

FAMILY TIES

by Anne Boleyn

Summary: Jack and Erica are married, and everyone's a happy family. Till a letter from Kendall and a small surprise changes everything. Part 2 of Meant To Be Series
Rating: PG

Chapter 1

"So did you tell her yet?" Leo asked. He and Bianca were meeting for breakfast at McKays.

"I thought I'd wait until tonight. Uncle Jack just got back from his conference last night," Bianca replied.

"Aaah, you want him to run interference for you."

"Partly. And besides, Mom was in such a rotten mood the three days he was gone that it was hardly the time to tell her anything. Especially something that's going to make her go ballistic."

"Maybe it won't be so bad," Leo said.

"Are you kidding?" Bianca rolled her eyes. "Did you ever see The Exorcist where the girl's head spins around? That's probably mild compared to the way Mom's going to react when I show her this letter."

Erica awakened when she felt Jack's lips nibbling at her neck. She smiled and stretched out her arms over her head. "Mmmm, this is so much better than an alarm clock." She turned and snuggled closer to him. "Jack, I missed you so much. I know it was only three days..."

"But it felt more like three years," Jack finished her sentence. "You know, I was wrong."

"About what?" Erica looked at him puzzled.

Jack leaned down and kissed her. "Every morning when I'd wake up in that hotel room, I'd imagine you lying there next to me. Then I'd think that I had to be mistaken - that no one could possibly be as beautiful as the woman I was picturing. But I was wrong. When I woke up and looked at you this morning, you were even more

beautiful than I had imagined."

"Why Mr. Montgomery, you say the sweetest things," Erica said teasingly in her best Scarlett accent. Then she wasn't able to say anything else as Jack's mouth was on hers and his hands were caressing her body.

Dixie stood in front of the mirror and tugged at her skirt, smiling at how tight it was. Another week and she'd have to start wearing maternity clothes. Sometimes she still couldn't believe that the new specialist in high risk pregnancies had given them the go-ahead to have a baby. Tad had been reluctant at first but after several conversations with the doctor he had been as eager as she was. Dixie almost blushed remembering some of the marathon baby-making sessions that had resulted in this little miracle inside of her. She turned as Tad staggered out of the bathroom and collapsed onto the bed.

"Oh no sweetie, are you sick again today? I thought you were feeling so much better."

"I was," Tad groaned. I was fine last night . It's such a weird virus, it goes away during the day but it comes back every morning."

Dixie's eyes widened and she started to smile. "Tad, I think I know what's wrong with you."

Tad's voice was muffled by the pillow over his head. "Some kind of tropical disease?"

"Morning sickness! Think about it. You've been sick the last three mornings in a row but you feel fine the rest of the day. You're having morning sickness." Dixie tried not to laugh but she couldn't help it.

"Don't be ridiculous Dix. I'm probably dying and you're making fun of me."

"I'm sorry Tad, I know you feel awful but you're having morning sickness. Do you want me to get you some crackers?" Dixie was laughing so hard she almost collapsed on the bed.

"You're a vicious woman Dixie. I never realized that about you." Tad glared at her but he had a sneaking suspicion that she was right. "You go ahead and laugh. I'll just lay here in misery. Don't worry

about me."

"Poor baby." Dixie leaned down and kissed him. "I have to leave for work now. You should be better in a couple of hours."

"Jack, did you think Bianca was behaving strangely last night?" Erica and Jack were finally getting around to having breakfast.

"She seemed a little quiet maybe. Why? Do you think something is wrong?"

"I don't know. She's just seemed a little secretive again for the past few days. I thought we were to the point where she could talk to me about anything but I think now she's keeping something from me." Erica looked down at her coffee cup. "I guess I can't blame her for being afraid to confide in me after the last time," she said with a trace of sadness in her voice.

Jack reached across the table and took her hand, stroking it with his fingers. "You two are past all that now. I'm sure Bianca will tell you what's bothering her when she's ready. And I'm sure that whatever it is, you'll understand

Chapter 2

Mom, Uncle Jack, there's something I need to talk to you about," Bianca said as the three of them were finishing dinner.

Erica and Jack exchanged glances. "Go ahead sweetheart. You know you can tell us anything," Erica told her daughter.

"Just please listen to everything I have to say before you get upset," said Bianca. She took a deep breath. "A few days ago, I got a letter in the mail. It was from Kendall."

"Kendall!" Erica's face was flushed. "Well, I certainly hope you burned it!"

"No Mom, I read it. You can read it too if you like. She says in the letter that her mother, her adoptive mother died a few weeks ago. She's all alone in the world and I'm her only sibling. She'd like for us to get together, just to get to know each other."

"Absolutely not!" Erica got up from the table and started pacing

around the room. "Bianca, you are to have no contact of any kind with her. Do you understand?"

"Bianca, you remember what Kendall was like. Do you really want to see her again?" Jack asked.

"I really do Uncle Jack. I know she was awful to you Mom. She was awful to me too. Maybe she's changed. Maybe not. But I want to meet her and decide for myself. She sounded really alone in her letter and I know how it feels to be alone. And she is my sister. It's strange having a sister out there that I never see or hear from." Bianca was determined not to back down.

"I think I can understand that," said Jack. "I remember how I felt when Chrissy came back after so many years and I had the chance to be a brother to her again. I don't think you'll find a real sister in Kendall but I can understand why you want to try."

"Jack, how can you even consider this?" Erica asked.

"Mom, it's my decision. Look, she's living in New York now but we're going to meet on Saturday at a restaurant in Center City. Leo's going with me just to keep an eye on things. I'm not going in expecting a great reunion or to find a new best friend. I just want to meet my sister and see what she's like after all this time. Can't you understand that?"

"No, I can't." Erica was angry. "But you've made up your mind so whether I understand isn't important is it? Now I'm going upstairs to bed." Bianca turned to face Jack. "Are you mad at me too?" "No honey. I understand why you want to do this. But be careful. If Kendall is anything like she was before, you can't trust her at all. Promise me you'll keep your guard up."

"I promise." Bianca hugged Jack. "Will you try to get through to Mom? She'll listen to you."

Erica turned away and walked to the window when Jack entered their bedroom.

"I guess you're not very happy with me right now," he said.

"No I'm not. You're my husband Jack. Why can't you just be on my side?"

Jack put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. "I'm always on your side. You know that. But Bianca needs to do this. The harder you fight her, the more determined she's going to be. She takes after her mother in that respect."

"But Jack, she doesn't know what she's getting into."

"I think she does. Bianca's a good judge of character and she's very smart. She gets that from my side of the family." He was rewarded by a trace of a smile from his wife. "I imagine it will take her less than an hour to see through Kendall. Her curiosity will be satisfied and that's the last we'll hear of it."

