, she sat there shaking. Finally, she pulled herself together and called Jack to pick up Andrew. Blaming an appointment that was running late, she was confident that she had pulled it off.

The house was dark and strangely quiet when Erica arrived home over an hour later. Taking a deep breath, she crossed the foyer and walked into the dimly lit living room. At first she thought no one was home but then she saw Jack standing by the fireplace. His face was impassive but she knew him well enough to know she had to tread carefully.

"Where is everyone?" she asked lightly.

"I had Reggie and Lily take Andrew out," Jack replied, his tone revealing nothing.

"Oh, well, I'm exhausted," Erica said, starting toward the stairs, "A bath would be--"

“How long have you been drinking?”

Erica froze in her tracks. She could feel the panic rising in her chest. He can't possibly know, she thought, he can't. I've been too careful.

She turned. “What? Jack, I-“

“Don't, Erica. Don't deny it.” Jack's voice was weary. “I couldn't believe it when I first suspected. I thought I had to be imagining things. I couldn't believe that things could be that bad or that you wouldn't come to me if they were...”

Erica stood completely still, hardly daring to breathe. She searched her mind for a quick explanation, an excuse, anything...but she knew he knew and there was nothing she could say.

Jack crossed the room until he was standing in front of her. Erica looked down, not wanting to see the look she knew must be in his eyes. “Tonight when you called me and I realized that you could have been driving with Andrew, I knew I had to say something.” He reached out and took her by the shoulders. His touch was gentle but somehow that was worse. “Sweetheart, I-“

Erica tore herself free from his grasp. “Don't start with me, Jack,” she said defensively. “I know exactly what you're going to say. I don't have a problem. It's ridiculous for me to go through the rest of my life not having a simple drink every once in a while.”

“Sweetheart, you can't drink. You know that,” Jack said quietly.

“I don't know anything of the kind,” Erica replied, “and quite frankly, Jack, I'm not interested in a lecture right now.” Determined to escape, she headed for the stairs once again.

“I don't want to lecture you,” Jack followed her into the foyer. “I want to help you.” He grabbed her arm as she started up the stairs.

“Let go of me,” Erica said angrily and he dropped her arm.

“Erica, we have to talk about this -“

“Really? Why now, Jack?” Erica asked scathingly, “I can't remember the last time you wanted to talk - or listen, for that matter.”

“Alright, that's fair,” Jack admitted. “I realize I've let you down and I'm sorry but now-“

“Well, now I don't want to talk,” Erica retorted, her mind racing. All she knew was that she had to find a way to end this conversation and get away from Jack. “In fact, I want you to leave.”

Jack looked stricken. “Sweetheart -“

“I mean it, Jack,” Erica said firmly. Although it was difficult, she held his gaze and eventually his eyes changed from their usual warm blue to a chilly grey.

“OK, maybe tonight isn't the best time,” Jack spoke finally. “But at least now it's out in the open and we can deal with it. I'll have Reggie and Lily bring Andrew to the loft and we'll spend the night

there.”

“You can’t keep Andrew from me,” Erica protested.

“I have no intention of doing that,” Jack replied. “I just think it’s best if he spends the night with me.”

Erica watched him walk toward the door as if in a dream. She wanted to stop him, to run after him and throw herself into his arms and tell him that she loved him, but she didn’t move. The door closed with a decisiveness that frightened her. She stood there for a long time and then headed upstairs to the bedroom. Opening the closet, she easily located the bottle on the shelf behind her handbags. She walked over to the bed and curled up with the bottle clasped tightly in her hand.

She didn’t return Jack’s phone messages the next day or answer the door when she heard him ring the bell. Thankfully, he didn’t try to come in. She missed Andrew terribly but seeing him meant contacting Jack and she couldn’t face him. She ignored the phone calls from Bianca, Kendall, Reggie and Lily as well.

After several days, Erica answered a knock on the door of her office. With shaking fingers, she opened the manila envelope that the officer of the court gave her and stared blankly at the papers stating that Jack had filed for a legal separation. Everything after that was a blur. She remembered wanting to go to the loft but losing her courage. Instead she went home and sat in the dark for hours. She vaguely remembered Bianca and Kendall stopping in and trying to talk to her but she sent them away. Finally, she unplugged the phones and fell asleep.

Erica awoke to the late afternoon sun and a pounding headache. Clutching the railing, she carefully made her way downstairs. There had to be something to drink somewhere in the house, she thought. As she headed toward Jack’s den, her bare foot came down on something sharp. She turned on the light and looked down at Andrew’s favorite little blue toy car. The pain that stabbed at her heart took her breath away. She remembered the day that Jack had brought the car home for Andrew. They had watched him push it back and forth on the tiled floor of the foyer for hours, smiling at his fascination with it. Oh, God, what am I doing? she thought, sinking down on the carpet.

Thirty minutes later, Erica threw a suitcase into the trunk of her car and drove away from the house. She didn’t stop until she pulled up in front of the rehab center a few hours later. As soon as she did, a feeling of peace washed over her and she knew that for the first time in a long while, she had made the right decision.

True to his word, Jack didn’t try to keep Andrew from her. Her son came to visit every couple of days, sometimes with Kendall or Bianca, sometimes with Reggie and Lily. He was too young to know that anything was wrong and was happy to visit Mommy in the “hospital.” Jack didn’t come, although she hadn’t really expected him to. She tried to gather the courage to call him, but as time went on, it became harder and harder to imagine talking to him.

When Erica was ready to leave the center, she insisted on going home alone. She drove up to the

house slowly and let herself in. Everything was exactly as she had left it. She picked up the stack of mail piled neatly on the hall table. The first envelope she opened was the formal letter that New Beginnings had been cancelled. The second contained the date for a preliminary hearing regarding the separation.

A few days later, Erica took a deep breath and pushed open the door to the courtroom. Her surroundings faded as she saw Jack for the first time in three months. He was wearing a grey suit and the light blue tie that she had given him for his birthday last year. He looked thinner than she could ever remember him being and she was sure that the strands of grey at his temples hadn't been there a few months ago. He looked tired and pensive but still so handsome that he took her breath away. As she watched him talk to Livia, he finally looked up and saw her. Time stood still as their eyes locked. As hard as she tried, Erica could read nothing in his expression. After a few moments, he said something to Livia and started across the room toward her. Before he could reach her, the judge entered and called the room to order. Jack hesitated for a moment and then returned to his seat.

Erica sat down next to her lawyer, her thoughts in a whirl. What had Jack been about to say to her? Was it possible that he wanted to work things out? As much as she wanted to cling to that hope, she acknowledged to herself that it was more likely that he wanted a divorce. After everything that had happened, how could she blame him? As she listened to the judge review the separation agreement, Erica convinced herself that a divorce was exactly what Jack wanted. The thought of actually hearing Jack say that he wanted to end their marriage terrified her. *I'll do it first, she thought, then it won't be so bad; anything to avoid the heartache of facing the fact that he didn't love her anymore.* Before she could change her mind, she leaned over and whispered to her lawyer.

Erica never looked at Jack as her lawyer stood and asked for permission to speak before Livia. She answered the judge's questions in a daze, confirming that a divorce was what she wanted and agreeing to mediation regarding visitation and custody of Andrew. She knew that Jack spoke quietly to Livia and to the judge but she couldn't focus on what he said. Just concentrate on getting through this, Erica told herself. She thought it would never end but finally the judge granted that a divorce would be final in ninety days.

Erica thanked her lawyer and stood up to leave. She felt totally empty as she gathered the courage to look across the room. Jack was already gone, the still swinging courtroom door testimony that he had left in a hurry. Erica watched the door until it stopped moving, knowing that the door had also closed on the happiest time of her life and she had no one to blame but herself.

Erica came back to the present with a jolt. Three and a half years had somehow passed since that day in the courtroom. For Andrew's sake, she and Jack had managed to establish the polite, distant relationship they now shared and had concentrated on making sure that their son knew that both of

his parents loved him beyond reason. Jack was an incredible father to Andrew, as she had always known he would be and Andrew was the light of Erica's life, a part of Jackson that would forever be hers. In the beginning, Erica had sometimes hoped that the connection they shared would lead them back to each other but, little by little, that hope had dimmed.

As she walked back into the living room, Erica reconciled herself to the fact that it was finally time to let that hope die. Jack was obviously moving on and any chance that they could recapture their life together was gone. As much as it hurt, Erica knew she had no choice but to accept that and move on herself. Of course, she admitted, moving on would be so much easier if she didn't still love Jackson with all her heart.

Chapter Two by Misha

Jack quickly gulped down his last bit of coffee. He had ten minutes before he had to be out the door and he still wasn't even close to being dressed. Starting to panic, Jack grabbed the first thing that he saw, and hurriedly pulled a pale blue tee shirt over his damp head. It clung to his chest and arms, yet another victim of his suspect laundering skills. A quick glance in the mirror confirmed the snug fit but rather than hunt for another option, decided to make do. In lieu of a comb, he quickly ran his fingers through his hair and made a mad grab for his white trousers. Five minutes. Not enough time to hunt down a clean pair of socks. Instead, Jack padded into the living room and slipped into his favorite pair of Docksidiers that always maintained residence just inside the front door.

Relieved to be back on schedule, Jack took a much-needed breath. His eyes fell on the assorted family photos he had scattered on the console table behind the couch. A dark-haired young girl gazed up at him with bright, shiny eyes. Miranda's impish grin always made him smile. She had her moments of "everything nice" but the tomboy was more the "snakes and snails and puppy dog tails" type. Bianca certainly had her hands full. Miranda had a ferocious appetite for living that left most everyone around her exhausted. Jack was one of the few exceptions. He positively fed off her energy and was always tickled to see Spike and Andrew running to keep up with their young hero. Andrew in particular, worshipped Miranda and somehow always managed to get into mischief when he spent any length of time with his "way cool" niece. Jack wondered what kind of new adventure was in store for his impressionable son today. No doubt something to do with water . . . The mermaid and her two little fishes.

Much as he loved his granddaughter, Jack was leery about spending the entire afternoon at her "don't make the summer be over" party. Erica was going to be there and even though she behaved matter-of-factly when he told her that he was bringing a date, Jack didn't trust her not to make a scene. And the thought of not being able to trust the woman that, God help him, he still loved, broke his heart.

Their divorce had been final for more than three years but even with the passage of time, the hurt never lessened. *If only I had . . .* Jack stopped mid-thought. *I've got to stop doing this to myself.* It was a conversation he played over and over again in his head. So much time wasted, grieving for what might have been until finally he had had enough. Just last month Jack realized it was time, finally, to move on. Andrew was heading into kindergarten in a few weeks, for God's sake. He

needed to take a page out of his son's book and move on to the next stage of his life. And he had to admit. He enjoyed Jill's company.

She wasn't the beauty that Erica was but then, no one could ever hold a candle to his ex-wife in that department. Still, Jill did have plenty to recommend her. She was smart and compassionate and certainly had her act together. That, of course, was a prerequisite if she was going to spend any time with his son. Though just a toddler when the divorce happened, Jack believed that somehow, it had still taken a toll on the boy. The night Jack walked out the door, he swore an oath to provide a stable, nurturing environment for his son, no matter what the cost. One thing was for sure. Over the past three years, he had paid dearly.

The agonizing week after he first left, Jack tried every which way he knew to reach out to Erica but all of his efforts were ignored. The information Bianca and Kendall passed along was the only thing that stood in the way of him completely losing his mind. That, and Andrew's well-being. His son was his top priority and the thought of him being in danger because of Erica's drinking ate Jack alive. He knew that he had to do something to shake some sense into her and for the life of him the only thing he could think of was a separation. Days later when he heard that Erica had entered a recovery program, his hopes soared. Surely, they would be able to put this nightmare behind them and rebuild their life together. As soon as Erica was allowed visitors, Jack made arrangements for Andrew to visit. He wanted to take him himself but Erica's doctor advised Jack to move slowly, insisting that she determine the timetable for their first visit. It made him crazy but the fact that Tom and Livia--and Mark--agreed with the physician convinced him to give Erica whatever space she needed to recover. And so, reluctantly, he acquiesced, and instead Kendall or one of his other children escorted Andrew to visit mommy in the hospital.

But weeks turned into months and not once did she contact him. Instead, Jack spent sleepless nights worrying, wondering how they were going to get their life back on track if he couldn't even look into her eyes, much less hold her in his arms. He felt helpless simply waiting by the phone, hoping and praying that she would call. Jack tried not to pressure the kids about her. He knew they were struggling with the situation too and he didn't want to do anything that would make things any more difficult than they already were. But as hard as they tried to hide it, the truth echoed as loudly as if they had sung it in chorus. Erica didn't want to see Jackson. Didn't want any contact with him whatsoever. It practically killed him but he loved Erica too much not to honor her wishes. And Andrew needed his mother full-time. If staying away was the only way to ensure that Erica would stay sober, Jack decided, that's what he would do. And so, he summoned all of his courage and did the only thing he could. Jack filed for a permanent legal separation.

