

## Out on a Limb

### Chapter One            by Misha

Despite the blue skies, a dark cloud hovered over Jack as he stared through the French doors leading out to the terrace. *What the hell am I going to do with the rest of my life?* he wondered.

After an absolutely sublime night of lovemaking with his beautiful wife, Jack had awakened that morning filled with a newfound energy. Fully charged, he stepped into the shower, and mentally planned out his day. His goal was simple: systematically attack the pile of briefs that were accumulating on his desk. But almost before his hair had a chance to dry, an all-too-familiar malaise supplanted Jack's enthusiasm. Instead, his body was consumed by an overwhelming sense of lethargy that neither the brilliant sunshine nor the love of his family could shake. Jack knew he needed to do something, to make some sort of life-altering change but for the life of him, he couldn't get a handle on even the slightest detail.

Though it was almost noon, Jack noticed there were still faint traces of dew on the wide expanse of lawn. The rolling emerald hill stretched down to the formal gardens, framing the Victorian gazebo in the far corner of their estate. He loved the beautiful mix of English roses that Erica had instructed the gardener to plant, with colors ranging from a lemon sorbet to a burnished gold. She had surprised Jack with it on their first anniversary, about six months after they moved into their new home. "A special reminder of our wedding day" she had said, as they inhaled their sweet fragrance. That evening they christened the place, and the following morning declared it

**permanently off-limits to their children.**

**As Jack reflected back on that sultry night, a tender melancholy washed over him. He couldn't believe Erica and he had been married more than a year. Time seemed to fly by so quickly these days, except when it came to his work.**

**Eighteen months ago, Jack was notified that his license to practice law had been reinstated. He expected that being welcomed back into the profession that had been his home and salvation for so many years would bring some measure of peace, and, maybe make sense of the madness that had become their lives at the hands of Greg Madden. Instead, Jack experienced a profound emptiness. Sadly, he realized that his passion for the other great love of his life was gone from him forever. But with no clear alternative in mind, Jack slipped back into his familiar role as attorney and tried to ignore his growing apathy for the legal world. He metaphorically hung out his family practice shingle, deluding himself into believing that he was engaged in meaningful work. But, reality was slowly nibbling at his soul and this morning had rudely taken a giant bite out of his ass.**

**For weeks, Jack had been working tirelessly to defend Jim Toy's claim against the township that his homeowners' rights were being trampled on in favor of a developer's bid to turn the family-owned farm into a combination shopping complex and town-home community. Unfortunately, the builder had the support of the city council, which, citing "eminent domain" spouted the familiar buzzwords of "job growth" and "expanded tax base" in an effort to re-appropriate the land.**

**The fact that the brother of the most powerful member of the zoning commission also stood to make a fortune if the deal went through was considered a minor detail—even by the**

**hungry press corps. Apparently, the goings-on in the sleepy little burg of Pine Valley held little cache for reporters eager to uncover large-scale corruption and scandal in the neighboring cities of Philadelphia and Camden. When news of Toy's ordeal was finally reported, it was buried on page three of the human-interest section.**

**Despite these setbacks, Jack was determined to fight for Jim, and fight hard; *all the way to the Supreme Court, if necessary*, he silently promised himself. Protecting the rights of the little guy had long been a passion of his and Toy's case gave Jack the opportunity to stand for something that truly mattered.**

**But this morning, the fire in Jack's belly was replaced with an acidic burn when Erica handed him the newspaper. On the front page was a report on the court's 5-4 decision against a similar claim that all but handed the keys of Jim's farm over to the community.**

**Incensed, Jack slammed down the paper, knocking over the box of Kashi that had become his breakfast ritual. After ranting to Erica and discussing the legal implications with Livia, Jack called the Toys with the bad news. Salt-of-the-Earth folks that they were, Jim and Anne thanked Jack for his efforts and resigned themselves to losing the land that had been in their family for generations. Unfortunately, their generous spirit only served to darken Jack's mood.**

**Now, three hours later, Jack still couldn't summon any energy to face what remained of the day. Despite the heady fragrance of the honeysuckle bushes that wrapped around the outside edge of the patio, the air hung heavy with gloomy despair.**

**Fortunately, a soft knock on the door interrupted his dark thoughts. It was Erica.**

**“Jack, I just got off the phone with Bianca. Miranda’s running a slight fever. Nothing serious but she thought it was best if they stay in this evening.”**

**“That’s fine; I’m not much up for company anyway.”**

**“Company? Since when is Bianca and our grandchild company?”**

**“You’re right . . .you’re right. I guess I’m just . . . I don’t know.”**

**“Jack, what is it? What’s bothering you? You’ve been moping around this office all morning. And today’s not the first time. You’ve been like this for months.”**

**“I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration.”**

**“I don’t think so counselor . . .You’ve been—”**

**“Counselor” Jack said, slowly exhaling. “Some counselor I turned out to be. . .”**

**“Come on, Jack. You, yourself said that it would be a miracle if you won the Toy case. That’s why you insisted on doing it pro bono.”**

**“If you ask me, I still robbed them blind. You know, Erica, I am just so sick to death of being sick to death. Jim and Anne are going to lose the land that’s been in their families for more than a hundred years. And for what? So Pine Valley can have another strip mall?”**

**“Some people would call that progress.”**

**“Some people also believe that reality programs mirror real life.”**

**“Hey! Don’t knock the television industry. Your wife’s show just landed a major syndication deal.”**

**Jack smiled for the first time that day. “My wife . . .my wife. . . Do you have any idea, Mrs. Montgomery, how much I love knowing that you are my wife . . . finally. There are times that I still can’t believe we pulled it off” he said, taking Erica’s hand and leading her to the steel blue sofa. Jack wrapped his arm around her tiny shoulders and gently kissed her. “Exactly thirteen months today, our families became one.”**

**“Thirteen to the day?”**

**“That’s right. June 24, 2006.” Jack caught a flicker of concern cross over Erica’s face. “What? Don’t tell me the great Erica Kane is suddenly superstitious? Sweetheart, nothing can get in the way of our happiness. Certainly not a number.”**

**“You’re right. Of course, you’re right” Erica said, comforted by the endless pool of blue in Jack’s eyes. As he reached down to kiss her, Erica suddenly pulled away. “I have to go!”**

**“What?”**

**“Jack, I’m sorry. There’s somewhere I need to be.”**

**“Erica . . . Erica . . .” Jack shouted after her but before he could launch himself off the couch, his wife was out the door and Jack was left with a deep hunger of what might have been.**

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**Jack spent the rest of the afternoon returning phone calls and paying bills. It was a quarter to five before his stomach reminded him that he hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast. Jack headed to the kitchen and rustled through the refrigerator and cabinets, leaving a culinary disaster in his wake. Just as he crowned his sandwich masterpiece with a healthy slather of brown mustard, the quick-fingered hands of Jack's teenaged son liberated his cold-cut treasure.**

**“Reg-”**

**Chomp.**

**“-gie.”**

**“Mmmm, good” Reggie mumbled, continuing to chow down on the prized sandwich. “Next time, though, go with the hot peppers, not the sweet. It'd be better with a little bit more oomph,” he added, clearly delighted with the forlorn look on his father's face.**

**“I'll do that” Jack conceded, whipping up a pale imitation of his original creation with whatever leftovers remained. “So, how's the restaurant business going?”**

