

Let the Games Begin

Chapter 1

A New Plan Evolves

It was almost a year since Erica left Pine Valley, after Bianca and Kendall banished her from their lives. At the time, the Kane/Montgomery family was being destroyed from the inside out, breaking the faithful bonds between mother and daughter. If truth were told, no one in either family was left untouched by the evilness of Michael Cambias. The greatest loss of all was the bitter reality that Michael not only raped Bianca, but also stripped something away from each person that had touched her life.

One by one, the Kane women fell, taking with them the men and women that loved them deeply. They had suffered so much, each crying out to the other for comfort, but none could be found. For them, it was hard to imagine a time when laughter came easy, and love was all that was in their hearts. A mother, torn apart by the need to protect her children from the blackness of her own childhood trauma; a daughter, whose love for her unborn child brought comfort in her darkest hour; and Kendall, a daughter, a sister, a friend, who carried the scar of both their nightmares. A pain that was too deep for words. Each of them, a broken soul that even time didn't seem to mend.

Months passed, and still no sign of Erica. Jackson refused to give up hope on the woman who consumed his life, his heart, and yes, even his soul for what seemed an eternity. What Erica didn't know is that Jackson was an empty shell of a man who had no great purpose without her.

Although time served as no friend to Erica, her daughter's Bianca and Kendall were starting to heal. The anger that they once felt towards their mother was overshadowed by their need to have her close again. Everyone knew why Erica left, but somehow it didn't seem to matter now. All they could think of was bringing her home. Home to a family that loved her.

As the days passed, it seemed that they were never going to find Erica, until Erica wanted to be found. Each had their own fears, but Jackson was the one that felt her absence the most. Day by day, week by week, Jackson searched everywhere for Erica. Sadly, at the end of each day, he always ended up where he started, without Erica in his arms. It was hard to remain optimistic, but Jackson never gave up hope of finding her. He vowed that he would spend the rest of his life searching for her. This was his eternal mission to the woman he loved.

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It was almost evening when Jack and Reggie got home from another day in search of Erica. They were exhausted and discouraged that another search for Erica had ended in failure. Jack was tired, and it was starting to show. He had spent every moment

searching for her, barely stopping to eat or sleep, and tonight his pain was clear. In every part of Jack, the sadness was there. It was getting late, when Reggie retired to bed and left Jack in the living room with the phone wrapped around him like it was his only lifeline to Erica. It was there that Jack fell fast asleep, dreaming of a time when he would hold her in his arms again. The smell of her skin was real to him, as was every inch of her amazing body. In his dreams, he could feel apart of her and know that she felt safe in his arms.

Suddenly the sound of the phone ringing out in the silent air awoke both Jack and Reggie from sleep. Jack was the first to react, as he fumbled around the sofa to find the phone that had fallen to his side throughout the night. Within what seemed like a lifetime to Jack, he found the phone pressed against the inside pillow. His heart was beating faster than he could ever recall. He searched the call display for answers, but it revealed nothing. Instinctively he called out her name before his mouth even reached the receiver. "Erica!"

His voice was soft and inviting, hoping that it would reflect how much he had missed her and longed to have her close again. When she did not speak, he called out to her again, but this time his voice was trembling. "I love you Erica. I need you. Please come home," he pleaded to the empty air.

For a moment he held his head down in defeat, praying that God would give him the wisdom to reach her heart, and he did. As she spoke, he could feel his heart pour over with love for her. Her voice was weaker than he remember almost reflecting her weary state, but to Jack it was like heaven. "Jackson, I left Pine Valley because I thought that I could escape who I am and find some peace in my soul, but all I found is loneliness. I want to come home Jack...you are my home."

When Jack picked her up at the airport, he swore that he would never let her go and for once they were both on the same page.... They spent almost all their time together, walking in the park, going out to dinner and enjoying every moment of every day. The pain was not completely gone for either of them, but they were dealing with it together. For Erica, Kendall and Bianca, the mother daughter bond was different than before, how could it not be after everything they had gone through, but this time there was a respect and appreciation that had not been there before. It seemed that time was indeed healing a pain that a year ago did not seem to go away. For the most part, they were one big happy family. The only thing missing was for Jack and Erica to become husband and wife.

They both wanted to take this next step, but neither wanted to scare the other off. Jack had just got Erica back in his life, and everything was going better than he could ever dream of. Marriage was something he wanted, but it seemed that every time they got to this point, something always tore them apart.

For weeks he thought about proposing to her, but fear always seemed to stop him. He wasn't afraid of his own feelings and he knew that she loved him. They have come so far,

and he finally had her back in his life again; if he told her that he wanted to get married, he might scare her off; so he kept his feelings to himself. Erica on the other hand was finally ready to take a leap of faith and make Jackson her husband for once and for all, but she was not going to propose to him.

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It was close to 5 PM on Monday evening and Erica was caught up in thoughts of Jackson, as she stared out her window taking in the scene of Pine Valley. Pine Valley was beautiful at the best of times, but there was something about spring that made everything seem possible. The flowers were blooming all over the place and with them was the hope of a new beginning, one that she wanted to start with Jackson Montgomery. As the possibilities ran through her mind, Erica began to think of ways that she could get Jackson to propose to her. Most women would take the direct approach and just tell him how she felt, but she was no ordinary woman, she was Erica Kane.

As her heart held Jackson tight within her arms, her mind traveled back to the last time she tried to convince him to marry her... "OPERATION SNARE JACKSON," she said underneath her breath. Her laughter echoed off the walls and bounced back to her heart, filling it with such joy that she knew that she had to make this happen. She had to convince Jack to propose to her.

Suddenly her office door opened and through it came, the answer she had been struggling to find. "Hi Tad, how did you know that you were just the person I needed to see?" she said in her most winning and seductive Erica Kane smile.

"Well Erica, I told you that I would be coming by with the information you asked me to look for, REMEMBER," Tad said in confusion to her statement.

"Oh yes Tad, come in and have a seat," Erica said trying to use her womanly charms on him.

"OK Erica, you don't have to do that... I mean flirt with me and put on the charm," Tad said as he pulled her down on the sofa next to him. "And secondly, I can see that you are plotting something because those beautiful brown eyes are dancing with mischief. So what is going on, and don't play coy with me," he said as he reached out and turned her face towards him. "What are you about to get me involved in and better yet is Jack going to disown me?"

Erica began to fill Tad in on her plan of "OPERATION MARRY JACKSON," telling him how much she truly loved him and that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with the man that always owned her heart. She discussed a brief outline of her plan and how she would trick Jack.

"Well Erica, this sounds a little crazy, why don't you just tell Jack how you feel and than go from there?" He stopped for a moment and than spoke again, "Never mind! You

would think that after all this time that you and Jack would be able to do this without anyone's help, but since I am a romantic at heart and I love the two of you... count me in."

Erica thanked Tad as she kissed him on the cheek and showed him to the door, "I will be in touch Tad."

"That is what I am afraid of," he mumbled under his breath as he walked out the door. By the time he got to his car, he couldn't believe that she was actually able to talk him into helping her. Tad was so lost in his own thoughts that he did not seem to notice that someone was in the back seat of his car until he heard a man's voice call out from behind him.

"She can really do a number on you, can't she?"

Tad was frozen, until he realized that the man's voice was Jack. "What the hell are you doing, Jack?" Tad said a little confused as to what Jack was doing in the back seat of his car.

"Why Tad, I could ask you the same question. OPERATION MARRY JACKSON... sound familiar?"

Tad was speechless and could only manage to laugh at Jack's interpretation of his earlier conversation with Erica. The thought of Jack skulking outside of Erica's office trying to get the goods on her feelings for him was image that brought Tad to tears. "Jack..." he tried to say, but he could not get the words out. "Jack, I can explain. Please don't be angry," he said trying to talk his way out of the predicament that Erica just got him into.

Jack silenced him before he could say another word. "I know what you and Erica are up to Tad." He stopped a moment and Tad looked at him in fear, believing that Jack was about to let him have with both barrels, but instead he was calm and surprisingly happy.

"Listen Tad, I love Erica with all my heart, and now I know that she wants the same thing. If she wants to try to get me to propose to her, then I am all for this little game that Miss Kane has dreamt up, but I want to have a little fun with her before I do the deed. Let's see how far Erica will go to convince me. Are you in or out?" Jack said as he reached out his hand to seal the deal.

"Jack if she finds out, she will have my head on a platter, but I guess it might teach her a lesson about playing games," he said as he shook Jack's hand in agreement.

The two men talked for several more minutes before Jack opened the door to leave. "So we understand what you have to do?" Jack said. "Whatever plan Erica comes up with you will tell me about it, and I will do the opposite of whatever she expects of me.... And Tad, don't let her know that you are working with me."

As Jack closed the door behind him, Tad spoke out to Jack, "You can count on me, Jack. Double Agent Tad Martin on the job."

Chapter 2 Monkey (Business) In the Middle

Erica paced the floor of her penthouse frantically trying to come up with a plan that would have Jackson proposing within minutes. *How hard could it be*, she thought. *I am Erica Kane. Doesn't every man want to marry me?* And certainly after all the history between Jackson and her, it would just come naturally. She'd never known a man that made her feel as safe and loved as Jackson. Perhaps a romantic dinner would solve this problem?

A short time later, the stage was set. Erica had ordered up a gourmet meal from The Valley Inn, set the mood with fresh roses, romantic music, a fire in the fireplace, and candlelight everywhere else. She was now in the midst of deciding what to wear. The Givenchy? Perhaps the Versace? The room was strewn with couture. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Erica opened it to reveal Opal, covered from head to toe in electric orange and bright white, with baubles that were large enough to fit on the great Sphinx.

"Girlfriend, what's got you fired up more than a mangy cat in a room filled with chubby mice?"

"Opal! Thank you for coming on such short notice."

"Well, it's not like I've got anything else on my plate, unfortunately. I brought my bag of tricks; now what's this all about?"

"I need your help, Opal. Tonight is a very special night, and I want to look spectacular."

"Honey, you know you don't need any help in that department. The man upstairs tossed the mold when he made you. Now spill, what's so special about tonight?"

"Jackson's going to propose!" she beamed.