From the moment Erica walked into the courtroom, Jack could tell she had changed. For the first time, she looked frail. It wasn't so much that she had lost weight; Erica had always been rail thin. No, this was more about the way she carried herself. She looked less self-assured than he ever remembered. Instinctively, he walked towards her, determined to take her in his arms and promise to make things right between them. Just as he was about to reach out to her, Jack heard the

disembodied voice of the judge, calling the courtroom to order. He hesitated for the briefest of moments and in that sliver of time, the opportunity slipped through his fingertips.

Taking his seat beside Livia, Jack leaned toward his attorney and brusquely told her that, no matter what; he wanted to call off the separation. Somehow he would figure out a way to get their life back on course without compromising Erica's sobriety. Livia nodded in agreement, relieved to hear that her friend and colleague had finally come to his senses. But it wasn't to be. Before the attorney could open her mouth, Erica's lawyer stood and asked to go first. In shock, Jack heard that the love of his life wanted to move forward with a divorce as quickly as the legal system would allow. Jack was shattered as he felt the ground beneath him give way. As soon as the gavel rained down signaling the end of the session, Jack bolted out of the courtroom and into a nearby vestibule. He fought back tears but, as hard as he tried to stem them, a few escaped and rolled down his cheek. His life with Erica was over and this time there was no going back.

Exasperated, Jack pulled into the gravel driveway and turned off the ignition. He couldn't believe it had taken him close to twenty minutes to travel the six miles to Jill's home. What the hell was the township thinking having a road crew work the weekend before Labor Day? Jack was just about to step out of his car when he saw Jill scurrying out the door, a covered dish in her hands. She looked trim and fit just like the day he first met her.

It was early morning and a low-lying fog blanketed the park. As had become his routine, Jack was cycling his way into consciousness, on the way to completing his third lap around the man-made lake. Out of nowhere, another bicycle entered the course and though he swerved mightily to get out of the way, the two bikes collided, tossing Jack and the other rider onto the dusty trail. Momentarily dazed, he laid still, feeling something warm run down his forehead. He opened his eyes and saw a pretty brunette standing over him.

"Don't move. You're bleeding" the young woman said.

"I'm fine" Jack replied, wiping away the sticky liquid with the back of his hand. He moved gingerly, trying to sit up but despite his best efforts, needed to take her outstretched hand for an extra tug.

"I'm sorry about cutting you off. I looked but didn't see anyone coming."

"Next time you might want to enter the course at the designated areas instead of just barreling through" Jack said, unable to hide his displeasure.

"Look, I said I'm sorry. I just moved here a few days ago and this is my first time at the park. I didn't expect to have any company, especially so early."

"No, I'm sorry" Jack apologized. "I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. It's just that I'm not

used to taking a header off my bike. It makes me kind of cranky . . . My name's Jack" he said, taking a decidedly more friendly tone.

The woman smiled broadly. "I'm Jill" she replied "and I think I'm responsible for breaking your crown." Jack looked back at her, puzzled. "You know, Jack fell down and broke his crown--"

"And Jill came tumbling after" he finished with a hint of a smile. "So, Jill, welcome to Pine Valley, home of nursery rhymes and"

"Happily ever afters?" Jill offered.

"Not exactly but one out of two's not bad." Jack stood up and walked over to his bike that lay crumpled in a heap. "On second thought, looks like I'm "O" for two. Want to save me from complete misery and join me for a cup of coffee--or do you happen to have a pail of water that you need to take back up that hill?" Jack teased, motioning in the slope's direction.

"Coffee sounds nice."

They ended up talking for close to an hour. Jill, it turned out, was the new counselor Livia had hired to help out at work. Over the past few years, it had become apparent to both Jack and Livia that, although many of the folks that wandered into the Montgomery Law Clinic had legitimate legal issues to deal with, just as many people had simply hit a rough patch and needed help getting assistance from the assorted government programs the county offered. Unfortunately, most of them didn't have the wherewithal to figure out what they qualified for and the agencies themselves were way too understaffed to do anything more helpful than point to a stack of forms and pamphlets on the nearby tables. With the recent slew of donations brought on by the article in *Tempo* magazine about the clinic, Jack and Livia were now finally in a position to hire some additional staff. Jill Waters was slated to start that Monday. Jack asked her out the following week and the two had been dating casually now for the past month.

They talked easily on the drive over to Bianca's. Jack took a deep breath when they pulled up to the low-slung rancher. *What was I thinking, bringing a date to a family gathering? Bianca will be friendly enough but Kendall and Erica? Jill will be lucky if she gets out alive!* Before he had a chance to turn the car around, the front door opened and a tow-headed boy dashed to its side.

"Daddy!" Andrew exclaimed with unabashed delight. "What took you so long?" Peering inside the car, he noticed a strange lady sitting next to his father. "Who's she?" he asked, crinkling his nose in dismay.

"Her name is Miss Waters and she's a friend of mine, okay?"

Andrew shrugged his shoulders. "I guess" he said and turned his attention back to his father. "Daddy, you have to come inside. Me and Spike--"

"Spike and me"

"Spike and me are doing cannonballs in the pool."

“Spike and I” Jack again corrected.

“Spike and you, what?” Andrew asked, clearly confused.

“Never mind. Listen, sport, if you want me to come and watch I think you better let me out of the car.” Jack turned to say something to Jill and the next thing he knew, Andrew was by her side, opening the door.

“Hi, Miss Waters. I’m Andrew Mark Montgomery. May I help you out of the car?” the five year old said, without a hint of self-consciousness.

“Thank you, Andrew. You’re very sweet.”

Andrew scrunched up his face. “Yuck. No guy wants to be called sweet, right Dad?”

“I think what Miss Waters meant is that you’re a gentleman, just like your old man.”

“You’re not old . . . well, not real, REAL old, anyway.” Andrew giggled and took off for the house.

“Hurry, Dad. Please.”

“Hold your horses, Andrew. We’ll be there in a minute.” Jack lightly tapped the small of Jill’s back, directing her toward the house.

“Your son is charming, Jack.”

“He can be when he wants to be but believe me, he can be a real terror too, especially when he’s with Spike and Miranda. Those three have a real talent for getting into trouble together.”

“Miranda’s Bianca’s daughter, right? And Spike?”

“Spike’s my daughter Kendall’s son. Andrew and he are just over a year apart. Come on, let’s go inside and I’ll introduce you.”

Jack pointedly introduced Jill as a friend from work though it was clear from their studied reactions that Erica had already informed everyone that she was Jack’s date. As expected, Bianca greeted the woman warmly but Kendall had a harder time hiding her disdain. Erica, on the other hand, made a grand attempt at being friendly. But for Jack, the tension beat down almost as hotly as the afternoon sun.

As luck would have it, the Gods were on Jack’s side. Twenty minutes after Jill and he arrived, her beeper went off. It was the clinic’s answering service calling to tell her that Mrs. Watkins was having a difficult time getting the specialized in-home nursing care her ailing husband needed. Rather than try and deal with it over the phone, Jill decided to make her excuses and head over to the Watkins’ apartment complex. It was only a handful of blocks away and despite Jack’s offer to accompany her, Jill insisted on walking. Much as he hated to admit it, Jack was relieved. Erica may have been ready to deal with him bringing a date to a family function but he wasn’t feeling nearly as magnanimous.

Before he had too much time to dissect his feelings, Andrew appeared dripping wet. He grabbed Jack’s arm and began to tug in the pool’s direction. “C’mon, Dad. You promised to play with Spike

and me.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming. Just give me a second to change.”

“Okay, but don’t dawdle,” Andrew said wagging his finger.

Jack suppressed a smile. “I promise. I’ll move as fast as I possibly can. Scout’s honor.”

“My dad’s coming” Andrew shouted at the top of his lungs as he raced for the door. Even through the glass sliders, the adults could hear the kids’ whoops of excitement.

Five minutes later, Jack emerged from the back room, dressed only in his swim trunks. To Erica, his tanned physique looked even more inviting than she remembered and in spite of herself, she too whooped with excitement, albeit silently. She was almost grateful that he didn’t stop to talk and merely slipped outside to the awaiting chaos.

Jack splashed around with the kids the rest of the afternoon, lifting them high in the air and then tossing them back into the water. When it was time, finally, to eat, he wolfed down two cheeseburgers, washing them down with a cold beer. Just as he was setting his empty bottle down, Erica came to a stop in front of him, her face expressionless.

“Andrew’s exhausted. Before he falls asleep, I’m going to take him home.”

“Okay, well, let me go kiss him goodnight” Jack replied mechanically. He stood up and waited for what seemed like a lifetime expecting Erica to step out of his way. “Is there something else?” he inquired when she didn’t move.

“Andrew’s first day of kindergarten is this Tuesday.”

“Yeah, I know. And?”

“Well, if it wouldn’t be too inconvenient, I thought it might be nice if we took him together . . . It’s a big day for him and I didn’t want to exclude you.”

“I appreciate that,” Jack offered, trying to make amends for his curt tone. “What time should I be at the house?”

“Eight thirty? That will give us a couple of minutes to take pictures.”

“Eight thirty it is” Jack nodded in agreement. “I’ll bring the camera.” Without uttering another word, he stepped around her and moved toward his yawning son. “So, champ. You’re pretty tired, huh?”

“Just a little” Andrew said softly.

“Well, you go right to sleep when you get home, okay? Now . . . give me a kiss and a hug . . .” Andrew wrapped his tiny arms around his father’s neck. Jack picked him up and held him for a minute, inhaling the sweet smell of his son. Nothing filled him with a greater joy than holding the boy’s body next to his. Andrew planted a wet kiss on his father’s lips, and snuggling close, whispered in his ear. “I love you, Daddy.” Jack didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry.

Erica and Andrew left moments later with Kendall and Spike right on their heels. As Bianca cleared the table, Jack looked at the toy-strewn yard. “Hey, Pip, whaddaya say? Want to help old Grandpa clean up around this pool?”

Pip! Only Grandpa was allowed to call her that. It was short for Pipsqueak and Jack nicknamed her that not long after she began to talk. Just a toddler, Miranda was already passionate, opinionated and brimming with confidence. A tiny carbon copy of Erica, Pip spoke her mind, no matter the circumstance. She was fierce and Jack adored her. The feeling was decidedly mutual.

Miranda absentmindedly walked toward Jack, making only a half-hearted attempt to pitch in. Trying to rouse her into action, Jack began tossing assorted inflatables in her direction.

“Grandpa! You’re getting me wet.”

“Oh, what’s the matter? Suddenly, you can’t stand a little water?” he teased and swept her into a big embrace. Miranda squealed and started to laugh. “So, what’s this I hear about you not wanting to go to school this week? Hmm?”

Miranda shrugged her shoulders and following his lead, joined Jack on the old-fashioned glider perched under the giant oak tree.

Jack tugged on her long braid. “Come on . . . spill.”

“School’s okay, I guess. It’s just not as much fun as the summer” she said with a pout.

“Yeah, well, I can’t argue with you there. But, hey, you’ve still got a few more days. Besides, think of how much fun it will be to wear all those new clothes I’m sure your grandmother bought you.”

Miranda’s face brightened. “Well, I did get these really cool new jeans. They have embroidery and lace all over them. Mom said they were too much money but Grandma insisted.”

“I’m sure she did, honey” Jack said, a faint smile caressing his lips. “Your grandma does know how to shop.”

“She’s awesome. Almost as awesome as you.”

“Almost, huh?”

“Well, it’s her fault you got a divorce when Andrew was just a baby” she said, without so much as blinking an eye.

“Where’d you get an idea like that?” Jack said, flabbergasted.

“I heard Mom and Aunt Kendall talking about it one day. They thought I couldn’t hear them but I could. Mom said it was the biggest mistake Grandma ever made.”

“Listen, Pip, what happened between your grandma and me was really complicated--and nobody’s fault.”

“If you say so-”

“I do. And it’s also private, as I suspect the conversation between your mom and your aunt was. So, no more eavesdropping. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Good. Now how about we finish up out here before it’s too dark to see what we’re doing? It’s getting late and one of us needs to hit the sack pretty soon.”

“It’s only eight o’clock!” Miranda said, hands on hips. “Mom lets me stay up until ten.”