**“It's going.”**

**“What's the matter? Vasquez working you too hard?”**

**“Nah, he's cool. I just wasn't expecting to spend my summer serving someone else food.”**

**“I know the feeling” Jack cracked, taking a bite out of his puny sandwich. “So, what? You going to look for something else?”**

**“Are you kidding? I’m making a fortune in tips.”**

**“You are, huh?”**

**“I just turn on the charm, flash them a smile and they’re putty in my hands.”**

**Jack laughed. “The girls, too?” Reggie nudged his father with an elbow. “Sorry.”**

**“Yeah, well don’t be. By the time this summer’s through, I’ll have enough money to pay for all of my expenses, and then some.”**

**“You know you don’t have to do that. Erica and I—”**

**“I know, I know. You put plenty of money aside for my college education. You told me a million times. But like I said, I don’t want a free ride. It means something to me to help pay my own way. Besides, it’s not like you guys are getting away scot-free. I’m still more than happy to stick you with the tuition bill AND room and board. ”**

**“Good point” Jack said, taking another bite of his sandwich.**

**A few moments of communal eating passed before the newest member of the Montgomery family joined them in the kitchen. Zoey gazed up at her two favorite men adoringly. Always a sucker for her copper-colored eyes, Reggie slipped the Irish setter a sliver of roast beef. “So, have you had a chance to look through Penn’s course catalog yet?” Jack inquired.**

**“J, man, relax already. I got that like, what, two days ago? Freshman orientation isn’t for another month.”**

**“I know, I know. I’m just so damned proud of you, that’s all. I want you to enjoy every minute of your college experience and the first step is picking the right classes.”**

**“Don’t worry. I’m good. Besides, you’ve been lecturing me on the joys of a college education since the first day I came to live with you. If it hasn’t stuck by now, it never will.”**

**“What do you mean ‘if it hasn’t stuck?’ Are you saying I pushed you into this? That you’re not going to college by choice?”**

**“Jack, c’mon, you’ve got to chill” the teen said, shaking his head. “Damn, you’d think that getting into an Ivy League would have convinced you that I’m going to make something of myself.”**

**“That’s one thing I’ve never doubted” Jack said adamantly. Like all true Montgomeries, Reggie’s eyebrows arched in disbelief. “Okay, maybe in the beginning I wasn’t so sure but the way you applied yourself these last two years, well, it was a thing of beauty.”**

**Reggie laughed. “That’s not what you said about my handwriting.”**

**“True. Lucky for you, world-renowned journalists have been doing their writing on computers for years. Aside from signing your name on hotel registries and airport check-ins, you’ll never have to master the art of penmanship.”**

**“So, you really think I can make it as a foreign correspondent?”**

**“I think you’ll be a natural. With your knack of seeing the truth and that oh-so-winning smile of yours, you’re going to be a knockout. Though, I must say, I’m not too crazy about the idea of you being so far away. And I hate thinking of you surrounding yourself with so much danger.”**

**“Dad, don’t worry. I’ve got at least four years of school ahead of me and it’s not like the moment I graduate, some newspaper’s going to drop me in the middle of a war.”**

**“I know, I know. But I’m your father. No matter how old you get, I’m going to worry about you.” Jack hugged his son, holding him close and savoring the moment. Though Reggie was going to be living only a scant thirty minutes away come September, he already missed him.**

**“Listen, J, I gotta fly. Dani’s expecting me in . . . geez, I’m already late.”**

**“Drive carefully” Jack shouted after him. “And call me when you get there.”**

**“Got it” Reggie yelled back and slammed the door behind him. Immediately, the house echoed with his absence.**

**“Here, girl” Jack said sadly, handing Zoey the faint remains of his sandwich.**

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**It was almost dusk when Erica peered inside Jack’s study, expecting to see him still hard at work. Instead she found him dozing on a chaise by the pool, his faithful friend by his feet.**

**“Jack, wake up . . .Jack” she nudged him gently.**

**“Huh, what? What time is it?”**

**“It’s time for you to shower and get dressed” Erica said.**

**“Shower? What for? I thought we were having a quiet dinner alone.”**

**“We were.”**

**“Erica, come on, can’t we just stay in tonight? I’m really in no mood for company.”**

**“Please, Jack. Don’t be difficult. You’ve been cooped up in this place all day. It’s time you got out of here and joined the living.”**

**“One day, Erica. I spent one day lounging around. That hardly qualifies me as a recluse.”**

**“I know you, Jackson Montgomery, and for you to spend all day just puttering around the house is not normal. You love people, Jack, and yet I can’t remember the last time you actually left this place without my prodding you.”**

**“Fine, have it your way. I’m too tired to argue with you.”**

**“Please. You’re the most vital man I’ve ever known. And believe me, I’ve known a lot of men” Erica said, affecting her best Mae West impression. Not unexpectedly, Jack rose to the bait.**

**“Oh, really. Is that so? Well, Mrs. Montgomery, you may have known a lot of men in your day, but none of them could hold a candle to me” he said, pulling her onto him. Erica let out a soft**

squeal, causing Zoey to briefly lift her head. Jack laughed at the pup's blasé expression. "It seems our dog is unimpressed."

"Yes, well, I'm sure if we had the time, we could give her a real education, but it's getting late and we're expected."

Jack banged his head repeatedly against the green-striped cushions in mock disgust. "Okay, just tell me. Who and where are we expected? And please, tell me it's not another one of those boring PR functions."

"I promise. It has nothing to do with my work. As for the rest, well, I'm afraid you're just going to have to wait and see. Now, come on, let's go" Erica said, taking his hand. Reluctantly, Jack got on his feet and walked closely behind his bride, drinking in the intoxicating sway of her hips, as they made their way back to the house.

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Erica sat on the edge of their bed, watching Jack tug his sweater over his head. He had been relieved when Erica told him that casual attire would do and grabbed for her favorites: a pair of white trousers that showed off his muscular thighs to their full advantage and the soft black cashmere knit she had picked out for his birthday. Finishing off the look was a pair of black hand-stitched loafers. Erica had insisted he purchase the shoes when they spotted them strolling along the Via Condotti in Rome. Normally he wouldn't splurge for footwear but the supple calves' leather seemed to be molded just for him. Since they returned, he wore them at every opportunity.

After grabbing his keys and his wallet off the dresser, Jack moved to smooth his tousled hair. Just then he felt his wife's arms circle his waist. "Let me do that" she purred, reaching

for his golden locks. “On second thought,” Erica sighed, leaning her head against his shoulders “it’s perfect the way it is.”

“Is it now?” Jack asked, turning to face her.

“You, Mr. Montgomery, have the most exquisite head of hair I’ve ever seen. If I didn’t love you so much, I’d be jealous. As it is, I can barely keep my hands off of you.”

“Oh, please, don’t let me stop you” he encouraged and bent down to gently kiss her. Inhaling her scent, he felt his pulse quicken and without uttering a word, motioned her toward their bed. Erica took a few steps forward and then stopped.

“Jack, no. We can’t.”

“Why can’t we?” he asked plaintively, not trying to mask his growing impatience.

“We have plans, remember.”

“What I remember is that all day you’ve been putting me off, and frankly, it’s beginning to wear thin.”