Opal looked confused. "Again? Now Erica, you know you're my bestest girlfriend, but what in Sam Hill makes you think you're going to get that delicious ex-DA down on his knee again?"

"Jackson loves me, and he's always wanted to marry me. And I've been so wrong in the way I've treated him lately. I'm just giving him a little push," she stepped back to reveal the room she'd decorated for the occasion.

"Push? This looks more like a life sentence. Subtle is not your middle name, girlfriend. I wish I had a life preserver."

"Why?" Erica was puzzled.

"Because you have gone OVERBOARD!" Opal gestured toward the rose strewn carpet

near the fireplace, and the twelve dozen candles that lit the room brighter than the midday sun.

“Well, I think Jackson will appreciate all the effort I’ve put into tonight. You make it sound like I want to put a noose around his neck.”

“Sweetheart, it’s just that when everyone else in this town gave up on you, he wouldn’t. Do you know he begged my baby boy to find you, just so he could know you were safe even if you didn’t want to be with him anymore? Love doesn’t get anymore beautiful or selfless than that. And now you’re going to try to force something that should come naturally. You don’t need all this.”

“Well, you tell me. You tell me, Opal. What should I do? Should I just let things continue as is, without letting Jackson know that I want things back on track for a wedding? I want to marry this gorgeous, beautiful soul and look into those stunning blue eyes for the rest of my life. I can’t bear being apart anymore. I’ve learned a lot since my father died. What’s important is family. And Opal, Jackson is my family. He’s my heart.”

“Glad to hear it. Now, you know I’m one for flash and sass, but you don’t need all of this. Let’s kill about half the candles, and I can bring some of the excess flora to the hospital on my candy striper rounds. And let’s get you in an upsweep that will have Jackson staring at that lovely neck of yours all night. That’ll speed things along naturally.”

“If Operation Marry Jackson is going to succeed, I have to decide what to wear before you do my hair. It has to be perfect.”

“Well, I think that fuchsia number down there near the fireplace looks like a million bucks. That’s the one I’d wear.”

“Ok, so ... I’ll nix the Escada,” Erica teased, a smile playing around her lips.

“Very funny, you are one lucky lady in the friend department, missy. But that must mean you deserve it. Now, let’s get you ready.”

Opal and Erica began collecting the couture and candles in preparation for tonight. When Opal was satisfied with the result, she wished Erica well and left. Erica proceeded to call Jackson and invite him to dinner.

“What do you mean you can’t make it tonight?” Erica said incredulously into the receiver.

Jackson had to cover his cell phone to keep Erica from hearing him start to laugh. He cleared his throat. “Well, it’s not that I don’t want to have dinner with you, Erica. I’d like nothing more.” Jack, fiddled with the buttons making it look like bad reception. “Erica, you’re breaking up. I’ll have to call you back.” He sat down on Tad’s couch.

Tad was shaking his head, seated on a chair. He still couldn't understand why Jackson would want to delay this wedding. After Jack's pep talk that got him to go in search of Erica, Tad knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Erica was all there was for Jackson. That would never change. He knew this feeling all too well, himself. And luckily for Jackson, he had a chance to be with the woman he loved beyond reason, so why not jump at the chance? "You shlemeil. Why not just propose? You want to. She wants you to. Why all the double agent subterfuge?"

"Because I've been through hell and I want a little fun. I want some reassurance. I want to make sure that when I put another ring on her finger it's not coming off. I don't want to go the merry-go-round route again."

"So tell her that, not me."

"I intend to. But I really want to see how far she's willing to go for me. I'm tired of the games, you know? I could use a little ego boost."

"You're stunning." Tad joked batting his eyes.

"Not from you. Cut that out." Jack threw back.

"Sorry. I've been on hiatus too long, and even you are starting to look good."

Jackson took a pillow from the couch and hit Tad with it. Just then, Opal barged in as she always did.

"Jackson, well, don't you look happy. Surprised to see you here, what with your big dinner tonight and all," she hinted.

Jack tried to keep his smile hidden. "Big dinner? You know something about SOS's take out that I don't, Opal?"

"SOS?" Opal was majorly puzzled. When she left Erica's, Erica had told her she was going to call Jackson. She even had the phone in her hand. That was quite a few minutes ago. She sat down on the sofa next to Jack.

"I have to help Livia with some legal work I promised. She wants to get Montgomery & Associates up and running again. And in six months I'll be back on my legal feet, as it were."

"As opposed to on your knees," Opal muttered to herself.

"What?" Jack asked.

"Er, nothing."

“Mama, what did you come here for?” asked Tad, knowingly.

“Ooh, never mind that now. You know what you need Jackson, with all that important stuff coming up? A good card reading.”

“Oh God, no.” Tad put his head in his hands. “Mama, I told you to get rid of that mumbo jumbo stuff around me?”

“Hush now, this could be important. There are unseen forces at work in the cosmos,” she took out her well worn tarot deck.

“I’ll say,” Tad muttered. “I’ll be in the kitchen. I’m famished. Should I go find you a live chicken while I’m in there, Mama? Jack?” Tad exited.

“Nothing for me,” Jack answered as Opal handed him the deck to cut. “Uh, just what is it you’re doing there, Opal? Keep in mind, I come from a long line of southern folk who didn’t look too kindly on this stuff, let alone believe it.”

Opal laid out Jackson’s spread, intending to help Erica’s cause by pointing him in the right direction. But the cards spoke for themselves. “Oh, my stars.”

“What is it, Opal?” Jack asked as Tad returned with what could only be classified as a Dagwood sandwich.

Opal pointed to the spread. “See this, most of your cards are upside down, giving them the opposite meaning as they should have. Makes me wonder if something isn’t right. This one here, represents the past, and it’s about to repeat. That’s good, I think.”

“I’ve been trying to avoid that, actually.” Jack stated.

“You shouldn’t try anything. Just let it happen. There are good auspices all around. Happiness. Prosperity. See here, The Empress. Unconditional love, family. I think we all know who that represents.”

“I haven’t the slightest clue,” Jack laughed while Tad rolled his eyes.

“Here... the Page of Swords,” turning over the card, she looked at Tad now. “A spy in the midst.”

Tad coughed on his sandwich. “Mama, get that stuff out of my house. It gives me the willies.”

Opal stopped in her tracks when she turned over the Death card. All color drained from her face.

Jack sat back. “That can’t be good.”

“Well now, it’s not that bad. See here,” she said pointing to the card next to it. “The Moon. That means all isn’t as it appears to be. So, death may not mean death. Besides, the Death card is really about change. That’s all. Well, if you two gentlemen excuse me, I better be off. Toodles!” she shoved all the cards into her bag and bolted out the door.

“I hate when she does that,” Tad said, finishing off the last bite.

“How often is she right, Tad?” asked Jack.

“A little too man times for my comfort. Are you sure you want to continue this, Jack?”

“I don’t believe in that stuff anyway, besides she said it could be good.”

“Whatever you say, boss. I am your Page of Cups, ‘til the end.”

“Bad choice of words, Tad.” Jack got up to call Erica back.

Outside Opal’s heart was racing. She was sitting in her car still in shock at the reading. The spirit world was trying to tell her something, she just felt it. What worried her most wasn’t the spy, she knew Erica hired Tad to help her with Jackson. It was the fact that the death card was in close proximity to that card, meaning that it would be Tad, not Jack or Erica that the card affected. “Lord, I hope you know what you’re doing.” She said putting her car in gear. “I just got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.”

In her penthouse, dressed to the nines and looking utterly ravishing Erica answered her phone. It was Jackson...

Chapter 3 A Little One on One

“Jackson, what’s going on? I thought you were busy?”

“Erica, I’ve taken care of that business. Now what were we discussing earlier?”

Erica began to get excited at the prospect of her plan working out once more. “Well, I had wanted you to come up to the penthouse and enjoy a nice dinner.”

“Hmm... as much as I would enjoy that, I’ve got a better idea. Meet me at the park in 25 minutes and dress accordingly.”

With that, he clicked the end button, and a grin broke over his face. This was going to be great. On the other side of the line, Erica sat stunned. *Surely, he was joking. He couldn’t be serious.* Well, if she was to be there that quickly, she’d have to change and speed. And so she did.

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The crisp night air sent a tingle through his body. The night was so alive, so open. He walked the quick path to the basketball court and dropped the ball to rest in the grass. He knew he had a good ten minutes before she would be here. He scanned the area, scouting out any other visitors. Alone, just as he had figured.

Picking up the ball, he dribbled the court, getting a feel for the cool cement. Going through the motions, he made a few shots and rebounded the misses. As he made his way back to mid-court, the glare of headlights caught his attention. Finally, she arrived.

She made her way through the patchy grass, stopping mere feet away from the court. She was beautiful, wearing a long sleeve fleece pullover, matching track pants, and to finish it off, a pair of tennis shoes. Whistling his appreciation loudly, she smiled softly, where he couldn’t see it.

“Well Jackson, you didn’t expect me to don a Gucci here now, did you?”

“Baby, you always keep me guessing. But, you are missing just one thing.”

He walked to meet her, still smiling at the thought of her picking out this outfit for him tonight. Standing in front of her, he took his hat off, and placed it backwards on her head. Grinning, he declared her outfit complete.

“A hat, I knew I had forgotten something.” Pulling it off to read the words, a smile broke across her face. “SIU, Salukies, that sounds cute.”

“I picked it up awhile back. I hadn’t really seen it lately, then found it in the closet. As you can tell, it matches your outfit better than mine.”

“Well, I am Erica Kane.”

“Yes, yes you are.”

Silence fell over them, but the sounds of the night continued to carry on. Faint sounds of scurrying creatures could be heard from the bushes. Leading her from the grass, to the court, Jackson picked the ball up once more.

“So, my dear, are you ready for the game?”

“Jackson, I don’t play basketball. I don’t...”

“Oh, honey, don’t think of it as basketball. Think of it as, a little game of one-on-one.”

Chapter 4 Two Hearts Collide

“Oh Jack, I really like your idea of one on one.” Erica joked, but her meaning was not lost on Jack, who pulled her on top of him once again and began smothering her neck with soft sensual kisses. Since their game of one-on-one would not be permitted at the park, they had quickly headed to Jack’s apartment.

“Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm,” he whispered in between his kisses. “How does this work again? Oh yes, I remember now; the first one to get to 21 wins, and I think you are in the lead.” Jack couldn’t help but laugh as Erica’s face turned twelve shades of red. “No need to be embarrassed, sweetheart. I am glad that you enjoy yourself with me.”

Her embarrassment faded quickly, and in its place was all the passion Erica had in her heart for this man. Her eyes were dancing with desire as she maneuvered herself on top of Jack and looked him in the eyes. “Well I think you need to get a couple more baskets, if you want to catch up,” she said raising her eyebrows to let him know that she had a double meaning.

“Well I best get busy,” he said. As their lips met the world outside faded, and they once again drifted into their own little paradise. A paradise that only they could understand. Each kiss, each touch, each feel of the others skin was like they were becoming a part of each other for the very first time even though they had explored this world many times before.

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The night had faded into morning and Jack woke up to Erica pressed against his chest. He couldn’t help but marvel in the amazement of this beautiful woman who was in his every thought. “How did I ever manage to get you to love me as you do”, he whispered softly not realizing that her eyes were open now. His fingers gently caressed her shoulder causing her to shiver just a little. Jackson did not notice her stirring because he was too lost in own thoughts. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want you to be my wife”.

Erica’s eyes opened wide as a victory smile flashed across her face. Thoughts were racing through her mind that finally she had reached her goal and got Jack to propose. “What did you just say, Jack?” she asked, knowing full well what she heard, but wanting him to repeat the question.

“Oh, ah, oh” was all he could manage to say. He searched his head for an answer to her question. “Oh, I, I was just saying that I need to get a life”.

He tried not to laugh, but his response sounded so ridiculous that he couldn’t help but think that she would not buy his answer.

“Yeah I was just thinking about how much time I spend at work, and how I miss out on these moments with you.”

When she reached up and kissed him on the lips, he was starting to feel very proud of his quick comeback. On the surface, it seemed that Erica bought his explanation. When she put her head back down on his chest, Jack could not help but breathe a sigh of relief that he had not blown his cover.

“Well you must be hungry sweetheart, so why don’t I go and make you some breakfast”.

Before she could even respond, Jack was out of bed and running towards the door. All he could think of was getting out of this room before he spilled the beans, which is why he didn’t notice Erica’s high heels in front of him until it was too late and he fell to the floor with a crash. When he tried to get up, he began to laugh as Erica’s lace bra was wrapped around his neck.

“What do you think of my new scarf?”

They both laughed, but Jack knew his odd behavior was not going to go unnoticed by Erica. When he reached the kitchen, he put his hand across his forehead and said, “Good one Jack, you almost played right into her hands”.

“I know what you said Jack, and I know that you want to marry me, so why won’t you ask me?” she said as she began putting her clothes on from the night before. “You’re not getting off the hook that easy Mr. Montgomery.”

As Erica opened the door to the bedroom, she stopped when she heard Jack talking to someone on the phone. She slid back behind the door and listened to his conversation. She could only hear Jack, but it was clear what they were talking about. “I almost slipped up this morning and asked Erica to marry me. Not yet, I am not ready to give into her just yet.” Jack abruptly changed the subject when he heard Erica moving up the hallway. “Yes, exactly Yes. I don’t want to give them a life sentence, but I think it is important to teach them a lesson. But we will have to discuss this later when I get to the office. Yes, great, talk to you then.”

Jack put down the phone and pulled Erica into the most amazing good morning kiss, which only set off alarms in her head. She knew that he was up to something, and she was pretty sure she knew what.

“So who were you talking to on the phone?” she said, really not sure who is partner in crime was, but knowing full well that Jack was up to something.

“Oh honey, that was just the... Defense lawyer... Wondering if I would make a plea bargain with his client, you know work stuff... but enough about that, I have made you some breakfast.... So while I get a shower, you can have a bite to eat, unless of course you would like to skip breakfast and join me in the shower?”

“That sounds good,” Erica said with a seductive smile, trying not to tip Jack off that she was on to his game. “But you go in and get everything ready and I will be in to join in just a moment after I check my messages.”

As she heard the shower turn on, she rushed over to the phone to check the call display to see who had really called Jack. “Oh I wonder when Tad Martin went to law school.... Well Tad, looks like you have been playing both sides of the fence.”

Several minutes went by and Erica still did not join him in the shower, as she originally told him she was. “Erica... Where are you honey? I am lonely in here without you. I have a surprise for you... Erica.” He called out several more times before leaving the shower and heading back to the kitchen where he had left her moments ago.

“Erica, the shower is getting cold. Are you going to join me in the shower? Hello! Sweetheart,” but Erica did not respond. She just continued to stare out the window. He began to walk towards her, when a knock on the door stopped him in his tracks. “Tad, what are you doing here?”

Tad walked passed Jack and towards Erica hoping that she could give him some explanation to why she beckoned him here at this early hour.

“Erica, what did you want me here for?” Tad questioned, but not sure he wanted the answer when Erica turned and gave him one of her disapproving looks.

“Why don’t you tell me Tad all about your little double agent gig?” They both knew they were busted, and there was no way that Erica was going to buy anything they said at this moment.

“I thought that you just didn’t want to marry me Jack, but here you were trying to teach me a lesson. Why don’t you tell me what lesson you wanted me to learn?” Her tone was cold and both Tad and Jack knew that this had gone way past a little fun.

“Erica, sweetheart, it is not Tad’s fault, it is mine. I just wanted to know that you were serious and that you really wanted to marry me.”

“Oh really Jack, well I am sure Tad told you I wanted to marry you. In fact I am sure he told you everything.”

“Yes Erica, I did know the plan from the beginning, and I am sorry that I acted like I didn’t. But you have to know that I have asked you to marry me more times than David Hayward has committed crimes, and we just never seem to get there. I just needed to know that you really wanted this.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me how you were feeling? I heard you on the phone with Tad when you said that you wanted to teach me a lesson. What lesson did you want me to

learn? WHAT? Did you want me to know that you would not fall at feet whenever I looked your way; did you want me to know that you were not going to chase after me anymore; what lesson Jack did you want me know? Just be honest! Did I hear you correctly on the phone? Were you trying to teach me a lesson Jack? Well were you?"

"YES, YES, Yes I was. I am not proud of what I did, but I never expected you to react this way. Yeah I think that we are both wrong for playing this stupid game in the first place, but yes you are right, I was trying to teach you a lesson."

As the tears fell down her cheek, Jack reached out to wipe them away. "Erica I have spent my life chasing after you, and I guess... I guess, I just wanted you to come to me."

As she looked away, both men could see that she was visibly hurt by both their actions. However, her voice was calm, almost too calm. They were both expecting her to yell and scream and storm out the door, but she didn't.

"I understand what you both did and why." She kissed Jack on the cheek and walked past Tad and lightly touched his arm. "Well I have some things I need to do Jack, so I will touch base with you later today. And Tad, I guess, I won't be in need of your services anymore."

They looked at each other and than back at Erica wondering when the other shoe was going to fall, but she stood her ground. She headed towards the door without uttering another word to either man. Jack reached out for Erica's arm and turned her around so that she was now facing him.

"Sweetheart, are you sure you're not upset? You do know that I love you, right and that I really do want to marry you? You do know that, right, Erica?"

"It's okay Jack, I do know all of that, and I am not upset. As I just said, I understand why you did what you did. I'll talk to you later."

When she was just about out the door, she turned to Jack and said, "David has one up on you." Jack was confused, and his face told her so. "Well you said that you asked me to marry you more times than David committed crimes, but that wasn't true. If you had have asked me one more time, you would of have been even."

As the door closed behind her, Jack was more confused now than he was earlier. Tad was the first to speak, "Am I the only one that thinks we are not off the hook here?"

Jack looked back at Tad, who was standing directly behind him and said, "Not by a long shot, my friend. Not by a long shot."

~*~

It was almost noon before Erica arrived at her office. She was busy all morning trying to

finalize her plans for the next step of Operation Marry Jackson, but this time she had no intentions of including Tad. There was no question that she was hurt by Jack's tactics of using Tad as the go between guy, but she also had to take responsibility for her part in all of this. And if the truth was told there was a part of her that admired his ability to outwit her. However, she was wiser now, and she refused to make the same mistake twice. If her plan was going to work there was only one person, who could be privy to the details. When she stepped off the elevator and headed towards her office, Val greeted her at the door to tell her that Opal had already arrived.

"Hey Opal, I am glad that you came so quickly".

"Well when you told me to drop everything and get over here ASAP, I didn't really have a choice. And why are you looking at me like a deer stuck in headlights?"

"Oh nothing, Opal, just wondering where you got those earrings at. Oh and look you even have the matching necklace and bracelet to go with it. I can't believe they actually have it in a set."

"Isn't it great! I got it at the New Age store that opened up last week. They say it is one of a kind."

"Thank goodness! I mean, I think it is great that you got one of a kind. It is certainly a conversation piece," Erica said in a sarcastic tone that was lost on Opal.

"Well since you're my favorite gal pal, and you like it so much, here you go," Opal said as she placed the bracelet in Erica's hand.

"OH NO, Opal! I couldn't take this amazing bracelet from you. REALLY, I wouldn't feel right about it. It looks better on you anyways." Erica turned away so that Opal couldn't see the fear on her face and mumbled under her breath, "I would have to be out of my mind."

"What did you say Erica about your mind?" Opal questioned.

"Oh I said I am running out of time." Erica looked to Opal hoping that she bought her explanation, and she did. "I need your help Opal".

"Well Erica you're my bestest girlfriend, and I would do anything for you. So what do you want me to do?"

Erica filled Opal in about her conversation with Jack and Tad and how Jack was trying to teach her a lesson. The two women spent all afternoon discussing what the next move would be and at the end of the day, the plan was set.

"Remember Opal tell no one about this".

“Erica, I don’t like the sound of this idea. I wasn’t going to say anything about this, but I was talking to Jack and Tad yesterday, and I started to read Jack’s cards to kinda give my galpal a little help in the love department”.

“What! You were reading Jack’s what?”

“It is not important, Erica. The point is that I was reading his cards, and it was spooky. I know something bad is going to happen. I don’t want you to do this, please don’t go to Paris.”