"But what if it's not? What if Kendall worms her way back into our lives? What if Bianca wants to be close to her and blames me for not accepting her into our family? I came so close to losing my daughter before Jack. I don't want to go through that again."

Jack pulled Erica into his arms. "Sweetheart, let's not borrow trouble. Bianca loves you. She's not going to turn against you because of anything Kendall says or does."

"I wish I was as sure of that as you are." Erica held on to Jack tightly.

"And I wish I could promise you that Kendall won't cause any problems but I can't. What I can promise you is that I love you and that we will deal with whatever happens together."

Chapter 3:

Mom, I'm leaving now." Erica and Bianca were standing in the living room.

It was Saturday morning and Leo had just arrived to drive Bianca to Center City.

"Bianca, I still wish you'd reconsider. You can call and leave a message at the restaurant saying that you changed your mind."

"It's going to be OK Mom. What could happen? I'm going to meet Kendall in a public place with Leo right there. She's not going to kidnap me or anything."

"I wouldn't put it past her to try," Erica said. "Promise me you'll be

careful. Don't get sucked in by some pitiful story she tells you to gain your sympathy."

"Bianca's too smart for that." Jack came downstairs at that moment. "She can handle this Erica. Have faith in her."

" See Mom, Uncle Jack trusts me."

" I trust you too honey. I just don't trust Kendall." Erica held Bianca tightly for a moment, then watched through the window as she and Leo walked to the car.

Bianca and Leo arrived at the restaurant a little early. Bianca was more nervous than she wanted to admit. They were seated at a table close to the door and she jumped every time it opened and someone walked in. Fifteen minutes went by, then twenty, then thirty.

"I don't think she's coming," Leo said.

"Let's wait just a little longer." Bianca stared as a young woman came through the door carrying a baby. "Oh my God, that's her!"

"Bianca?" Kendall came up to the table. "You're all grown up! I can't believe it." She turned the baby to face Bianca. He was dark haired with huge brown eyes and chubby cheeks. "Nicholas, say hello to your Aunt Bianca."

"He's so cute Kendall." Bianca smiled and reached out to touch the baby's cheek. He grinned at her showing two teeth. "You didn't say anything about him in your letter. How old is he?"

"Eight months. He's the reason I wanted to get back in touch with you."

Kendall sat down and smoothed the baby's hair. " I want him to have a family Bianca. My parents are dead and you're my only sister. I don't want him to grow up alone." Kendall looked as if she meant what she was saying.

"Wow, I'm an aunt!" Bianca was still smiling at her nephew. She reached over and tickled the baby on his tummy. "Kendall, this is my friend Leo. I hope you don't mind him being here."

"Not at all. I can understand why you wanted some moral support. I

know I was pretty mean to you when you were a little girl." Kendall looked down at her son.

"Did you tell Erica you were coming? I'll bet she wasn't jumping for joy." She smiled and said with a trace of bitterness, "How do you think she'll feel about being a grandmother? "

Bianca immediately went on the defensive. "If you're going to start trashing Mom then this meeting is over."

"No Bianca I'm not. I actually understand her a little better now that I'm a mother too. There's a lot more to it than just giving birth. I know why she never felt like I was her daughter." Kendall was trying to pacify Bianca. "Would you like to hold your nephew?"

"Sure." Bianca held out her arms for the baby. He went to her happily.

"Would you mind watching him for me while I go to the ladies room? It was a long drive." Kendall asked.

"No problem." Bianca and Leo played peek-a-boo with the baby, both of them enchanted by him.

They didn't notice how much time had passed until the waiter appeared at their table, asking if they would like to order.

"My sister's in the ladies room. We'll wait for her. She should be right back," said Bianca.

"Do you mean the young woman who was at your table earlier? She left about ten minutes ago, " the waiter told her. " She asked me to give the two of you a few minutes before I took your order or I would have been to the table sooner. She also left the baby's car seat up at the front for you to pick up."

"What?!" Bianca was stunned. "You must be wrong about that. She was just going to the ladies room. Here Leo, hold the baby while I go check."

"Can't I go check while you hold him?" But she was already gone. Leo looked at the baby. "So kid, you're not going to spit up or anything are you?"

When Bianca came back to the table she looked sick. "She's really gone Leo. I looked everywhere. There's a car seat at the front and a note with my name on it that says 'I'm sorry'. Leo what am I going to do? Mom is going to kill me!"

Chapter 4

Erica, looking at your watch every five minutes isn't going to make the time go any faster," Jack said gently. He came up behind Erica and put his arms around her.

"I know," she said leaning back against him. "I just can't help worrying. I'd hoped that Bianca would have had enough of Kendall by now." Just then they heard a car coming up the drive.

"Thank God," Erica said. "Now maybe I can relax and enjoy the rest of the day."

Bianca and Leo came up on the front porch. Bianca was carrying Nicholas.

"Leo, please, you go in first and prepare Mom for this. If I walk in with the baby she's going to have a heart attack."

"Can't I do something easy like swimming with live sharks?"

"Leo, please!" Bianca begged.

"OK, but you owe me big time." He went into the living room, leaving the front door ajar. Bianca waited on the porch.

"Leo, where's Bianca? What happened?" Erica was instantly on edge.

"She's right outside. Sheshe.....well you see Kendall....." Leo was beginning to sweat. "There's this.....she left awe didn't know she wasnone of this was my fault!"

Bianca came through the door. "Thanks for breaking it to her gently Leo."

She walked up to Erica. "Mom, meet your grandson."

Jack sat next to Bianca on the couch while she explained everything that had happened in Center City, asking questions occasionally. Erica paced around the room, never saying a word as Bianca told her

story. "I didn't know what else to do when I couldn't find Kendall. So Leo and I just came home," Bianca finished. She was holding Nicholas on her lap while he played with Leo's car keys.

"You did the right thing honey," Jack told her.

"What are we going to do now?" Bianca asked him.

"We call the police and report an abandoned child, that's what we do." Erica finally spoke.

"I think we need to make sure we have temporary guardianship of the baby too," Jack said. "Then we try to find his father. He may be looking for his son."

"You must be joking! We can't keep that child!" Erica looked horrified.

"Mom, we have to! Where else would he go?" Bianca was close to tears.

Jack walked to where Erica was standing. "Erica, if we don't take him, the police will have to turn him over to Child Protective Services and place him in foster care. You don't want that."

"Why not? He may not even be Kendall's child. She might have kidnapped a baby and then dumped him on Bianca before she was caught. This could all be some trick. You know what she's capable of." Erica was too upset to make sense.

"Sweetheart, I don't think that's possible. Besides, he must be Kendall's son. He has your eyes."

