

**Race to the Future  
by Team Montgomery**

**Chapter One by Misha**

They lived by their own golden rule: “take no prisoners.” It was each person for him--or herself. One of them was going to win, to come out on top. Elbows were flying as the two bodies collided, each jockeying for position, each looking to gain even the slightest advantage over the other.

“Excuse me, but I am trying to fix my hair here.”

“Your hair?” Erica replied incredulously. “Reggie, look around you. This is my bathroom, my mirror and my hair care products. And if you’ll notice, I’m trying to use all three.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not the only one that’s going to be in front of the cameras today. I happen to have a reputation to uphold. You think I just wake up looking as good as I do right now?” As Reggie turned back to the mirror to admire himself once again, he broke out in a big grin. “I . . . am . . . one . . .fine . . . looking . . . man,” he nodded, approving of what he saw.

Erica knowingly returned his smile. She knew what it was like to preen in front of a mirror and sharing that bond with Reggie helped her to not take herself quite so seriously. “Yes, well, I can certainly see that. And far be it for me to stand in the way of your reputation. After all, if I’m going to be seen in public with you, I certainly don’t want to do anything that might hinder your appearance. Why, just think how that could negatively reflect on my reputation?” she purred, passing him the hand mirror. The two of them burst out laughing.

The reverie filtered down the hallway, breaking Jack’s concentration as he paced back and forth on the living room carpet. “Hey, you two, what’s going on in there?” Jack shouted.

“Nothing Dawg, we’re just trying to look beautiful for you.”

“I’m touched,” a puzzled Jack replied.

“Yeah, well, Erica has a little bit more work to do but I’m sure she’ll be done in another hour or two—or three.” With that, Reggie retrieved something from his back pocket and not so cavalierly slammed it down on Erica’s head. “Okay, now you look perfect.”

Erica let out a yelp. “Reggie!!!”

Reggie stepped back for a moment. “What, you don’t approve? I uh, I thought you’d love it. I mean, I KNOW how much you like accessories.” Erica quickly spun around and looked back in the mirror. Sitting slightly askew on top of her luxurious mane of chestnut-colored hair was a blue and white baseball cap with the words “Jack Is Back!” emblazoned in gold.

“Where did you get this?”

“I hooked up with some guy down in Center City. I got enough for all of us—the entire Montgomery/Kane posse. You think Jack will like them?”

“I think Jack will love them, especially since you thought of the idea all on your own.” As she lightly touched his arm, she turned her head ever so slightly to the side. “But, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll just carry mine for now.”

In tandem, the two turned back to the mirror for one final check. As they finished primping, they could hear Jack’s muttering getting louder. “Erica, I think we better hustle. I recognize that sound. Jack’s about to lose it and if you don’t mind I’d just as soon he not explode in my direction. I have plans this evening and the last thing I need is J going off on me, messing things up.”

“What kind of plans? Nothing that’s going to get you in trouble I hope.” Reggie wisely decided to take a moment before responding. After all, there was no reason to make things unnecessarily difficult for anyone—especially himself. As luck would have it, the doorbell rang, freeing Reggie from passing along the somewhat flimsy cover story he and Jamie had invented earlier.

Jack rushed to the door and swung it open. The next thing he knew, a young girl launched into his arms.

“My god, Lily, it’s you! What on Earth . . .?” As if on cue, Erica entered the room.

“I see your surprise arrived. Opal, thank you for picking her up this morning.” Shooting a quick glance in Jack’s direction, Erica blushed. “I got a later start than I expected.”

Reggie snorted. “Please, have some dignity.” His arm around Lily’s shoulder, Reggie continued. “Believe me, you two have our blessing to do . . . whatever but we beg you, keep the details to yourselves.”

Mildly exasperated, Jack nodded. “Thanks for the suggestion, Reggie. I’ll try and keep that in mind. In the meantime, why don’t you get the car keys? Opal, thank you for getting Lily. Having her with us today means the world to me.”

**“Jackson, believe you me, it was my pleasure. When girlfriend called me and told me that the two of you were otherwise engaged, why I just thought the least I could do was hop in my car and pick up your little angel. She is a sweet one, that Lily.”**

**“She sure is. I hope you’ll be coming with us this afternoon.” Jack put his arm around Erica’s waist and pulled her close, brushing her lips ever so softly with his own.**

**“Why I wouldn’t miss it for the world. But if you two lovebirds don’t get a move on, the only thing that’s going to be left at the Valley Inn by the time you get there is going to be a couple of stuffed reporters and some stale scraps of bread. Now let’s hustle.”**

**“Opal, I don’t think we need to rush out just yet. After all, they certainly can’t start without the man of the hour. Besides, I’m sure Lily would like a moment to freshen up. And, I need your help in deciding which scarf to wear with this dress,” Erica replied, gently taking her best friend’s hand.**

**Clearly confused, Opal muttered. “Why in the world would you ever need my help picking out a scarf? Lord knows the last time you asked for someone’s opinion on what to wear—least of all mine—you were probably no bigger than a kernel of corn about to pop like a marshmallow over an open campfire.” Erica grabbed Opal’s arm and dragged her from the room.**

**Reggie turned toward Jack. “Did you understand anything of what she just said?” Jackson shrugged.**

**“I gave up trying to understand those two a long time ago. I found it best just to stay out of their way.”**

**“Yeah, well I might not have understood what they were talking about but I bet you money that something’s going on.”**

**“Maybe. But whatever it is, there’s one thing I’m sure of and that’s that it is none of your business. Got it?”**

**“Yeah, uh huh,” Reggie replied deliberately. “I’ll be right back-”**

**“Reggie, Reg—”**

**“ . . . I really am desperate, Opal. It’s been too long already. I’ll never forgive myself if I let this go on another day.”**

**“Don’t give it a second thought. You know whenever you need my help I’ll be here in a jiff. And this sounds to me just like one of those times. So, what’s the plan?”**

Just then, a noise came from the hallway. “Uh, don’t mind me. I was just, uh, getting, my, uh, my coat.”

“Your coat? Reggie, it’s 75 degrees outside,” Erica replied skeptically. “Don’t you think it’s a little warm for that?”

“Actually, I kinda feel a sudden chill in the air. I, uh, I’ll just grab my jacket and go.”

“Yes, Reggie, you do that.”

Erica waited until he disappeared out of earshot and then turned back to Opal, handing her a piece of paper. “For now, everything you need to know is here. I’ll tell you the rest at the Inn.” With that, the women returned to the living room.

“Well, are you lovely ladies finally ready to go?” Jackson asked, desperate to get going.

“Jackson, don’t be silly,” Erica responded coquettishly. “Of course we are.”

“I’ll see you folks over there in two shakes of a lamb’s tail,” Opal said as she headed toward the door. “Reggie, Lily, why don’t you come with me and give your folks a little privacy on the way over. I’m sure they could use a moment alone to catch their breath.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” Reggie agreed.

“How about you, Lily? You mind riding with me for just a little while longer?” Opal inquired. Shyly, Lily shook her head no, gave Jack a quick kiss goodbye and made her way toward the door. “Well, we’re off like the bride’s pajamas,” Opal declared and waved the two of them goodbye.

Jack turned toward Erica. “Well, my love, are you ready to stand beside me this afternoon and face the public?”

“I’d go anywhere and face anyone as long as I knew that I could reach out my hand and touch you,” Erica replied.

“Oh, really? And, where, exactly, would you touch me?” Jack teased, pulling her into an embrace.

Erica took the tiniest step closer making sure there was not even the slightest distance between their two bodies. A small smile formed on her lips. "I would definitely begin with that hair. It's so . . . so touchable," she slowly exhaled as she lazily drew her hand through his thick golden locks that curled ever so slightly over his collar. A familiar surge of excitement coursed through her veins. It never ceased to amaze her that such a simple thing—the contrast of his soft hair brushing against the crisp starchiness of his shirt—could arouse her so. She often wondered how a man could be blessed with such a perfect head of hair. The only thing that kept her from feeling even a twinge of envy was the knowledge that she, and she alone, was the only person that got to caress each and every strand.

"Mmmmmmmmm. And then?"

"Then I'd move to your lips." Erica stood on tiptoe as she brought her mouth to his." Jack leaned in to meet her, holding her steady. They lingered, enjoying the sweet taste of desire. Their kisses grew deeper, their breaths shorter as want turned into need. In the haze of emotion, a deep groan filled the room and as they hungrily feasted on one another, each of them knew the sound came from the very core of their own being. Seconds passed. Again, a wail filled the room. This time, however, it startled the couple, pulling them back into the present. Looking up, Jack spotted the dour face of the grandfather clock. It was 2 PM; a half-hour had gone by and now Jack and Erica were seriously late for the afternoon's "other" main event. Jack looked around the room for Erica's purse. "Come on, we've got to go—"

"That's it? We've got to go? A moment ago we were in each other's arms--"

"I know, sweetheart, and believe me, it was wonderful but we can't keep everyone waiting like this . . ."