“OPAL, as always your imagination is getting the best of you here. Everything is going to work, and Jack and I will get married in Paris. But before we do, I want to teach him a lesson about trying to beat ERICA KANE at her own game. NOW, Opal, are you with me on this?”

“Oh girlfriend, I don’t agree with this, but mums the word. Cross my heart, hope to die... stick a needle in my eye and all that stuff, I will keep your secret!” Opal took the bracelet off her wrist and tried to put it on a reluctant Erica. “This bracelet, is not just a fashion yes, it is going to keep you safe. This should protect you from any danger. If you want to keep this secret and go along with this plan, you just wear it and stop making a fuss.”

“Okay, Opal. I will wear the bracelet. Now I have to get to the airport. And Opal, thanks for everything! You really are my best friend.” When the door closed behind her, Erica turned to her desk and put the bracelet in her top drawer “Oh Opal. You certainly have the flare for the dramatic. And this bracelet, what would people think, if they saw Erica Kane wearing this? I can see the tabloids now... ‘Call the Fashion Police, Erica Kane needs to be Arrested.’” She laughed hysterically as he headed out the door to marry the man she loved more than life itself.

~*~

It was almost six that same evening when Opal bolted through Jack’s door without even knocking. She was frantic, and Jack was not sure what to think of her recent outburst. He had known Opal to be off the wall sometimes, but her behavior tonight seemed odd even for her. She grabbed the remote from Reggie’s hand and began surfing through the channels. They all looked on as she tried to speak, but she couldn’t. It was clear to everyone that she was upset, but no one had any idea to what magnitude. As Jack moved towards Opal and took the remote from her hand, he caught a glimpse of the news report. “American Airline flight 1974 to Paris crashes killing 50 people.” Everyone stopped to listen to the report still not clear on how it affected each of them directly, and why Opal was upset. But as the words echoed through the apartment it all began clear.

“It is confirmed that Supermodel and Business Tycoon Erica Kane was indeed on this flight to Paris.”

Chapter 5 The Truth is Revealed

Silence consumed the apartment. It was like a vacuum had sucked all the life, energy, and sound out of Jack's loft. Reggie's eyes were welling up in tears as the news media flashed pictures of the crash site.

"Fifty confirmed dead; names are being withheld until families can be notified. So far the rescue crews have found more than thirty survivors, their conditions have ranged from critical to minor. From the looks of this crash site, you wouldn't believe anyone could walk away. Again to recap for those viewers that are just now joining us. American Airlines Flight 1974 crashed upon landing in Paris. It has been confirmed that Supermodel and Business Tycoon Erica Kane was aboard this flight, her condition is unknown at the moment..."

"Shut it off..." Jack said softly, speaking his first words since Opal arrived. "Shut the damn thing off." Jack's voice was growing louder and stronger. Both Opal and Reggie were paralyzed with fear for Erica's safety. They had all come so far and now... The thoughts were too much for Jack, as he kicked the TV and yanked the power cord out of the wall.

"Jackson, do you want me to call Kendall? She can bring Bianca and Miranda over here." Opal's voice was weak. The tears were rolling down her cheeks. "I tried calling the airline on my way over here, but they wouldn't tell me anything. I'm not next of kin. Jackson... Jackson, you need to have Kendall or Bianca call. But they need to hear it from you, first."

"The Hell with that... I'm calling, damn it she's my..." Jack rose in a fury of anger, but was quickly reduced to tears. "She's my Erica, but not my wife. DAMN IT!"

Reggie reached out for Jack, as Jack swore again. "She's okay, J. I feel it. Trust me, Erica's not gone. I'll go get Greenlee. She can call Kendall and just tell them to get over here now. Greenlee will get Kendall and Bianca here."

With that Jack slumped back on the couch, and Reggie rushed out of the apartment. Opal sat beside the love of her girlfriend's life. "Jack, you need to be strong. Erica needs you to be strong for her and for her girls. The kids need you now. We don't know how Erica is, so we just need to find out. I am going to call Myrtle and then Tad to see how they can help."

~*~

Her eyes fluttered slowly at first, but then faster as she began to awaken. "Where am I?" she asked.

"You are at a hospital in Paris. It's alright, Ms. Kane. You are okay." The nurse was

monitoring Erica's vitals and writing down all the latest numbers. "My name is Kristen. You were very blessed to be in first class. If you had not, you might not be in such good shape."

"What happened?" Erica tried to sit up. Kristen quickly moved to help her. Although Erica was in good shape for having survived a plane crash, she was still weak and fairly banged up. *There was something familiar about this lady*, Erica thought, but her headache was pounding so loudly, she couldn't be sure of anything.

"Your plane caught fire on the tail end as it made re-entry. It crashed as it was landing, but you will be just fine. Just a minor concussion, two broken ribs, some cuts and bruising. I wish all the passengers were like you." Kristen handed Erica a cup of ice chips to suck on to help her dry throat, which Erica did.

"Oh no, my family, they must be worried sick. Has anyone contacted them?" Erica was suddenly alarmed at how Jack and all the kids must have taken the news that her plane crashed. It had to be out that she was on the plane.

"No one at the hospital has, Ms. Kane. The airline told our administration to let them handle all of the family notifications. We are only to report to the airline. So I don't know what your family might know." Kristen was trying to answer her questions as honestly as possible, but still keep her patient calm. She had heard of Erica Kane and had no desire to upset her. Erica looked at Kristen, studying her sweet face. Kristen was probably in her mid 30s. Her blonde wavy hair attractively framed her face. Something about that face just seemed so familiar, but Erica couldn't place it.

"Is there any way I could use a phone? I need to call my family. I need to let my daughters and Jack know that I am alive." Erica's love for her family was obvious.

"I certainly understand. I wouldn't be able to keep from calling my Kate to let her know that her Mommy was alright." Kristen handed Erica the phone off the bedside table. "I'll give you some privacy for a few minutes. If your family wants to talk with a doctor, it will have to wait, since all the doctors are swamped with other crash victims, but I will be happy to reassure them that you are okay, if needed."

"Thank you." And with that Erica dialed Jack's loft. Her thoughts lingering on the name Kate.

~*~

"Hello, where's my Erica?" Jack answered the phone as he had been for the last hour. Demanding answers out of everyone that dared to call and tie up the line, while they were awaiting news. The girls, Opal, Myrtle, and Tad had gathered at the apartment with Jack and Reggie. Several others had called and were on their way.

"Jack, it's me. Don't worry. I'm okay." Erica's voice cracked as she started to cry after

hearing the fear in his voice.

“Erica... Honey, is it really you?” Everyone now gathered around Jack. Bianca picked up the other extension. “Mom... mom are you okay?”

“Bianca, honey, I’m fine. Just a little banged up. Don’t worry you guys. I’m okay. I’m in a hospital in Paris. My nurse let me call. I knew you had to be worried after she told me what happened. Jack...”

“Yes, sweetheart.”

“Jack, I am sorry. Please come get me. Please make me feel safe.”

“Of course, honey. We’ll be on the next flight. Don’t you worry. We’ll all be there as soon as possible.... And Erica...”

“Yes, Jackson...”

“I love you. I want to marry you, just as soon as possible.”

Tears that had been contained started rolling down her cheeks, “I love you too.”

Erica quickly spoke with all of their children and assured them that she was okay. After speaking with Jack one more time, to reassure both of them that she really was alright, Erica hung up the phone.

~*~

Kristen came back into the room half an hour later. “Sorry it took me so long. I got tied up with other patients.”

“That’s okay. I certainly don’t expect to have a nurse in my room fulltime.” Although Erica was tired, her headache was dying down, and now she was better able to focus.

“Actually, due to your fame, Ms. Kane, they would like me to remain in her with you. The administration wants to make sure you receive absolutely the best care. Plus there is a hospital guard stationed outside your door to make sure no one but staff and family enters your room.”

“Thank you, Kristen. I really don’t want the press getting pictures of me like this.” Erica motioned to her cut lip and black eye.

“Not to worry.” Kristen went to work taking Erica’s blood pressure and temperature; then changed her IV bag.

“So Kristen, you mentioned your daughter Kate. How old is she?”

“She’ll be four this year.” Kristen finished writing down all of Erica’s latest stats.

“May I ask where you are from? You don’t have a French accent, so I am guessing you are not originally from here.” Erica was getting more and more curious.

“I think I was from American, but to be honest, Ms. Kane, I don’t remember.” Kristen brushed a strand of hair off her cheek and sat in the chair beside the bed.

“How can you not remember?”

“I was in a very horrible accident before Kate was born. I was lucky to live. They took Kate by caesarian when she was 7 months along because they were so concerned I would not make it. I did, but I don’t have any memory prior to it. I sadly don’t even remember who I was or who Kate’s father is.” Kristen’s eyes welled up with tears. “Sorry to unload all that on you, Ms. Kane.” Looking down at her watch, “It’s time for shift change. I am going to go inform your new nurse of your status. Take care.”

Kristen quickly retreated before Erica was able to share her thoughts or even ask for a picture of Kate. *It couldn’t be, could it?* Erica pondered, as she allowed sleep to overtake her.

Chapter 6 Perchance to Dream

As Erica slept her thoughts drifted back to where her heart was, Jackson.

She was standing on the observation deck on the second level of the Eiffel Tower at sunset. Amazingly, there was no one else around. She heard accordion music playing that familiar Parisian standard, "La Vie En Rose" from below. The elevator doors opened and Jack exited, wearing a tux and carrying a single red rose.

"Jackson," Erica smiled.

"You better not have said any other name," Jack teased as he swaggered over to her and took her in his arms. He kissed her passionately and when they finally caught their breath they lost it again gazing out across the city, sparkling in the twilight. Jackson stood behind Erica, holding her shoulders from behind as she held his hands with her own. He turned her around to face him, and Erica knew exactly what he was going to say. Jackson got down on one knee and removed a small box from his lapel pocket revealing a stunning diamond ring. Erica smiled and caressed his face as he asked the magic question ...

"Would you like a bedpan?"

Erica opened her eyes and was confused for a moment. Finally, she realized it had been only a dream. She wondered about visitors.

The nurse continued, "Parlez vous Anglais?"

"Oui. Has anyone been to see me? Has anyone asked for me?"

"No madam. But that doesn't mean anything. You've only been asleep for a few hours."