“I’m sorry. Really I am. Trust me. I’d like nothing more than to spend some quality time with my husband. But now’s not the time-”

“When is the time? No, don’t answer that. I don’t think I want to know.”

“Jack, please. Let’s not ruin this night.”

“Fine, have it your way. For now. But soon, Erica, soon.”

**“Soon; I promise.”**

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**“Explain to me again why you had to drive?” Jack asked.**

**“Well, for one thing, I didn’t want you behind the wheel of the car when you’re so upset.”**

**“I’m not upset” he argued. “I’m frustrated. There’s a big difference.”**

**“And for another reason, I thought it would be easier finding parking with my car than that hideous wagon you insist on driving.”**

**“Watch how you talk about Francine. That girl’s a classic.”**

**“Which is simply a nicer way of saying she’s a jalopy!” Erica teased.**

**“Francine is not a jalopy. She’s a 1953 Mercury Monterey. And she’s got all her original parts, which is a lot more than some people can say at her age.”**

**“And just what do you mean by that?”**

**Jack gave Erica a sideways glance and laughed. “Do I look like I’ve gone insane? Sweetheart, believe me, never for one second was I referring to anyone in this car. I value my life way too much. Besides, you’re nowhere near Francie’s age.”**

**“Yes, well, just as long as we’re clear on that. Because if we’re not, it’s you who’s in danger of losing some parts, parts might I**

**add that I've grown quite fond of" Erica said, suppressing a smile.**

**"I'll keep that in mind. In the meantime, maybe it would be a good idea if you keep your eyes on the road before we both lose a couple of our favorite limbs."**

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**Ten minutes later, Erica pulled her ink blue Lexus SC to a stop.**

**"This is it? This is where you're taking me?" Jack asked.**

**"What, you don't approve?"**

**"I'm not sure. Exactly what did you have in mind?" Jack queried, clearly baiting his bride.**

**"Oh, I think you have a pretty good idea. And if you don't, I'm sure you'll think of something soon" Erica answered coyly, taking hold of Jack's outstretched hand as she stepped out of the car. "You have a definite talent that way."**

**"Well, I'm glad you think so" Jack said, distinctly delighted by the unsolicited compliment. They continued hand-in-hand, blissfully absorbed in each other as he escorted her down the long, wooden ramp until they came to a stop in front of the "At Last."**

**"Happy Anniversary, Jack" Erica said with a flourish. On the pristine deck of their honeymoon yacht stood a small table cloaked in white linen and ornately set for two. A sea of tea lights on the surrounding railings illuminated the space with a radiant blush as deeply sensuous jazz tunings wafted softly in**

the air, punctuated by the unmistakable sound of Kim Waters' smooth soprano sax.

**"Oh, honey" Jack exclaimed, obviously flabbergasted. "You did all of this for me?"**

**"For us" she replied, gently stroking his arm. "And, actually, Val did all the work." Erica smiled unapologetically. "I supervised."**

**"My lady" Jack offered in his most chivalrous tone, carefully guiding Erica up the ramp.**

**"I hope you like my surprise" Erica said, tilting her head to gaze into his lapis-colored eyes.**

**"More than you can possibly imagine" Jack replied, pulling her close. He eased his six-foot-three frame down and paused for a moment, so mesmerized was he by her magnificent countenance. When Jack finally swept her into his arms and kissed her deeply, Erica felt an overwhelming need to reach out and touch his skin. Slowly she caressed his cheek, holding him still as she luxuriated in Jack's tender touch. When at last they were forced to breathe, Erica murmured "I've missed you."**

**"Missed me?" Jack asked, taken aback. "Just last night, we—"**

**"Yes, I know" Erica said, stepping just out of his reach. "Last night was wonderful."**

**"But?"**

**"No buts." Erica turned and fixed her eyes on him. "The problem we have *isn't* in our bedroom."**

**“But we do have a problem?” Erica nodded. “And it is?”**

**“I don’t know, Jack. I was hoping you could tell me.”**

**“I’m not following you.”**

**Erica reached out and lightly stroked Jack’s arms before resting her hands in his. “I look at you sometimes and you seem so far away, so lost in thought. Something is really bothering you. Something important.”**

**“It’s that obvious?”**

**“Mmmhmmm” Erica nodded. “I want to know what it is, Jack. What’s got you so upset? I mean, I know it’s not me—”**

**“You’re pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?” Jack said eyes twinkling, as he brought her hands to his lips.**

**“After all we went through during the trial—and survived—yes, I’m sure it’s not me.”**

**“The sonovabitch. Thank God that’s behind us and that Martin convinced Josh to head back to Africa with him for some one-on-one time. That son of yours could use some character building and with your busy schedule there wouldn’t be enough hours in the day . . .”**

**Erica pulled away. “I’m serious, Jack. Much as I’d love you to make passionate love to me, what I’d like even more is for you to be honest with me and tell me what’s really going on with you.” A loud horn belched in tacit agreement. Erica looked toward the bellowing sound. “And we’re not leaving here until you do!” A confused look washed over Jack’s face as his body**

**lurched ever so slightly to the left. “That’s right” Erica said smugly, “this time I’m kidnapping you.”**

## **Chapter Two                    by Mary**

**“Ah, the infamous kidnapping ploy,” Jack responded, clearly amused. “It has been known to have some distinct advantages.”**

**“Yes, it has,” Erica agreed. “Like forcing the kidnappee - that would be you - to have no choice but to be honest about his feelings.”**

**“I was thinking more along the lines of the kidnapper - that would be you - having no choice but to give in to her desire for her victim,” Jack returned smoothly, reaching out to pull her toward him once again.**

**Erica managed to avoid him and instead walked over to the table. “Maybe you’ll be more forthcoming after we’ve eaten,” she decided, waiting expectantly for Jack to pull out her chair. Sighing in exasperation, Jack complied, pulling out the chair and deliberately letting his fingers trail lightly over the soft bare skin of her shoulders. Noting her slight shudder with a satisfied smile, he sat down across from her.**

**An hour later, Jack watched as the steward cleared the plates from the table and returned with an array of deliciously tempting desserts. Jack had deliberately kept the conversation light as they ate, questioning Erica about the syndication deal for New Beginnings and discussing Reggie’s upcoming move to Penn’s campus.**

**When Pierre finally disappeared again, Jack stood and held**

out his hand to Erica. Erica went into his arms without a word as they began to move to the slow, sensuous beat of the music.

“You're not going to distract me,” Erica insisted as Jack's fingers caressed the bare skin of her back.

“Is that what I'm trying to do?” asked Jack innocently, bending down to inhale the heady scent of her hair.

Erica struggled to remember just what it was she wanted to talk about as Jack trailed his lips from her hair to just behind her ear. Her breath quickened as his lips explored the delicate lobe, followed by the intoxicating feel of his tongue on her skin. She closed her eyes as Jack moved his tongue along her cheek. Her lips parted as soon as he reached her mouth. He paused, their breath intermingling, and lightly traced the outline of her lower lip with the tip of his tongue. She moaned and put her hands in his hair to pull him closer.

“You seem distracted,” Jack observed softly.

“Shut up and kiss me,” Erica whispered, ignoring his victorious chuckle as his lips finally devoured hers in a deep kiss. Her mouth opened for his tongue and she met it with her own. He kissed her passionately, the closeness of their bodies leaving little doubt as to his desire for her. Erica felt his hands at the knot tying the top of her dress together and unwillingly opened her eyes.