"Fine, let me just fix my makeup—"

"Oh, no, we did that earlier today. I'm afraid you're going to have to do a touch up in the car on the way over—not that you need to touch up, mind you. You look ravishing."

"So ravishing that you're able to just stop everything and drag me out of here?"

"Trust me. If there was any other way . . ." Jack stopped and looked in Erica's direction. God, she was beautiful. "Come here." Erica remained rooted to her spot. Reaching his arm out to her, he once again commanded, "Come here." Erica took his hand and was gently pulled close. "I love you" Jack voiced huskily. "I will always love you." As his lips gently brushed her forehead, he grabbed her bag that was lying on the couch and tugged her toward the door.

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“Okay, if you touch that microphone one more time I’m going to scream,” Kendall directed toward Greenlee.

“It has to be perfect. I think it just needs to be adjust—”

“That’s it. Just leave it alone!”

“But—”

“No buts. It’s fine. Trust me. I know what I’m doing.”

“That will be the day . . . What makes you so sure that you’re right and I’m wrong?” Greenlee shot back.

“Well, for starters, I’m a helluva lot closer to Jackson’s height than you could ever dream of.”

“Are you calling me short?” Greenlee replied somewhat indignantly.

“Now, why would I ever do a thing like that?” Kendall said smugly. “After all, you must be, what, 5, 5 1/2 feet tall. I’m sure somewhere that’s normal.”

Greenlee crinkled her nose and sneered. “Ha, ha, very funny. At least I don’t have hair that reminds people of Shirley Temple.”

“Would you two just cut it out already. You both sound like a couple of brats,” Ryan admonished. “What’s next? You’re going to beat each other to a pulp on the playground? Better still, why don’t you two do us all a favor and see who can hold their breath the longest?”

Kendall and Greenlee exchanged a glance. “Shut up, Ryan” they said in unison.

“Shut up Ryan? Is that the best you can do?” Ryan mocked. “Then again, at least you’re agreeing on something.” Greenlee turned to Kendall. “You hold him. I’ll beat him up.”

“No way. Why should you have all the fun? You hold him and I’ll beat him up.”

“Ladies, ladies, please. Don’t fight over me. Have some self-respect,” Ryan smirked. Lunging toward him, Kendall feigned anger. “Forget beating him up. Let’s kill him.”

**“What is it with the three of you? I leave you alone for one minute and you’re sniping at each other,” Bianca scolded.**

**“Relax, Binks. We were just kidding.” Kendall turned toward Greenlee, then Ryan. “Right? Right?”**

**Sheepishly Greenlee replied “Yeah, Bianca. We were just fooling around. Honest.”**

**“Okay, then, let’s just get back to business. Mom and Uncle Jack are going to be here any second.” Bianca moved toward the podium. “Did anyone check that the mike is working?”**

**“DON’T TOUCH IT!” Ryan, Greenlee and Kendall shouted in chorus. Startled, Bianca took a step back. “Are the three of you all right . . . because you are definitely acting a little weird, even for you,” Bianca responded, more than a bit puzzled. Ryan walked toward Bianca, reaching for her hand. “Forget about it. Long story. Not very interesting.”**

**“Whatever,” Bianca replied, shaking her head.**

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**As they pulled up to the curb, Jack and Erica noticed Opal and Lily standing off to the side of the parking garage involved in an animated conversation, oblivious to their surroundings. The same could not be said of Reggie who made a mad dash for the car. Before Jack could even step out of the car, Reggie was by its side, clearly frantic.**

**“You’re late. Is something wrong? Are you guys okay? Nothing happened, did it?”**

**“Relax, Reggie. Everything’s good” Jack replied. Visibly relieved, Reggie took a step back, getting a better look at both Jack and Erica. “Uh, huh, and just how good was it?”**

**Jack shook his head confused. “How good was what?”**

**“You’re not going to make me say it, are you? Jack, your tie’s all crooked and your hair’s a mess. And believe me, when I left, Erica’s lipstick wasn’t even a little bit smeared—not like it is now.” Smiling, Reggie continued. “I’d say from the way the two of you look, things are A LOT better than good.”**

Jack rolled his eyes and gave the back of his son's head a quick rap. Knowing that he hit a nerve, Reggie let out an unapologetic laugh. The familiar noise reached Opal and Lily and they made their way toward the car. Greetings were exchanged all around; last-minute adjustments were made to hair and clothes. Together, the group walked the final block to the entrance.

A crowd had gathered outside the Valley Inn, the steps flanked by a group of enthusiastic supporters. Inside, the ballroom was filled to capacity with people of all stripes and colors. Signs filled the air and as Jack, Erica, Reggie and Lily entered the room, the happy masses spontaneously broke out into a chant of 'Jack-son,' 'Jack-son.' Reggie pulled his father aside.

"J, man, I think they love me."

"Yeah, Reggie, I'm sure that's it," Jack replied with a smirk. That kid never ceased to amaze him—or bring a smile to his face. That is unless, of course, he was driving him crazy with another one of his teenage pranks. Jack's life had changed so much in these last nineteen months since Reggie came into his life; sometimes he wondered how he ever made do without him. Before he had a chance to slip from overt joy into a long ago remembered melancholy, the rest of his extended family greeted him. Bianca was first in line, giving him a comfortable and familiar hug, one that had nurtured and sustained his paternal instincts all these years. They didn't exchange words for their long history spoke for them. Next came Greenlee, proudly embracing the man she now identified simply as Dad. They had had their ups and downs and were still learning about each other, both as people and as father and daughter but each took special pleasure in knowing they had a bond that was theirs alone to share. Finally, Kendall stepped forward. Jack still needed to take the lead in doling out hugs with Kendall. She was so much like Erica, so strong yet so insecure. As he held her close, he knew that the similarities between mother and daughter created an especially soft spot in his heart, a spot that was reserved just for Kendall.

Suddenly the band struck up a loud chorus of "Happy Days are Here Again." Once again, Jack mentally went through the remarks he had planned. It had been a while since he had addressed such an enthusiastic crowd but rather than intimidate him, he felt more energized than he had in a long while. This was his moment and he was damn sure going to take advantage of it. He exchanged glances with his campaign manager, giving him the go-ahead nod to introduce him to the crowd of supporters.

**Tad took to the podium. Deciding to forego his usual comedic style, he opted to play it low key and instead let the man he proudly thought of as his best friend get all of the much-deserved attention. “Ladies and gentlemen: I’ve had the great privilege of knowing Jackson Montgomery for the past 18 years. During that time, we shared several lifetimes’ worth of experiences. Those experiences helped forge this man . . . this man that stands before you, into the most honorable, the most trust-worthy and the most loyal of individuals. I’m sure that in the next few months you’ll come to see Jack the way I do—as a REAL and STRONG and TRUE VOICE for humanity. And so it is my great honor to present to you today, the next Governor of Pennsylvania, Jackson Montgomery.”**

**As Jack stepped to the microphone, the crowd cheered and the camera bulbs popped. It was like being in the center of an electrical storm and Jack soaked up the energy, using it to power his speech. He acknowledged his predecessor and how he wanted to continue his policy of improving public education across the state both in the urban and rural communities. He spoke to the steel workers in Pittsburgh and his desire to bring back much of the work that had gone overseas. He spoke of healthcare and drug coverage and providing life assistance services to both the elderly and to children caring for their ailing parents. He spoke about our common humanity and how we needed to work as one does in a family, with all the members—regardless of age or background or income, supporting one another, pulling for one another and when necessary, carrying the weight of one another to make sure that no one goes without. As he closed his remarks, Jack pulled his family members close to him and beamed with pride at his beautiful Erica and his terrific kids.**

**Those in the front rows could see tears of joy form in the corners of his eyes but rather than wipe them away, he let them softly roll down his cheek. He was such a lucky man and he didn’t care who knew it.**

**A moment later the mood shifted as a reporter pushed his way to the front of the crowd, knocking a waiter out of the way. His tray filled with empty glasses crashed to the floor. Greenlee turned toward the noise and became instantly rattled. She barely caught a glimpse of the man as he quickly left the room. His fast exit troubled her. Something wasn’t right. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it but her entire body was filled with an uneasy feeling of dread. Before she had a moment to process this sense of foreboding, she heard the reporter that had prompted the incident fire a series of questions in her father’s direction.**

**“Mr. Montgomery—your campaign manager Tad Martin introduced you as a man of trust and honor. How can the people of this state believe that in good conscience when nine months ago, you admitted in court that you stole cocaine from the police station’s evidence room and planted it in an effort to get revenge against a defendant in a case that you lost as D.A.?”**

Jack stepped to the mike and tried to answer but before he could, the reporter, a man he recognized from years ago as some slime from The National Intruder, hurled more accusations.