"Jack, half the people in the world have brown eyes."

"Not like yours." Jack went back to the couch and took the baby from Bianca. He walked over to Erica. "His eyes and his smile are exactly like yours honey. You'd see that too but you haven't really even looked at him."

Erica turned away. "I'm going to the study to catch up on some work. I can't deal with this right now." She left the room without looking at anyone.

Nicholas had been very good up until now but he was growing fussy.

Bianca tried giving him the bottle of apple juice that was in the diaper bag but he pushed it away and began to cry louder.

"Uncle Jack, what should I do? The last baby I was around was my little brother and that was years ago."

"You're one up on me kid. The last baby I was around was you." Jack took the baby and began bouncing him up and down on his knees. Nicholas cried even harder.

"When Happy's fussy I scratch his belly," Leo offered.

"Leo, you're not helping," Bianca snapped.

"Let me try." No one had noticed Erica coming back into the room. Jack handed her the baby and she put him onto her shoulder and started rubbing his back with a circular motion. She swayed back and forth rocking him gently and humming to him.. The baby snuggled down and stopped crying almost instantly. Jack smiled at her lovingly. "It looks like you have the magic touch."

"He was fighting sleep just the way you used to Bianca. This always worked for you." Erica's voice was shaky but she cuddled the baby closer. I guess we can keep him for a few days while we try to find his father."

Chapter 5

"I think that's everything," Erica said as she handed the list to Bianca. Nicholas was asleep in his car seat and Erica had prepared as list of everything the baby would need for a few days. Leo and Bianca had volunteered to go shopping. "The only thing I'm not sure of is formula. I don't know what Kendall was using or if she was breastfeeding."

"I don't think she was breastfeeding. She didn't look very....." Leo's voice trailed off as Erica and Bianca turned to stare at him. "Just trying to be helpful."

"Mom, I thought we were only keeping him for a few days. There's a ton of stuff on this list."

"Babies need a lot of things every day Bianca. It's a big responsibility taking care of someone so helpless." Erica looked down at the sleeping baby and smiled. "But until we find his father or hear from

Kendall, its what we have to do."

After Bianca and Leo left, Jack came in from the study. "Were you able to reach Tad?" Erica asked him.

"Yes, he'll be right over. I think letting Tad investigate rather than involving the police is the best way to handle this." Jack sat down next to Erica and put his arms around her as she leaned against his shoulder. "Are you really OK with this?"

"I was just so shocked at first Jack. When Bianca told me that she was gay, one of the hardest things was the idea that I'd never have a grandchild. I know that's hard for you to believe but it's true. I loved the idea of being able to spoil a baby rotten. Then I thought that someday Bianca might still decide to have a child and that I would get the chance after all. I never once thought about Kendall and any child that she might have. Then all of a sudden her baby was right there in front of me and I just couldn't deal with it. Does that make me some kind of monster?"

Jack stroked her hair. "Not at all sweetheart. Kendall made your life a living hell when she was here before. If having her son here is going to bring all that back"

"It's not the baby's fault. It's strange Jack. When I looked at Kendall I always saw Richard Fields, no matter how hard I tried not to. I was afraid it would be the same with her child. But when I look at Nicholas I don't see Kendall or Richard Fields, I just see this beautiful baby."

"So what are we going to call you? Nana, Granny?" Jack's voice was teasing.

"Granny? Bite your tongue!"

"I'd rather bite yours." Jack leaned in and kissed her, nipping at her tongue playfully with his teeth.

"That's quite a story," Tad said a couple of hours later after Jack and Erica had filled him in on all the details. Nicholas was awake now and sitting on Jack's lap chewing on his watch. "It's a good thing he's too little to realize what's happened. I know from personal experience you never really get over being left behind like you didn't matter."

"I'm sorry Tad. I didn't think about how this might bring back awful memories for you." Erica looked at him with concern. "You look a little pale. Is this case going to be too hard for you?"

"No, not at all," Tad replied. "I haven't been feeling very well the past few mornings but I'm OK. Dixie says never mind."

"You'll be able to start on this case right away won't you," Jack asked. "We need to find out who this baby's father is and where Kendall could have gone as quickly as possible."

"I know Del and Kendall broke up a few years ago," Tad said. "I'll check with him and see if he has any idea where she's been living. I'll look into the return address on Bianca's letter but I'll bet you lunch at McKay's that it's phony."

"I won't take you up on that," Jack said. "I'm sure its phony too. You might check down in Florida and see if Alice Hart is really dead or if that was another one of Kendall's lies." He put the baby down on the floor and watched him crawl to Erica. She picked him up and held him over her head, both of them smiling identical smiles. Jack felt a twinge of worry at how attached Erica already seemed to the child. "Tad, I want this taken care of quickly," he said quietly. "We need to get this little guy back home."

Chapter 6

Erica stirred and looked at the clock when she heard the baby crying. "6:30," she thought sleepily and started to sit up when Jack stopped her.

"You go back to sleep honey, I'll get him this time."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"It's my turn. We'll get in some male bonding." Jack kissed her and got up from their bed.

He walked into the nursery to find Nicholas standing up in his crib. When he saw Jack in the doorway he stopped crying and grinned. "You little fraud. You just wanted attention," Jack laughed. The baby chuckled as if he understood what Jack had said. "Oh well, I'm up anyway. We might as well go play for a while." Jack picked up the baby and headed downstairs with him.

Erica had listened to the exchange through the baby monitor, smiling at how soft-hearted Jack was where the baby was concerned. Then she turned over and went back to sleep. When she woke up the next time it was almost 8:00. She got up and went downstairs. There she found Jack lying on the couch with Nicholas on his chest, both of them sound asleep. She was hit by a wave of love for both of them that was so powerful it almost made her knees buckle.

Erica walked over to the couch, knelt beside it and dropped a kiss on Jack's forehead as she stroked the baby's hair. "Is this what you call male bonding?" she asked as Jack opened his eyes.

"Hey, sleeping on the couch is a guy thing," he grinned. "We were going to have beer and potato chips but it was a little too early."

Nicholas woke up and held out his arms for Erica. She picked him up and gave him a quick hug. Then as he began squirming to be put down, she placed him in his playpen which was full of toys. She stood beside the playpen for a moment, watching him attack his Pooh bear and roll around with it, giggling. Jack noticed an expression of sadness cross her face.

"What is it sweetheart?" he asked.

"I didn't want this to happen Jack. I didn't want to fall in love with another child that I can't keep." Her eyes had filled with tears.

"Sometimes I still ache inside when I think about Maddie and remember those months when I was her mother. I loved her so much. I know we've only had Nicholas for a few days but he's such a part of my heart it's like he's always been mine." The tears were streaming down her face now. "Jack, I don't think I can just hand him over to Kendall when she comes back. I think it will kill me to have to give him back."