"Thank you," Erica paused. It seemed there was something else she had to know. "That nurse that was here earlier, Kristen was her name, is she here now?"

"I don't know any nurse named Kristen on this floor, Ms. Kane. Do you want me to check with personnel?"

Erica shook her head, could she have dreamed that too? Kristen looked remarkably like... no, it couldn't be. What would she be doing in Paris? Erica took a deep breath and settled her nerves. This was really too much. She had to wonder why no one from her family had shown up yet. How long had it been since they left Pine Valley?

~*~

When Jackson stepped off the plane in Charles De Gaulle airport he could feel himself

getting closer to Erica. Bianca, Opal, and Kendall had gone with Reggie to get the bags at baggage claim while he phoned the hospital to check on Erica.

CHAPTER 7
And My Reason Is You

“Paris, the city of love. The land of forgotten lives, and new awakenings. Paris—“

“Reggie, enough with the brochure reading, drop it and lets meet up with Jack. We’ve got our bags, now move it.”

“Whoa, Kendall, chill. We’re moving, we’ve got this. You need to relax.”

“How about both ya scrappers get a movin’? Your Uncle Jack is here in the city where it all began, and you’re dilly-dallyin around this carousel like two kids at a carnival.”

”C’mon guys, Opal’s right. Uncle Jack needs us, lets go.” Bianca, ever the voice of reason, led the pack back towards the information desk. Jackson stood silent, phone pressed rightly to his ear, awaiting word on Erica.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught site of the group, anxiously waiting to hear what was going on. He was amazed that they had traveled this far, this fast, all for him. Sure, he could have come alone and seen Erica. But somehow having the kids here, and Opal, things just felt so much better.

Clicking the phone off, Jackson turned to everybody. A smile creasing his face, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

“Well, she’s fine, resting comfortably right now, and will be quite ready to see us.”

“That’s great Jack, lets head over there, I know she’s thinking about us right now.”

“Oops, how’d ya figure that? She’s resting.” Reggie always willing to question her smiled proudly at his question.

“Don’t you worry about that, just worry bout getting this stuff to the car, we’ve gotta move.”

Walking together, baggage in hand, they made their way to car rental, and then off to the hospital. Jackson secretly couldn’t wait to see her face, and maybe send the others away for some quiet time. Loading up, the trip was quick to the hospital.

~*~

The room was basked in sunshine, and Jackson slowly crept the door open. His eyes met hers as she turned away from the window. There was passion, and love in her eyes, beneath the tiredness. He knew his eyes reflected the same, and both smiled at their thoughts.

The door slid the rest of the way, and everyone was soon crowding around Erica, touching gently, relieved to see her once more. Opal, Kendall and Bianca were all talking, quickly and smiling happily every minute. Reggie stood a little further away, allowing her room to breathe, and finally Jackson stood quietly against the window. Watching his family interact, and trying to control his heartbeat.

He wasn't sure if he'd ever been this happy before. The last time he was here, in Paris, things had been wonderful. Yet, this reunion seemed to top it. Last time it was finding out if the love would last, if it was possible. This time, it was the fact that the love was true, that he was here, that she was here, that it came back here.

It seemed that this was the only place to be. Of course, this time the family was here, their family, and they had made it. Glancing at her, he watched her interacting with everyone, reassuring them of her health, that she was fine. Catching her eyes, he smiled. This is all that he could have ever wished for, yet had dared not to hope. She was safe, she was okay, and they were all together.

Opal looked away from Erica for a moment, and noticed her previous distraction. Eyeing Jackson, she knew what needed to be done.

“Okay you guys, I think your mom needs some time alone with Uncle Jack here. Why don't we go wrestle up some vending machine goodies?”

Reggie caught on quickly, and soon was aiding in the exiting of the room.

“Yo J, we'll be down the hall, ya know, grubbin', so ya know, we'll be back. E, we'll be back later. Remember, no strenuous activity.”

With a smack from Kendall, they left the room, and a calm quiet fell upon them. Jackson made his way to the bed, pulling a chair along with him. Sitting close to the bed, he took her hand, and brought it to his lips.

“I've missed you.”

“And I you, Jackson. I'm so glad you're here. I needed to feel your hands, see your face. I know I'll be okay as long as you're here. I need you.”

“I'm here Erica. Where else could I be?”

Smiling at that thought, she rested her hand against his cheek. Feeling the stubble of a few days growth. Knowing the worry brought him here, and that made his rest fitful over the last few days.

“I love you Jack, don't ever think otherwise.”

“I never could, even if I wanted to.”

Smiling, he sealed her lips with his own. A brief kiss that left the desire for so much more. They'd have time for that later. This was Paris of course. The city of love.

“Jackson, there is a nurse here. She looks familiar. I want you to meet her. I think you'll recognize her.”

“Erica, are you sure you're okay? I mean, the last time we were in Paris, I don't recall leaving our hotel room.”

“Jackson, you're going to think I'm crazy, but I could swear it's Dixie.”

“Okay, I talked to your doctor, and my French may not be the best, but he didn't say anything about head trauma.”

“Jackson, believe me, I have my doubts. She usually makes rounds in the evenings. Tonight, when she comes, you'll see her. I really think it's her.”

“Okay, Erica, its okay. I'll be here. Why don't you get some rest, I'll sit here with you.”

“Mmm... that sounds nice. Why don't you tell me a story, help ease me into sleep.”

“Mmm... hmm... okay. Once there was a Marshall, and he rode his horse through the lands, protecting a special lady of his. Miss Kitty was a pretty woman...”

With Jackson's story fading her into sleep, her thoughts went the nurse. What if she was Dixie? What if, what if, what if.

Chapter 8 A Miracle

“Opal, what’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Jack and Erica had been discussing Paris with the kids, since only Greenlee had been to Paris previously, when Opal walked back in the room.

Gingerly Opal sat on the edge of Erica’s bed, “I think I may have.” Opal’s face was much paler than normal. “I could have sworn I saw Dixie as I was coming back from the waiting room.”

“There’s no way you saw Dixie,” Jack reassured her. Bianca had taken Opal’s hand, trying to soothe her nerves. “You had just been talking to Tad, right?”

“Yes, maybe that’s it. Maybe I just wanted it to be her.” Opal started to look a little better.

“Ms. Kane, it’s time for me to check your vitals.” Kristen walked in. “Oh, it looks like your entire family got here. That’s wonderful.”

“Good evening Kristen. This is my fiancée, Jackson Montgomery, and almost all of our children, Greenlee, Kendall, Bianca, and Reggie.” Erica’s voice was as calm as ever, while she introduced the clan. All of their faces were ashen, watching Kristen.

“This is my good friend Opal.” Erica introduced Opal, who went weak at the knee as she stood. Reggie held her up.

“E, I think we’ll wait outside.” Reggie guided all the ladies out, while Jackson remained by her side.

Jack’s eyes studied Kristen’s face. If she wasn’t Dixie Martin, she had to be related to her somehow. When his eyes settled on her neck, Jack noticed a cross necklace that he recognized. Tad and he had gone shopping, Jack for the latest engagement ring for Erica and Tad for that necklace.

Jack suddenly gasped as he realized the truth. Erica leaned over to him as Kristen took her blood pressure. “See, it is her, isn’t it?”

Jack nodded. “Kristen, thank you for being so kind to Erica. You don’t know how much I appreciate knowing that you were caring for her when I could not be here.”

“Certainly, Mr. Montgomery. I know just how Ms. Kane felt waking up in a strange place, unsure of what happened.” Kristen finished the paper work. “Do you need anything, Ms. Kane?”

“You were going to show me a picture of Kate, your daughter, remember?” Erica knew

this would solidify things one way or another. If this little girl had any of Tad in her, Jack and Erica would be able to tell and would then know how to proceed.

“Oh yeah.” Kristen pulled a small wallet sized picture out of her pocket. “Here is my little angel. I only wish I could remember my past, so I could find her father for her.”

Erica took the picture. After examining it closely, she handed it to Jack, “Isn’t she beautiful, Jack? Those gorgeous eyes, don’t they remind you of someone?”

“Oh my God, she’s adorable,” Jack said quickly recovering, handing the photo back to Kristen. “Do you mind if I ask you some questions? I might be able to help you piece things together.” Jack was sincere in his offer. He wanted her to remember who she really is herself, not anyone telling her.

“I don’t mind, Mr. Montgomery, but I can’t right now. I have way too many patients to take care of. Maybe another time. I have tried hypnosis and everything. The police here don’t have my finger prints on file, but they were great about helping me get on my feet when I woke up.”

“I have some connections back in the states, maybe they could help you figure out your past, either with finger prints or DNA.” Jack desperately wanted to get physical proof.

Kristen pulled one strand of hair out of her head and handing it to Jackson. “If you think you could help me find out who my daughter’s father is, I’ll do anything. Now I really must go check on my other patients. Have a nice evening. You should be released soon, Ms. Kane.”

Jack and Erica huddled tight most of the night, trying to figure out the next step. They didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up, but were fairly positive that Kristen was really Dixie. If only she remembered Tad, if only they had some hope she would eventually remember him. Neither one of them wanted to hurt Tad. Knowing they would not be able to come to any firm decisions until morning, Jack curled up in the small hospital bed with Erica, and they both drifted off.

~*~

“Jack, Erica, was that really who I thought I saw last night?” Opal, in her normal flare, was bouncing around the room like a yo-yo.

“We don’t know for sure, but it may be her,” Jack said in a very cautious tone. “I have Aidan looking into it.”

“Opal calm down. Your pacing is giving me a headache.” Erica reached out and grabbed her friend’s hand. Opal sat on the edge of the bed.

“What if it is her, girlfriend? What if her daughter is my grandchild? What are we going

to do?" Opal was searching for answers they didn't yet know.

"Opal, let's just take things one step at a time. First let's get me out of this stupid hospital bed and out of this drab gown and then we can tackle this Kristen/Dixie issue." Erica was definitely better. Most of the bruising was starting to heal, and although she would have to take it easy, the doctors had told her she would be released by ten. As that time drew nearer and nearer, her patience with everything was starting to wane.

"I'll go check on your release papers. Opal, will you help Erica get dressed? There is a suitcase in the closet of clothes that Kendall brought with us." Jack quickly kissed Erica's forehead and left.