“And isn’t that your niece, Bianca Montgomery, standing to your right? Isn’t it true she’s raising a child with her lesbian lover? Is that your idea of family values? And your adopted son Reggie, the black one, hasn’t he been arrested a couple of times for what—breaking and entering, threatening a former gang buddy of his with a gun, who knows what else? And Miss Kane—she is using her maiden name now or has she finally decided to go with the name of husband number—I’ve lost count. Anyway, how can anyone in this state trust your judgment when your personal life is the punch line of so many late-night talk-show comedians? By the way, Miss Kane,” the reporter said derisively, “congratulations on completing that substance-abuse program you just finished. Hopefully, this one’s going to stick.”

The people in the ballroom had grown silent, the mood turning a dark gray. Jack took the mike and stepped in front of the podium, not wanting to shield any part of himself from the crowd. As he did, the reporter tried to skulk out of the room.

“Excuse me, Mr.? I didn’t catch your name.”

“It’s Donald, Donald Steele.”

“Yes, well, Mr. Steele, you asked a bunch of questions, the least you could do is give me the courtesy of listening to my response. First, yes, you’re right. I did take cocaine from the evidence room and try and plant it on a defendant in a case that I lost. And it’s something I’m deeply ashamed of. For the record, I offer no excuses for my behavior but, if you’ll indulge me for a moment, I’d like to explain my actions--there’s a little bit more to the story than you laid out. That defendant was Michael Cambias, the man who raped my teenage niece and terrorized my family. What I did was wrong, no question about it. I acted out of desperation, in fear for my family’s safety. And while I certainly don’t condone vigilantism, I’m sure any parent can understand that fear for a child can lead you to do things you wouldn’t normally consider under any other circumstances. Since that time, I’ve gotten a fresh perspective on the incident and as a result, have channeled my energies working with both local police organizations and Citizen Watch groups across the state to create a network of assistance, in an effort to fight the rise of street crime in our communities. I’m proud to say that since the network was established, violent crime has dropped eleven percent. I’ve also been heavily involved in working on a bi-partisan committee of legislators and legal-aid representatives to create a stronger bill in this state to promote victim’s rights.”

**“As for my niece, Bianca--she is probably the bravest, most courageous person I’ve ever known. She suffered a terrible tragedy, something no woman should go through but rather than turning bitter she opened her heart to her child and now, Bianca and her partner are raising her little girl in a loving and nurturing environment. All children should be so fortunate. This is a great and wonderful state we live in and I believe there is room enough for people of all races, denominations and orientations. There’s even enough room for you, Mr. Steele.”**

**“And, my son, Reggie. He is one terrific kid. Sure, he’s made some mistakes in his life, some big ones and I’m certainly a lot grayer than I ever thought I’d be. Believe me, there are times when he drives me crazy. But I feel blessed that we found each other and, I’m pretty sure he feels the same. Right, Dawg?”**

**“You know it, J.”**

**"And, finally, Erica Kane. She is obviously beautiful. But her beauty pales in comparison to the love, the passion, the strength and the grit she provides each and every day to our family. I happen to be the luckiest guy in the room because of this woman and believe me, if I ever forget that, she’ll be more than happy to remind me, won’t you sweetheart?" Jack turned and unabashedly kissed Erica for all the world to see. A cacophony of bulbs and cheers once again filled the room and, as the band began to play a soft romantic tune, Jackson reached out for Erica's hand, pulled her against his chest and they began to dance.**

## **Chapter 2 by Joy**

**As Jack and Erica danced, each only having eyes for the other, the crowd and other dancing couples faded into the background. The two had shared many dances over the years but each was as magical as the first. As they held each other close, it made no difference to them that flashbulbs were going off or that they were under the scrutiny of several reporters as well as others in the crowd.**

**As the song ended, Jack kissed Erica lightly on the cheek, before they turned to face the crowd again.**

**"I want to thank you all for coming here tonight to show your support," Jack said. As he ended his speech, the mood of the crowd was once again upbeat and cheerful. Donald Steele was nowhere to be seen. The crowd applauded loudly as he backed away from the microphone still holding Erica’s hand.**

**Tad moved back up to the stage. "Well, I don’t know about you folks, but he’s sure got my vote!" Tad announced, sending the room into another round of cheers and flashbulbs going off.**

Surveying the crowd briefly, Tad could tell Jackson had a lot of supporters. He noticed many well-known Pine Valley citizens clapping, their smiles showing just how much his speech had touched them. Most of them knew firsthand about the havoc Michael Cambias had caused, and they didn't appear to have been too affected by Steele's little stunt at tarnishing Jack's name.

As he continued to scan the room of supporters and well-wishers, he paused for a moment. His eyes fell on a group of men that seemed to be staying away from the crowd. They didn't seem to fit in somehow and they didn't seem like supporters either. He was still observing them when one turned and looked directly at him.

Tad's eyes met the cold gray ones of the stranger; he knew he was right in feeling that something was wrong.

Tad quickly broke eye contact as Jack put his hand on his shoulder. "Thanks for doing this Tad; you've always been a great friend," Jack said, his appreciation and love for his friend clearly showing.

"That's what friends are for, buddy," Tad smiled back, clapping Jack on the shoulder. As they all walked from the stage to join the people on the floor, Tad let the suspicious-looking men slip from his thoughts.

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"Man, I can't wait to move into the Governor's mansion. It's even got its own arcade," Reggie said with his usual flair, causing the group to chuckle.

"I heard it had 24 rooms, an Olympic-sized pool and a ton of closets," Greenlee added.

"Wow, I'm going to be part of the Governor's family; this will be great for business," Kendall said, all of them talking over each other as their excitement mounted.

"Hey, hey . . ." Jack broke in, "calm down a little bit. I haven't been elected yet, you know. Keep it up and people will think we're just out for the house," he teased them lightly, enjoying the youthful excitement they displayed.

"You did great, Daddy." Lily added softly, once the commotion had died down.

"Thank you honey, and thank you all," Jack said, surveying the kids, amazed again at how well the family had blended. "Now we're going to mingle with the crowd a bit; you guys are own your own--but no sneaking off before this is over, okay?"

**"And don't forget the place is crawling with reporters, so don't say anything you don't want splashed on the front page," Erica reminded them gently as she held Jack's hand and began to follow him to meet with their supporters.**

**"As if we need tips on how to deal with reporters by now," Bianca laughed good-naturedly. But it was true. The family had dealt with reporters for a long time now, though at least this time, it wasn't due to any tragedy or courtroom drama.**

**Jack and Erica made their way down the line of supporters and well-wishers, taking a moment with each one. Jack had the special gift of making everyone he talked to feel like they were the only one in the room for a moment, Erica noticed, as he made his way down the lines.**

**"You'll be a fine governor," Phoebe Wallingford said in Jack's ear as he bent down to hug her in her wheelchair. "The Daughters of Fine Lineage will all be voting for you, and I think 'Dear Aggy' may be printing a word of endorsement also." Phoebe beamed at him. "And maybe Tempo can do an article as well...." she went on, seeming to take over as campaign manager for a moment.**

**"Of course Tempo will be doing an article supporting Jackson," Brooke stepped in, halting her aunt's planning and aiding Jack in moving on. "That was an excellent speech, I know you'll make a fine governor, Jack." She gave him a quick hug and briefly shook hands with Erica. There was still no love lost between the two women, but over the years they had managed to reach a level of civility and maturity about their feud that had begun practically in high school.**

**As they continued to move down the line, Erica could tell how truly blessed they were to have so many friends in this wonderful town. Eventually, of course, they made it to the not-so-supportive people. Bracing himself, Jackson continued toward Adam and Mary, determined to continue with his campaigning.**

"I'd like a word with you about those programs and how you plan to fund them," Adam quickly grabbed his arm, and led him away from the crowd for a few steps, launching into his concerns without any preamble. "I hope you aren't planning on increasing taxes on those in the higher income bracket." Jack sighed inwardly. He figured that some people would be more concerned about their own money rather than anything else. "If you would like to schedule a meeting for us to discuss this further, Adam, call my secretary and we can set up something. However, I assure you, I do have funding plans for these programs. I'm also looking at other avenues of support for these programs, like federal funds, grant programs, and more. I certainly don't plan to impose any more taxes on the citizens of this state." Adam looked somewhat appeased, but still didn't seem thoroughly convinced.