Jack took Erica in his arms and held her tightly. "It's ok, it's ok," he murmured into her hair. "I'm meeting with Tad later today. We'll see what he's found so far." He tilted Erica's face up toward his. "Maybe he'll have information that will help us keep him. Kendall may never come back and if she does, it shouldn't be too hard to prove that she's an unfit mother."

Tad and Jack met for lunch later that day at the Valley Inn to go over

Tad's report. "Alice Hart died about 6 weeks ago," Tad said handing Jack a folder with a print-out of his report. "According to her neighbors, she never knew where Kendall was or what she was doing. Kendall would show up occasionally, sometimes rolling in money, sometimes broke. The interesting thing is this - Alice had been taking care of Nicholas from the time he was about three months old until the day she had a heart attack. Kendall appeared one day out of the blue with the baby. Alice hadn't even known she was pregnant. Then just like she did to Bianca, she took off without a warning leaving the baby behind. No phone number, no address, no way for Alice to get in touch with her if the baby was sick. Only Alice was the one who got sick. After she went to the hospital, her next door neighbor looked after the baby. Kendall just happened to come back the day before Alice died or she might never have known."

"So Alice dies and Kendall goes looking for the next available place to dump her child," Jack said in disgust. "She's still the same piece of slime that she was years ago."

"I haven't had any luck in finding out who the father might be. I haven't found any trace of a birth certificate. Del had no idea if Kendall was seeing anyone. Alice didn't seem to know or if she did she never confided in her neighbors. I'm sorry I don't have more for you Jack."

"That's OK Tad. From what you've told me, I don't think we have to worry about Kendall coming back for the baby. If she does, we should be able to keep her from getting him."

"Whoa, what are you saying? You're thinking about keeping the baby?"

Jack looked down at his plate. "He's such a great kid Tad. He's happy almost all of the time. It's been wonderful having him with us. I don't think we could just give him back to Kendall, knowing she wouldn't take care of him. If we knew who the father was it would be different. But it doesn't look like he's been in the picture for a long time if Kendall even knew who he was. Erica's so happy just being with Nicholas. I'd do anything to make sure Kendall doesn't take that away from her."

"You know, as painful as being abandoned in that park was, it was also the best thing that ever happened to me. Mom and Dad took me in and my life changed so much for the better." Tad had tears in his eyes. "If you and Erica can do the same for that little boy, well, anything I can do to help, just ask." Then Tad looked at Jack's plate. "Are you going to eat your pickle? For some reason I just can't stop eating pickles lately."

Chapter 7:

"Dixie, you're doing beautifully." Dr. Thomas finished up the exam. "I almost feel guilty treating you as a high risk pregnancy."

"That's such great news," Dixie beamed. "I know I feel wonderful. Fat, but wonderful."

"Your weight is exactly where it should be for this point in your pregnancy. Fifteen pounds is a good weight gain for right now."

"I've gained twenty," Tad said. "I've got to get to the gym more often."

"You need to stop eating pizza at midnight," Dixie laughed. "Dr. Thomas, do any of your other patients have husbands with cravings?"

"Not that I know of," the doctor grinned. "But I'm glad his morning sickness has eased up."

"I can't believe you told him about that." Tad looked at Dixie and shook his head. "It's a sad thing when a wife makes fun of her husband like this."

When they got home, Tad checked his e-mail, hoping for results in his search for Nicholas's birth certificate. It had been almost three months with no luck which wasn't really surprising. He had no idea of the exact date or place of birth so it was truly like searching for a needle in a haystack. Dixie looked at Tad's serious expression as he hit another dead end. "This case really gets to you doesn't it?"

"I can't help but identify with that little boy. Kendall may not have physically abused him the way Ray abused me, but she still abandoned him. If Jack and Erica could have her parental rights terminated, they could adopt him. But they can't do that if they can't

prove he was her son to begin with. I just want to help make sure Nicholas is safe. I remember how I used to lay awake at night terrified that Ray would come back for me before the adoption was final."

Erica sat on a bench in the park watching Lily feed the ducks in the pond. Nicholas was in his stroller beside her and Lily would hand him bread crumbs and show him how to throw them into the water. She was completely enthralled with the baby and had spent most of her spring break visit playing with him.

Erica glanced at her watch. Bianca and Leo were bringing a picnic lunch in a few minutes and Jack was going join them if he could get away from court on time. She leaned back against the bench and closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the absolute contentment of being with the people she loved most in the world. Suddenly a shadow fell over her blocking the sun. She looked behind her.

"David!" she said in shock. "What are you doing here? I thought you were still in jail."

"Early release due to a sterling record."

Lily pushed the stroller back to Erica and sat down next to her.

"Who is this?" David asked.

"This is my step daughter Lily." Erica could tell that Lily was nervous and she put her arms around the child.

"I heard you'd gotten married again. So Montgomery's turned you into June Cleaver has he?"

Lily buried her face in Erica's shoulder and began to shake. "Bad man, bad man." she said.

"What's wrong with her?" David asked.

"Darling, this is Leo's brother. You know how much you love Leo. Don't be afraid." Erica was trying to calm Lily but she kept chanting, "Bad man, bad man."

Nicholas picked up on the tension and began to cry. Erica reached

out with one hand to soothe him while keeping one arm around Lily. David began to laugh. "Not quite like the old days of playing Vittorio and Principessa is it? I'm staying at the Valley Inn again. Why don't you ditch all this and join me there?"

"Get out of here David," Erica was still trying to keep her voice calm for the children's sake but she was visibly upset.

"You heard her David, get lost!" Leo grabbed his brother by the arm and dragged him away from the bench. He and Bianca had come up unnoticed.

Bianca picked up Nicholas and began calming him while Erica kept trying to reassure Lily. Leo kept dragging David until they were in the parking lot.

"You stay away from my family, do you hear me? "

"Family? I'm your family Leo or have you forgotten?"

"We may share Vanessa's gene pool but that's not what makes a family. My family is over there and you stay away from them or you'll answer to me."

Jack walked up to the maitre d at the Valley Inn. "I had a message to meet Bianca Montgomery here. Could you tell me if she's arrived?"

"Actually the message was for you to meet your step-daughter. And I have arrived Jack."

Jack turned to find Kendall standing behind him.

"We need to talk," she said. "I want my son back, as soon as you can get his things packed. I'm only in town for a couple of days and I'm not leaving without him."