“Jack, we're not alone,” she protested faintly.

“You're talking too much,” Jack said huskily as he released the knot and the dress fell to her waist. He kissed her hungrily as his hands explored the curves that the dress had laid bare. Erica clung to him as he dragged his mouth from hers, moved

**it past the beating pulse in her throat and then toward the hollow between her breasts.**

**Suddenly she was swooped up in Jack's strong arms. "We'd better move this downstairs," he said with an unsteady laugh as he headed toward the stairs. "Exactly how long did you say you were kidnapping me for?"**

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**Several hours later, Erica stretched in satisfaction and raised her head from Jack's chest. Leaning on one elbow, she traced her fingertips along the strong angles of his face until he opened his eyes.**

**"Okay, no more distractions," she warned him sternly.**

**"Well, you certainly weren't complaining earlier," Jack replied devilishly. "In fact, at one point, you actually-"**

**"Jack -"**

**"OK, OK," he sighed. "Really, sweetheart, it isn't anything earth-shattering."**

**"Anything that has you as troubled as you've been the past few months is earth-shattering to me," Erica said seriously. "Now - spill."**

**Seeing that his wife wasn't about to give up, Jack put one arm around Erica and gently guided her head back onto his chest.**

**"I guess it's mostly the law practice," Jack began, staring at the ceiling. "I just can't recapture my enthusiasm for it. I**

thought as time went on, it would come back..." his voice trailed off.

**"But it hasn't?"**

**"No, it hasn't and my disillusionment with the whole legal system isn't helping either," Jack continued. "Half the time I feel like my client doesn't even deserve my help, and the other half, like with the Toys, I feel like I'm totally helpless. Does that make sense?"**

**"Of course it makes sense," Erica answered. "I know you're disappointed about the Toys."**

**"It's not just that," Jack said. "I feel like no matter what I do, it simply doesn't make a difference anymore - not to anyone, including me."**

**"Maybe you could take some time off," Erica suggested. "Things should calm down with the show soon and we could go on vacation somewhere - a second honeymoon."**

**Jack smiled and stroked her cheek lightly. "As tantalizing as a second honeymoon sounds, I know you can't get away right now," he said. "And I have the distinct feeling that I'd still feel the same when we got back."**

**"I just want you to feel as passionate about what you're doing as I do about New Beginnings," Erica said. "I don't want you to feel like Mr. Erica Kane."**

**Jack laughed in genuine amusement. "Is that what you're worried about? Sweetheart, I've never felt threatened by your success. I love your ambition and drive. I always have. They're so much a part of you."**

**“And you know how much I admire that legal mind of yours, counselor,” Erica teased, looking up at him. “As well as several other things.”**

**Jack kissed her lightly on the nose. “Well, you can show me how much again in a few minutes,” he suggested.**

**“Is that all there is?” Erica asked seriously. “Just your frustration with the legal system?”**

**“I guess I'm feeling a little nostalgic about Reggie going off to college,” Jack admitted. “Next year it will be Lily's turn and eventually Sean will be heading back to Seattle.”**

**“We can only hope,” Erica muttered under her breath.**

**“Hmmm?”**

**“Nothing,” Erica said quickly. “So you're not looking forward to us having the house all to ourselves? I can think of some distinct advantages.” She raised her head and smiled at Jack suggestively.**

**“Yes, well, when you put it like that, so can I,” Jack agreed, twirling a tendril of her hair around his finger and pulling her closer to place a lingering kiss on her lips. “It will take some getting used to though.”**

**“I know how tough it is letting go,” Erica said seriously. “When Bianca and Miranda were in Paris, there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't miss them. And I know how much you miss Greenlee.” Jack nodded silently in reply.**

**“As hard as it is, we just have to let them spread their wings**

sometimes,” Erica continued. “The important thing is that they always have a home - and a family - to welcome them back.”

“How did you get to be so smart?” Jack asked.

“Years of practice at being not-so-smart,” Erica answered with a laugh. “So, has any of this helped?”

“Yes, sweetheart, it has. And I appreciate it. I know I haven't been the most pleasant guy to be around lately.”

“I just want you to know that I'll support you in whatever you decide to do,” Erica promised.

“Right now, I'm deciding that we've talked enough about me,” Jack said, turning so that he leaned over her slightly. “So, how much time do you think we have before we get back to land?” He bent his head and instinctively found the sensitive spot behind her ear with his lips.

“I'd say about an hour,” Erica replied. “If we're lucky.” She ran her hands up Jack's arms to his shoulders and brought his mouth to hers. “I love you,” she whispered against his lips.

“I love you, Erica Montgomery,” he murmured, his voice growing husky. “And, trust me, I'm definitely feeling lucky.”

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Erica did a quick scan of the room with her eyes, hoping to locate her husband. Jack hadn't exactly been ecstatic about attending the party to launch New Beginnings national syndication deal but she hadn't expected him to disappear on her either.

**“Mom!” she turned and saw Bianca waving her over. “Can you come here?”**

**Erica sighed and momentarily gave up the search for Jack. She was sure he was still there somewhere. He certainly wouldn't have left without telling her, she reasoned. She walked over to Bianca and Kendall and smiled obligingly as a photographer took a picture of her with her daughters.**

**The crowd was starting to thin and finally she spotted Jack across the room. No matter how often she saw her husband in a suit, he never failed to take her breath away. Tonight was no exception, as she took in the sight of him in the dark blue suit that set off his shiny blonde hair to such perfection.**

**Erica didn't recognize the tall, distinguished-looking man Jack was talking to but she was relieved to note that her husband looked happy and relaxed. In the month that had passed since their night on the boat, Jack had seemed more content and the pile of work in his office had begun to decrease. Still, the fact that she knew Jack wasn't enthused about his career any longer worried her. Something had to change, and soon, but she was at a loss as to what that something could be.**

**Jack looked up and smiled as he saw her. He shook hands with the man Erica didn't recognize and started across the room toward her.**

**“So, can we make our escape?” he asked as he reached her, taking her hands and kissing her on the cheek.**

**“Just about, I think,” Erica responded, looking around at the almost empty room. “Who were you talking to?”**

**“I'll tell you about it on the ride home,” Jack said with a trace**

of the old twinkle in his eyes that she loved so much. “Let's just say that my being here tonight may have been fate.”

Erica opened her mouth to question him further but he put a finger over her lips. “You'll have to be patient,” he teased.

Erica sighed but she knew that pressing him for further details would be futile. “Let me just check with Val and say goodnight to Kendall and Bianca.”

After Val assured her that he had everything under control, Erica went over to Kendall and Bianca and put an arm around each of the girls' shoulders.

“Thank you so much for being here tonight,” she said to them. “I still can't believe that the three of us are actually working together. It's like a dream come true for me.”

“Who would have thought it?” Kendall laughed. “I was terrified about leaving Fusion but this has been a blast. I never thought that marketing a TV show could be so much fun.”

“We would never have landed this syndication deal without you, Kendall,” Bianca said. “You're a natural at this.”

“Just like you are with Research and Development, Binks,” Kendall replied. “All of our most critically acclaimed shows have been your idea.”

“I hate to end this lovefest,” Erica said with genuine pride. “But Jack and I are leaving. I'll see you both tomorrow. Give Miranda and Spike a kiss for me.”