Mary was even less tactful as she stopped Jack. "I've been catching up on the latest gossip about you," she grinned devilishly. "I didn't know you had helped hide a body, or caused your brother to lose his job as Senator due to your mismanaging his campaign funds. Talk about a politician with a few skeletons in the closet!" she finished, looking very pleased with herself.

Erica intervened before Jack could find an answer. "If that's the latest gossip you've come up with then you are very behind on the news. Why don't you keep listening and you might hear some of the more recent stories, like how Jack helped build a house for Habitat for Humanity, or how he..."

Erica didn't get a chance to finish as Mary abruptly turned around and walked away with a superior sniff. "People like that are just so... so..." Erica searched for the word.

"Unimportant," Jack finished for Erica with a gentle grin as he led her on to meet the next person.

"Look at them working the crowd," Reggie observed, seeing how successful Jack was with his campaigning.

"He sure is terrific," Bianca agreed, pride for her uncle obvious to all. "Don't you agree Greenlee . . . Greenlee?"

Bianca turned to find Greenlee staring off in the distance. "Are you all right?"

"Huh . . . oh yeah, I was just . . . I thought . . . oh, never mind," she shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts.

"Seeing ghosts?" Bianca asked

"Huh? What? No, I just got the weirdest feeling."

**“What kind of feeling?”**

**"I can't explain it exactly . . . it just completely creeped me out. Look, I have goose bumps. Of course, that could have something to do with the fact that this place is freezing."**

**“Yeah, that and you're exhausted. You and Kendall got here at the crack of dawn this morning.”**

**“Anything for the campaign . . . and the family.”**

**Bianca put an arm around her cousin's shoulder for a moment, sharing a quiet moment alone before they caught up with the rest of the family.**

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**Tad spotted Jack trapped in a debate over his proposed Crime Watch Program with both Liza and the Police Commissioner. Liza had talked passionately about the program before and the Commissioner was very vocal in his disapproval of the program, believing that citizen involvement could pose "potential hazards" as well as cause "interference with police officers doing their jobs." Tad decided to intervene and signaled the band to play another song.**

**As the band cued up and couples began dancing again, Jack swept Erica into his arms and said a silent 'thank you' that he had finally been able to escape that discussion. He knew debating was part of politics, but it did get old sometimes, and he had already been involved in a couple of the very same conversations with the Commissioner. The dialogue was repeating itself. As a result, Jack found it was no longer energizing but more tiresome, hashing over the same old statistics and scenarios.**

**"You're a million miles away," Erica said gently, bringing him back to the present.**

**"Sorry," he said, taking her hand for a quick kiss to her palm, not caring as a flash went off in the background.**

**"You're really wonderful out there, you know that?" Erica couldn't help the small tears shimmering in her eyes as she gazed at Jack. She had no doubt that he was going to win this race by a landslide.**

**"Thank you. You know your support means everything to me, don't you?" Jack continued to hold her as they slowly danced.**

**"And you know you have it 110% don't you? The people of Pennsylvania are just now learning what the rest of us have known for years, Jack--that you're a wonderful man who cares about everyone, especially the less fortunate and the working class; that you're dedicated to championing peoples' rights, defending those who are victimized by people stronger or more powerful than they are."**

**Jack couldn't help but blush a little at her praise and lowered his eyes for a moment.**

**"Look at me, Jackson Montgomery," she commanded, bringing his eyes back to meet hers. "I am SO proud of you right now; even if you don't win . . . which, I have no doubt that you will. You'll always be a winner in my eyes."**

**Jack was so touched he didn't care who saw them at this point. He gently leaned in to kiss her and pulled her to him tightly, embracing her. "As long as I have you, nothing else matters." His voice was full of emotion as he felt the wetness of a tear sliding down his cheek.**

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**Lily had gone to the restroom and was standing in a side hallway near one of the exit doors. She had gotten a lot better at managing her autism, but still had some difficulty being in large crowds for very long so she took a few minutes to enjoy the relative quiet of the empty hallway. Reggie was on the other side of the room, surrounded by friends, as usual, when he noticed her standing there. Thinking she might want some company, he started making his way through the packed room.**

**Lily had taken a few steps to the water fountain and was getting a drink when she felt the presence of someone else in the hall. Figuring it was someone from her family, or a friend of her Daddy's, she looked up pleasantly, but her eyes widened when she realized it was not only someone she didn't know, but that the look in the stranger's eyes was not a friendly one. She slowly backed away from the stocky man, unwittingly placing her further into the shadows, and harder to spot from outside the hallway.**

**"What do you want?" She could barely whisper she was so afraid.**

**"I just want to talk for a minute," the stranger said somewhat menacingly. "You're the candidate's daughter aren't you?" She nodded mutely, wondering why he had gotten so close if all he wanted to do was talk.**

**"Please, I want to go back to my Daddy," Lily murmured as she tried to edge her way around him. She was startled when he grabbed her arm.**

"Not just yet. Why don't we step outside and talk?" he continued in the same quiet yet menacing tone and started backing her toward the exit door. Lily began trembling in fear not knowing what to do next.

"Hey Lily, everything all right?" Lily's knees felt weak with relief as she heard Reggie's voice. She could tell by the way the man stiffened that, unlike her, he was not pleased by this turn of events.

"Lily?" Reggie moved closer. "Hey, who are you?"

Reggie noticed the guy holding Lily's arm. It only took him a moment to realize this guy was bad news. Without a second thought, he walked over to Lily and grabbed her other arm. "Hey mister, this is my sister you're holding onto. Why don't you let her go and we can end this with no hard feelings." Reggie tried to act cool even though his heart was hammering in his chest. He had seen a lot of street thugs, but this one seemed more dangerous than the garden-variety thug he was used to.

"I don't think so," the thug grinned, almost condescendingly, as he began to tug at Lily, pulling her toward the door. Reggie continued to hold onto Lily's other arm, as he started yelling for help. It took a moment for Reggie's voice to filter into the crowd but then it was quickly drowned out by the noise of the revelry. The man quickly released Lily who stumbled backwards into Reggie.

Lily seemed to be in a state of shock by this time, hardly able to process the events and danger they were in. Realizing she was free, Reggie quickly placed himself in front of Lily, fully expecting the guy to run. He could see the sweat glistening on the man's brow as he paused to think for a moment.

"Boss didn't say which kid I had to grab," he grunted as he quickly raised his fist. Reggie didn't even see the punch coming; he just felt the fist hitting his jaw before everything went black. The guy quickly grabbed the limp teenager and pulled him out the side door as Lily looked on in horror.

### Chapter Three by Misha

A low moan came from the backseat of the dark sedan. "I think the kid's waking up. You sure he's tied up good?" The older man just grunted in return. How come he got stuck with this job? Not only was he gonna have to wet-nurse the kid, but he was also going to have to keep an eye on Randy. This was his first time out and the boss told Al that if Randy screwed up, both Randy and him were going to take a fall. He'd been on the boss's short list before and was in no mood to end up there again. Two surgeries later and his knee still hurt like hell.

**“Uhh . . . Wha . . . ?” Reggie’s whole body ached but for the life of him, he couldn’t remember what hit him. Opening his eyes, he looked around and saw two men seated in the front of the moving car. One of them looked familiar but he couldn’t quite place him. All he knew at that very minute was that his jaw was throbbing and he couldn’t move his arms to rub away some of the sting.**

**Reggie shut his eyes again and winced. Everything came back to him. He didn’t recognize the guy behind the wheel but the stocky one with the beady eyes was the same thug that was bothering Lily. He remembered the guy’s fist coming at him when he jumped in front of his sister but then it was lights out.**

**“Hey? Hey, you? You mind telling me what’s going on?” Reggie demanded. Beady-eyed guy barely turned his head. “Hey I’m talking to you. I’d like some answers.” Still, no response.**

**Reggie was getting mad. Who cared if his arms were tied and he was in the car with a couple of lowlifes. He was Reggie P. Montgomery and he didn’t scare easy. Reggie kicked the front seat of the car as hard as he could. “I know you can’t be deaf and ugly . . . ” Reggie spat.**

**“Shut your trap, kid,” was the only response he received. Kid? Who did this guy think he was messing with?**

**“I’m not a kid and you best tell me what is going on NOW before I . . . before I . . . ” Before I do what? Reggie wondered. Frustrated, he kicked the front seat of the car again, this time aiming his legs in the driver’s direction. Startled, the driver swerved wildly, tossing his young charge to the floor.**

**“Yo, man, watch it. Precious cargo in the backseat, remember?” Reggie snorted as he struggled back into place.**

**“Sorry. Are you okay? I didn’t hurt you did I?” the driver asked.**

**“I’m fine. Couldn’t be better . . . ” Reggie muttered, shaking his head. Was he tripping or did the guy actually seem to care? At that very moment the skies opened up and it began to pour but for Reggie, the sun had just darted out from behind a dark cloud.**