“I was talking about me. I’m beat.”

Twenty minutes later, Jack pulled away from the curb and flipped on the radio. Rod Stewart was midway through crooning “The Nearness of You.”

“When you’re in my arms and I feel you so close to me;

All my wildest dreams come true... ”

Jack flashed back to his wedding day. With the exception of the birth of his son, it had been the happiest day of his life. That afternoon, he scooped his bride into his arms and they danced, so full of hope and joy for the future. Tonight, those same words took on a mournful quality. To his profound sadness, Jack felt the long shadow of loneliness following him.

Chapter Three by Mary

“Is he here yet?” Andrew raised himself up on the window sill and looked impatiently out the window for the umpteenth time.

“He’ll be here any minute, Andrew,” Erica reassured him. “Your father is never late.”

“I know,” Andrew said, barely containing his excitement. “I just don’t want to be late for school.”

School - Erica could hardly believe it. In spite of everything that had happened, sometimes it seemed like only yesterday since Andrew had been born. How had the time gone by so fast? She had savored every moment of her son’s childhood, clinging to it fiercely as she knew that the older Andrew got, the less he would need her. If she was honest with herself, she had to acknowledge the fact that she needed him just as much as he needed her. Andrew was so precious to her, a miraculous gift that she considered her final chance to get it right, after so many times of getting it wrong...

“OK, Erica, it’s almost time,” Dr. Clader’s voice penetrated the haze of pain that enveloped Erica. “I need you to get ready to push.”

Erica nodded weakly, trying to focus on his words. There was nothing she wanted more than to bring her and Jack's child safely into this world but she didn't remember feeling like this when Bianca was born. She felt so weak and disoriented, as if her body didn't really belong to her. The labor had gone on for hours and she was exhausted. And why was she so cold? No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop shivering.

"Sweetheart," Jack's voice was strong and clear. "You're doing great." His grip on her hand tightened. "Just focus on your breathing."

Erica gasped as another sharp pain tore through her. "I can't wait," she moaned, breathing heavily. "I have to push."

"I know, Erica, just hold on one more minute," Dr. Clader said soothingly. Erica heard him mutter something to his assistant. Most of it was unintelligible but she heard "blood pressure" and "dangerous."

"Jack -"

"I'm right here, sweetheart," Jack's voice was calm but she knew him well enough to detect the underlying fear he was trying to hide.

"Jack, if something happens to me -"

"Nothing is going to happen to you, Erica, nothing," Jack said fiercely. "Look at me."

Erica's eyelids fluttered open. She smiled slightly as her eyes met Jack's.

"You are going to be fine," Jack told her. "And so is our child. After everything that we've been through, believe that. Please - believe it."

Erica nodded slightly, drawing strength from his words. "OK," she said, "but if something - if something goes wrong...just promise me...promise me that you'll take care of Andrew -"

"Erica," Jack's voice wavered for a moment. "We don't even know that it's a boy."

"Promise me," Erica insisted, catching her breath as another wave of pain washed over her.

"Jack, you're going to have to move back," Dr. Clader said urgently. "We need to get this baby born."

"Jack -"

"I promise," Jack said finally, letting go of her hand. He bent down and kissed her cheek. "I love you." Erica felt the wetness of tears on her face but she wasn't sure if they belonged to her or to Jack.

After that, everything was a blur. She vaguely remembered pushing for what seemed like an eternity, then finally the sound of a baby crying and Dr. Clader's announcement that they had a boy. She remembered an incredible feeling of joy and relief, but before she could rejoice, she was overcome with exhaustion once again.

Then everyone seemed to be crowding around her. "We've got to stop this bleeding," she heard and then everything started to go dark.

The last thing she heard was Jack's voice. "Hold on, sweetheart, please, just hold on."

"He's here!" Andrew rushed by her and into the foyer. Erica followed slowly. She hadn't seen Jack since Miranda's party and had been dreading it ever since. She had steeled herself for the ordeal of meeting Jack's date but she had been unprepared for the red hot flash of jealousy that had raced through her. The fact that Jill was young, pretty and appeared genuinely nice had only made it worse.

By the time Erica got to the foyer, Jack was already inside. He was dressed casually in jeans and a blue pullover that made his eyes a piercing blue. His hair was still damp from his shower and she couldn't help but notice that it was the perfect length, just touching the back of his collar. The thought of how she used to love to run her fingers through it still made her knees go weak.

"Let's go!" Andrew grabbed his backpack and headed for the door.

"Hold on there, sport," Jack said, putting his hand on Andrew's shoulder. "We've got plenty of time. I'm sure your mom wants some pictures."

The next few minutes were spent trying to get Andrew to stop squirming long enough for Jack to take the pictures.

"OK, I think I managed to get a couple of good ones," Jack said finally, snapping the lens cover shut and turning to Erica. "I'll follow you," he stated. Erica nodded silently. The thought of the two of them driving together was out of the question. It had been years since they had spent any length of time alone together or in any kind of close quarters.

Fifteen minutes later, Erica pulled into the parking lot of Pine Valley Elementary School. Andrew was out of the car in a flash, waiting for Jack to park. Erica looked up at the red brick building with its tall windows and imposing roof. It had been years since she had been inside this building. She had been a student here long ago herself, and years later, Bianca had attended until Travis took her to Seattle. Now Andrew was about to walk away from her and through those doors for the first time.

"Are you alright?" Jack asked, looking at her intently as he joined them.

"Of course - I'm fine," Erica replied, grateful for the bright morning sun as she adjusted her sunglasses.

Andrew ran on ahead as soon as he spotted Miranda and Spike in the playground. Erica and Jack followed, each lost in their own thoughts.

"He'll be fine," Jack said, finally breaking the silence between them. "He doesn't have a shy bone in his body."

Erica smiled in spite of herself. "That's true." She hesitated. "It just seems like he's growing up so

fast all of a sudden.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Jack replied.

“Grandma! Grandpa!” Miranda, Spike and Andrew came running across the playground. “I can't believe it!” Miranda exclaimed. “Andrew is finally here!”

“Well, you certainly seem more excited about school than you did last week,” Jack observed wryly.

Miranda made a face. “Once I thought about it, I realized it might not be that bad now that Andrew is here too,” she explained airily.

“Ah, The Three Musketeers together at last,” Jack said. “This school isn't going to know what hit it.”

“Miranda and Spike said we'll see each other at lunch and recess,” Andrew told his parents. “And can I take the bus like they do?”

“No!” Erica said sharply and then took a deep breath. “Maybe next year, Andrew. I'll drive you this year.”

The shrill sound of the bell sent children scurrying toward the school. Miranda and Spike quickly lined up with their classmates. Erica and Jack walked with Andrew over to the kindergartners' line. A quick glance at the faces of the other parents confirmed to Erica that she wasn't the only one having a difficult day.

“I love you, Andrew,” she said, bending down and hugging him tightly. “Have a wonderful first day of school.” She blinked back the tears that insisted on obscuring her vision.

“I will, Mom. I love you too,” Andrew hugged her back just as tightly and then turned to Jack.

“This is a big day, sport,” Jack said, kneeling down so that he was on Andrew's level. “I love you and I'm so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Dad. I love you,” Andrew hugged Jack and started to walk toward the line. Suddenly, he turned and ran back over to Erica. “It'll be OK, Mom,” he said seriously, looking wise beyond his years. He reached into his backpack and placed something in her hand. “You should keep this today.” He ran to catch the line as it started to move. Before long, he disappeared inside and Erica was left staring at the closed door.

“I'll call him this afternoon to see how it went,” Jack said as Erica started walking toward her car.

“Fine. I'll tell him,” Erica increased her pace until she reached her car. She was surprised when Jack reached carefully around her and opened the car door. Just as carefully, she slid behind the steering wheel. It was an unspoken rule that they never touched. Toys, backpacks, even Andrew himself - all had been exchanged over the years without so much as an accidental brush of fingers.

Erica waited for the door to close. “Are you sure you're OK?” Jack asked finally.

“I'm fine, Jack,” she answered curtly. “How many times do I have to say it?”

The door slammed shut. "Tell Andrew I'll call him."

Erica watched him walk away, wishing she didn't notice the way the sun made the highlights in his hair even blonder or the way the rolled-up sleeves of the blue pullover clung to his muscular arms.

Only after Jack had pulled out of the parking lot did Erica allow herself to open her hand. She had known what it was the minute that Andrew had wrapped her fingers around it. The little blue car had always been Andrew's good luck charm, the object he had held on to for years whenever he was scared or upset. Erica rapidly blinked back tears but they fell anyway. Her son knew her so well.

Erica glanced at the clock on the dashboard. If she hurried, she'd be able to make the AA meeting at the hospital. Experience had taught her that she shouldn't try to get through the day without some support. As she started the car and backed out of the parking space, she acknowledged the possibility that things might be very different if only she had learned that lesson long ago.

"This was cool," Reggie said, finishing off his piece of pie with enthusiasm and eyeing Erica's plate from across the table. "I'm glad we got together."

Erica pushed her plate over to Reggie. "Me too," she said with a smile. "It's nice to know that even hotshot journalists still have time for their mothers."

"Not exactly hotshot," Reggie mumbled between bites. "You won't believe the lame stuff they have me doing."

"Give it time. You're just getting started," Erica reminded him. "Jack says you love living in the city."

"New York is awesome," Reggie finished Erica's pie and put down his fork. "Totally awesome."

Erica smiled. "I've lived there myself so I know what you mean."

"J says that Andrew is doing great at school," Reggie said. "No big surprise there." He hesitated for a minute. "Erica, are things cool with you and Jack?"

"Why wouldn't they be?" Erica responded, surprised.

"Uh, I don't know..." Reggie's voice trailed off but Erica got the feeling he wanted to elaborate.

"Do you mean because of Jill?" Erica probed further.

"Yeah, I guess. That's gotta be awkward."

"Well, it isn't," Erica said. "It's not," she insisted, seeing Reggie's look of disbelief. "Jack and I have been divorced for years now, Reggie."

"I know, but the two of you...the two of you were just it, you know. I always thought you'd work things out...get back together."

The door to McKay's suddenly swung open and a blast of cool air filled the restaurant as Andrew ran

across the room.

“Hi, Mom!” Andrew said, launching himself into her arms. “We had the best time!”

Erica hugged him and watched Jack approach over her son's head. “I'm glad you liked the art museum,” she said. “Did you get any ideas for your project?”

“A couple, I guess,” Andrew sat down next to Reggie. “I wish you weren't going away again.”

“I know, squirt, but I'll be back before you know it,” Reggie said. “Definitely for Thanksgiving.”

Erica watched Jack move a few feet away as he answered his cell phone. Jill, she thought, noting the faint smile on his lips as he spoke into the phone. Her nails dug into her palm as she got up to leave.

“Reggie has a new girlfriend,” Andrew announced as Jack walked back over to them. “Her name is Chantel and she's really pretty and - how old is she again?”

“Six months younger than me,” Reggie answered.

“Well, it's nice to know that some people still date in their age range,” Erica commented snidely, carefully avoiding looking at Jack as she felt his gaze narrow on her.

Reggie coughed and Andrew watched fascinated as soda came out of his brother's nose. “How'd you do that?” he demanded as Reggie stood up, still coughing, and grabbed a napkin.

Erica hugged Reggie. “I'll see you when you come home for Thanksgiving,” she said.

“Count on it,” Reggie replied. “Take care of yourself, Erica.”

“I'll pick him up at the usual time on Saturday,” Jack said to Erica as Andrew and Reggie said their good-byes.

“Fine,” Erica said mechanically, still not meeting Jack's eyes. She now regretted her earlier remark and couldn't wait to leave. The last thing she wanted was for Jack to think she cared anything about his relationship with Jill. She watched Andrew kiss Jack goodbye, gave Reggie a final hug and quickly ushered her son out of the restaurant and into the cool evening air.

Erica raised her head from the pillow as Jack came into the bedroom, closed the door behind him and leaned wearily against it.

“Is he asleep?” she asked.

“Yes, finally,” Jack replied. He walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge. “They do eventually sleep through the night, right? You're not just teasing me?”

Erica laughed softly. In the eight weeks since Andrew had been born, sleep had become an elusive creature. Andrew was an incredibly sweet and happy baby but sleeping through the night was not something he seemed interested in mastering in any great hurry.

Erica reached over to the nightstand and switched on the baby monitor. Kneeling behind Jack on

the bed, she lightly ran her hands across his shoulders and then began massaging the tense muscles of his neck.

“Well, as much as I enjoy - teasing you - I promise, he will eventually sleep all night,” she said, enjoying the way his muscles rippled beneath her fingers. “I just can't guarantee exactly when that will happen.”