By the time he returned with the paperwork, the two women were both pacing. Erica quickly signed the papers, and they all headed for the door. Greenlee was showing Kendall, Bianca, and Reggie some of Paris, while Jack, Erica and Opal figured out their next step.

Kristen had been given Jack's card with the number of their hotel, but they had no way to contact her. So they had left word at the hospital for her to call them. Just as the three were entering Jack and Erica's hotel room, his cell phone rang.

"Montgomery... Yes... Thank you, that's great news. Would you fax the report to the hotel... Thank you, great work... Yes, not a word to anyone for now. We will handle that on our end. Thanks again!"

Erica and Opal were clutching each other's hands, waiting with baited breath for Jackson to tell them the great news. Although both were sure of the results, they needed to hear it. Jack turned to face them, beaming.

"So now how do we reunite Tad with the love of his life and his daughter?"

Chapter 9
Déjà vu

Once they were back in the hotel Erica and Opal hatched a plan.

“Girlfriend, this sure is one humdinger of a plan. I just hope my Tad comes through. I called him from the hospital and told him to get his baby blues to Paris tout suit. Do you think this will work?”

“It has to, Opal.”

First and foremost, Erica wanted to get married as quickly as possible. She and Jack had waited far too long for their wedding. Phone calls were made, and after Erica threw around her considerable celebrity weight, they had secured a time at St. Germain church, the oldest in Paris, in Saint Germain des Pres, and the reception would be at the Jules Verne, one of Paris’ most prestigious restaurants 125 meters up the Eiffel Tower. Erica made sure this wedding would be spectacular since it would be her last.

“You and Opal have been busy, I see,” he said, noticing the organizer and appointment book with multiple entries and erasures. Jackson came up behind her and kissed her on her cheek, holding her from behind.

“I told you I could pull this wedding together with my eyes closed and my hands tied behind my back.”

“Isn’t that a pretty picture?”

Erica playfully batted Jack’s arm at the comment and Jack laughed. “Jack, we’ve waited so long for this, and I’ve planned it in my head so many times. Once we were here, I knew in my heart how I wanted everything to be. It was simply a matter of convincing the managers of the places that it was the only thing to do.”

He turned her around to face him and caressed her cheek. His voice low and full of emotion he started, “All that matters to me is that you’re there. We could get married in a pig sty with a fat sow as witness and I’d be happy.”

Erica smiled even though she was mildly repulsed by the thought. “That better be a blue ribbon prize winning sow. After all, I am Erica Kane... soon to be, Montgomery.” Her eyes twinkled with delight and mischief. “I deserve the best.”

“And I intend to see that you get it, every single day, for the rest of my life,” he pulled her into a long, slow, meandering kiss that would have gone much further but Erica didn’t want anything spoiled.

“Jack,” she said breathlessly, “I love you so much, despite the past, despite my issues, you’re the only man who has ever fully understood and appreciated me. And you’ve

always been there for me even when I pushed you away. I may not say it enough, but I hope you know that I always think it – you’re my heart and always have been.”

Jack looked deep into her dark chocolate eyes, they were filled with emotion and Jack felt his heart filled to bursting. “I’ve told you before – You took root in my heart the day I met you and you will live there until the day I die. Nothing has changed and nothing ever will. You’ve been the only woman for me since I met you, and even before that. I was always searching for something and restless with myself before I met you. You were what I was searching for and my soul wasn’t complete until I found you. I’ll always be there when you need me, and even when you don’t.”

Erica instinctively cradled his head in her hands and kissed him passionately on the mouth. A long, luxurious kiss. Her hands roamed all over Jackson’s taut body. Jack responded in kind. Soon they were by the fireplace, Jack’s jacket and shirt strewn on the floor along with Erica’s jacket. Passion overtook them and as Jack picked Erica up to carry her to the bedroom, someone else in the room cleared their throat. Erica and Jack spun around in shock.

“Sorry guys. Mama called me and told me to get here immediately, so I hopped the first flight.” Tad stood in the doorway, sheepishly wanting to crawl back out the door.

Jack put Erica down and grabbed his shirt from the floor. “Remind me to return the favor one day soon, Tad,” Jack grimaced, being in a state that wasn’t too comfortable at the moment. He sat on the couch while Erica tried to explain.

Erica checked her state of dress and fixed her hair. “Tad, come in. What did Opal tell you?”

“I really am sorry about this. I had no idea. The bellman just brought me straight here when I checked in.”

“Don’t worry about it, Tad,” said Erica. “I asked the manager to send you directly here.”

“Mama mentioned something about a ‘cosmic emergency’ and told me that my chakras were about to be unkinked in a major way. She also mentioned that everything happens for a reason. Now, if you can figure out what that means, enlighten me.” Tad rolled his eyes. “I just figured it had to do with the plane crash.”

“It does have to do with an accident, but not mine. Call it serendipity. I guess it’s true, and everything does happen for a reason. Jack and I just needed a final push to stop playing games and my accident put things into perspective. We’re getting married here.”

“Well, congratulations, you two. Mazel tov. I couldn’t be happier.”

“Oh, yes you could,” Jack muttered, under his breath.

“Tad, would you do me a favor?” Erica asked, hoping her and Opal’s plan would work a miracle. It was pretty risky.

“Sure.”

“When I was in the accident, I met a woman named Kristen in the hospital. She works there. Anyway, I’d like her to be in the wedding tomorrow, but for some reason she’s not on file at the hospital. One nurse that I spoke to said that she really wasn’t a nurse, but a nurses’ aid. I need you to find out where she lives, so we can invite her.” Erica’s eyes were full of hope for him.

“Well, my connections here aren’t as good as in the states, but I’ll give it my best shot.”

Jack piped in, “Would it help if I said ‘she’s gorgeous and just your type’?” He smiled at his friend, not wanting to spoil the surprise.

Tad smiled wistfully. “Is this a set up? I’m not sure I’m up to it, guys.” After trying to fool himself with Simone, Liza, and Krytsal, Tad came to the realization that after Dixie, he just wouldn’t ever be as complete with anyone else. Everyone else came up short.

“It’s really just a favor, for me.” Erica replied. “I really want to do something for Kristen, since she really made me feel at home in Paris. So, she simply has to be at the wedding.”

“How can I deny you that on your wedding, Erica? I’m on the job. Kristen will be there.” Little did Tad know that he was about to get the biggest and most beautiful shock of his life.

Tad left, on his mission. “Do you think we should have told him?” Erica queried.

“Let him find her on his own. Tad’s been through some rough times, and I’m not sure he’d believe us if we told him. Dixie’s death is still an open wound for him. I hope you know how overjoyed and relieved I am that you’re safe and sound after what happened. I couldn’t go on without you, Erica.”

Erica smiled. “I’d hope not!”

“Now, where were we?” Jack asked playfully, picking her up in his arms once more.

Erica giggled. “We were uh... about here.” She kissed him again, but stopped herself. “I hate to say this Jack, but I’m glad Tad interrupted us. I don’t want to jinx the wedding. Opal said it’s best if we don’t see each other tonight.”

“I’m going to kill Tad.” Jack muttered, putting Erica back down on her own two feet.

“Monsieur, Corrine promises to make it up to you demain soir, nes pas?” Her eyes twinkled with passion and playfulness, wondering where she could get a French maid

costume on such short notice.

“Oh, yes! I promise to be a good boy, ma’am! Vive le France!” Jack laughed anticipating the wedding night.

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Tad used his contacts and managed to track Kristen down to a small flat on the outskirts of town. Opal had been on the phone with him numerous times asking if he’d found her yet. Tad didn’t understand what the commotion was about. He verified the address before he knocked on the door to Kristen’s apartment.

“Hello?” he asked. “Kristen? Erica Kane asked me to find you.” He waited a few moments, hearing movement inside the apartment.

Kristen had just put Kate down for her nap, she had an anxious feeling all day. Last night, after talking with those people who visited Erica Kane, she began to have memory flashes. But that couldn’t be right? Could it? “One minute!” she called out to the man at the door. Kristen undid the lock and opened the door.

Tad dropped the paper with the address on it. He had to be seeing things. It couldn’t be. His eyes began to water, and he knew he had to be in shock because he was unable to speak. His mouth opened and closed repeatedly. He swallowed hard and a smile burst across his face. “Dixie…”

Kristen was inundated with images in her mind. Her knees started to give way under her. The man standing before her was the same man she saw last night in her dream. Things were happening too fast for her. Scared about what she was feeling she promptly slammed the door shut and leaned against it, catching her breath.

“Dixie!!! Not again! It’s me… Tad!” He was frantic on the other side of the door, pounding it with his fists. She looked different but the same. How was this possible? If she were in Paris, why wasn’t she with Lanie and David?

Tad? Somewhere in her heart, Kristen knew this man. She was petrified, but some part of her wanted to fling the door open and run into his arms. But she had to protect Kate. She didn’t know this man, did she? Was it safe?

“Dixie, please open the door. How did you get here? We all thought you died in Zurich. At least you could have told me you were alive, even if you didn’t want to see me again.”

Kristen had flashes of a car accident. Was that how she lost her memory? She had been in a coma for a few weeks, the doctors had told her. “Tad?” she asked, not sure of the name.

“Yes! Tad! The man you left because of the baby, our baby. Dixie at least tell me you’re alright. I need to know you’re safe and happy even if you never want to see me again.”

Kristen looked toward the bedroom where little Kate was sleeping. She hoped he wouldn't wake her. She had a splitting headache all of a sudden. Another memory flash hit her, dancing in white robes, a wedding, children. "JR!" she screamed. How on earth could she forget her son?

"That's right, you abandoned him too. Did you really hate me that much to fake your own death?"

Dixie pulled herself up, memories coming in faster and faster. Kate was up now, and walking toward her mother. "Mommy, who is the man at the door? Is he a bad man?"

Tad couldn't believe what he was hearing. It was a child's voice... could it be? "Dixie, for the love of God, is that Kate? Please open the door." Tad was emotionally spent a mere feet between him and his life.

Dixie picked up Kate, "Katie, I think that's your daddy on the other side." She had tears streaming down her face as she unlocked the door, hysterically sobbing.