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**It took a few moments before Lily was able to compose herself sufficiently to return to the ballroom but as soon as she did, she made a beeline straight for her father.**

**“Daddy, daddy,” Lily tugged on Jackson’s coat sleeve so fiercely, he was almost knocked off-balance. He had been engrossed in a conversation with a top fundraiser, but immediately turned his attention toward his daughter. Whatever Lily wanted had to be important for her to interrupt him so forcefully.**

**“What’s the matter, sweetheart?”**

**“It’s . . . it’s . . . ” Lily was so upset she was barely able to get the words out. “It’s Reggie. He’s gone!”**

**“Gone where?” Jackson looked closely at his daughter’s face. Her skin was translucent and she was visibly shaking. “Lily, where’s Reggie gone?”**

**“I . . . I don’t know. A man, a man--he grabbed me. He hurt my arm.”**

**“Lily, the man. Did Reggie go with the man?” Jackson was desperate to keep Lily focused and find out what happened to Reggie but knew from experience that too much excitement would result in his daughter withdrawing to somewhere he was unable to follow. He gently stroked her back and softened his tone.**

**“Sweetheart, can you tell me if Reggie went with the man?” Nodding ‘yes’ Lily looked to the ground and began to sob.**

**“He hurt him, Daddy. He punched Reggie.”**

**Jack’s heart began to thunder in his chest. He wanted to hug his little girl but was afraid that the pounding of his pulse rate would be more frightening than comforting. “Baby, did you see where the man took your brother?”**

**“In a car. It was big and black.”**

**“Did it look new?” Jack probed.**

**“Uh, huh. It reminded me of Uncle Palmer’s car except it wasn’t as shiny. And the man that was driving was a lot taller than Mr. Michaels.”**

**“Sweetheart, I’m going to call Danielle’s father over to talk to you. He’ll be able to help us find Reggie.” Jack pulled out his cell phone and punched in Detective Frye’s personal number.**

**“Derek, it’s Jack. I need your help. Reggie’s disappeared and from what little I know it sounds like he’s been kidnapped.”**

**Derek’s thoughts immediately went to his daughter. “Danielle . . .?”**

Jack looked around and spotted the teenager laughing in a corner with a group of her friends.

“Danielle’s here. She’s fine. Please, can you get over here right away?”

“I’m on my way.”

As soon as Jack hung up the phone, he saw Erica and a coterie of supporters coming toward him. “Oh please, dear Lord, not now,” he silently prayed.

“Jack, I wanted to introduce you to these new friends of mine. They just agreed to host some—” Erica stopped mid-sentence; Jack’s face was ash-gray—something definitely was wrong. “What is it? What’s the matter?” she inquired.

Jack calmly addressed the confused onlookers. “Will you excuse us for just one moment.” As the group dissolved, he turned his attention back to Erica, still holding Lily close. “There’s a problem. It’s Reggie. Lily just told me that some guy grabbed him and they drove off in a car together.”

Alarmed, Erica’s voice carried over the crowd. “Somebody did what? Jack, I don’t understand.” The crowd began to stir.

“Sweetheart, please; lower your voice.”

“Lower my voice? Jack, you just told me that someone has kidnapped Reggie. Where are the police? We need to do something.”

Greenlee, Bianca and Kendall turned toward the pair and a moment later the three women were gathered around Erica and Jack.

“What’s going on?” Greenlee demanded.

“Everybody, please, calm down. Erica, I hung up with Derek not five minutes ago; he should be here any moment. In the meantime, we need to stay as calm and focused as we possibly can.” Jack gently squeezed Lily’s shoulder; keeping her grounded was his top priority since she was the key to getting any additional information that might help the police locate his son.

The decibel rate in the room began to rise. Clearly the news had traveled beyond the immediate family and people were chattering nervously. Just as quickly, the room grew quiet as Derek and his men entered and made their way toward Jack.

**“Okay, tell me what you know,” Derek advised, wasting no time with needless formalities. Jack relayed what information he had already ascertained from Lily and then the two men gently prodded the young teen for more details. When Derek was satisfied that no new facts would be coming his way, he assembled his men and instructed each of them on the course of action they were to take. Some got busy questioning onlookers; others secured the exits. No one was leaving the building without Derek’s specific permission. The detective made sure an all points bulletin was put out and then turned his attention back to Jack and his family.**

**“I’ll keep you posted on any developments. In the meantime, I want you to think. Is there anyone that might hold a grudge against you?”**

**“Come on, Derek. I was the D.A. for almost nine years. What do you think?”**

**“I think that instead of talking to me you should be compiling a list. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”**

**“That’s it? That’s all I can do?” Jack demanded.**

**“That’s my best advice. We’ll take care of it from here.” Derek turned and walked away.**

**“The hell you will,” Jack muttered to himself. Scanning the room, he spotted Tad huddled with Aidan and Ryan. A thought began to formulate in his head but before he could take it any further his cell phone rang.**

**“Please dear God, let this be Reggie,” Jack silently prayed.**

**“Jack Montgomery,” he answered.**

**A voice, mechanically distorted, responded. “We have your son. If you want to see him alive, you’ll withdraw from the race.”**

**“Who is this? What have you done with my son?” Jack demanded.**

**“Withdraw from the race.”**

**“I’m not doing anything until I know Reggie’s all right.” There was a click on the other end of the line and the phone went silent.**

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Reggie squirmed uncomfortably in the metal chair. His wrists were tied tightly behind him and his ankles were taped to the legs of the chair. The room of the abandoned building was almost dark with only a small shaft of light coming through the yellowed panes of glass. This was definitely not going to be a good day. He was cold and hungry and not in the mood to make nice with the losers that had grabbed him.

“Hey, ugly man, make yourself useful and get me something to eat. And, you, pretty boy; how about you turn on the heat in this place? I’m beginning to get a chill.”

The tall man looked around, trying to find a thermostat. Al shook his head in disgust. “Randy, you moron, the building’s been abandoned for years; I doubt the owner’s been paying his gas bill.”

“Who you calling moron, ugly man? At least he knows how to treat a guest.”

“Just shut your trap, kid. You’re beginning to get on my nerves.”

“You have no idea,” Reggie muttered to himself.

“Leave the kid alone, Al. The boss said we were to hold onto him and make sure he was comfortable.”

“You heard the man. Make me comfortable. To start with, I’d like some refreshments. Mmmmm, I think I’ll start with a cheeseburger—medium-well and an order of fries. Hold the ketchup. Now, get busy. I don’t want to be kept waiting.”

Al tried to ignore the brat. How long was he going to be stuck in this crummy place with one loudmouth kid and a goody-two shoes idiot as a partner. Whoever said that crime didn’t pay sure knew what he was talking about. He had to get the hell out of this rat hole; one more minute with these two and he wasn’t going to be worth a damn when the real action went down.

“Randy, keep a watch on the kid while I go make a food run. And don’t let him pull any crap. The boss may want us to keep him comfy but he sure as hell don’t want him going nowhere.” Al passed Reggie on the way to the exit. Was he nuts or did the little delinquent just blow him a kiss? Al grabbed the car keys and bolted out the door as fast as his poor legs could carry him.

Reggie couldn't believe his luck; ugly Al left him alone with the chump. "Let the games begin" he muttered to himself. It was party time and Master R was about to spin some tunes. Reggie waited until he heard the car screech out of the parking lot before he put his sad song into play. He knew that if he laid things down just right, Randy would be bustin' all the right moves. He was sure of it; he could feel it in his gut and, if the streets taught him anything, it was that you always go with your gut. Still he had to play it smooth. He'd just turn on the killer charm, throw him some baby dog eyes for good measure. Piece of cake. He'd have the guy begging to help him in no time.

"Um, Randy?"

"Yeah, whaddya want?"

"Uh, you're not really going to hurt me, are you?" Reggie trembled his lip ever so slightly. "I mean, I'm going to be okay, right?"

Immediately Randy took the bait, his tone softening. "Don't worry, Reggie. You do what we tell you and nothing's going to happen to you."

This was going to be even easier than Reggie thought. "Are you sure? Al sure seemed angry before he left."

"Al's always angry. It's nothing personal, believe me."

"Seemed pretty personal to me. It was kind of scary. I don't know how you take it. He's always yelling at you, calling you names."

"That's just his way. He doesn't mean it. Al's been good to me, always looking out for me, making sure I don't screw up."

"Maybe. But why does he always have to be so, uh, um . . . grumpy?" Reggie almost laughed, thinking of the words coming out of his mouth. I sound like I'm five-years-old and this joker's buying it.

"You'd be grumpy too if you had to put up with a smart-ass kid and a virgin kidnapper! Come on, Reggie, what do you think I am, a moron? I may not be a rocket scientist but I'm not stupid enough to fall for this whole 'I'm scared' act you're throwing my way."