Jack relaxed and leaned back against her. “Hmmm, that feels good,” he said huskily.

Erica bent down and touched her lips to the back of his neck. Then she reached her arms around his neck and lightly trailed her fingers down his bare chest.

“Even better,” Jack murmured and turned around to pull her onto his lap.

Erica smiled up at him and wound her fingers into his hair to bring his mouth to hers. He returned her kiss tenderly. After a moment, Erica deepened the kiss, seeking his tongue with her own. She felt Jack tremble slightly and then he gently pulled away from her.

“Jack -” she protested.

“Sweetheart, you need your rest,” he told her.

“What I need,” Erica stated, looking directly into his eyes, “is for you to make love to me.”

Jack took a deep breath. “Honey, believe me, there's nothing I want more.”

“It's been so long, Jack,” she said yearningly.

“I know,” Jack replied. “Between Andrew's birth and homecoming and your recovery - “

“But I have recovered, Jack,” Erica insisted. “And I'm not made of glass.”

“Maybe not,” Jack said seriously. “But you're much more fragile than I ever realized.” He hesitated and then continued. “I never really thought of you that way before. You've always been so strong.”

Erica looked at him closely. Over the past few weeks, she had frequently imagined how worried Jack must have been after Andrew was born. Now, listening to the emotion in his voice and seeing the pain in his eyes, she realized just how frightened he must have been.

“That night, when I thought I might lose you...” Jack's voice broke and his arms tightened around her. He buried his face in her hair. “I don't know how I could go on without you.”

“You're not going to lose me, Jack,” she said softly. “We were meant to be together and nothing will ever separate us. Even when I was so sick, the thought of you and our life together was what gave me the strength to fight.”

Jack took a deep breath and raised his head to look at her again. “I've never been so scared in my entire life,” he admitted. “Never. I just want to make sure nothing ever happens to you, to protect you and love you-”

“Then love me, Jack,” Erica whispered, closing the distance between their lips once again. With a

groan, Jack captured her lips hungrily and they kissed with increasing passion. Turning with her in his arms, he lowered her gently onto the pillows.

“God, I love you,” Jack said deeply, sliding the strap of her nightgown down her arm and leaving a trail of kisses from her shoulder to her neck until he reached her mouth. This time, his tongue parted her willing lips insistently. Jack slowly removed her nightgown, his hands igniting a blaze of desire as he thoroughly explored every curve. Erica moaned and wrapped her arms around him as they were consumed by passion that had been too long denied.

Erica awoke with a start, looking around in confusion. I can't believe I fell asleep, she thought, although keeping up with both Andrew and Miranda all morning had been exhausting. After lunch, she had thankfully sunk down on the couch with the latest Enchantment stock reports. Now, as she picked the fallen reports up off the floor, Erica recalled what she had been dreaming about and blushed. Even after all this time, she could still remember the feeling of Jack's lips on hers and the touch of his hands on her skin.

“Mom, didn't you hear the doorbell?” Andrew yelled, bounding down the stairs with Miranda close on his heels. Erica suddenly realized what had awakened her and quickly smoothed her hair and skirt as she walked out into the foyer.

“Hey, champ,” Jack said as he walked in, picking Andrew up and swinging him around as he always did. When he saw Erica, Jack suddenly stopped with a strange look on his face.

“What?” Erica asked nervously into the silence, the memories evoked from her dream still vivid in her mind.

“You just look really pretty, Mommy,” Andrew said. “Doesn't she, Daddy?”

“Of course she does,” Miranda piped up when Jack said nothing. “Grandma's beautiful.”

Erica blushed uncomfortably and quickly changed the subject. “Andrew, do you have everything?”

Jack finally looked away from Erica. “You too, Pip. I promised your mom I'd drop you off on my way back to the loft.”

“I've got everything,” Andrew gestured toward his backpack on the floor.

“Me too,” Miranda said, picking up her flowered knapsack. “You'd better get going on that art project this weekend, Andrew,” she reminded him. “I'm almost done with mine.”

“We have a few ideas, Miranda,” Erica told her granddaughter. “We're just having a tough time getting started.”

“Grandma, you know I love your fashion sketches,” Miranda said in a slightly patronizing tone, “but maybe you and Andrew need some help with this.”

“Oh, really?” Erica asked, smiling slightly. Her granddaughter never failed to amuse her.

“I know!” Miranda exclaimed, “You can help them, Grandpa!”

“Can you, Dad?” Andrew asked excitedly. “That would be great! Me, you and Mom can work on it together.”

Erica and Jack stared at each other in consternation. “Uh, I don't know, Andrew,” Jack said.

“Please, Dad,” Andrew begged.

“OK...sure,” Jack said after another minute. “Why not?”

“Great - thanks Dad,” Andrew hugged Jack tightly around the waist.

Erica kissed both Andrew and Miranda goodbye and the children ran out on to the porch to wait for Jack. Erica looked at Jack warily. The thought of them working together on something - on anything - was enough to send her into a tailspin.

“I think the loft would probably be more conducive for an art project,” Jack said finally. “And most of Andrew's art supplies are there anyway. Why don't you come by tomorrow afternoon? That way you can take Andrew home with you when we're done.”

“Fine,” Erica said, willing her heart to stop beating so wildly. “Around three?”

Jack nodded curtly. “See you then.”

Erica watched Jack race Andrew and Miranda to the car, smiling as the kids shrieked with laughter when Jack caught them. She shut the door and leaned against it for a moment with her eyes closed. She knew she shouldn't be so excited at the simple prospect of spending an extended period of time with Jackson but she couldn't help herself. It was an opportunity for more contact than they had had in over three years. And Jack hadn't seemed entirely against it...

Erica walked back to the sofa and picked up the stock reports. As she leafed through them, she found her thoughts wandering. Suddenly tomorrow couldn't come fast enough, and even though she tried, she couldn't quite suppress the little smile that hovered on her lips.

Chapter 4 by Misha

Erica slammed her mascara down on the vanity. There was no denying the truth, not when the evidence was as obvious as the lush dark lashes she had just curled. She was a wreck. Worse still, she was a wreck who couldn't decide what to wear. It was nearing two o'clock and despite having changed five times, Erica was no closer to making a decision than she was when she began an hour ago. The only thing she had succeeded in doing was converting her bedroom into a demolition zone.

Erica looked around her room in despair. *I must be out of my mind agreeing to spend time with Jackson after everything that's happened. Am I trying to make myself crazy,* Erica wondered?

Steeling herself, she tugged open the bottom drawer in her dressing room table and gently retrieved the gilt-edged frame she had stashed away years ago. Erica had tucked it away for safe keeping shortly after the divorce and since that time, only allowed herself the occasional luxury of a few stolen glances. The photo had been taken only a day or two into their honeymoon, not long after they had docked at the mouth of the Mississippi. Jack and she looked so carefree, so full of hope for the future. It had been a magical time for the new Mrs. Montgomery. Lazy mornings in bed, afternoons strolling down the streets of the French Quarter, wrapped in her husband's arms. And then, at night . . . No, she couldn't let her mind wander there. Not if she was going to be on time. Jack was such a stickler about being prompt and Erica was determined to make the afternoon as pleasant as possible. Taking one last look before slipping the picture back into its hiding place, she turned back to her closets and sighed. Dresser drawers were pulled open and her clothes were strewn everywhere. How had she let this happen? For three years she had kept her emotions for Jack tightly in check. How could working on a simple art project with him so completely unnerve her?

Erica swiveled back toward the mirror. *He gave up on you, she silently lectured. When push came to shove, he walked away and almost took your son with him.* Erica felt the familiar tug of anger and resentment boiling up inside. Better but not quite enough. And then she remembered Jill. Jill - what a plain little name it was. Plain and average, she thought, with a quick toss of her hair. In that moment, Erica realized that it didn't matter whatsoever what she wore. Except for Andrew, Jack was out of her life forever.

Jack stared at the glass sitting in front of him and gritted his teeth. He hated to admit that it had come to this, but he couldn't deny the truth. He needed it. *Face it, Montgomery. This is the only way you're going to make it through the afternoon.* Jack lifted the glass in mock salute and, taking a deep breath, chugged down the eight ounces of milk. Jack hated milk but it was the only thing that stood between him and a stomach overrun with acid. *One hour. In one hour, she'd be here. How the hell did I let myself get talked into this?* It was bad enough that he'd be spending time with Erica but in the loft of all places? *What the hell was I thinking?* Thinking, hell. He hadn't done that in a good long time. And there was something else he hadn't done in a good long time and it was really beginning to piss him off. No doubt about it: celibacy definitely didn't agree with him.

Jack flung himself onto the couch in abject misery. This whole damn thing would be over already if Kendall hadn't called yesterday and asked me to watch Spike, he thought, feeling more and more sorry for himself. Jack clamped his eyes shut, hoping the darkness would block out memories that kept bubbling to the surface.

The last time Erica had been there was just after Andrew had turned one. The house had been

overrun with family and they decided to sneak out for a couple of hours of much needed alone time.
But as so often had become the case, fate intervened.

When Jack and Erica left for the loft, the sun was shining brightly, but within moments of arriving, snow began to fall. At Erica's urging, Jack flipped on the TV and was relieved to hear that only a light dusting was predicted. "Looks like the weather Gods are on our side," he commented and immediately turned off the set in favor of the stereo. Etta James was just where they left her. Jack inched up the volume until the sultry strains of "At Last" filled the space.

*"At last, my lonely days are gone
and life is like a song . . ."*

Wordlessly, he reached out his hand to Erica. She eased toward him, finding sanctuary in his arms. Nowhere did she feel more at home than nestled against his broad chest. Slowly they danced to the rhythms of the music.

*"...and then the spell was cast
and here we are in heaven
for you are mine at last"*

"I missed spending time alone with you," Jack said softly. "Life has gotten so busy, what with you working at the station and me trying to jumpstart the clinic. Whatever time we have together these days, we're with Andrew."

"You're not regretting—"

"Having Andrew? Not for a second. I can't imagine our lives without him. Aside from marrying you, sweetheart, he's the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"To us. You know how I adore Bianca—and Kendall, but having a child, a son with the one man who's always understood me, who's never wanted me to be anything other than who I am . . . How did I ever get so lucky?"

"Luck had nothing to do with it. You, Erica Kane, always have and always will be the woman I love."

*Erica pulled away from Jack just enough to look directly into his eyes. "Erica Kane
MONTGOMERY. And don't you forget it. . ."*

"Not a chance in the world," Jack replied and gathered his wife back into his arms, spun her around and gently dipped her. And came to a dead halt. The light flurries had been transformed into giant

snowflakes that all but obscured his view outside.

“What is it?” Erica asked.

“The weather,” Jack said, gesturing toward the window. “Looks like the experts weren’t on our side after all. We’re in the midst of one helluva storm. Come on. Get your things. If we don’t leave this minute, we’re going to be stuck here.”

“Would that be so bad?” Erica asked seductively.

Jack just stood and looked at her. “You’re kidding, right? Last time we didn’t even make it through the movie before we both decided we’d rather be home with Andrew. And I don’t care what the critics said. Why you chose to see a picture about a kidnapping is beyond me.”

“I told you. I thought it was a love story,” Erica replied, slipping her arm into the outstretched coat Jack was holding.

“Yeah, well, next time I get to pick. In the meantime, you know as well as I do that neither one of us is going to enjoy the evening if we’re worrying about what’s going on at the house. I love our kids to death but I think we’d both feel a lot better knowing that everything’s all right rather than taking their word for it. When all of them are together, especially in less than ideal circumstances, anything could happen, and usually does.”

“Please,” Erica said, holding up her hand. “Don’t even go there. I still can’t believe they thought it would be fun to have a popcorn tossing contest in the living room. Just promise me. Promise me that we’ll get back here soon. There’s so much I need to talk to you about.” Jack stopped and looked at her, concerned. “Not now,” Erica added. “Not when we’re rushed. Later, when we have time.”

But later never came. Days after the storm, an important case landed on Jack’s desk and before he had a moment to look up, planning for May sweeps had begun. Whole weeks went by where their paths barely crossed, save for a rushed conversation over morning coffee. By the time summer rolled around, Erica had begun drinking and their lives together had taken a downward slide.

Miraculously, Erica arrived at Andrew’s school a few minutes early. She kept the engine running, the heater at full blast hoping to get the chill out of her bones, closing her eyes briefly to calm herself, anything to get rid of her nerves. Erica’s body began to relax as she imagined being on a beach, the sun lightly kissing her skin. And then his face flashed in front of her, his eyes laughing, the gentle

breeze ruffling his hair. Erica jerked her eyes open. *Please, please let this afternoon go by quickly.* She looked at the clock on the dashboard. 2:50. Andrew had been dismissed five minutes ago but was nowhere in sight.