“Speaking of which, we need to get going too,” said Bianca, exchanging a look with her sister. “The last time Opal watched

**them, you wouldn't believe what they were wearing when we picked them up.”**

**A few minutes later, Erica studied Jack's profile as he slid behind the wheel of the car. Despite his outwardly calm demeanor, she knew him well enough to know that he was energized about something.**

**“Alright, Jackson Montgomery, I've waited long enough. What has you so excited?” she demanded.**

**“Is it that obvious?” Jack grinned, backing Erica's car out of the parking space and leaving the underground garage. He put his arm around her and pulled her close. Leaning down to give her nose a quick rub with his own, he said, “I think I may have found just the change I've been looking for.”**

**----**

**The door closed behind Jack, shutting out the brilliant afternoon sunshine of the late summer day. Despite the warmth of the sun, there was an underlying coolness in the air that suggested that autumn wasn't very far away. Jack crossed the foyer, hoping to round up all three kids without having to search the entire house. Loud music from upstairs easily established Sean's location and he found Reggie and Lily in the family room without any undue effort.**

**Lily looked up from her schedule as Jack walked in and took out her earplugs. “Hi, Dad,” she said with a smile. “Did you have a good day?”**

**“Yes, sweetheart, I did,” Jack answered. He glanced at Reggie, who was slouched on the sofa surrounded by crumpled-up papers and a stack of catalogs.**

**“Maybe your sister wouldn't have to wear her ear plugs at home if someone told Sean to turn down that music,” Jack suggested to his son.**

**“Huh?” Reggie looked up. “What?”**

**“Never mind,” Jack said, going to the foot of the stairs. “Sean! Turn off that music and get down here!” he called to his nephew.**

**Reggie groaned as Jack walked back in. “You were right, J,” he admitted. “I should have looked at this stuff weeks ago.”**

**“Really?” Jack said in mock amazement. “You mean, I was actually right about something?”**

**Reggie ignored him. “Know what I need?” he asked no one in particular. “A class where I can just hang out in the back, catch up on my sleep, and borrow some notes once in a while. My other classes are going to be killers.” He paused to study the catalog in front of him, then made a triumphant sound. “Yes! This'll be a piece of cake. I can catch some zzzz's, score some notes and ace the tests without even showing up half the time.”**

**The sound of loud footsteps on the stairs signaled Sean's arrival. “Hey, Uncle Jack, you're home early.”**

**“It is early, Dad,” Lily agreed. “You've been getting home really late for weeks now.”**

**“I know, honey, I've been busy with some stuff I needed to brush up on,” Jack said. “Anyway, tonight Erica's the one who's going to be late,” he informed them. “And Coral has the**

**night off. So I thought we could either eat out or I could rustle us up something -”**

**“Say no more,” Reggie bounded off the sofa. “I’ve got it. 1-800-PIZZA.” He reached the phone in record time. “Who wants pepperoni?”**

**“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” Jack asked, his expression belying the stern tune in his voice.**

**“Sorry, Dad, but the last time you made us dinner, it wasn’t very good,” Lily said truthfully and then stopped. “I mean -”**

**Jack laughed good-naturedly. “That’s OK, honey, I guess pancakes for dinner isn’t for everyone. Actually, I was thinking I’d take the three of you out - wherever and whatever you want.”**

**“Cool, I’m starving,” said Sean. “You’re in a good mood, Uncle Jack,” he remarked. “I guess you and Aunt Erica enjoyed that ‘alone time’ you said you needed last night.”**

**Something in Sean’s tone made Jack narrow his eyes but his nephew’s expression was completely guileless. Still, Jack couldn’t quite shake the nagging suspicion that entered his mind.**

**“Uh - Sean?”**

**“Yeah?”**

**“You remember what I said about the gazebo being off-limits, right?”**

**“Sure, why?”**

**“No reason,” Jack answered slowly, trying to rid his mind of the memory of a particularly intoxicating moment from last night. Deciding that nothing productive could come by following this train of thought, he made a mental note to talk to Erica about installing motion detector lights down by the gazebo and let it go.**

**As they walked toward the door, Jack put his arm around Reggie's shoulders. “This may be the last chance we get to do this for a while.”**

**“Aw, J, you're not going to get all sentimental on me again, are you?” Reggie complained half-heartedly.**

**“Don't worry - I'll spare you this time,” Jack said. “Sometimes it just strikes me that I'm an incredibly lucky man.” As the door closed behind them, Jack thought to himself that, for the first time in months, he finally felt that all aspects of his life were back on track.**

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**Erica took one last sip of her tea as she stood on the patio and looked out over the back lawn. The vivid colors of the summer flowers had faded and in their place were the telltale brownish leaves of fall. The morning air was chilly and she was grateful for the fitted jacket that completed the new Dolce & Gabbana outfit that she had bought on impulse over the weekend.**

**The house was unusually quiet. After months of being the first one out the door every morning, it felt strange to be the last to leave. Several days had passed since they had settled Reggie in at Penn, Lily and Sean had left for school in Sean's car a half hour before and Jack had left even earlier. Erica glanced**

wistfully at her watch. She realized that she already missed Jack working at home and wondered how long she could wait before checking in with him on his cell phone.

As she turned to go back inside, she suddenly spotted a flash of red on the lawn. The realization that it was Zoey barely had time to register before the dog reached the patio at full speed, obviously excited about something. The thought of paw marks and dog fur on her new outfit caused Erica to stop Zoey in her tracks with a firm, "Sit!" Since Zoey had the exasperating habit of listening only to Jack, Erica was shocked when the dog obliged and sat looking at her expectantly.

Erica moved closer to Zoey and stared at the white object in her mouth. "Not again, Zoey," she sighed, taking the dirty, crumpled envelope from the dog's mouth. "Bad girl," she said, grimacing as she wiped the drool off the envelope with a napkin.

Several weeks ago, the gardener had spotted Zoey digging at the foot of Erica's favorite rose bush. The irate man had chased Zoey across the lawn until Zoey reached the patio and dropped an envelope at Jack and Erica's feet. A subsequent investigation revealed that Zoey had apparently decided that grabbing a piece of mail out of the mailbox at the end of the driveway, burying it under the rose bush, and then retrieving it weeks later was great fun. The first piece of tardy mail had turned out to be a letter from Barbara; therefore, Erica had considered it no great loss. This time, however, she frowned as she looked at the return address.

The envelope was addressed to Jack and bore a postmark from two weeks ago. Part of the envelope was torn away and sections of the letter inside were clearly visible. The words "scandal" and "unethical" jumped out at Erica. She hesitated for a moment and then tore open what was left of the envelope.

Erica quickly scanned the letter and stood indecisively for a moment. Then she grabbed her purse and stuffed the envelope and its contents inside. Leaving Zoey staring after her, Erica headed quickly for her car. There was no way she was letting Jack's new lease on life get sidetracked by something like this - not if she could help it. As she backed down the long driveway, she pulled out her cell phone. There was only one person she could trust to assist her with something like this. She just prayed that her best friend was home.

----

Reggie knew he was going to be late. There was no way around it. His last class had been at the other end of the campus and he had already taken two wrong turns. *Forget the map*, he thought; *with the size of this campus, what he needed was a compass.*

He bounded up the stairs to the building and hurried down the hall. Finally reaching the designated room, he turned off his iPod and pulled the ear buds from his ears. The sound of voices from inside the room died down until only one voice was audible. Frowning slightly, Reggie walked up to the doorway and looked inside the room.