"Wha?" Reggie was so surprised by the sudden turn of events that he would have fallen off his chair; that is, if he wasn't still tied to it.

**“That’s right. I’ve actually got a brain in my head. And, just for the record, what I meant by virgin is that this is my first big JOB. Now, if you think you can manage to pick your chin up off the ground and get that ego of yours in check, I’ll let you in on a little secret. Not that I think it’ll come as a big surprise. You’re probably a lot smarter than this dumb con you’ve been trying to run on me.”**

**Reggie scowled. “I’m listening.”**

**“Grabbing you and keeping you tied up like this is not my idea of a fun time. But circumstances have kind of forced my hand.”**

**“Circumstances?”**

**“Yeah. Not all of us are lucky enough to be born with a silver spoon in their mouths like you were.”**

**“You’re joking, right? Take a close look. Do I really look like I was born a Montgomery? Man, up until last year I was living pretty much on my own, doing whatever I had to to get by. “**

**“Yeah, well, you’re rolling around in it now. Not all of us hit it big like you did when that Jackson guy took you in. Some of have to work for a living, you know, do what they can to survive.”**

**“You call this surviving? Looks more to me like you’re trashing whatever sorry life you have. It’s pitiful.”**

**“Hey, don’t feel sorry for me. I’m doing just fine.”**

**“I can tell. Man, look around you. You’re risking your entire life for what, a couple of Gs? And that’s if you’re lucky. If you get caught, you’re facing 10 to 20 in a state pen with someone like Al calling you sweetheart.”**

**“Well, it’s too late to do anything about that now. I guess I’ll just have to make sure I don’t get caught.”**

**“Oh, you’ll get caught all right. I may not be a Montgomery by blood but I promise you, my father will lay down and die before he lets anyone get away with hurting a hair on my head. If I was you, I’d be begging me to help you out.”**

**“Dream on, kid.”**

**“I’m serious. You let me go; you still have a shot at having something resembling a life. Keep me tied up, you’re history.”**

**“Yeah and why should I trust you?”**

**“ . . . 'cause right now, I'm your only shot.”**

#### **Chapter 4 by Christine**

**Derek surveyed the room as the crowd dispersed. He had finally cleared the last person to leave, even though it had been Opal and she had refused to go, wanting to be there for Erica and her family. He glanced over at his daughter standing with the youngest of the Montgomery's. Derek tiredly walked over to Jackson who was gathering his family to go upstairs to a suite. He had advised Jack that the family should stay together at the Inn under police protection and not return home until they knew what they were up against.**

**Derek relayed what little information they had and gave them the standard spiel. There still was not too much information surfacing at the moment but they had managed to piece the small bits together, although it had led them nowhere. It wasn't anything they didn't already know. Jackson handed him the list of known threats to him that he had compiled. Derek also told them that Lily was the best witness they had. The descriptions she had given them were pretty much all they had. Jackson knew that the person or people that had his son wanted him to pull out of the governor's race. He also had lost all confidence in his family ever finding any type of justice in Pine Valley. As Donald Steele had pointed out, they were a joke to most people. Hell, a woman who was had been married nine times and a crooked DA who had adopted a teenage street kid. He also knew that Derek had a vendetta against Reggie that had only increased when Danielle came into the picture. He knew he had to do something and he knew he couldn't wait.**

**Jackson had an idea and pulled out his cell phone to call the one person he knew that he could trust and that could help him. Jack walked away from his future wife and the women he called his children. He was a man on a mission, a man that was sure of what he had to do. He had to get the missing member of his family back. He could see the pain in Erica's eyes at the prospect of losing yet another child. He sure as hell wasn't going to be sitting on his ass and wait around for the PVPD to find Reggie.**

**Tad had just arrived home when his phone rang. “Tad, can you come back to the Valley Inn?” he heard Jack ask him. Tad listened to what Jack had to say and after their conversation, he called Aidan who didn't hesitate to meet him. He'd grown to like all of the Montgomery's and one of the Kane women that he'd never fallen out of love with. On his way to the inn, Aidan called Ryan, who was still at the inn. Ryan hadn't left the family since he'd heard about the kidnapping. He wasn't going to leave Kendall's side for very long at a time. It didn't take long for the three of them to learn what Jack had in mind. They quickly set about putting their plan in motion.**

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As the night wore on, more fear and apprehension built up in all three of the adult children of the Montgomery-Kane clan. Greenlee stood looking out a window at the news crews and police that were camped out at the front of the Valley Inn. The pain and fear was clearly etched in her face. Kendall was a little harder to read as she paced around the house. She had to keep moving because she knew what would happen if she stopped. She knew she'd be a mess and she could not fall apart. There were just too many people who would see her. She knew she was the one who had to be strong because everyone else was falling apart. When Jack had relayed the message from the kidnapers to them, it had sent Bianca into tears because Reggie was her brother as far as she was concerned. Little Miranda lay in a bassinet in the suite watching as Kendall tried to comfort Bianca. As Bianca tended to Miranda, Kendall looked over at Greenlee staring out the window. Knowing just how Greenlee was feeling at this moment, she pulled her into a hug.

As they both stood there hugging and comforting each other, they heard Aidan cough behind them as he walked in and asked where Jackson was. They didn't have a chance to answer him and really couldn't have if they'd wanted to. Erica walked in and told him that Jack was waiting for him in the other room. It was obvious to the Erica Kane trained eye that she was having the hardest time with this whole thing. All four of the girls noticed this. They all knew that Erica and Reggie had formed a special bond. Erica had come to accept Reggie as her son and with all of the things that had happened to their family over the past year, it was becoming increasingly hard for them all to cope with the events of this afternoon.

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Reggie sat in the old warehouse. He wasn't cold or hungry. Al had come back with the food and they had let him eat. He wasn't sure how much time had gone by but he was pretty sure it was evening now. Al had gone out again and Randy had ignored all attempts at conversation. Reggie couldn't shake the feeling that he had seen Randy before but he couldn't place where. I must have seen him in the crowd at the press conference, he thought. In spite of himself, he was scared and found himself thinking about all the things that had happened over the short time he'd been with Jack. Randy seemed to be as lost as he was. Reggie couldn't figure out how he'd gotten involved in something like this but he couldn't help but think that had he met this guy on the street that they would have been friends.

Eventually, Randy fell asleep, his head falling forward in his chair. Reggie had kept an eye on Randy's cell phone. After the last time Al called to check in, Randy had put it down on a crate not far from Reggie. If I can just loosen these

ropes, he thought, I can use that phone. It was a long process but he finally felt them loosening. He quickly undid the ropes and the tape on his legs. He knew it would be too easy but he went over and tried the door anyway. As expected, it was locked from the outside. He went over to the phone and made the call to Jack's cell phone.

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Jack called in his partners in crime when the call came through and laid it on the line. Aidan called in favors owed on two continents. Tad called around to his contacts and got the information they needed. It was through these favors and well placed contacts that they were able to trace the call. Within an hour they had the information. Reggie was being held in the warehouse on the corner of River Street and Water Ave. Jack did not want to take any chances on anything happening to Reggie so they discussed their plan to go and raid the warehouse themselves. They would only involve the police if needed once they got there.

Erica knew that Jack planned on going to save their son himself. Erica was already worried not only about the boy she'd come to think of as hers but the man she had loved for so much of her life. The man who was the very essence of being Erica Kane. The fear in her mind and the love in her heart was so great she couldn't help but let the tears flow. She just would not let anyone see them or so she thought. She also thought that no one had seen her in the hall when they were discussing their plan and no one had, but although he hadn't seen her, Jack knew she'd been there. It was just something about them - they seemed to sense each other's presence when they were any where near each other.

Erica retreated to the bedroom so no one would see her before she let the tears fall. Erica knew in the core of her being that something bad was going to happen to someone involved. Every time she closed her eyes, she could see Jackson being shot. After all they had gone through to fight their way back to each other, the thought of him being hurt or killed was more than she could bear. It all seemed so real to her and she was powerless to stop it. Erica was trying to fight back the tears even after she got to the room but they still flowed down her face. She had no choice and gave into the tears. She flung herself onto the bed and touched Jack's suit coat that he had taken off earlier. She inhaled his cologne as she held it close to her and sobbed.

Jack left the room where Tad, Ryan and Aidan were finalizing their plan and made his way to the bedroom where he knew that he would find his future wife. He did not expect to find his youngest daughter there sitting on the bed, her arms around Erica. Upon seeing Jack come in, Lily raised her eyes and untangled herself from Erica's arms. "Everything is going to be OK, Daddy," she said. "I just know it."