“C’mon, you guys. I’ve gotta go. You know how my mom worries about me . . .”

“Grandma can wait two more seconds. After all, we’re doing this for her . . .” Miranda reasoned.

“And for Grandpa,” Spike added, pushing his wire-rimmed glasses back into place. “Now remember, this is what it should look like,” and handed Andrew an elaborate chart. It was covered with arrows and footnotes—clearly not the work of an average seven year-old. But then Spike had never been average. He began talking at six months, reading at three and had mastered his multiplication tables before entering kindergarten. Though there was no mistaking who he had inherited his curly top from, the entire family was in awe of his book smarts. No doubt about it. The kid was a genius. As it turned out, he was also a gifted musician and had already mastered his instrument of choice: a fender guitar, modeled after the one his hero Eric Clapton played. Spike spent hours practicing in his room and liked nothing more than jamming in front of his family. They, in turn, delighted in his performances, though the boy raised more than a couple of eyebrows when he debuted his gold hoop earring. Initially, Kendall had refused him permission but Spike had cleverly worn his mother down, using the rationale that if she wanted a “regular” kid, she should have named him Ed. Conceding defeat, Kendall reluctantly escorted him to the mall.

“What’s those little squiggles mean?” Andrew asked.

Miranda rolled her eyes. “Spike! I told you not to make it too complicated. They’re supposed to have fun.”

“I know, I know. Sometimes I just can’t help myself. Here, take this one. It’s a lot simpler but will still get the point across.” Andrew grabbed it, stuffed it into his backpack and turned to leave just in time to see Erica walk through the door.

“Sweetheart, I was worried. What happened to you?”

“I, um...”

“Grandma!” Miranda interrupted. “Look, I’m wearing the glass necklace you lent me. You were right. All my friends thought it was the coolest. Do you think it would be okay if I went shopping in

your jewelry box this weekend? My class is going to the Franklin Institute on Tuesday and . . .”

“I’ll give your mother a call, honey, and see what we can do. In the meantime, your cousin and I have to run. We’re already running late . . . Give me a kiss. You, too, Spike.” Both kids enveloped Erica in their customary bear hug and then watched as both she and Andrew headed toward the car. “Your father’s going to wonder what happened to us,” she said as they pulled away from the curb.

“Don’t worry, mom. I’ll let him know it’s my fault,” Andrew reassured Erica. Much as she appreciated the gesture, it broke her heart knowing that even at his tender age, her son picked up on the tension between his parents. Guilt was about to overtake her when Andrew began chattering about his day and their plans for the art project. His excitement was infectious and by the time they reached the front door, Erica found her mood noticeably more upbeat. She was just about to ring when the heavy metal door swung open.

“We’re here!” Andrew exclaimed, launching himself into his father’s arms.

“I can see that,” Jack said, gazing past him and resting his eyes on Erica. *God, why did she have to look so damn gorgeous?* He wanted to linger on her but was determined not to make Erica feel self-conscious. Instead Jack took the two large shopping bags from her hands.

“More art supplies,” she said by way of explanation. “I wanted to be sure we had everything we needed.”

“Good thinking,” he said awkwardly. “Wouldn’t want to have to run out in the middle of our masterpiece. Here, let me take your coat.”

Before Jack was able to make a move to help, Erica quickly handed him her gold suede jacket. “The place looks nice,” she said, looking around, nervously. “Is that a new lamp?”

“Uh, yeah. Greenlee got it for me her last trip in. Said the place was too dark. Guess it will come in handy today.”

Erica nodded in agreement, trying in vain to think of something to add to the conversation. Fortunately, Andrew came running to the rescue.

“Look, mommy. Bashful. The frog I was telling you about. Daddy said that he’s an African Dwarf Frog. That’s why I named him Bashful. I thought about Dopey since he’s my favorite but didn’t want to hurt his feelings.”

Erica tried not to cringe. “It’s lovely, sweetheart, but don’t you think Bashful will be a lot more

comfortable in his cage?”

“Mommy, frogs live in tanks, not cages.”

Jack tried to contain himself, knowing Erica was less than thrilled to be in such close proximity to their son’s pet amphibian. “Andrew, why don’t you feed Bashful and put him back in your room. In the meantime, your mother and I will get things set up.”

“Okay, but don’t do anything until I get back. Mrs. Harper said we won’t get credit for the project if our parents do all the work.”

“Don’t worry, Sport. I promise. Your mom and I won’t lift a finger without you.”

As soon as Andrew left, the room again filled with an awkward stillness. Erica busied herself emptying out the shopping bags while Jack covered the dining room table with newspapers. Finally, Erica broke the silence. “Andrew’s very excited about the project. He barely came up for air on the way over.”

“Should be a lot of fun,” Jack offered. “What do you think of his latest idea?”

“The family tree? I don’t know. Do you really think Pine Valley Elementary is ready for it?”

“With all the twists and turns our family has? Not likely. Maybe we can steer him in another direction.”

“I wouldn’t count on it. When I picked him up at school, he was in deep conversation with Miranda and Spike. I swear, they’re up to something.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Jack laughed. “Those three are always plotting something, though I doubt very highly that it has anything to do with this,” Jack said, motioning to the supply-covered table. “Not one of them likes to lose at anything and from what Andrew tells me, only one student gets to represent the school at the Regionals in Philadelphia.”

Jack took note of Erica’s faint smile but was unnerved by her lack of eye contact. *She’s only been here two minutes and it already feels like two hours.* “C’mon, sport, we’ve got to get moving on this thing if you’re going to have it ready in time for the deadline. Don’t keep your mother and me waiting . . .”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Andrew said, emerging from the bedroom. This time, his little arms were holding an enormous box.

“What have you got there?” Jack inquired.

“Stuff for the tree. I thought it would be perspiration for the project.”

“I think you mean ‘inspiration’,” Jack clarified.

“Yeah, yeah, inspiration,” Andrew chirped. “Here, Dad, look at these.”

Jack took the photos from his son and after the briefest of moments, handed some to his ex.

“Andrew, where did you get these?” Erica asked, trying her best to sound calm when, in fact, her heart was racing out of control.

“Um, Miranda gave them to me. She said her mom has a whole bunch of them from when she was growing up. Why? Did I do something bad?” the little boy asked.

“No, sweetheart; of course not. It’s just that it’s been a while since I saw these. It just caught me by surprise.”

“I thought that you’d like them since you’re all dressed up and look so pretty. Not that you don’t always look pretty,” Andrew added with a grin, “but in these you look ‘specially beautiful.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” Jack smiled warmly. “We had a good time at the Ball that night. One of the best.”

Erica’s face faintly brightened but could only muster the slightest of nods.

As he always managed to do, Jack again came to the rescue. “What else have you got there?” he asked, moving the box out of his son’s reach. “Ah, now this one, this one has got to make it onto the tree. In fact, I think it should go on the trunk. What do you think?”

Erica looked at the picture hesitantly and instantly felt her shoulders relax. Looking up at her was a photo of Mona, her eyes exuding the wisdom Erica would later learn to cherish. “I remember when that was taken. I wasn’t much older than you are now,” she said to Andrew. “She was being honored for her volunteer work at the hospital.” Turning to Jack, Erica added, “I think that’s right around the time that she met Charles.”

“Who’s Charles?” Andrew asked.

“He was your grandma’s greatest love,” Erica replied.

“Was mommy your greatest love, Daddy?” Andrew asked with an innocence only a child could convey.

“Your mom and I loved each other very much.”

“But was she your greatest love?”

The sadness in Jack’s eyes betrayed his smile. “Yeah, champ, she was,” he added softly.

“Cool!” Andrew replied, bouncing off the couch. “This project is going to be the neatest thing EVER!” Erica and Jack looked at each other bewilderedly, following Andrew to the dining room table. “Dad, if we paste grandma here for Mommy, what should we put for you?”

“Good question. Got any ideas?” he asked Erica, shrugging his shoulders.

“Sweetheart, how about we put pictures on the tree for everyone we can and the rest you can draw.”

“Okay,” Andrew said, pulling a piece of paper out of his knapsack. “But I think that’s going to be an awful lot of drawing.”

“Let me see what you’ve got there,” Jack said, taking the crumpled diagram from his hands. Circles and arrows filled the page. “This looks a little complicated.”

“You should have seen the first one!”

“The first one?” Jack asked. “What do you mean, the first one?”

“Um, I, uh, um, I . . .” Andrew stammered.

“You what?” Jack asked again.

“Spike kinda helped me.”

“Helped you how?”

“He said that if he was going to be on the family tree he wanted to make sure he was on the right branch. So he did a bunch of research.”

“Research?”

“Yeah. At the library. You wouldn’t believe all these articles that were there about you,” Andrew said, turning to Erica. “Dad, did you know mommy was married before you? Like a hundred times!”

“Not quite a hundred,” Jack said, lightly admonishing his son.

“No, but it was lots. And Miranda said that all of us have different moms and dads. I didn’t believe her since she always zagerates. Is that true?”

“Exaggerates. And yeah, I guess it is true.”

Andrew let out a long, plaintive sigh. “That explains it,” he said seriously.

“Explains what, sweetheart?” Erica asked, concerned.

“Why Spike told me to get a gigantic poster board. I’ve got to draw about a jillion people.”

Jack looked back at Spike’s diagram and then handed it to Erica. “Maybe two jillion.”

Erica suppressed a laugh. “Honey, maybe we can rethink your art project idea. It’s after four and we haven’t even started yet.”

“I’m with your mom on that. Maybe go with something a little easier.”

“Like what?” Andrew asked.

“Well,” Jack said. “How about we draw a big tree—”

“Like the one you and mom got married at?”

“Sure,” Jack replied, after getting a silent nod of agreement from Erica.

“And we draw pictures only of your brother and sisters on it.”

“Hanging on the branches?” Andrew asked. “Like monkeys?”

Jack laughed. “How about we pretend it’s an apple tree and put their faces on them?”

“I like the monkey idea better.”

“Okay. Monkeys it is but let’s get a move on. Like your mom said, it’s getting late.”

Ninety minutes later, Reggie hovered on the top branches, casting a watchful eye over Bianca and Lily. Kendall dangled nearby, her arms outstretched as if claiming the tree as her own. Down below hung Greenlee “on account of her being scared of heights” Andrew explained. At their son’s insistence, Jack and Erica stood at its base holding hands, their youngest at his parents’ side.

“Sweetheart, why don’t you go wash up while your father and I clean up this mess?”

“That’s okay. I can take care of it when you leave,” Jack responded. “It’ll give me something to do.”

“Let me at least help you get started,” Erica offered, and began gathering up mounds of crayons.

“The tree looks nice,” he offered, weakly. “Thanks for not making a big deal about the holding hands thing. Sometimes I don’t know where he comes up with this stuff.”

Erica stopped and looked at him in amazement. “Are you kidding? I’ll tell you where he comes up with it. From you!”

“Me?”

“Jack, our son is a hopeless romantic.”

“And he gets that from me?”

“Well, he certainly doesn’t get it from me,” Erica said emphatically.

“So, what? Being a romantic is a bad thing?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You sure as hell implied it.”

“I didn’t mean . . .” Erica let out an exasperated sigh. “Honestly, Jack, are we really going to argue about this?”

“No . . . no. You’re right. You’re right. I’m overreacting. It’s just . . . Its been a long day and I guess I’m just a little worn out.”

“Me too. I wonder what’s taking Andrew so long,” Erica asked looking toward the doorway. “I usually have to remind him that washing up includes using soap.”

“Let me go check on him,” Jack said, grateful for the opportunity to slip away, albeit briefly. A moment later he emerged, a sleeping Andrew in his arms. “Guess the day took a toll on him too. I’ll carry him to the car.”

Erica quickly gathered her things as Jack effortlessly juggled their son to open the front door. “The picture.”

“It’s okay. I’ll drop it off tomorrow.”

Jack and Erica walked to the car in a companionable silence. After settling Andrew into the backseat, Jack lingered for a moment. The amber glow of a late-day sun colored the sky, casting a golden shadow behind Erica. Jack fought to keep the still familiar ache of love lost at bay. “Thanks for making today so easy.”

“It was nice spending time at the loft—for Andrew.”