Tad stood there not knowing what to do. He saw his daughter for the first time, she looked a little like Jenny and a little like Dixie. He was paralyzed until Dixie smiled and reached her free arm towards him. In an instant he was through the door, kissing her, kissing Kate.

"Tad! I love you. I remember you." Dixie was laughing and crying at the same time.

"Amnesia? I should have known. I should have looked for you. I shouldn't have given up like Brooke said. I didn't want to leave your apartment in Zurich, but the boys..."

"JR and Jamie," she sniffled. "How are they? They must be big by now."

"You have no idea," he said, kissing her once more.

"Tad, stop... this..." she handed him their daughter. "This is Kate, our Kate." She beamed as she looked at him holding her. She had his eyes. Dixie was about to squeak she was so happy.

Tad's tears finally burst the dam, and he was holding his daughter at long last. "I love you, Dixie, I always have."

"We've lost so much time. I have so much to tell you. I love you so much it hurts. If you'll fill me in I'll do the same?"

"Always." Tad smiled. Finally feeling content and whole once more... he held up two fingers to Dixie.

She smiled and held hers up touching his. “Together forever,” she said.

“Me too!” piped in Kate, and they laughed.

Chapter 10

A Second Chance To Love

It was getting late in the evening when Erica finally convinced Jack to retire to his room. Erica had explained to Jack that it was bad luck to see the bride before the wedding and with their luck, she didn't want to take any unnecessary chances. Jackson reached for the door, opened it and kissed Erica all in the same sweeping movement. He kissed her passionately hoping she would change her mind and let him stay the night. She was caught off guard by his kiss. Trying hard not to give in to her desire, she pulled away from him, but he was not willing to give in so easily. Jackson was an extraordinary man by anyone standards but for Erica, he had a passion for her that would light up Paris. So to resist his advance was difficult especially when he knew what he wanted and he wanted it now. He kissed her like it was their first and last kiss, which Erica returned with the same passion. Jackson had won in the game finally bringing Erica at his mercy. Just as he was about to close the door and show Erica how much he desired her, Tad came waltzing through the half open door.

“Hi guys! Am I interrupting something?” he smiled.

Under any other circumstances Jack would be upset with Tad for his unwelcomed interruption, but tonight he was more concerned with Tad's latest adventure to be upset with his friend.

“Someone seems in good spirits tonight! Any particular reason why?” Jack questioned.

“Well if seeing my two favorite people getting ready for there big day tomorrow isn't enough, Jamie just got accepted to Law school,” Tad said.

“Wow that is great Tad, but is there any other reason?” Erica questioned.

“Well isn't that enough reason to be happy, Erica? Why is there another reason I should be?” he said trying not to reveal his latest discovery of Dixie and Kate.

“Well we, Jack and I, were just wondering if you found Kristen... and if you have invited her to the wedding.”

“For two people who are getting married tomorrow, you sure are spending a lot of time focusing on this nurse. And yes I was able to locate her.”

“AND,” they both said.

“And I left her a message. I told her how much you appreciate how kind she was to you, and that you both would very much like for her to attend your wedding tomorrow.”

“But... But you didn't see her Tad? I mean you didn't invite her in person,” Erica said in a demanding voice.

“Well I did leave a message for her, but I knew that wouldn't be enough for you. So I took it upon myself to visit her,” Tad said trying to keep himself from screaming out that he had seen Dixie.

“AND,” they both screamed out again like two teenagers waiting for their friend to share the latest gossip with them.

“Relax you two. I met her, and I invited her on behalf of the two of you... Okay?” Tad said to a very confused Jack and Erica. “Now I will let the happy couple get back to planning.”

“Tad... Wait,” Erica said as she dragged him towards her. “When you met with Kristen, didn't you notice anything about her?”

“Kristen,” Tad yelled, “I thought you said Tristan, no wonder she looked so surprised when I told her that you insisted she be at your wedding. She was surprised that the Great Erica Kane would want her at the wedding.” Tad laughed more at the expressions on their faces than the obvious mistake they both thought he made.

“Oh my God,” Erica yelled at him.

“Are you ok, Erica?” Don't you think you are making more of this Kristen thing than you need to? It was just a mistake, but I will find her. Here give me the number to the hospital and I will try to catch up with her there! ... Kristen is her name, right?” Tad questioned knowing full well the answer.

Tad began dialing the number to the hospital as Jack and Erica looked on. Tad stood there with the phone to his ear, calling out one ringy dingy, two ringy dingy, until finally the nurse's station picked up after the third ring.

“Hi this is Tad Martin, Yes the American! Yes the tall dark hair man who was visiting Miss Kane,” he said as he began to sit comfortably on the sofa.

“Why thank you, you have a nice phone voice as well. Pamela; Pamela is a beautiful name. Well I am not sure how long I am going to be in Paris, but you never know.”

“I don't believe this; he is making a date while we are trying to find the love of his life.” Erica said quietly to Jack so that Tad could not hear her.

“Tad, Tad,” Erica said as she moved closer to him. “Do you think that you could stop flirting long enough to find out about Kristen?”

“Oh yeah, sorry,” Tad said as he looked towards Jack and Erica. “Pamela sorry to cut this conversation short, but I was wondering if you can tell me, if Kristen Long is working this evening. *Oh REALLY! WHEN!* Well thanks for the information Pamela. Yeah,

you never know, I just might like to play doctor. Ok! Yes, I got that number. Thanks again, bye.”

Jack and Erica looked at Tad without uttering a word, waiting for him to tell them about Kristen, but he didn't speak. Instead he rolled up the piece of paper he was writing on during his phone conversation and put it in his pocket. They did not look away from him. In fact, they continued staring wide-eyed at him each sharing the same expression of frustration and disbelief.

“WHAT?” Tad spoke.

“Are you going to tell us what you found out?” Erica said in a very impatient tone.

“Oh that, yeah! It seems that your nurse Kristen has left town and hasn't left a forwarding address.” Tad said.

“What do you mean left town?” Jack shouted back at Tad.

“What about that phone number you just put in your pocket?” Erica snapped back.

“Oh that was Pamela the nurse at the front desk. It was her phone number, she thought I was hot,” Tad said trying not to burst into laughter.

Jack and Erica walked over to the sofa and sat down simultaneous, placing their hands on their head in defeat. It was clear that their plan of reuniting Tad with Dixie was failing miserably. They were running out of opinions. They couldn't tell him directly because he wouldn't believe them and if by chance he did, they also had to consider the possibility that Kristen/Dixie might not want to be found. How could they set Tad up for that kind of hurt? Although neither spoke a word, both knew of the others pain and fear. They sat there in silence just looking back and forth at each other and than Tad, until finally Tad spoke.

“Listen guys, I know that you are disappointed about not having Kristen at the wedding, but don't you think you are both overreacting just a little. You make it seem that not having her here is going to ruin your wedding. She is not going to be at your wedding, but all the people that love you are going to be there. You two are my best friends and I love you guys, which is why I need to put a stop to this obsession that you both have with finding this mystery lady. You're getting married tomorrow! Do you have any idea how long we have all waited for this day to finally get here? You are worse than that Soap Opera that Opal is always watching! The point is, this moment only comes around once, ok, maybe a couple of times for you two... but it is really going to happy this time... So stop obsessing and start focusing on each other.”

Jack turned to Erica and kissed her gently on the cheek, “Tad's right sweetheart, we need to give this thing a rest. Besides I have to figure out a way to make sure the wedding goes off without a hitch... I don't want you getting away again.”

For the first time this evening Erica smiled, as she slapped Jack on the arm for his comment. "I am going to Mrs. Jackson Montgomery! **COME HELL OR HIGH WATER**, I am going to be your wife!"

"My work here is done," Tad said as he headed towards the door.

As the door closed behind him, Erica turned to Jack and softly whispered, "I just wanted Tad to be as happy as we are."

"I know sweetheart, but... It is not going to happen just yet. When we get back from our honeymoon, I promise I will find Dixie and bring her back to Tad," Jack said as he wrapped his strong arms around Erica's waist.

The mood was changing now, and Jack was moving into seductive mode, as he allowed his hot breath to gently caress Erica's bare shoulder. Her breathing slowly began to increase with each stroke of Jack's tongue along her neck. He moved his hands along her waist and back up the curve of her back until he reached the zipper on her dress. She could hardly manage to speak but found the words to ask,

"Honeymoon, where are we going on our honeymoon?"

"Hmmm, Hmmm," he said in between kisses. "Honeymoon, it is a surprise, but I can (hmmmm) tell you (hmmmm) what we will be doing. Better yet... oh... let me show you." he said as he picked Erica up into his arms and carried her towards the bed.

The world outside was fading away as Jack and Erica drifted into their own little paradise. He gently laid her on the bed and began licking her fingers. He moved his hands down her leg and back up again making sure he did not miss a spot on her petite but beautiful frame. When their eyes met, they both knew that all the years of being together and apart came down to this moment in time. Maybe a test of their love or just timing... Whatever it was, their love was stronger for it. They looked at each other for several minutes until the sound of knocking at door broke their stare.

(Knock Knock Knock) "Miss Kane, it is Kristen, are you there?" (KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK) "Erica," she screamed from the other side of the door.

Jack and Erica jumped off the bed and scurried around the floor to find their clothes that had fallen a few minutes earlier. "Jack, I can't believe it; it is DIXIE." She turned away from Jack who was fixing up his shirt and headed towards the door.

"Kristen, I am so glad to see you," Erica said almost dragging her inside the room.

"Miss Kane I am sorry to bother you at such a late hour, but I wanted to say goodbye and to thank you for listening to me when you were in the hospital."

"Oh Kristen you don't have to thank me. I am the one who should thank you for taking such good care of me." Erica reached her hand out to Kristen and offered for her to have a seat.

"Will you excuse me for a moment?" Erica said as she headed towards the bedroom where Jackson was getting dressed.

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"Jack," she said in a whispering tone so that Kristen would not hear her. "Jack, you need to call Tad and get him over here ASAP."

"Well what am I going to say? I have your dead wife here, but guess what, she is not dead. What am I going to say, Erica?"

"Jack just get him over here NOW. If you can sweet talk me into doing anything you want, you can sweet talk Tad into coming over," Erica said.

"Really, I can sweet-talk you into doing anything... hmmm... I like this", he said as he reached over and pulled her towards him. "ANYTHING?"