He stood as if turned to stone as two things hit him with the utmost clarity. The first - in what could only be described as a cruel twist of fate - was that his father was his teacher. The second was the realization that this class was going to be anything but a piece of cake.

### Chapter Three by Misha

Reggie pulled his hand off the doorknob as if it were on fire. *No way. No way in hell am I going in there*, and made a mad break for the exit. He was halfway to the

registrar's office to drop the course when his cell phone rang. One glance at caller ID and he knew his life was over. It was Jack.

**"You're late."**

**"I'm not late for nothing" Reggie barked. "I'm dropping the class and there's no way you're going to talk me out of it."**

**"Reg-"**

**"Forget it, Jack. You might as well hang up the phone and get back to teaching or whatever it is you're doing here."**

**"Five minutes. That's all I'm asking. Give me five minutes to explain and then if you still want to drop the course, I promise I won't give you a hard time."**

**"Don't. Don't do this to me, Jack."**

**"Look, I've got to get back inside. Just meet me at Logan Hall. Room 165. I'll be there until four."**

-----

Jack sat behind the mottled desk in the cramped room that served as his office. It was a far cry from the book-lined ivy-league quarters he imagined when he first accepted the teaching position from Dean Walker but even the substandard accommodations hadn't dampened his enthusiasm. For the first time in he couldn't remember how long, Jack felt inspired. Or he did until this morning.

**For the tenth time in as many minutes, Jack looked at his watch. It was after four and there still was no sign of Reggie. Not that he blamed the kid. How the hell did he think Reggie would react having his father as his professor, especially when the course in question was Legal Ethics and Morality?**

**One last glance at the time told Jack everything he needed to know. Reggie wasn't going to show. He flicked off his computer, stuffed a couple of books into his satchel and locked the door behind him. And grabbed for the wall.**

**“Geez, Reggie, I almost tripped right over you. What the hell are you doing sitting on the floor like that? Why didn't you come in?” he asked his son.**

**“I was thinking . . .”**

**Jack looked surprised. “You mean, you might keep the course?”**

**Reggie replied with a withering look. “I was thinking that maybe going to school in California isn't such a bad idea.”**

**“Reggie-”**

**“No. I'm serious, man. I'm not staying here if you're going to be around all the time. And having you as my teacher? You've got to be out of your mind if you think I'd be all right with this.”**

**“Look. Let's go back to the house and talk this**

**through.”**

**“You don’t get it, Jack. There’s nothing to talk through.”**

**“Fine. Then just humor me. One hour. That’s all I need.”**

**“On the phone you said five minutes. What? Now you need a whole hour?”**

**“On the phone I didn’t realize how angry you were.”**

**“Well, if you think you can lay a guilt trip on me and talk your way out of this . . . ”**

**“Guilt trip? Is that what I do?”**

**“It’s been known to happen.”**

**“Yeah, well, guilt is a great motivator.”**

**“Not this time. I’ll listen” Reggie said getting to his feet, “but no way am I changing my mind.”**

**“That’s all I ask.”**

**-----**

**Reggie didn’t see what the big difference was. So what if the teaching assistant graded him? His father was still going to be the one teaching the course. What kind of ethics and morality was that anyway?**

**“I didn’t plan on having you in my class. It just . . . happened.”**

**“Happened? Happened how?”**

**“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you . . .” Jack said, closing the double doors to his study. “I was only supposed to be teaching a course on Non-Profit Law--graduate students only. This morning I got a call from the Dean. The professor scheduled to teach your course came down with the flu. They asked me to sub. I didn’t know you were going to be in the class until a minute before I saw you standing at the door.”**

**“Well, now that you know, don’t you think the *ethical* thing for me to do is drop it?” Reggie asked, flopping onto his father’s leather chair.**

**“I see your point. On the other hand...”**

**“No, Jack. There is no other hand.”**

**“On the other hand” Jack repeated, perching on his desk, “it just might be fun. Look at it this way . . . The class is in an enormous lecture hall. It has over 200 students in it with little—if any—opportunity for one-on-one interaction. I wouldn’t be responsible for grading you so there’s no conflict there. And we both know you have a talent convincing me that some of the stunts you’ve pulled were the righteous thing to do. Acing this course should be a snap, which, if memory serves, was just what you were looking for in a class” Jack argued, a sly smile crossing his face.**

**“Funny.”**

**“Come on . . . think how much fun we could have discussing the day’s lecture over a burger at Casey’s.”**

**“Yay” Reggie replied glumly.**

**“Besides, it wouldn’t be for the entire semester; just for a couple of weeks—tops.”**

**“Fine, a couple of weeks. I still don’t get why it’s so important that I keep the class. It’s not like I need the course for my major. What’s really going on?”**

**Jack nodded his head. “Truth? I’m on unfamiliar turf here, Reggie. I haven’t been in a classroom in more years than I care to count. Believe me, getting up in front of a judge and a courtroom full of people is a lot different than lecturing a bunch of college kids. Especially for a class I haven’t prepared for. It’d be nice to look out into the class and see a friendly face. . . or,” Jack said, taking a deep breath, “gauging your reaction to this whole thing, at least a familiar one.”**

**Damn, his father was good. Playing the ‘I need you’ card worked every time. The fact that he laid his soul bare to do it convinced Reggie that Jack really was up against it. How could he refuse to throw a drowning man a life vest? Reggie shook his head. Lily would never forgive him.**

**“Okay, all right. I’ll stay. But if she’s not back by midterms, I’m taking an incomplete.”**

**“Thanks, Reggie You saved my life” Jack said, clearly relieved.**

**“Uh, huh. Just lighten up with the nerves, okay? You’re beginning to freak me out.”**

**“I’ll do my best” Jack replied and pulled his son into a bear hug. “By the way, you missed your homework assignment. You’ve got a five-page paper on Privacy and Campus Life due next Thursday.” Smiling, Jack added, “typed, single-spaced. How’s that? Better?”**

**“I’m leaving.”**

**“Oh, and we’ll be discussing Ch. 2 on Wednesday” Jack shouted after his son, laughing as he heard the front door slam closed.**

**“What’s with him?”**

**“Sean, where’d you come from?”**

**“You mean this minute or in general?” the teen asked, settling into the couch.**

**“Make yourself comfortable” Jack said sardonically. “Just get your feet off my couch—and my table.”**

**“Did we have a bad day, Uncle Jack?”**

**“Just a long one. Now, is there something I can do for you or are you just here to make me crazy?”**

**“Well, excuse me” Sean replied, obviously hurt. “I just thought. Never mind. Forget it.”**

**“Sean, come back here. Look, I’m sorry” Jack said, loosening his tie. “I’m just tired. Sit down, talk to me.”**

**“Nah, it’s okay. It can wait. . . .Really.”**

**“I appreciate that, really I do, but go ahead. Tell me what’s going on with you. Trust me, the way my day’s been going, you’d be doing me a favor.”**

**“I was just wondering . . . have you heard from my mom lately?”**

**“No. Not since we talked about you sticking around for the school year. Why? Is something going on?”**

**“Not really. I was just . . . I don’t know. I was wondering if she’s planning on staying in Europe forever. Not that I mind living here with you and Aunt Erica or anything. I don’t. It’s just . . .”**