“For Andrew.” *And for me too*, Jack thought, biting back the words. “Let me get the door for—”

The earth came to a screeching halt. For the first time in years, Erica’s tiny hand was engulfed by Jack’s. Wordlessly, they stood there, unable to move, unable to process. An unspoken vow had been broken and the emotions brought forth were excruciating. Pain, anguish, hope, fear, all induced by a simple touch. There was no turning back, and yet, neither one of them knew how to move forward. To their great relief, salvation reared its little blonde head. “Mommy, are we home yet?”

Home . . . With all his heart, Jack wished that, one day, the answer would be yes.

Chapter Five by Mary

“Sorry I’m late.”

Erica didn't need to hear Jack's deep voice behind her to be aware of his presence. She had known he was there from the moment he entered the auditorium. She glanced up as he eased his long frame into the seat beside her.

“Did I miss anything?” he asked her.

“No, it’s just starting,” Erica replied casually, determined not to be unnerved by the brush of Jack’s

arm against her shoulder as he shifted in his seat.

For the next ten minutes, Erica's attempt to focus on the principal's introduction of the art show was a dismal failure. The vivid memory of her hand entwined with Jack's made it difficult to concentrate, especially given her ex-husband's current proximity. *How on earth did that happen?* she silently fumed. She had been so careful all these years, sure that the feelings evoked from such contact would be unbearable, and she had been right. After the initial shock, they had both pulled away quickly. Erica had avoided looking at Jack as she got into the car but her hands had been trembling as she drove away. When she finally arrived home, she had sat in the car for several minutes, her heart racing, before she brought Andrew into the house. That had been a week ago and the memory of Jack's strong fingers hadn't stopped tormenting her since.

When it was finally time to view the art projects, she gave a silent sigh of relief and rose quickly from her seat.

“Mom! Dad!” Andrew dodged his way through the crowd. “There’s a ribbon on my project!”

“That's great, honey,” Erica said as her son reached her. She frowned as she noticed the two bright red spots on Andrew's cheeks.

“Do you feel OK?” she asked, putting her hand on his forehead.

“I'm fine,” Andrew replied impatiently. “Come on, let's go!”

“He's probably just excited,” Jack remarked as they followed Andrew's winding path over to the kindergarten section.

“See!” Andrew said triumphantly. “I told you so!”

In front of them, in all its glory, was the Kane/Montgomery family tree. Erica couldn't help but smile as she looked at the faces of her son's blended family. They were all so different, yet still united by a bond that refused to be broken. Nestled at the top of the tree was a blue ribbon proclaiming that Andrew's project had received honorable mention in the competition.

“That's quite a family tree.”

Erica turned at the sound of the voice behind her. The tall, dark-haired man in the navy blue suit smiled at her warmly. Paul Covington was the father of one of Andrew's classmates and had made no secret of his desire to get to know Erica better ever since they had met at the beginning of the school year.

“I was hoping you'd be here,” he said. “It's good to see you.”

Erica smiled politely. “You too.”

“You look stunning,” he looked at her appreciatively. “As usual.”

“Oh...thank you,” Erica said, suddenly flustered.

“I see Andrew won a ribbon,” Paul observed. “Madison did as well.”

“Congratulations,” Erica said. “I'm sure she's thrilled.”

“Oh, she is. She'll be thrilled for Andrew too,” Paul continued. “You know the crush she has on him. Kind of like the one I have on Andrew's mother.”

Suddenly, Erica was acutely aware of Jack standing behind her. Somehow she didn't have to turn around to know he was listening.

“So, when are you finally going to take me up on my lunch offer?”

It was the same question Paul asked every time he saw her and Erica always politely declined. This time she hesitated for a moment.

“I'll call you,” she finally said. “The next time I'm going to be downtown.”

“I'm holding you to that,” Paul smiled, obviously pleased. “I'd better get back to Madison.”

Erica avoided Jack's eyes as she turned her attention back to Andrew. To her dismay, her son's cheeks were now a furious shade of red. The heat of his skin under Erica's hand confirmed that Andrew had a fever and a high one at that.

“I don't feel so good,” Andrew said plaintively.

“He definitely has a fever,” Erica told Jack over Andrew's head. “I'm going to take him home and call the doctor.”

“I'll meet you back there,” Jack said immediately, his eyes narrowing with concern.

“Hey, sport, you'll feel better at home.” Jack easily scooped his son up in his arms and headed toward the exit.

“Are you parked out back?” he asked as Erica hurriedly followed him out the door.

Erica nodded, trying to stay calm. She knew that she always over-reacted when Andrew was sick but she just couldn't help herself. The last time she had nearly driven herself crazy over a routine stomach bug. Now, however, the sight of Andrew's blond head nestled against Jack's broad shoulder gave her more comfort than she cared to admit.

Erica removed the thermometer from Andrew's mouth and breathed a sigh of relief. “101.5,” she announced to Jack.

“Well, that's good.” Jack looked equally relieved. “It's gone down.”

Erica nodded and smoothed Andrew's hair back from his forehead. “Dr. Riordan said as long as it doesn't go over 103 again, we don't have to take him to the Emergency Room.”

“I don't want to go to the 'mergency room,” Andrew said drowsily. “I feel better... just sleepy.”

Erica studied Andrew, still not firmly convinced. Propped up on both of his pillows and surrounded by three of his favorite stuffed animals, he looked so small in the enormous captain's bed he had

insisted on getting for his fifth birthday. There was no doubt that the medicine had reduced his fever. The red spots on his cheeks had lessened and his skin was cooler. Dr. Riordan had been fairly certain that Andrew had fallen victim to the latest virus that was making its way through Pine Valley Elementary. Her instructions were for Andrew to get plenty of rest and fluids and come to her office in the morning for a check-up.

“Maybe we should take him to the Emergency Room anyway,” Erica said somewhat doubtfully. “At least they could check him out tonight.”

“No, please, I don't wanna go,” Andrew pleaded. “Dad...”

“Your mom just wants to make sure you're OK, Andrew,” Jack said, sitting down on his son's bed.

“But she worries all the time,” Andrew complained. “Last time I was sick, she spent the whole night in the chair next to my bed.”

Jack looked at Erica closely, and then returned his attention to Andrew. “What if I stick around until it's time to take your temperature again?” he suggested, waiting for Erica's nod of assent. “Then, if it's gone down some more,” he continued, “And if your mom agrees, I think we can probably hold off on the hospital and just go to the doctor's tomorrow.”

“Can we do that, Mom?” Andrew begged. “Please?”

“I guess so,” Erica agreed slowly. “That does make sense.”

Now that her worries over Andrew's health were subsiding, Erica felt suddenly overwhelmed by the intimacy of the situation. She had been so focused on calling the doctor and getting Andrew settled that it had been easy to ignore the unsettling emotions evoked by Jack carrying Andrew upstairs and tucking him in. Now, as she watched Jack with Andrew, she couldn't help but notice the way his sun-streaked hair touched the back of his collar or the tan skin revealed by the open buttons at his neck.

Feeling the need to escape for a moment, Erica grabbed the pitcher of water from Andrew's nightstand and darted into the bathroom. Over the sound of the running water, she could hear Andrew introducing Jack to his latest stuffed animal.

“Aren't you supposed to be going to dinner with Jill tonight?”

Erica winced as her son's voice drifted into the room. *How's that for a dose of reality?*, she thought. *So much for our little family scenario.*

“I already called her and cancelled, sport,” Jack replied. “We'll do it another time.”

“She's your girlfriend, right, Dad?”

“Well, she's a girl,” Jack answered slowly. “And she's a friend.”

“Oh.” Andrew was silent for a minute. “So when you say goodnight, do you kiss her?”

Oh, God. The handle of the pitcher dug into Erica's palm. *Get a grip*, she told herself harshly.

“Uh...” It was apparent that Jack was totally off balance, and for the first time in Andrew’s young life, Erica found herself cursing her son’s precociousness.

Erica turned the water up higher to drown out Jack’s answer. It was bad enough that thoughts of Jack with another woman tormented her no matter how hard she tried to bury them. She didn’t need to hear confirmation from Jack himself.

After a few minutes, Erica took a deep breath and turned off the water. *You can’t hide in here forever*, she said silently to her reflection in the mirror.

Surmising from the silence in Andrew’s room that the conversation, thankfully, was over, Erica walked back into the bedroom. However, Andrew’s next words immediately dispelled that notion and she stood rooted to the spot.

“But you used to kiss Mom, right?”

Erica’s eyes met Jack’s across the room and countless memories immediately consumed her. Their first kiss, the kisses in Paris where they made love for the first time, the kiss when they were pronounced husband and wife...

Jack looked away from Erica and said very carefully to Andrew, “Of course married people kiss each other, Andrew. You know that.”

“Yeah, ’course they do,” Andrew agreed. He fell silent but appeared to be thinking.

Still at a loss for words, Erica struggled to keep her hand steady and carefully placed the pitcher of water back on the nightstand.

“So, now that you’re divorced, you don’t want to kiss Mom anymore?”

“*Andrew!*”

Horrified, Erica finally found her voice. “Andrew, that’s enough,” she said firmly. “You need to get some rest.”

“Your mother’s right,” Jack said, pulling up a chair and sitting down next to Andrew’s bed.

“Inquisition’s over, sport.”

Erica thought that he sounded more amused than upset and breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’ll sit with him for a while,” Jack said to her and she finally managed to meet his gaze again. As usual, his eyes revealed nothing. “I’m sure you have things to do.”

Glancing down, Erica realized that she was still wearing her light jacket from earlier in the day and the inky darkness outside Andrew’s window reminded her that she hadn’t turned on any of the other lights in the house.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” she said and slipped out the door.

In the bathroom, Erica splashed cold water on her face and ran her fingers through her hair. Her

anxiety over Andrew's health had lessened somewhat but she had to admit that Jack's presence had her rattled.

She walked downstairs, turning on lights as she went. Her mind drifted back to other nights when Jack had been upstairs tucking Andrew in or reading him a story while she got ready for bed. As the soft amber glow from the lamps filled the rooms one by one with warmth, it seemed almost possible to slip back in time. Then, as always, she was overcome with sadness remembering how she had taken their happiness and smashed it to pieces.

Erica grabbed her file of Enchantment sales projections from the hall table and headed resolutely for the stairs. The sooner Jack left, the sooner she would be able to relax. She took a deep breath when she reached Andrew's room. Jack was standing by the window with his back to her and he turned when she entered the room. For a fleeting moment, she thought she saw her own sadness mirrored on his face but then decided that she must have been mistaken.

"He seems better," Jack told her. "He's definitely cooler."

Erica walked over to the bed and felt Andrew's forehead. "Yes, he is," she agreed, smoothing her son's tousled hair off his forehead again. Andrew mumbled something in his sleep and turned onto his side.

"How long before we take his temperature again?" Jack asked.

"About half an hour," Erica answered, glancing at the clock. "Look, Jack, you don't need to stay," she added in a rush.

"I told him I'd stay," Jack said. "I'm not going to disappoint him."

Erica nodded, silently wondering how they would get through the next 30 minutes. "Can I get you anything?" she finally offered.

"No, no...I'm good, thanks." Jack pulled some papers out of his suit pocket and sat back down in the chair next to Andrew's bed. "I've got some notes to review on a case."

"Oh...OK," Erica hesitated, then sat down in the opposite chair and flipped open her file. To her surprise, the next 30 minutes passed in a companionable silence broken only by the occasional sound of shuffling papers and the steady hum of Andrew's breathing.

"Mom? Dad?"

"Hey, sport, how do you feel?" Jack had moved from the chair to Andrew's bed before Erica even had a chance to close her file.

"Not bad," Andrew said sleepily. "How's my temperchair?"

"Temperature," Erica corrected with a smile. "Let's see."

"99.5," she said to Jack a moment later. "Down again."

"That's good, right?" Andrew asked. "I don't have to go to the hospital?"

“No, I guess not, sweetheart,” Erica replied.

Jack pulled the covers up higher around Andrew’s small frame and kissed his son on the forehead.

“Go back to sleep,” he said firmly. “I’ll call your Mom first thing in the morning to see how you are.”

Erica watched as Jack stuffed the papers back in his pocket and headed toward the door. Erica was unsettled to discover that she didn’t want him to leave. Earlier she had been counting the minutes. But now...

“Dad?”

Jack turned at the door.

“Thanks for staying.”

Jack smiled. “Anytime, sport. I’m always here for you. You know that.”

Andrew nodded and turned back on to his side again. “G’night.”

“I’ll be right back, Andrew,” Erica said and followed Jack into the upstairs hall.

“I’ll call you in the morning,” Jack reiterated. “I can rearrange a few things and meet you at the doctor’s.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Erica protested.

“I know I don’t have to,” Jack replied. “But I want to go. I’ll feel better knowing he checks out OK.”