She left as Jack sat down next to the woman who had held his heart for so many

years and looked her directly in the eyes and began to speak as his own eyes filled with tears. "You have had part of me from the moment I saw you. I know you know what I am going to do here. Sweetheart, you have no need to worry about me. I promise you that I will be OK. I will come home to you and I will bring our son with me." He knew that's what she was most worried about. Erica looked up at him with her tear filled eyes and spoke. "Jack, why does it feel like I am going to lose the best thing that has ever happened to me outside of my children? I can't stop thinking that I'm never going to see you again once you walk out that door."

Jack didn't know what to say so he just pulled Erica into his lap and let her cry in to his neck until she was all cried out. Somewhere in the midst of her sobbing, she felt her shoulder becoming wet and she knew that Jack had been silently crying too. That was one of the things she both loved and found sexy as hell about him. He was so tough to everybody else but with her, there was no pretense. They held tight to each other and lay down together in hopes of holding on to each for as long as they could. Jack lay on his back looking at the ceiling as Erica curled up next to him with her head on his chest. Jack held her as he tried for all he was worth to get through to her that he'd be all right.

Erica couldn't stand it, she just wanted to feel something more of him so she slid her hands underneath his shirt and he pulled away from her but not for the reason she thought. He knew what she needed and he took off the shirt. He knew she wanted to lay her head on his heart, to listen to him breath, to feel the constriction of his chest as he drew in his breath. He knew that she needed to feel him, to feel something other than pain.

Erica had fallen into a fitful sleep when Ryan knocked on the door of the bedroom to tell Jackson that he'd gotten the building plans for the warehouse where Reggie was being held. Jack walked into the hallway and the four men went over their final plans. They'd go in under the cover of darkness with guns and night vision goggles and anything else they would need for operation rescue Reggie. Jack knew that they had to get past Derek and his men so Ryan and Aidan headed downstairs to create a diversion. Jack went over and kissed each of his four daughters, lingering with Lily for a moment as she clung to him. He went in to the bedroom and leaned down to kiss Erica as she slept. "I promise I'll be back, my love," he whispered, touching her face. "After all, you're my heart."

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Erica woke and wandered into the living area of the suite. Opal and Myrtle were still there with the four girls. Jack, Tad, Ryan and Aidan were gone. As Erica sat on the couch, she heard the rumble of thunder in the distance, unsettling her even more. Myrtle sat on the couch with her, telling her to trust that everything would be all right. Everyone knew Erica hated storms and tonight it was worse because Jack was out there. Erica's thoughts drifted to memories of Jack, from

the first time they had made love in Paris to the time she was standing beside his hospital bed after he had been shot. From the happy times they had had together to thinking he was going to die. From all their almost happy endings to the one that would be, from the feeling of being together to the pain of when it would end.

Myrtle got up to go talk to the girls and Opal sat down beside her best gal pal. Opal reminded her that she needed to relax because of her little secret. This was what Reggie had nearly stumbled upon that afternoon as they were getting ready. Erica had wanted to wait until after the press conference before she shared her news with Jack. She had had it all planned out how she was going to tell him. She still couldn't believe it herself but here she was at her age about to become a mom again.

It was a dream come true for them and she couldn't wait to tell him. Now as she waited for a phone call, she just prayed that he would return to hear her news.

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Meanwhile the storm was raging outside. Jack, Ryan, Tad and Aidan had reached the alley behind the warehouse without incident. There were no cars parked outside so they were hoping that maybe only one or two men were with Reggie. They could see a sliver of light from behind the boarded-up windows in the basement. They broke up into teams of two, one on each side of the basement door.

At a pre-arranged signal, Aidan shot through the bolt on the door and they rushed inside. Before they could even adjust to their surroundings, shots rang out. They dived for cover behind the scattered crates. Jackson looked around and could see Reggie in a chair at the rear of the room. In front of him stood a beady-eyed man holding a gun. There was another, taller man to the right in the shadows.

"Throw down your weapons and come out or the kid is dead," yelled the beady-eyed man and Jack could tell from his voice that he meant it. Before Jack and the others even had a chance to react, the man pointed the gun at Reggie and pulled the trigger. At the same time, the tall man leapt from the shadows and knocked the gunman to the floor.

Jack ran to Reggie as Tad, Ryan and Aidan jumped on the two men. As soon as Jack could see that Reggie was OK, he turned to the two men being held by his friends. As the tall man stepped into the light, Jack couldn't believe his eyes. Aidan, Tad and Ryan were all staring as well.

"Leo?" Jack stepped closer. "My God, it can't be you."

"Do you know me?" asked the young man eagerly. "You don't know how long I've been searching for someone - anyone - who recognizes me."

**“Shut up, you idiot,” growled the other man.**

**As Jack struggled with the possibility that his daughter’s husband was alive, the door burst open and two more men rushed into the building. Jack pulled Reggie to the floor as gunfire broke out. When he felt the bullet hit him, Jack’s only thought was of Erica and the promise he had made that he would return to her.**

### **Chapter 5 by Mary**

**Jack could hear the police sirens approaching in the distance. The gunfire ceased as abruptly as it had started. The man who had shot at Reggie and the other two men fled from the building. The man who looked like Leo moved toward the door and then stopped. Reggie jumped up, panic on his face. “J, did you get hit? Are you OK?”**

**Tad, Aidan and Ryan rushed over at his words. “Don’t move,” said Tad as Jack struggled to his feet. “I’m OK,” Jack said. “It just grazed me. I think it’s just a flesh wound.” He winced as Aidan rolled up his shirt sleeve to look at his arm.**

**Derek and two other officers burst in. “Everyone OK here?” asked Derek as he took in the situation. His eyes stopped when he got to the young man who resembled Leo. “Who the hell are you?” he demanded. “Cuff him,” he said to one of the officers.**

**“Wait,” Jack said, walking over. “I need to talk to him.”**

**“Do you know me?” the young man asked Jack again. “Please, you have to tell me if you do.”**

**“I can’t be sure,” Jack said slowly, “but I think you’re my son-in-law, Leo Dupres.”**

**“What?” the young man and Reggie both said together. “Wait a minute,” said Reggie. “That’s why you seemed familiar to me. It’s that wedding picture in Greenlee’s loft. You look just like him.”**

**“Look, can you just hold him here for a while?” Jack turned to Derek. “Handcuff him if you have to but I need to call Greenlee.”**

**Derek sighed. “OK, but then he’s going to the station with his friends. We grabbed them on the way in. Kidnapping is a crime, Jack, as you well know.”**

**“He saved my life!” protested Reggie. “If it wasn’t for him, I’d be dead.”**

Jack sat down on one of the crates and pulled out his phone. Derek walked over. "I want the paramedics to check you out as soon as they get here," he said, observing Jack's ashen color and the blood still seeping from his arm on to his shirt. "I don't know what the hell you thought you were doing, coming here like this. Somehow it didn't surprise me when you didn't report that call to your cell phone. What I'd like to know is how you managed to trace it faster than we did."

"I had to make sure Reggie was safe, Derek," said Jack. "Maybe it wasn't the smartest thing to do," he added, "but I know you'd do the same if it was Danielle."

Jack dialed the number for the suite at the Valley Inn. He could hear the fear and then the relief in Erica's voice when she answered. He knew she was puzzled when he told her to bring Greenlee to the warehouse but he didn't want to go into detail over the phone.

Reggie walked over to Jack after he hung up the phone. "Jack, I don't know what to say," Reggie said, close to tears. "I mean, you came for me yourself. No one has ever done anything like that for me."

Jack reached out and put his uninjured arm around his son. "I love you, Reggie," he said, his voice filled with emotion. "I will never let anything happen to you or this family again, not as long as I'm still breathing."

"I love you, too," Reggie replied. He sat down to wait with his father, thinking how lucky he was to be a part of this incredible family.

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Erica was out of the car before it came to a complete stop with Greenlee right behind her. She rushed past the police and into the warehouse. She couldn't bring herself to believe that Jack was all right until she actually saw him herself. When she spotted him with Reggie, she sighed with relief. Then she saw the blood on his shirt and her fear returned.

"Jack, what happened?" she flew across the room. "You said you were all right."

"Sweetheart, I'm fine," he reassured her. "It's nothing - just a flesh wound."

"You were shot?" the color drained from her face. "I knew this was going to happen."

"I'm fine," he repeated, carefully putting his arms around her. She closed her eyes and laid her head against his chest. After a few moments, she turned to Reggie and hugged him tightly.