Jack walked over to a corner of the lobby, pulling Kendall with him. "You're insane if you think we're going to just hand him back over to you. You abandoned him in a public place with a teenage half sister you hadn't seen in years. You haven't called or been in touch to check on him. We know this is a pattern with you - you did the same thing when Alice was taking care of him. No judge is going to give a child to you."

"No judge is going to let my mother keep him either Jack. She's a recovering drug addict, she's served prison time for kidnapping another child, her other daughter is gay..... I don't see any court system proclaiming her mother of the year. Imagine the tabloid headlines if she even tries to keep me from my son."

Jack grabbed Kendall by the arm. "If you do anything to hurt Erica, I'll see to it that you pay big time, do you understand me? You stay away from Erica, you stay away from our home, and you stay away from Nicholas!" He strode out of the Valley Inn. leaving Kendall standing there rubbing her wrist.

"Well, well, it seems we have a common enemy." Kendall looked up to see a dark haired man standing next to her.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"My name's David Hayward. Why don't I buy you a drink? You can tell me how you know Jack Montgomery and why you seem to dislike him as much as I do."

Chapter 8

Kendall and David went into the bar in the Valley Inn and settled at a table in the back.

"Now tell me, how do you know Jack Montgomery?" David asked.

"He's my step-father."

"Wait a minute. I know Erica very well and you're not Bianca."

"I'm Kendall, the daughter Erica gave up at birth." She laughed at the shock on David's face. "I guess you didn't know Erica as well as you thought. I'm not surprised she never mentioned me. She prefers to pretend I don't exist. Bianca is her golden child, the one who can do no wrong."

"Not always," David grinned. "She wasn't exactly thrilled when she found out that Bianca was gay."

Kendall leaned forward and looked into David's eyes. "Really? Tell me."

"She threw me out of her house once for even suggesting it. She

was crying on my shoulder about Bianca's roommate from rehab and how upset Bianca was because the girl was getting married and didn't invite Bianca to the wedding. I pointed out the obvious, that Bianca would rather have been the groom than a bridesmaid and Erica came unglued."

"Interesting." Kendall looked thoughtful. "You and Erica must have been pretty close."

"Extremely," David said suggestively. "She couldn't get enough of me."

"I can see why," Kendall reached across the table and stroked his hand. "Have you ever had a mother and daughter before?"

"Not yet," David said softly. "But I think that's about to change." They got up and headed upstairs to David's room.

Jack got home just as Erica had put Nicholas down for a nap. Bianca and Leo had taken Lily to the mall. When he walked in the door, Erica told him about the encounter in the park with David. Then she noticed how quiet he was being. "Jack, what's wrong?"

Jack took Erica gently by the shoulders. "Kendall's back in town."

"Oh God no! Did you talk to her?" Erica looked terrified.

"She says she wants Nicholas back. I told her to forget it. Honey, we'll take her to court if we have to. No judge is going to side with Kendall over us."

"You can't be sure of that Jack. She's his mother. The courts almost always side with the biological parent." Erica began to pace like an animal trapped in a cage.

"I don't think they will in this case." Jack took Erica's hands, stopping her pacing and leading her to the couch. "Besides, I'm not so sure she really wants him. She didn't ask about him at all, didn't want to know how much he'd grown or if he was well. She didn't even ask if she could see him, she just made a lot of demands and threats."

"What kind of threats?"

"She mentioned the tabloids," Jack told her reluctantly.

"I don't care what she does to me Jack. I'm not giving Nicholas back to her. I won't!"

Kendall got up and put on her robe. "So how was it?" she asked David. "Was I as good as Erica?"

"That's kind of a sick question," David laughed. "I like that in a woman. "

He got up and headed into the bathroom. When Kendall heard the shower start she went to the phone. "Hi, its me. Yes, I made contact. They want to keep him. It shouldn't be a problem to get them to pay through the nose."

It must have been a combination of the stress of the day and the thunderstorm that night that brought back Erica's nightmare of her 14th birthday. She was back in her father's house in California and she couldn't get away from Richard Fields. She couldn't scream, she couldn't fight back and she could hear her father's voice in the background saying "You get what you deserve." She woke up sobbing as Jack was gently shaking her. For a moment she pushed him away, still lost in the nightmare. Then as she realized where she was and who she was with, she clung to him tightly.

"Ssshhh, ssshhh, I've got you, you're safe, " Jack murmured over and over as he held her against him. Gradually he felt her body relax into his as her terror receded. "I won't let anyone hurt you," he said as she was falling asleep again . "I'll stop anyone who tries to hurt you."

Chapter 9:

Bianca stood at her locker the next afternoon, sorting through her textbooks when she felt that someone was staring at her. She turned to see Kendall standing behind her.

"Surprised to see me?" Kendall asked.

"Not really," Bianca sounded much calmer than she felt. "Mom told me this morning that you were back. She warned me that you might try to contact me."

"I want my son back Bianca. Jack warned me to stay away from the house but you can help me. You can get him out of the house and

bring him to me."

"You must be crazy! There's no way I'd bring him to you."

Kendall stepped closer and her voice was low and vindictive. "I think you will baby sister. If you don't the tabloids will have a field day with what I can tell them about your sexual preferences."

"That's old news Kendall. I'm openly gay or hadn't you heard?"
Bianca started to walk away.

"But as far as anyone knows, you've never been in love. I think the Intruder would love a story about the rehab roomie that turned Erica Kane's daughter into a lesbian."

Bianca stared at Kendall in horror.

"An old friend of mummy's told me all about it. Your first great love and how she broke your heart by getting married."

"You can't do that!

"I can do anything Bianca. If you don't want to see all of this at the grocery store checkout, then make sure I have Nicholas with me by tomorrow morning." Kendall turned and walked away.

Bianca hurried down the hall with her head down trying to control her tears when Dixie reached out and stopped her. "Bianca, what's wrong? Was that Kendall you were talking too? Should I call school security?"

"No, Mrs. Martin, don't call anyone. I just need to talk to my mother. I have to tell her what Kendall is trying to do."

"Honey, you're too upset to drive right now. Why don't you come in to my classroom and tell me what happened? That will give you time to calm down."

Bianca sat down in a chair near Dixie's desk and told her everything that Kendall had said. "I can't let her do this Mrs. Martin. Sarah, the girl she was talking about, slit her wrists a few months ago. Her husband found her in time and she's OK physically but she's still being treated for depression. She's never been able to live openly and to be dragged through the tabloids might make her suicidal

again." Bianca began to cry. "But I can't give Nicholas back to her either. She's so evil. I can't let her take him away. God only knows what would happen to him. What am I going to do?"

Bianca was calmer when she reached Erica's office at Enchantment. However Erica took one look at her daughter's face and took her in her arms. "You saw Kendall, didn't you?"