“I suppose it won’t do me any good to tell you not to spend the night in that chair,” Jack continued as he started down the stairs.

Erica smiled ruefully as she followed. “I doubt it.”

“You don’t need to show me out, Erica. I know the way,” Jack said, stopping abruptly at the foot of the stairs.

Erica halted just as suddenly when Jack turned. Caught off balance, she put her hand out to steady herself and somehow found her fingertips on Jack’s shoulder. His hand had reached out when she stumbled and was now on her upper arm. Time seemed to stand still as neither of them moved. Even though Erica was a step higher than Jack, he was still much taller. Looking up into his eyes, she realized she hadn’t been this close to him in years.

To her surprise, his eyes weren’t the chilly gray she’d grown accustomed to over the past three years. Suddenly they were the deep blazing blue she remembered so well. Waves of longing and desire washed over her, and before she lost her nerve, she reached up and touched her lips to his.

Her heart was beating so loudly she wasn’t sure if the indrawn breath she heard belonged to him or to her. She was certain he was going to pull away, but when he didn’t she moved closer and slid her arms around his neck. After a moment, Jack groaned and then his arms went around her. It was as if

a floodgate had opened as they kissed hungrily. Erica clung to him as he lifted her off the stairs. He slowly lowered her to the floor and pressed her against the wall.

Every fiber of her being was on fire as their bodies locked together. Jack's lips on hers were hungry and demanding and when their tongues met her body trembled. She felt his hands slip under her blouse and across her back as he pulled her even closer. Erica felt as if she had merely existed for the past three years and was once again alive. She couldn't get enough of him as her shaking fingers unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt and she slipped her hands inside against his warm skin.

Suddenly, she felt Jack grasp her hands and remove them from his neck.

"Jack ..." she protested but he released her hands and stepped away from her.

Erica kept her eyes closed afraid of what she would see when she opened them. As the roaring in her ears diminished, she could dimly hear the ticking of the grandfather clock over their ragged breathing.

"Erica, look at me," Jack said quietly after a moment.

Erica opened her eyes reluctantly and met Jack's gaze. Once again, his face was impassive but she could still see a flicker of fire in the depths of his eyes.

"This can't happen," Jack stated and his voice was so calm that she felt she might have imagined the past several minutes. "It was a mistake and it won't happen again."

He turned to leave and Erica finally found her voice. "Jack, I -"

"I mean it, Erica," he repeated. "I won't go through this again." He took a deep breath. "I *can't* go through it again."

Erica could think of nothing to say as she watched him leave. After a few minutes, she walked over, locked the door, and then leaned against it with her eyes closed.

Her thoughts were chaotic but one thing was astonishingly clear. Jack was not as immune to her as he had led her to believe. Surely that had to mean something...

If only the closing of the door behind him hadn't sounded just as final as it had all those years ago.

Chapter 6 by Misha

Jack turned to look at the clock. 3AM. 3AM and still sleep wouldn't come. For the umpteenth time that night, he closed his eyes and willed himself to unconsciousness. It didn't happen. Instead he lay there, hearing his heart pound out a rhythm of utter despair. Completely frustrated, Jack hurled himself to one side and gave his pillow a solid punch. And then, another, and another until finally he grabbed it and launched it across the room. *Dammit, Erica!*

Fortunately, casualties were kept to a minimum, with his oversized date book taking the biggest hit. Papers flew everywhere, carpeting the floor with assorted receipts, business cards and stray notes. Jack knew it could have been much worse—a Tiffany lamp lay inches from where the pillow came to rest but that provided him with no measure of comfort. He was completely exhausted and whatever energy he had left went toward feeding his abject misery.

He had all but fled Erica's house earlier that evening after making what he considered to be one of the biggest mistakes of his sorry life—kissing her. No, he didn't just kiss her—he turned his soul back over to her without even blinking an eye. Jackass. That's what he was—the biggest Jackass the world had ever seen. Who else in their right mind would open himself up to the one person that nearly destroyed him just a few damn years ago?

Idiot. I am an idiot; a complete and total loser, Jack thought as he bent down to gather up what, at that hour, could only be considered trash. Carelessly, he began shoving the slips of paper back into the planner's rear pocket until something caught his attention. It was the picture he had taken just a scant six weeks ago when Andrew went off to kindergarten for the first time. Jack leaned against the dresser and simply stared at his precious son. The blond hair and blue eyes were all him but the nose was undeniably Erica's. God, how he had loved that nose, the way she tossed it in the air when she was in one of her haughtier moods and, even better, when she caressed it with his own, a sort of preamble of wonderful things to come. He was the love of Erica's life, or at least he had thought so until that awful day in court. Ever since then, Jack had given up hope, resigning himself to a life led alone.

Jack felt his stomach begin to churn. It had become a regular occurrence for him these past few years. Already sleep deprived, he forced himself to shake it off and make the most of whatever few hours of rest he might still be able to grab. He moved to swap his pillow for the book when the following day's calendar caught his eye. October 18th. Tomorrow was Friday and he had an early morning date at the gym with Jill. Jack couldn't decide what he was less in the mood to do—spend time at the gym or see Jill. *Who am I kidding?* he thought to himself. As much as Jack hated working out, there was no way he was going to see Jill tomorrow or any other day, not after what went down with Erica just a few short hours ago. *Okay, maybe not a few short hours ago,* Jack thought, spying his clock that now read 4AM. Hardly the point, Jack chastised himself. *There's no way I'm leading that girl on for a moment more than I already have.* Sure he had a nice time when they were together. Jill was a great conversationalist and he admired the way she cared about people. But that wasn't nearly enough to keep him interested and if ever he doubted that, all he had to do was think back to last night.

It had gotten off to a rocky start when a client called just as he was heading out to the art show. He thought about just letting the phone ring but knew if he did and it was something important, the damn thing would go off in the middle of Andrew's big day. Fortunately, it was a run-of-the-mill request and Jack was able to cut the conversation short. But that still got him off to a late start and the last thing he wanted to do was call attention to his arrival and create an even more awkward

situation for Erica than it was already destined to be.

Somehow, they had managed to get through crafting the art project itself reasonably intact. Truth be told, Jack had actually had a good time that afternoon save for their inelegant parting . . . A week later, and his hands still suffered the searing effect of Erica's touch. How he was going to manage to sit through an entire afternoon's activity was beyond him. But sit he did, even summoning up the nerve to steal an occasional glance at his ex-wife. She looked gorgeous as usual, even though she had opted for a decidedly unglammed look, wearing a simple pair of jeans and lightweight jacket. Of course, Erica chose a pair of Manolo stilettos and diamond studs as accents, but for her, it definitely erred on the side of understated.

The art show was a big hit and Andrew was barely able to contain his excitement over his honorable mention. Unfortunately, the little guy didn't have much time to celebrate before it became obvious that he was running a fever—and a high one at that. One thing led to another and before Jack knew it, he was sitting beside his son's bed while Erica busied herself in the bathroom. He was surprised at how natural it felt being back in the house, just down the hall from where he and Erica once shared a bed. It had been years since he had spent so much concentrated time with her and even longer ago since he had been upstairs. Never in his wildest imagination had he expected to find himself in such close quarters when he left for the art show earlier that afternoon. But there was no way he was going to leave Erica to fend alone with their son's high fever, especially since her pallor stood in direct contrast to Andrew's reddened complexion.

After Andrew was soundly asleep, Jack found himself drawn to the window. The room had grown dark and eerily intimate. A small shaft of moonlight dipped behind the gazebo, teasing him with memories of happier times. He squeezed his eyes shut, determined to keep them at bay. The moment passed. Relieved, Jack took a deep breath only to be stung by the intoxicating bouquet of Erica's signature perfume. He turned and saw her framed in the doorway, looking even more beautiful than she had hours ago. He forced his attention back to his son. "He seems better," nodding in Andrew's general direction. "He's definitely cooler."

The next thirty minutes passed easily as both Erica and he settled in with work, passing the time until Andrew's temperature could again be checked. Fortunately, it had come down again and since there was no longer any reason for alarm, Jack gathered up his things to leave. And that's when it happened. Her lips were on his, faintly caressing his mouth, her fingertips gently grazing the nape of his neck. He felt his body quiver, a sliver of hope taking refuge in his heart. A touch, he needed to feel just a touch of her porcelain skin. Gently, softly, sweetly, he moved his fingers over and around her breasts, teasingly avoiding her nipples. As he did, her hands rode the length of his chest. God, how he wanted her: now and forever.

Forever. The word stabbed him like a jagged shard of glass. With Erica, there could be no forever. Not anymore. Not after all they had been through. His survival depended on it. And so did Erica's. Jack pulled away from her, offering what few words he could. As he left, he pleaded to whatever God there was, that his memory be mercifully purged and, once again, he be granted the blessing of

nothingness.

Though Andrew's temperature was back to normal the following day, it was another three before Erica allowed him out of the house. Fortunately, she took pity on the little guy and allowed Miranda to visit on day two of his incarceration. Erica cautioned her granddaughter to keep the excitement level to a bare minimum and was delighted when, an hour later, she barely heard a peep coming from her son's playroom. It never occurred to her that the quietude was a result of some heavy duty plotting.

"Mom!" Spike shouted up the stairs. "Hey, Mom—"

"Geez, Spike. Can you keep it down to a dull roar? Your brother is still napping."

"Sorry, I forgot."

"Uh, huh, so, what's the big emergency?"

"No emergency, I was just thinking. Halloween's going to be here in like ten days and I still don't have a costume."

"A costume! You're actually going to go trick or treating this year?"

"Well, not exactly."

"I didn't think so. So, if you're not going trick or treating, why do you need a costume?"

"I thought maybe I'd have a party instead."

"A party? You?"

"Yeah, me! What's the big deal?"

"Well, for starters, I practically have to force you to go to all the parties you're invited to."

Spike shrugged. "Most of them are stupid, or at least, the kids having 'em are. All that Pin the Tail on the Donkey stuff. It's dumb and embarrassing."

"You're seven years old, Spike. How embarrassing can it be?"

The boy shook his head. "I'd like to see you stumbling around with a blindfold on trying to pin a piece of paper on the wall."

"You are such a weird kid, you know that?"

Spike grinned. Being called weird was one of his favorite things, especially by his mom. He loved that he was different from most kids his age, preferring to hang out in his room writing music or working on his latest canvas. He was a free spirit who also strived to make sense of the universe. It was an odd combination to be sure, this mix of creativity and math prowess but somehow it worked

for Spike. He got along well enough with most of his classmates, even though most of them didn't understand half of what he talked about. And just when Spike was verging on taking himself--or the world--too seriously, his cousin Miranda would miraculously swoop in and pull him into her latest adventure. Five minutes earlier she had done just that.

"So, can I?"

"Can you what?"

Spike let out an exasperated sigh. "Can I have a Halloween party?"

"A Halloween party. Sure, why not?"

"Awesome. Thanks, Mom."

"Don't thank me just yet. If I'm going to do this thing, you're going to have to help out."

"Help out how?"

"Well, let's see. There's decorations, food, games, not to mention the all-important guest list. Who are going to invite?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought about it."

"You . . . Spike! You want to have a party but you don't know who you want to invite?"

"Yeah, why? Is that a problem?"

Kendall shook her head. "No, why should that be a problem? Honestly, kid, sometimes I wonder if you're really mine!"

Now it was Spike's turn to shake his head. "The hair, mom. Check out the hair," he said laughing, tossing his curly brown locks in front of her.

Kendall reached out and drew him close. "Weird, that's what you are. Just plain weird."

It was just after six when the doorbell rang. Spike rushed to the door and threw it open. Standing before him was a pint-sized blonde dressed in a short black dress and frilly white apron. "What are you supposed to be?"

"What do you think? I'm a maid just like I said I was going to be."

"You don't look like any maid I've ever seen," Spike scoffed.

"Yeah, well, you've never lived abroad like I did," Miranda replied haughtily. "Besides, mom said I looked just right, didn't you?"

"Trust me," Bianca replied. "You look perfect. Now, give me a kiss."

"You're not staying, Aunt Bianca?"

"Sorry, Spike. You're on your own with this one. Besides, I have my own plans to make."

“Okay,” he responded reluctantly, “but you’re going to miss all the fun.”

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll have plenty of my own,” and pulled her nephew close to give him a hug. “Be good.”

Be good, Miranda thought. Coming from her mom it would normally be the kiss of death but tonight it held a different meaning. She stood in the driveway until the last wave goodbye and then turned her attention back to Spike. “So, you ready?”