**“Just . . .?”**

**“I’m sick of having to mooch off of you all the time.”**

**“Since when?” Jack asked, surprised.**

**Sean smiled sheepishly. “Okay, maybe it’s hard to tell sometimes-”**

**“Sometimes?”**

**“Okay, a lot of the time. But I’ve changed, Uncle Jack.”**

**“You have?”**

**“Yeah, I have!” Sean said more adamantly.**

**“And what’s behind this sudden transformation, oh nephew of mine?”**

**“I don’t know. I guess I’m just growing up” Sean offered.**

**“And he’s got a new girlfriend” Lily added, coming into the room.**

**“Is that right? A new girlfriend, huh? What happened to Colby?” Jack asked.**

**“Please . . . Colby and I are just friends. Nothing more.” Sean replied dismissively.**

**“Her name’s Temperance” Lily offered.**

**“Temperance, huh” Jack smiled. “Are you sure she’s for you?”**

**“Very funny” Sean said, making a face. “It’s a family name, okay? And she hates it.”**

**“I’m sure she does. And believe me, I understand. Growing up with the name Andrew Jackson Montgomery was no picnic. Your father rescued me on more than one occasion from kids giving me a hard time at school. . . .Of course, that didn’t stop him from teasing me himself.”**

**“Yeah, well, lucky for her, her brother’s got his own problems. His name’s Atherton.”**

**“Parents have an interesting sense of humor.”**

**“I don’t understand” Lily interjected. What’s so funny about the names Temperance and Atherton? That just makes them special. And being special isn’t a bad thing**

**. . . except sometimes” the girl said. “But things get better.”**

**“Yes, sweetheart, they do. And I’m so proud of you. You’re doing so well working at the office. Livia says you’re a miracle worker the way you’re able to match up our clients with just the right outreach programs. It’s no small thing figuring out all those little details; it takes a lot of research and dedication.”**

**“I like working. It makes me feel good.”**

**“Which brings us back to you” Jack said, putting his arm around Sean’s shoulder.**

**“Me?”**

**“Didn’t you just say you were tired of mooching?”**

**“Yeah” Sean said hesitantly.**

**“Well, I assume that means you’re looking for a job.”**

**“Not exactly. I was thinking that if I could find mom, she’d be able to write me a check or advance me some money from my trust fund.”**

**“Uh, huh, yes, well. I’m afraid that’s not going to happen, my friend, at least not anytime soon. You want more money, you’re going to need to earn it, just like every other member of this family.”**

**“Doing what? I’m stuck in school all day. And there’s no way I’m wearing some dumb hat and asking people if they’d like fries with that.”**

**“Actually, I was thinking that you could work for me.”**

**“Doing what?”**

**“That part I haven’t figured out yet. But when I do, you’ll be the first to know.”**

**“Can’t wait. Um, in the meantime, do you think you could float me some cash? I promised Penny I’d treat her to a movie and I’m a little short.”**

**“How short?”**

**“Twenty bucks?”**

**“I think what you mean is ‘tapped out.’ Here’s five. Rent something.”**

**“Uncle Jack!”**

**“Take it or leave it. Besides, I’d like to meet this girl Temperance.”**

**Sean snatched the bill from Jack’s hand. “In your dreams. C’mon, Lily. Looks like I’m gonna have to take you up on your offer of a loan after all.”**

**“Don’t forget,” the girl said cheerfully.**

**“I know, I know. The prime interest rate is 8.25%. Don’t worry. You’ll get your money.”**

**“Call me, sweetheart, if he welchs on it. I’ll break his legs for you” Jack called after them.**

**A confused look washed over Lily face. “Your dad’s just kidding” Sean said, glancing back at his uncle. “At least, I think he is.”**

-----

**Erica and Opal spent hours tossing around ideas and finally, their plan was beginning to take shape. Now all that was left to do was agree on the right wardrobe. “We’re supposed to blend in, not draw attention to ourselves,” Erica argued as Opal modeled a pair of thigh high boots.**

**“Said the spider to the fly. Honestly, girlfriend, if you think that blonde getup isn’t going to draw your man in, you got more than a couple of hairs pulled too tight. You might as well stick a neon sign around your neck flashing *maid service*.”**

**“Opal!”**

**“I mean it, Erica. Jack’s gonna take one look at you and visions of the Eiffel Tower and bubble baths are going to go ripping through his veins. And knowing our man Jackson, it’s not going to stop there . . . unless, of course, that’s a part of the plan you haven’t shared with me...”**

**“Opal, please. Please can we just get back to the business at hand? . . . What do you think of this one?”**

**Opal tilted her head as she slowly circled. “Quiet . . . unassuming . . . just this side of mousey. No one would ever look at you in that thing and think Erica Kane. It’s**

perfect.”

“Finally! Now, how about you trade those things in for the flats.”

“The gray ones? Erica, honey, I’ve never worn gray in my life.”

“Which is why it makes perfect sense. Now, let’s get out of here. I want to get home before Jack starts wondering where I am. Besides, all this could be for nothing” Erica said, waving her arms at the piles of garments the two women had decided on. “He might already know.”

-----

Erica was halfway up the stairs when she heard Jack’s booming voice. “Sweetheart, is that you? You’re just in time. We were just deciding on Chinese or Sushi.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes . . .”

Erica hastily stashed her bags in the back of the main walk-in before ducking behind her vanity. One glance confirmed what she already suspected; the day’s shopping spree had taken its toll. Erica picked up her antique wooden brush and tugged it through her thick mane, closing her eyes for just a moment to revel in the feel. Complete bliss washed over her.

“Let me do that” Jack said, taking the brush from her hands as he kissed her behind the neck. Erica drank in the faint traces of Jack’s cologne. *No*, Erica thought, *this is complete bliss*. Again, her eyes fluttered shut as he gently stroked her hair. And, then ...a faint

kiss...another, and then, a subtle caress. "I missed you"  
Jack murmured.

"Mm, I missed you too."

"Did you now?"

"Mm, hmm, all day. I kept hoping-"

"Hoping what?" he whispered.

Erica shifted ever so slightly in her chair. "I kept hoping that it would be everything you wanted it to be. . . and more."

"More, huh?" Jack replied, huskily.

"Yes, more." Erica said softly, her voice slowly turning serious. "Oh, Jack. I want this new job to bring you everything...just everything you ever wanted in a career....Just like the law used to do, only better. I miss that for you Jack. I really do..."

"Oh, sweetheart."

"I'm serious, Jack."

"Honey, I believe you. Really I do but you need to stop worrying about me; I'm fine... I'm fine. School's fine. The kids are fine...or mostly fine" he deadpanned.

"Everything's good." Jack punctuated his point by lightly touching his nose to hers. "Especially us."

Instinctively, Erica brushed her lips against his, enjoying the intoxicating feel of his five o'clock shadow.