She listened without a word as Bianca told her the whole story. Then she said in an icily calm voice, "Don't worry about any of this sweetheart. I'll take care of everything. You go home and forget Kendall ever existed."

"But Mom, what are you going to do?" Bianca was a little frightened by her mother's lack of emotion. She had expected ranting or hysterics, not this icy demeanor.

"You don't need to worry Bianca. It's going to be all right."

Dixie stopped at Tad's office on her way home from school to tell him about Kendall's appearance at the high school. "I can't go into any details but she's actually blackmailing her sister into giving the baby back to her. Can you believe anyone would use an innocent little baby like that?" Dixie's hands went to her stomach protectively.

"She's just like Ray Gardner. A child is property to her, not a human being with rights and feelings," Tad's voice was bitterly angry. "I think I'll pay a little visit to Miss Kendall Hart and get a few things straight with her."

Bianca was still worried when she got home. No one was there. "Coral must have taken Lily and Nicholas to the park," she thought. "I hope Kendall doesn't find them there." She picked up the telephone and dialed Jack's office. "Stephanie, it's Bianca. May I please speak with my Uncle Jack?"

"I'm sorry Bianca. He left the office suddenly a few minutes ago. I don't know where he went. Would you like to leave a message?"

"Just have him call me please." Bianca hung up the phone. She wondered what was going on.

Chapter 10:

Kendall opened the door of her hotel room to find Jack standing there.

"Well, well, I guess Bianca must have gone running to you," she said.

"I haven't spoken to Bianca today," Jack answered entering the room and shutting the door. "I've spent all day talking to family lawyers and family court judges. They all told me the same thing."

"If you think you're going to intimidate me into giving up my son, you're wrong."

"That's not what I'm here for. They all told me that if you want Nicholas back, then the courts will side with you. You never relinquished custody, there were no signs of abuse, you left him with a family member. It kills me to say it but we don't have any way to stop you."

Kendall turned and walked toward the window. This wasn't going at all the way she had planned. She tried not to panic as she asked, "What does Erica have to say about this?"

"I haven't told her. Nicholas is down in the lobby right now with Coral, our housekeeper. All of his things are packed and in my car. I want you to take him now and leave town. It will be easier for Erica this way than for you to rip him out of her arms."

Kendall was frantically trying to think of a way out of this. "I wasn't...."

Just then there was a pounding on the door. "Kendall, open this door! I know Jack's there!" It was Erica's voice. Kendall went to the door breathing a sigh of relief. Maybe there was hope after all. Erica pushed past Kendall and went straight to Jack. She slapped him across the face. "How could you do this to me?"

"Sweetheart, I was trying to protect you."

"By giving my child away? You're not getting away with this. I told Coral to take him home and start packing your things instead of his."

"Erica, legally, there's nothing we can do."

"Maybe you're precious legal system is important to you, but not to me. I won't lose another child because of legalities. Now get out of

here and let me talk to Kendall. I'll handle this on my own."

Jack reached out for her. "Erica, don't do this."

She jerked away from him. "Go Jack. Nicholas is my flesh and blood, not yours. I don't want you here."

"Fine, have it your way. You always do," he said angrily. Jack left the room as Kendall tried to hide her smile. Now things were going better. She had been worried for a while.

"I want my son back Erica. Jack said you can't do anything about it."

"Jack only sees things in black and white. Besides, he doesn't know you like I do. What will it take to get you to sign over your parental rights Kendall? You know you don't really want him but I do. I'll do anything, I'll give you anything, I just want to keep Nicholas." Erica looked close to tears.

"I'm not like you Erica. I can't give up my own child so easily and never look back."

"Let me make it easier for you Kendall. I'll make sure that he never wants for anything. You can see him whenever you like. You're not ready to be a full-time mother Kendall. This would be a good time for you to make a fresh start in life. What do you need? How can I help you?"

Kendall decided to put her cards on the table. "I don't have any money Erica. I deserve something from you. I was raised middle class while Bianca has always had everything. You're prepared to give my son the world. What about me?"

"How much do you need?" Erica reached for her checkbook.

"\$500,000. It's a nice round number don't you think?"

"You've got it. But in return you sign a paper giving up your parental rights and allowing me to adopt him" Erica handed Kendall a check for \$10,000. "This is a down payment. You'll get the rest when you sign the papers."

She turned and left the room. Kendall smiled in triumph. "I did it! I got half a million dollars from her. I can't believe it was so easy."

Erica left the Valley Inn through the delivery entrance and walked to a van marked Pine Valley Linen Service. She opened the door and climbed inside. Jack and Derek were waiting for her.

"Baby, you were amazing!" Jack said hugging her.

She caressed his cheek. "Did I hurt you?"

"A little," Jack grinned. "For someone so tiny, you've got an incredible right hook."

"Did we get enough to nail her Derek?" Erica asked.

"And then some," Derek replied. "She sold her child to you. No doubt about it. You had her pegged Jack. You know, if you two ever want to give up the law and the cosmetics industry and do undercover work, just give me a call."

Tad arrived at Kendall's door about 15 minutes after Erica left. He had thought all the way over about what he would say to Kendall. First he would try to appeal to her parental instincts. If that didn't work he would go for the jugular, telling her he was prepared to dig up more dirt on her than would fit in the Grand Canyon. He knocked on the door and it swung open. When he walked into the room he saw Kendall lying on the bed. Her eyes were open and staring. There was blood soaked through the pillow she was lying on. He felt for a pulse in her neck even though he knew he wouldn't find one. Tad stepped back into the hall and pulled out his cell phone.

"911. What is your emergency?"

"This is Tad Martin. A woman has been murdered in Room 734 in the Valley Inn.

Chapter 11:

Bianca was sitting on the couch watching Lily and Nicholas play with a jack-in-the-box when Jack and Erica arrived. She was amazed to see them both smiling as they came through the door. Erica went straight to Nicholas, picked him up and twirled around with him in her arms. "How's my little sweetheart? Did you know that today was your lucky day?"

"Mom, what happened?" Bianca was completely confused.

"Kendall's on her way to jail honey. As soon as you left I called Jack and told him everything. He came up with the most brilliant plan and it worked like a charm." Erica put Nicholas back on the floor, hugged Lily and came back to the couch to sit next to Bianca.

"It worked thanks to an Oscar caliber acting job on your mother's part." Jack was smiling broadly.

"Will you two stop complimenting each other and tell me what happened?" Bianca was getting exasperated.

"When your mother told me about your conversation with Kendall it confirmed what I had suspected. She didn't really want Nicholas. She's never asked to visit him or even shown any interest in him at all. Kendall was after something else and knowing her history it could only be one thing - money. She wanted us to be so desperate that we would pay anything to get him."