**Greenlee walked over to Jack. “Thank God you’re OK,” she said. “I was so worried. I mean, we’ve barely even started to get to know each other and -”**

**“I know,” Jack said, taking her hands in his and looking down at her. “Look, I asked Erica to bring you here for a reason. I don’t know how to prepare you for this. It’s not bad,” he said immediately, seeing the look on her face. “In fact, if it turns out the way I think it will, it’s going to bring you the happiness you’ve been searching for these past months.” He led his daughter toward the opposite corner of the room. When the young man stepped out of the shadows, Greenlee’s look of shock and disbelief quickly turned to joy as she rushed toward him.**

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**Jack listened to Lily’s excited chatter with a smile on his face. He could remember a time when she wouldn’t have been able to put her feelings into words like this, even with him. The drive to bring her back to school was just what the two of them needed. Erica had insisted that they go alone so they could share some father/daughter time and had even arranged for them to keep the limo for another day since Lily enjoyed riding in it so much.**

**As they approached the school, Jack reflected on the events of the past few days. Derek had informed him that the men who kidnapped Reggie were members of Vanessa’s old gang. They had apparently found Leo after he fell in the river and kept him in the dark about his identity, no doubt thinking that he could be useful to them somewhere down the line. Derek and his men had also uncovered their connection to Jack’s opponent, a man with a habit of looking the other way when it came to organized crime. The last thing they wanted was someone like Jack in the governor’s race.**

**Reggie had bounced back in typical Reggie fashion. He had spent most of his time at the hospital with Greenlee and Leo while David ran a battery of tests on Leo. Jack could see that Reggie and Leo were already becoming fast friends. After the initial shock, Greenlee was happier than Jack had ever seen her. For the first time since he had discovered that she was his daughter, he felt confident about her future. Meanwhile, Jack and Erica had spent a lot of time with Lily assuaging her fears and she seemed to be doing better than she had in years.**

**“Remember, honey, the next time Erica and I pick you up, it will be to take you home for good,” Jack said to his daughter.**

**“I know, Daddy, I can’t wait,” Lily said excitedly. “And I can’t wait for the wedding.”**

**They got out of the car together and Jack hugged Lily as she went inside with one of her teachers. He got back in the car, pulled out his glasses, and picked up the**

notes Tad had given him for his next speech. He was so engrossed that by the time he looked up and out the window, he realized he had no idea where they were.

He leaned forward and pressed the button for the privacy glass. "Excuse me, but we're supposed to be heading back to my campaign headquarters," he said when the glass went down ever so slightly.

"Don't worry, sir, we're just taking a shortcut. We're right on schedule," came the muffled reply. It occurred to him that he hadn't gotten a good look at the driver. There was something oddly familiar about the southern twang in the driver's voice and before the privacy glass went back up, he was sure he caught a glimpse of red hair under the chauffeur's cap perched on the driver's head.

After all that had transpired in the last few days, Jack briefly entertained the thought that he was being kidnapped. *Relax*, he told himself, *you're just on edge after everything that's happened*. The limo took a turn down a country road leading even further away from town. *That's it*, Jack thought, *something is definitely going on here*. He leaned forward to press the button again and then stopped when he realized that his surroundings were familiar. *I haven't been down this road in years*, he thought, *not since-*

His train of thought was interrupted when the car rounded a curve and he saw the sign at the fork in the road.

**BLACK ANGUS INN  
5 MILES AHEAD**

He smiled at the feeling of nostalgia and anticipation that swept over him. He truly was engaged to the most beautiful and exciting woman in the world and he loved that she knew exactly what he needed - what they needed.

The car came to a stop and Jack got out. He leaned in through the driver's window and kissed the chauffeur on the cheek. "Thanks, Opal," he said with a grin. He turned and walked into the inn. It was like stepping back in time. It looked exactly as he remembered it. He approached the desk and the clerk held out a room key. "We've been expecting you, Mr. Montgomery," the young man said with a smile. Jack didn't need to look at the room number on the key as he headed for the stairs.

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Erica lit the last candle as she heard the key in the door. She turned and smiled at Jack as he walked in. Her breath caught in her throat at how handsome he looked. What she had to tell him would change their lives forever and she had wanted everything to be just right. She had given careful thought to every detail,

from her upswept hair to her strapless black gown, from the softly lit candles to the scented flowers, from the romantic music to the carefully chosen dinner.

She met him halfway across the room and reached up to kiss him, putting her arms around his neck and leaving them there. "You are right on time, Mr. Montgomery," she said with a smile.

"I didn't exactly have any choice now, did I?" he answered with a laugh. "At least now I know what you and Opal have been up to the last few days."

"Are you objecting?" she teased.

"Not a chance," he replied. "This is exactly what we need," he added, taking in every little detail in the room and then looking down into her eyes.

"Yes, it is," Erica said. "No reporters, no press conferences," she undid his tie and dropped it to the floor. "No kids, no phone calls, no....clothes," she said seductively, starting to unbutton his shirt.

"I'm starting to think you lured me here for purely illicit purposes," he murmured, bending down and kissing her bare shoulder. "So how long do we have?"

She smiled mischievously. "Well, Lily is safely back at school, Greenlee is with Leo, and Reggie is spending the night with Kendall and Bianca. That means that we have the rest of this afternoon, all night and all day tomorrow until we have to be back."

"You, my love, are incredible," he told her. He dimmed the lights and pulled her close as the music changed to a slow, romantic tune. They moved in time to the music, the candles flickering in the dimly lit room.

"This is perfect," she sighed. "Yes, it is," he agreed as he dipped her.

"Jack, your arm -" she protested.

"Is fine," he finished as he lifted her back up to him, smiling down at her. "My God, you're beautiful," he said hoarsely as his mouth claimed hers. Their tongues met as the kiss deepened, leaving them both breathless. He reached behind her and unzipped her dress. She shivered as his hand caressed the length of her spine. The dress dropped in a pool at her feet. He reached up and pulled the pins from her hair and it tumbled around her shoulders.

She hurriedly unbuttoned the rest of his shirt and pushed it from his shoulders, stopping when he winced as it traveled past the gash on his arm. "Sorry," she whispered, covering the wound with her lips. She kissed her way up his arm to his neck. He groaned and picked her up, lowering her slowly to the bed. She

pulled him down to her, running her fingers through his hair.

“I heard what you said, you know,” she spoke softly. At his questioning look, she continued. “I’m your heart – and you’re mine.”

“Yes, you are,” he said huskily as their lips met. “From the moment that we met until the day that I die.”

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The fading candles still cast a warm glow in the room as Erica lay with her head on Jack’s chest. She knew that it was time to tell him and even though she had gone over it in her mind time and time again, she was so nervous she didn’t know how to start.

“Actually, Jack, I did have an ulterior motive for luring you here,” she began. “Besides the illicit one, I mean.”

“Ah, dinner maybe?” he suggested, looking over at the meticulously set table. “I realize that we were supposed to eat first but I’m not the only one who got sidetracked...several times.”

Erica laughed softly. “I’m not complaining,” she said. “But there is something else.”

“Sweetheart, is this about the wedding?” he asked. “I know you want us to set a date and believe me, I do too, but with all this craziness with the campaign I just don’t think we can do it until after the primary. I want everything to be perfect, not rushed.”

“I do want us to set a date,” she replied. “And it should be sooner rather than later.”

“I promise as soon as we can,” he said. “You know that we’re already a family in every way that counts. There is nothing more important to me than you and our children.”

“You’re an incredible father, Jackson.” She took a deep breath and continued. “What would you say at the chance to be there from the very beginning this time? To be able to be a father from the very first day? To be able to share in every moment of a child’s life – with me?”

“Sweetheart, we’ve talked about this and I’ve told you -” Jack stopped. There was something about the look on her face that made him choose his words carefully. “What exactly are you telling me, Erica?”

**“I’m telling you that it’s about to happen - well, in about seven and a half months anyway,” she said, starting to laugh and cry at the same time.**

**Jack stared at her, not saying anything, but the look on his face was all that she had hoped for. “I don’t know what to say,” he finally said. “Are you sure?”**

**“Yes, I’m sure,” she replied. “Are you happy?”**

**“Happy? I’m ecstatic!” he reached down to kiss her and she felt his tears mingle with hers. “What about you? Are you OK with this?”**

**“It’s a dream come true, Jack, it really is,” she said. “So you don’t think it’s too late?”**

**“What have I always told you?” he asked and then said. “That’s the great thing about us, kiddo - it’s never too late.”**

**“I love you so much,” she said, reaching up to touch his face.**

**He captured her hand, kissed it and held it against his cheek. “I love you, Erica,” he said. “It doesn’t seem possible to be this happy, especially after everything we’ve been through. Maybe we needed to go through all of it to get to this place. I don’t know.” He leaned down and kissed her softly. “I’ll tell you what I do know. Our life together -especially now - may be many things, but it will never, ever be boring.”**

**“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she said, pulling him down to her.**

**“Neither would I,” Jack replied. “Neither would I.”**