**Jack closed his arms around her and held Erica tight. As she folded into him, a tiny wave of relief trickled over her. *Jack didn't know.***

-----

**It was close to eleven when Jack finally turned in. Except for a quick call to Livia, he spent the entire evening poring over Lynn Hasting's notes. Preparing for one class was tough enough but adding a second one, especially on such short notice, was proving quite a challenge. Luckily, his days cramming for law school left him with good, albeit rusty, study skills. Satisfied that he had enough material to comfortably cover tomorrow's lectures, he headed upstairs.**

**Jack planned on finishing what he'd started earlier that evening but instead he walked in to find Erica sleeping. Though he was loath to admit it, Jack was secretly relieved. Truth be told, he was exhausted. After setting his alarm, Jack pulled off his clothes, tossed them in a heap on the floor and crawled into bed. Seconds later, he was sound asleep.**

-----

**Jack woke up refreshed and invigorated. Since Erica was still out like a light, he channeled his energy into a longer than normal workout, adding an extra set of reps on his pecs and abs. Now, showered and dressed, Jack determined he was ready for just about anything. Being back in school definitely agreed with him . . .**

**Behind him, a rather unladylike yawn caught his attention. "You, Mr. Montgomery, were made for**

**academic life.”**

**Jack turned and saw his sleepy-headed wife propped against a sea of pillows. “Not too casual?”**

**Erica studied her husband’s visage. Dressed in a nubby brown sweater and tan cords, he looked relaxed, fit and confident. “More like incredibly handsome. So handsome in fact that I’m going to phone Reggie and tell him to call me if he sees any female students trying to sink their claws into you.”**

**Jack laughed. “Sweetheart, I appreciate the thought, really I do, but I’m pretty sure they’re more interested in kids their own age instead of someone who’s old enough to be their father... and then some.”**

**“Never underestimate the power of ‘then some.’ Trust me, Jack, there are plenty of young women out there looking for a man of your . . . maturity.”**

**“Ouch.”**

**Erica smiled. “Make that vast experience-”**

**“Better...Of course,” Jack said, kneeling onto the bed “if you want to make a sincere, heartfelt apology-”**

**Erica hesitated. “Don’t you have to leave soon?”**

**“Class doesn’t start for another couple of hours.”**

**“Yes, but it’s only your second day” she replied, slipping into her robe. “You don’t want to be late...”**

Jack moved around the bed. “You’re not trying to get rid of me, are you?”

“Why on earth would I want to do that?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me?”

Erica cinched her belt closed. “Jack, you’re imagining things.”

“I am? And that’s why you picked this second to... I don’t know . . . Can I get you a set of armor? Maybe a shield?”

“A set of...? Jack! Honestly, sometimes you are just too suspicious for your own good.”

“Is that so?” a dubious Jack asked. “Come on, Erica. I can tell when you’re hiding something.”

“Oh, so now I’m hiding something? What’s next?”

“That’s a good question. What *is* next?”

Erica bristled. “What’s next is I’m going to take a shower. Alone. What you choose to do is strictly up to you-”

“Fine. I’ll go. But that doesn’t mean we’re finished with this.”

“With what?”

“With whatever *this is*.” Jack leaned in and gave Erica a quick kiss before heading for the door. “I just hope that

whatever it is, it doesn't blow up in your face first." Erica let out an exasperated sigh. "Just promise me you'll be careful." Erica opened her mouth to object. "Promise me..." he repeated.

"Fine" she shrugged noncommittally. "I promise. Jack?"

"Yeah?" he asked, leaning against the door.

"I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart."

A minute later, Erica heard the garage door close. She pulled the last shopping bag from the closet, picked up her phone and dialed. "Opal, he's gone. What time can you be here?"

-----

They sat near the back row, their vision partially obscured behind two lanky students. Opal furiously took notes while her redheaded friend stole quick glances at the front of the room. Even from that distance, Erica couldn't believe how sexy Jackson looked. She didn't know what she enjoyed more: Seeing him prowl the stage firing questions to the class or watching him scrawl something on the blackboard behind him. Both views offered their own particular pleasure. A scan of the room confirmed what she already suspected. All the young women were equally enamored with their hot new professor.

A light jab to the ribs jarred her back to reality. "What did Jack just say?" Opal asked.

**“Say? What? I have no idea. Why?”**

**“Why? I just thought we might as well learn something as long as we’re sitting here.”**

**“For heaven’s sake, Opal. We’re here to get information, not learn about ethics and morality.”**

**“I guess not considering we’re here spying on your husband.”**

**“We are not spying. We’re *investigating*.”**

**“Excuse me. Investigating; though I doubt your hubby will appreciate the fine distinction.”**

**“Well, he’s never going to find out about it, now is he?”**

**“Hey, would you mind shutting up?” the guy in front of Erica hissed. “I’m trying to concentrate on what this jerk is trying to say.”**

**“Jerk!” Erica replied indignantly. “I’ll have you know... Ouch.”**

**“Sorry, Cynthia. Guess my foot slipped in these here flats I’m wearing” Opal said, forcing a weak smile.**

**“Is there something going on back there?” Jack asked, squinting to see where the noise was coming from.**

**“Uh, no sir” the guy in front replied. “Just trying to hear is all” and turned to glare at the source of the commotion.**

**“Fine. Keep it that way.” Jack glanced at the clock, “Look, it’s getting close to noon. Everyone, don’t forget. Papers due on Thursday.” Jack put down the piece of chalk and gathered up his notes as the room began emptying out. He watched as the last students filed out before noticing Reggie standing in front of him. “So, how’d I do?”**

**“A’ight. You sounded like you knew what you were talking about, at least most of the time.”**

**“Only most of the time, huh?”**

**“Well, when you began talking about leading lives you can be proud of, I admit, I kinda tuned you out.”**

**“Oh really? And why is that?”**

**“Please. I practically know the speech by heart. I mean, Come on... How many times have I had to sit through that lecture at home?”**

**“Point taken.”**

**“Yeah, I thought so. Now” Reggie said, putting his arm around his father, “how about you explain to me what Erica and Opal were doing here?”**

**“WHAT?”**

**“You heard me—”**

**“Your mother was here?”**

**“Didn’t I just say that?”**

**“I’m sorry. Yeah, . . . I just . . . I have absolutely no idea in the world what Erica and Opal were doing here, Reggie” Jack said, snapping his satchel shut.**

**“Well, brace yourself. Erica was wearing a wig. A red one.”**

**“She what?”**

**“Please. Don’t make me repeat it. I’m already scarred for life.”**

**“Reggie. Look, do me a favor . . . promise me something.”**

**“What?”**

**“Promise me you won’t say anything about this to anyone--”**

**“Are you kidding? Jack, if I had my way, I’d have it surgically removed from my memory.”**

**“ . . . especially Erica. Got it?”**

**“Yeah, relax, I got it. Now you have to promise me something.”**

**“What?”**

**“Promise me that I’m not going to walk into my dorm and find Kendall or Bianca waiting for me.” Jack tried unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh. “I’m serious, J, I’m**

**starting to feel stalked or something.”**

**“Forget about it, Reggie. I have a feeling that whatever it is that’s going on with your mother and Opal, has more to do with me than with you.”**

**“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?”**

**“No, I guess not. Listen, I’ve got an idea. How about I buy you that burger at Casey’s I promised you. If there’s one thing I’m sure of it’s that free food has an amazing healing effect on you. And from the looks of you, you can use it. Besides, maybe between the two of us we can figure out what to do the next time those two put in an appearance.”**

**“You really think there’s going to be a next time?”**

**“I can practically guarantee it.”**

**“In that case, you better throw in some fries and a shake.”**