"So we went to Derek and told him about her attempts to blackmail you and Jack's theory that she wanted money in exchange for her baby," Erica continued. "He wired us and we set Kendall up. Jack pretended he was going to give her the baby to throw her off balance."

"You should have seen her when she thought her whole plan was about to crash," Jack laughed. "She actually turned green."

"Then I came in and threw Jack out. I ranted and raved and offered her anything and she fell for it hook, line and sinker." Erica reached out and took Jack's hand. "We made quite a team didn't we?"

Jack leaned down and kissed her. "The best!" Bianca, right about now Kendall is being arrested for trying to sell her child. Her parental rights will be terminated and we should have no trouble adopting Nicholas. I don't think you have anything to worry about where Sarah is concerned either. Even the tabloids aren't going to pick up on a story that she would try to sell them now."

Lily came over and sat down hugged her father. "Good job," she said smiling.

Derek was talking to the staff and guests on the seventh floor of the Valley Inn. Kendall's body had been taken to the coroner's office and

the crime scene had been secured. David approached him in the hallway.

"Derek, I might be able to give you some information about the murder."

"Just how did you know there had been a murder?" Derek asked.

"Everyone in the hotel knows. News like this spreads fast. I saw a man leaving Kendall's room earlier this afternoon, not long before I heard that she had been killed." David smirked at Derek. "I heard this same man threaten her only yesterday. Interested?"

Derek opened his notebook. "I'm listening."

"Jack Montgomery was leaving Kendall's room about four this afternoon. He told her yesterday afternoon to stay away from Erica or she'd be sorry. I know Kendall was trying to get her baby back and Jack was fighting her on it. Apparently Erica has become very attached to the child and doesn't want to let him go. Erica is Montgomery's Achilles Heel, Lt. Frye. He beat the hell out of me once because he thought I'd hurt her. His violent streak should be documented even though your department ignored his assault on me. If he got angry enough at Kendall, I don't think he'd have any problem with killing her. I think you need to take a good hard look at him." David looked very pleased with himself.

"Jack Montgomery has an airtight alibi," Derek said. "I can assure you that he's not the killer. What I do find interesting is that you knew Kendall Hart. Just how well were you acquainted with the deceased? And where were you this afternoon between 4:15 and 4:30?"

David looked chagrined. Once more things seemed to be slipping out of his control.

Dixie listened as Tad told her about finding Kendall's body. "How awful for you sweetie! I'm so sorry you had to go through something like that."

"Kendall was one of those people that courts trouble. I'm just glad that she can't cause any more trouble for her little boy." Tad turned away from Dixie and looked out the window.

She watched him, feeling a little nervous at his reaction. "Tad, she

was a human being. You make it sound like her death was a good thing."

"I can't pretend that it was a tragedy Dix. I just don't see it that way. "

"Do you know what we should do next week?" Jack asked Erica. She was rubbing his shoulders, helping to erase some of the tensions of the day.

" I think we should go to the beach house outside of Charleston. It's the last week of Lily's spring break and the first week of Bianca's. We could all stand to get away and just relax."

"That sounds perfect," Erica answered. She sat down on his lap. " I adore the idea of making love on the beach." She kissed him, feeling his tongue slip between her lips as he laid her back onto the couch. His hands had just opened her robe when the doorbell rang. Erica gave Jack a few moments to get back to normal, then opened the door. It was Derek.

"So Derek, is Kendall behind bars?" Jack asked.

"No she isn't. I'm sorry to have to tell you this Erica but Kendall is dead. She was murdered this afternoon."

Chapter 12

Derek filled Erica and Jack in on as many of the details as he could. "We have a very small window during which the murder could have occurred. Between the time Erica left the room and Tad called 911, there is only a fifteen minute interval. Erica, did you see anyone at all when you left Kendall's room?"

"No one," she answered. "The hall was empty. There were people on the elevator but they were coming from an upper floor." Erica looked at Derek. "I guess its a good thing that Jack and I were wired or we might be your top suspects."

"You and Jack do have the best alibis I've ever run across."

"Alibis for what?" Bianca came down the stairs. "What's going on?"

Jack went to Bianca and put his arm around her."Honey, Kendall's dead. She was murdered."

"Bianca, could you tell me where you went after you talked to your mother this afternoon?" Derek asked.

"Derek, you're not seriously asking my daughter if she has an alibi?" Erica was furious.

"It's OK mom. I came straight home Lt. Frye."

"Was anyone here who can verify that?"

"This is ridiculous. You can't talk to Bianca as though she were a common criminal."

"Mom, don't worry. I don't have anything to hide. No one was home when I got here but Coral came in with the kids about ten minutes later. I called Leo to tell him about Kendall. You can ask him about the times if you need to."

"I will check with Leo, but don't worry Bianca. You're not really a suspect." Derek told her.

"Derek, Erica and I were thinking about a trip to Charleston next week. Is there any reason we can't go ahead with our plans?" Jack was watching Erica with worry in his eyes. Except for her anger at Derek's questions to Bianca she seemed to be withdrawn. She had shown no emotion at all when Derek told her about Kendall's death.

"I don't see why not. Just make sure you leave a number where I can reach you if anything comes up."

"I still can't believe that Kendall is dead," Erica said later that night, sitting in the window seat of their bedroom. "I gave birth to her Jack. I should feel something more than this vague sadness."

Jack knelt in front of her and took her hands. "There aren't any rules where feelings are concerned Erica. Kendall never brought you anything but pain from the moment of her conception. She only came back into your life to cause more trouble. It would be surprising if you felt any real grief for her."

"It's ironic isn't it? She was conceived in an act of violence and she died in an act of violence." Erica looked down at their clasped hands. "The least I can do is to take care of the final arrangements. I want her body sent back to Florida where she can be buried next to

her parents."

"We can take care of that tomorrow. Right now, why don't you let me take care of you? You've been on such an emotional roller-coaster the last couple of days.

"I'm fine Jack. You don't have to take care of me." Erica reached up and touched his face.

"I want to take care of you. I want to take away any pain you might feel, any fears you might have." Jack picked her up and carried her to the bed, kissing her and cradling her close to his chest.

"I love you so much Jack. I think I fall a little more in love with you every day." She wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him with a growing passion as she pulled him down on top of her.

"I need you to make love to me Jack. Is that an awful way to feel with everything that's happened today?"

"I don't think so," he said tenderly. "Making love for us is like sharing our souls. There's never a time when that's wrong."

Chapter 13

Jack and Erica walked hand in hand along the beach. The children were all in bed and they had decided to enjoy some private time at the ocean's edge.

"I'm so glad you thought of coming here Jack. It's been a perfect vacation so far. Lily and Nicholas love the ocean and the beach. Bianca's made friends and is having so much fun."