By seven o’clock the party was in full swing. Pirates and caped crusaders were everywhere with the occasional princess and mermaid sprinkled in for good measure. Not surprisingly, Spike and Andrew stood out like sore thumbs, just like their older cousin. The invitation expressly said to dress like a favorite super hero but like their personalities, Spike and Andrew’s interpretations were one-of-a-kind.

Spike wore a fringed vest, his scruffiest pair of blue jeans, and a faded denim shirt. It was opened to the waist to show off his prized vintage Cream tee. A gift from his last birthday, it dated back to 1968 when the band played at the Fillmore. His round wire frames added the perfect finishing touch for the mini-Clapton.

Andrew, on the other hand, was dressed to the nines, wearing a charcoal gray suit, white shirt and pale blue tie. His mother had tucked a matching blue handkerchief into his breast pocket and after scouring the stores for days, found just the right pair of suspenders to complete the look. There was absolutely no mistaking whom the little boy had chosen to emulate. He adored his father and refused to consider any other option.

Unlike her son, Erica struggled on deciding what costume to wear. It was only after she checked out the final guest list that an idea came to mind. When Kendall opened the door and burst out laughing, Erica knew that she had succeeded in picking out just the right look.

“Mother, you’re unbelievable.”

“So, you think he’ll get the message?” Erica replied coquettishly.

“Well, if he doesn’t, it’s not for lack of trying.”

“What about me?” Andrew asked. Just like he practiced, he quickly struck a pose doing his utmost to raise one eyebrow.

Kendall couldn’t help but smile. “Perfect, Andrew, just like your dad. Maybe even more handsome.”

“Nah, nobody’s more handsome than my dad—right, mom?”

Erica smiled slightly and nodded. “Like your sister said, you look perfect. So, is there any last minute thing you need help with?” Erica asked, changing the subject. Just then, Spike came to the door and dragged his best friend away.

“You can help me put out the rest of the food, that is, if you’re not afraid of getting your costume dirty,” she said with a smirk. “Honestly, mother. I don’t know how you came up with that look.”

“Speaking of which, is he here?”

“Yeah. He’s downstairs supervising the kids. And maybe I’m imagining things but he seems kind of on edge. Every time the doorbell rings, he practically jumps out of his skin.”

“I’m not surprised. Last time we saw each other he made it pretty clear how he feels.” Erica eyed the doorway leading down to the basement warily. “You know, if you don’t mind, I think I will join you in the kitchen.”

Erica camped out upstairs for as long as she could. She was in no rush to join the others but realized if she stayed cooped up in the kitchen any longer it might send out the wrong signal. The last thing she wanted was to be trapped one on one with him, especially after how awkward their last encounter was. Making sure she had something to occupy her hands, Erica grabbed a tray of sandwiches and bravely headed downstairs.

Her timing couldn’t have been any worse. The kids were gathered round a plastic pumpkin that was stuffed with slips of paper that had their names written on them. Miranda was just about to pluck her partner’s name out of the orange globe when she spotted her grandmother and made a mad dash to say hello.

“It’s about time, Grandma,” the girl exclaimed. “I was beginning to think you’d never come downstairs.”

Erica took one look at her granddaughter and felt the color drain from her face. “What in the world are you wearing?” she asked, pulling the girl over to a quiet corner so they could talk privately.

Miranda grinned. “Mommy told me the story about you and Grandpa in Paris. When Spike told me what the theme was, I *had* to wear this. You’re my hero, grandma!” she said without a hint of apology.

“Your mother?” Erica was stunned. *What, exactly, did Bianca tell her?*

“Yep”, Miranda replied. “It’s one of my favorite stories. Almost as good as the time you—”

Erica waved her off. “No, don’t. I don’t think I want to know.”

“Okay” the girl shrugged, a tad confused. “But I think it’s neat how you like to play dress up. You like my wig? It’s cool, huh? It’s called a pageboy.”

“Miranda, why can’t you be like other girls your age and dress like a cheerleader or a ballerina?”

“Me a ballerina? Come on, Grandma. Be real. Since when have I ever been like anyone else? Except maybe you,” she teased.

“Honestly, Miranda, one day you’re going to push me just a little too far,” Erica said, exasperated.

She wanted to be angry with the young girl but seeing the devilish twinkle in her granddaughter's eyes instead made her heart swell. She loved Miranda's spirit and truth be told, took enormous pride in their kindred attitude toward life. She just wished sometimes the girl didn't imitate her quite so literally. *At least she forgot the feather duster, Erica thought, and the pink towel.*

"Mom, mom, come on. It's almost your turn!" Andrew shouted, running toward her.

"Almost my turn for what?" Erica asked.

"To bob," the boy replied, jumping up and down in excitement.

"Bob? Honey, what are you talking about?"

"We're bobbing for apples. Your team's next."

"My team?"

"Yeah, everybody's got a partner."

A partner. Erica didn't like the sound of that. Without a doubt, she knew who she'd be paired with and she was in no mood to keep up appearances.

"Mine was icky," Andrew lamented and pointed in Cinderella's direction. Before Erica had a chance to reprimand him, she heard her name being called. She squeezed her eyes shut, wishing the moment away but instead was escorted to the dunking barrel. And then she saw him. *Dear God, tell me he's not dressed like Hugh Hefner.* Sure enough, Paul Covington was decked out in a wine-colored smoking jacket and matching silk pajamas, a pipe clenched between his slightly crooked teeth.

"Hey there, team mate. Ready for a little apple passing?" Paul's tone was harmless enough but that didn't prevent Erica from cringing. *Oh, Andrew, Erica thought, my partner's icky too.* She considered making a run for the door but decided to just get it over and figure out later how to shake him. After all, it was close to eight, which meant the party would soon be over.

Erica listened attentively as Kendall explained the rules. The team that transferred the most apples from one to another and then into the nearby basket during the allotted time won. Erica was so horrified that she missed hearing what the eventual prize was. Not that it mattered. She was in no rush to make contact, even one as benign as this. Taking a deep breath, Erica braced herself for the first dunk. A moment later, the timer went off.

Erica slowly plunged into the barrel, clamping her chin on the nearest apple. When she emerged, her head was to the side, her eyes were shut, and her skin was clammy waiting for the wannabe playboy to approach. It was all too much to bear. She felt his chin take hold of the fruit, and immediately Erica's stomach began to flutter. She expected to feel revulsion but instead she felt the familiar sensation of butterflies—butterflies the size of Pterodactyls. Erica's eyes flew open. Standing in front of her was a masked man—a very tall, very blond masked man.

"Jack!"

"It's Zorro and there's still time left on the clock."

They managed to dump a half dozen more apples into the basket before the buzzer rang but that wasn't enough to eek out a win. For Erica, it hardly mattered. Her prize was towering over her, dressed completely in black from his gaucho hat to his Laredo boots, a long silver sword fastened neatly to his hip. In spite of herself, Erica couldn't help imagining what it would be like to have the letter "Z" emblazoned across her chest. If only the rejection she experienced just a few short weeks ago wasn't still so close to the surface. "What are you doing here?" she asked, trying to sound casual. "I thought you were in Harrisburg on business."

"I got home early." His tone mirrored hers but the intensity in his eyes cut deep.

"Oh," she replied, weakly.

"Oh? . . . that's it?" Jack didn't know what he expected but "oh" was definitely not it.

"I wasn't expecting you here, that's all." Erica shrugged. She tried to sound blasé but was struggling to regain her composure.

"I guess not." Jack skimmed his eyes down the length of her body. "Who the hell are you dressed as anyway?"

Erica ran her hands over her ensemble, smoothing her outfit as she went. "Madame Curie," she tossed off with a shake of her head.

Now it was Zorro's turn to lose his composure, laughing so hard that he removed his mask to wipe away the tears. "Madame Curie is your hero?"

"So, what if she is?" Erica replied defensively.

"I'm sorry," Jack said, clamping his hand to his mouth to prevent another snicker from escaping his lips. "I just, I just never knew," and began laughing all over again. Even in his wildest fantasies, Jack had a hard time imagining Erica decked out in a white lab coat, drab gray house frock and orthopedic shoes.

"Yes, well, laugh all you want but I think her scientific discoveries are very admirable."

"I'm sure they are. So, when did this fascination with Madame Curie start? And how come I've never heard of it until now?" he said, folding his arms and suppressing a smile.

Erica was about to walk off in a huff until she noticed Hef looking her way. Jack followed her train of vision and then turned back to the good physicist. "I see your admirer's here. I don't suppose he had anything to do with your choice of costume?"

"Absolutely not," she replied haughtily, removing her oversized tortoiseshell glasses. "I had no idea he'd be here and even if I did, why would I care?"

Jack held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, I was just asking. No need to bite my head off."

"Yes, well, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go see if Kendall needs any help."

“Suit yourself. Besides, I want to go find the kids and let them know I’m here.”

Now it was Erica’s turn to smile--Zorro had taken off before she had a chance to warn him about his granddaughter’s costume.

It seemed like only moments later when Jack burst into the kitchen. “What in God’s name was Miranda wearing?”

“Hey, don’t look at me. I had nothing to do with it,” Kendall offered, turning to look at her mother.

“Well, it certainly wasn’t my idea.”

“Then—?”

Erica tossed her hands up in the air. “Try asking Bianca. Apparently, she’s been filling Miranda’s head with all sorts of bedtime stories.”

“Bedtime stories? You’re kidding, right?”

“Oh, believe me, I wish I were. Just the thought of Miranda filling Andrew in on—”

“You don’t think?”

“I honestly don’t know what to think. But it certainly does explain why Bianca chose not to make an appearance this evening.”

“She told me that she had other plans,” Kendal volunteered in her sister’s defense. “Besides, you know Binks. I’m sure she left out all the juicy parts.” Jack and Erica turned in unison and stared at Kendall. “Forget I said anything. In fact, if you’ll excuse me. I think I’ll go make sure the party’s winding down. The kids’ parents should be here any minute. Oh, and mother. You can probably lose the bun. Paul left with Madison about fifteen minutes ago.”

Erica smiled wanly at her eldest before turning back to Jack. “Sandwich?”

“No thanks. I’ll pass.”

Just like it had weeks ago, the room quickly filled with a palpable awkwardness. Erica tried to busy herself packing away the leftovers as Jack gathered up empty plates and cups. Only a couple of minutes passed before the silence got the better of her. “You know, I...I think I’m going to head home.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s getting pretty late for Andrew. Loved his costume, by the way. Very suave.”

“It was all his idea. He adores you, you know.” Jack nodded appreciatively. “And, actually, he’s spending the night with Spike. And, Miranda.”

“Oh, that should be good,” Jack said, with a faint smile. “Pip can regale the boys with all sorts of stories about our legend past.”

Erica’s cheeks colored a pale peach. *Don’t go there, Jack*, she silently begged. *Not tonight, not*

dressed like that.

It was as if he read her mind. "Listen, I'm going to say good night to everyone and head out myself." "I'll join you . . . saying goodnight, that is." After what happened the last time they parted company, Erica was determined not to leave even the slightest room for misunderstanding. She had already lost too much.

Several rounds of goodbyes and behaves later, they were poised at the front door. "Goodnight, Jack. It was good to see you."

"Good to see you too," he said easily. "Listen, how about you let me walk you to your car? When I drove up, there were a lot of older kids mulling around. I'm not sure they realize that mischief night is over."

Erica smiled. "That would be nice, thanks."

They walked the handful of yards in silence, careful not to get too close. When they reached the car, Jack took her keys to unlock the door. That's when he noticed her front tire was flat. Headlights from a passing car suddenly flashed on her rear tire. Another flat. *Son-of-a-*, Jack thought. "Erica, I hate to tell you this," Jack said, pointing out the matching set of tires "but it looks like you're not going anywhere, at least not in this car."

"Jack!"

"Hey, don't look at me. I'm just the messenger."

"Now what?"

"I'd fix them myself but I'm guessing you only have one spare?" Erica nodded. "Seems to me then, that you have two choices. You can wait here until triple A arrives or you can let me drop you off at the house. Your call."

Erica looked at her watch. It was after nine o'clock. "Would you mind?"

"Not at all. In fact, when we get there, I'll even make the call so that it's ready for you in the morning."

"Thank you, Jack but that's not necessary."

"I know it's not but it's the least I can do for giving you such a hard time tonight. I've got to admit. Even in that getup, you look kind of cute—for a physicist, that is."

For the first time all evening, they shared an easy laugh. "My lady," Jack said, taking her hand.

As Jack turned to walk toward his car, a beam of light caught his attention. He spun around to see where it came from and spotted movement in the upstairs window. Were his eyes playing tricks on him or did his son just give Spike and Miranda a high five?