"Jack, stop it. Is that all you can think of?" Erica said as she tried to maneuver herself out of Jack's strong arms.

"Well actually Erica, I can think of other things as well, want me to show you?" he said as he unhooked the strap of her dress.

"Jack, NOT NOW."

"Sorry sweetheart, I went too far, didn't I? Ok... I will call Tad and get him over here, but I would like to discuss this power I have over you... at a later date," Jack said as he pulled her in for another kiss. "HMMMM, HMMMM. You better get going Miss Kane or I won't be held responsible for my actions."

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"Sorry about that Kristen. I just had to take care of something," Erica said trying not to give any more information than she had to.

"That is okay. I understand, but I will be going and let you get back to whatever you were doing before I came," Kristen said a little embarrassed as she notice that Erica's dress was inside out.

"Oh... I wasn't doing anything. Please stay and chat," Erica said not realizing that she was already busted.

The two women chatted back and forth for about 20 minutes until Jackson came out of the bedroom acting as if he had just woken up. He greeted Kristen with a smile and then moved and sat next to Erica on the sofa and kissed her gently on the cheek. It wasn't until he moved his hand up Erica's back and felt the tag of her dress on the outside that he realized that she had her dress on inside out. The look of panic on his face didn't go unnoticed by Kristen who began to laugh. It seemed that Erica was the only one who didn't know what the joke was. When Kristen got up to leave, Jack tried to motion to Erica about her dress, but Erica was too busy trying to stop Kristen from leaving to notice Jack.

"Wait Kristen... Please don't go yet. I have a favor to ask," Erica said as she wrapped her arm around Jack's waist. "Jack and I are getting married tomorrow, and I was wondering if you would be my guest."

"Oh Miss Kane, I mean Erica... I am honored by your request, but unfortunately I can't. My plane is leaving tonight," Kristen said as she reached her hand out to Erica. "But thank you so much. Goodbye."

Erica couldn't speak as the door slammed closed, and Kristen was gone. Gone forever! She stood frozen; they both did, as the possibility of reuniting Tad and Dixie was fading away. Jack reached down and turned Erica's face towards him and kissed her gently on the forehead.

"I don't believe it Jack. Every time it seems that we are close to getting them together, something happens. I finally know how the Posse feels."

"Yeah and we have only be trying to get Tad and Dixie together for a few days, imagine after 16 years. They obvious have more patience than us," Jack said laughing.

"Well now the wait is over," she laughed.

"Oh Erica, I have been meaning to tell you... **your dress**," Jack started to say, but was interrupted by the sound of Tad at the door.

"Ok Jack, what is the big emergency?" Tad said as he rushed through the door like the room was on fire.

"I almost got in an accident trying to get here... so tell me what is so important that you rushed me over here," Tad questioned.

"I'm sorry," Erica piped up. "It is my fault. I insisted Jack call you and come over..." She struggled trying to figure out what she should say next. "And take Jack out of here for me. It is bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding."

"Oh... okay... I can do that, but it sounded so important that I thought it was something else," Tad said knowing it was time to give up the game and tell Jack and Erica the truth.

"What else could it be my friend?" Jack said as he picked up his coat and headed towards the door.

"Well I thought maybe you two had a secret, and you were trying to share it with me, which would explain why you have been acting like Nancy Drew and one of the Hardy boys," Tad said trying to contain his laughter.

"No secret here," Erica said as he held her head down in defeat.

"Well I think that you do have a secret... and I think..." Tad moved towards the door and opened it. "This is the secret you have been trying so hard for me to uncover."

As the door opened there she stood, the woman that they had tried so hard to make Tad find, but it all seemed so surreal. Was this really happening? Was it possible that Kristen knew she was Dixie Martin, and that finally Tad and her had reunited? They stood there looking at her, neither making a movement towards or away from the door. They didn't look at each other or Tad; they just stared at Dixie...

"Well aren't you going to invite me in?" the woman's voice echoed through the room.

"I am not sure what is going on here, but I have a feeling we've been **HAD** sweetheart," Jack said still looking at Dixie.

"So you know, you both know about the other." Erica was still confused on what was going on.

"Well if you invite me in, Tad and I will explain the entire story," she said with a smile that could only be given by Dixie Martin.

Tad and Dixie spent several hours explaining to Jack and Erica how this all came to be. By the end of the story, everyone was laughing at what had transpired in the last several hours and how each had played a role. Tad commented on how Erica had topped the list as the funniest attempt at matchmaking he had ever seen, but he had to say that it was the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for him. From the outside Erica could seem uncaring and often untouchable, but the people close to her always marveled at her loyalty and love of her friends and family. Today was no different, but yet it stood as a reminder to all of them how fortunate they were to have her on their side. He moved towards Erica and grabbed her tight and said, "Thank you Erica... thank you. Thank you for bringing the light back into my life."

She smiled at him and said, "I just want you to be as happy as I am with Jack. Jack completes me and I him. He is my soul mate, and I couldn't imagine living without him. I can't imagine how you must have felt living without Dixie, but now you don't have too. Don't thank me Tad... just always remember that we have been given a second chance to get it right. Let's make the most of it."

"Here here, well said my beautiful friend. I just have one more question and than I am on my way," Tad said uncertain about the answer. Leaning closer to her, "Erica, why is your dress inside out?"

"WHAT?" she said looking down at her dress and than back at Tad.

"Oh," was all she could manage to say before her face turned 12 shades of red.

"Maybe I should take Jack out of here before you two get into any more trouble," Tad laughed.

"Yes I best get going my love, but the next time I see you I will be making an honest woman out of you," he said leaning in to kiss her quickly. "Seriously sweetheart, I love you and I will spend everyday of the rest of my life showing you how much."

"Ok you two love birds, time to break this party up and let the bride get her rest," Tad said as he motioned for Jack to exit.

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The moment was here, and Erica was ready to take her journey towards her destiny and the man that had filled her soul for so many years. As the door opened revealing the stunning vision of Erica before him, Jack mouthed to her 'I love you'. As she slowly walked towards him, Jack felt like she would never get to the Alter. He held his breath waiting for her to arrive and be by his side. Within seconds she was there ready and willing to become his wife. This moment was more than Jack could ever imagined his mind; a moment that had taken a lifetime to get to, was finally here. Although the church was filled with their friends and family, for Jack and Erica it was as if they were the only two people in the room. The only time they looked away from each other was when the minister asked if there was anyone here who had any reason why they should not be married. They searched the room waiting and praying that nothing would interrupt this moment, and this time, nothing did. Before they had finished Jack stopped the Minister and asked if he could say a few words to his bride.

"Erica, I am a man who stands before you with complete love in my soul. I would risk a lifetime of pain to have one moment with you. That is how much I love you Miss Kane. From the first time I saw you, I knew my search was over and that finally I had found my purpose in life. We have had many obstacles over the years, which many people never survive, but here we are where we always find ourselves in love with each other. As I put this ring on your finger I want you to know that I will never leave you, and I will always be your best friend, your lover, your companion, your critic, your champion, YOUR HEART. With this ring, I thee wed."

"Jack, I am a woman who stands before you naked. One by one you have stripped me of my walls of fear, insecurity and loneliness. It is because of you that I not only understand

the power of love, but I feel worthy to be a part of it. When I first saw you, I knew that my soul belong to you. It has taken me many years to come to you freely, but today I stand here before you knowing that you are my friend, my lover, my champion, and MY HEART. And for the rest of my life, I want you to know that I will be all of those things for you. That is how much I love you Mr. Montgomery! With is this ring, I thee wed."

"Let me introduce, JACKSON AND ERICA MONTGOMERY!"

The church was filled with screams of joy and tears as the excitement of this moment finally hit home, but to Jack and Erica it was journey that was just beginning. They were half way down the isle when Jackson stopped and lifted Erica into his arms and carried her out of the church. "Your chariot awaits my Princess," he said as he put her in the horse and buggy. As Jackson wrapped his arms around his new bride, everyone else was busy dialing their perspective people to inform them of Jack and Erica nuptials.

"I can't believe it, they finally did it," Opal yelled out to Palmer on the other end of the phone. It was hard for Opal to hear what Palmer was saying because of the noise on both ends of the phone, but she could hear Palmer saying, "Pass it on... ERICA AND JACK TIED THE KNOT!" And in the background there were screams of joy.

"Myrtle, they did it. They finally made it legal," Bianca yelled.

"I know, I am so happy right now," Kendall cried out to Mia and Simon who had her on speaker phone at Fusion.

Everyone at the wedding called different people to inform them of the ceremony. A lot of people had a great deal invested in this couple. As Reggie look at his list, he could see a name he didn't recognize.

"The Posse, who are they? Well Big J wanted me to call them, so I guess I should let them know," Reggie said to Bianca.

"Yes, the Posse, wait I have heard that before. Yes mom has that on her list as well," Bianca said.

"Do you think Big J and E belong to some kind of cult?" Reggie questioned.

"CULT! The Posse Cult," Bianca laughed.

"What are you laughing at Bianca? Stranger things have happened," Reggie insisted.

"Reggie it is probably some kind of self help group that Mom and Uncle Jack are doing as charity work."

"Well I better call them and let them know anyway... Ya don't want them coming after Big J and E on their honeymoon looking for a fix," Reggie laughed.

"Oh Reggie, where do you come up with these ideas? Next you will be saying they are some kind of crazed fan group that is obsessed with Uncle Jack."

"Big J, got it going on," Reggie laughed.

"Ok Mr. Imagination, enough about the Posse," Bianca said as her attention drifted towards the site of her mom and Uncle Jack leaving the street corner.

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As the couple pulled away, everyone gathered behind them and watched the site of Jack and Erica fading into the sunset taking with them the promise of tomorrow... The last image that anyone saw was the message from Erica to her new husband.

"Look Jack," she said pointing to the message that was flashing across the sky in front of them.

"EK LOVES JM FOREVER!"

"Well I think it is EKM now and just for the record. JM loves EK just as much," Jack said as he folded his hand in hers.

"And you know what else sweetheart, I really loved your plan."

"What plan?" she questioned.

"OPERATION MARRY JACKSON," he winked... **"OPERATION MARRY JACKSON"**

THE END