"Of course, we've hardly seen her but I guess that's part of being the parents of a teen-ager," Jack said smiling.

"I'm glad she's just getting to be a normal teen-ager for a change," Erica said.

"Now if we can just get your nightmares to stop once and for all, our trip will be a complete success."

Erica's nightmares had continued almost nightly since Kendall had reappeared. Jack usually felt her begin to tremble and was able to wake her up before the dream became too intense, but he still hated

for her to have to deal with nightmares at all.

Erica stopped walking and looked up at Jack. Even in the moonlight he could tell she looked stricken. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I know I'm being needy again and I'm so sorry. I don't want to suffocate you."

Jack took her face in his hands. "Do I look suffocated? Honey, you're not being needy. There's a difference between needing someone and being needy. God knows I need you just as much as you need me. You've been through a lot, that's all. I want the nightmares to stop because they're hurting you." He leaned down and kissed her, pulling her close. "Now, what was that fantasy you had about making love on the beach? "

Erica stood on the wide porch of the beach house watching Jack on the beach with Lily and Nicholas. Lily could sit for hours just watching the waves come in but she never ventured near the water. Nicholas was another story. Ever since the night when he took his first toddling steps from Erica's lap into Jack's outstretched arms, he had been in constant motion. He loved to walk up to the edge of the water and someone had to watch him every minute to make sure he didn't go any farther. Finally, even though the water was still chilly, Jack had carried him into the waves. He shrieked with laughter as the water splashed up on him.

Erica walked down to where Lily was sitting and called, " Jack, bring him back in now. The water's really too cold."

When Nicholas realized that he was being taken out of the water he began to scream. By the time they reached the shore he was in the middle of his first full-blown temper tantrum. Jack put him down on the beach towel and watched him kick and scream with an amused smile. "You know, he looks more like you every day," he said to Erica. She laughed and scooped up the screaming toddler. "Ignore him sweetheart. Daddy doesn't understand people like us who feel things so intensely."

Jack had called Derek every other day to see if there was any progress being made on the investigation into Kendall's death. The coroner had determined that she died from a blow to the head, probably from the butt of a gun. Fingerprint and fiber evidence had been collected but without a suspect it wasn't helpful. The tabloids

had featured lurid headlines for a few days about the murder of Erica Kane's daughter but interest in that story had been eclipsed by the latest Hollywood divorce. By the time Jack and Erica had taken Lily back to school and arrived home from their vacation, the investigation was stalled.

"Perfect timing," Erica said as she and Jack arrived at the Valley Inn for lunch at exactly the same time.

"Excuse me, aren't you Erica Kane?" A man with a slight southern accent approached them in the doorway. "I'm sorry but I really need to talk to you about your daughter Kendall."

"My wife has no comment," Jack said moving protectively between Erica and the stranger.

"I'm not a reporter. I knew your daughter in Dallas. We lived together for several months. I'm hoping that you can help me find my son."

Chapter 14

"My name is Jeff Talbot. I met your daughter in Dallas two years ago. I can't say that we fell in love but we had a child together. She left one night without any warning and she took my son with her. I've spent almost a year looking for him but it was like they vanished without a trace."

Jack, Erica and Jeff were sitting at a table in the Valley Inn. Jack reached out and took Erica's hand. It was ice cold and she looked pale.

"You couldn't have looked that hard. Up until three months ago he was with Kendall's mother in Florida.", Jack said.

"I didn't know there was a mother in Florida. I didn't even know her name was Kendall Hart until I saw her picture in a tabloid in the grocery store. I almost passed out in the checkout line. Here was the woman I'd searched for for months and I had never even known her real name." Jeff looked at Erica. "I had no idea that she was related to you Ms. Kane until I read the article in the Intruder. I thought her name was Ricki Jo Fields."

"Oh my God," Erica gasped. "She told you her name was Ricki Fields? She was using his name?" She looked like she might faint.

"I'm sorry, it's obvious that I've upset you. When I read the article I knew where she got the name. I didn't mean to bring him up but I want you to understand that I had no idea who she was. Please Ms. Kane, do you know what happened to my son? Ricki Jo was here when she was killed. I thought that maybe she had contacted you. His name is Nicholas. He's almost a year old. In fact, his birthday is next week. Did she tell you anything about him?" Jeff looked desperate.

"Nicholas has been living with us," Erica told him. "We've had him for three months."

Jeff's eyes filled with tears. "You mean I've found him? After all this time, he's right here? I can see him today?"

"Wait a minute," Jack interrupted. "How do we know you're on the level?"

"I don't blame you for being suspicious," Jeff said. "I have Nicholas's birth certificate in my suitcase. And I have some pictures of him when he was little." He hesitated. "Do you have any pictures I could see? I've tried to imagine what he would look like as he was growing but ..." He pulled out his wallet and handed it to Erica. She and Jack saw there were several pictures of a dark-haired baby that was unmistakably Nicholas. In some shots he was alone, others were of Jeff holding the baby. Erica handed him back his wallet and pulled out her own. Jeff's hands shook as he looked at the pictures of his son. He handed the wallet back to her and got up from the table. "I'll go get the birth certificate now. I want you to be sure I'm who I say I am. It's clear that you've taken very good care of my son. I've prayed that he was with people who loved him." His voice choked and he turned and walked away.

Erica looked down at her lap. "We have to give him back, don't we Jackson?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"I don't know," Jack answered, putting his arms around her and kissing the top of her head. "We don't have to make any decisions right now. "

After seeing the birth certificate, Jack and Erica agreed to let Jeff see Nicholas that afternoon. He followed them to their house in his car.

As they entered the house they found Bianca and Leo listening to music in the living room.

"Nicholas's room is upstairs," said Jack. "I'll go with you." He turned and looked at Erica. "Are you coming too sweetheart?"

"I'll stay down here," she said. She still looked very pale and withdrawn.

As Jack and Jeff started up the stairs Bianca went to her mother and put her arms around her. "Mom, what's wrong? Who was that?"

"He's Nicholas's father," Erica said. "He's been looking for his son. I guess we were living in a fantasy when we thought the father wasn't ever in his life."

"Does he want Nicholas back?" asked Leo.

"He hasn't said that in so many words but I'm sure he does," Erica said.

"No, Mom, we can't just give him to this guy!" Bianca said.

"I'm afraid we might not have a choice," Erica replied. "I'm going for a walk. I need to clear my head." She went outside, controlling her tears until she was on the front porch.

Jack watched expressionless as Jeff played with Nicholas on the floor of the nursery. He seemed to be at ease with the baby but there was something about him that Jack was unsure about. Jeff noticed how carefully Jack was watching him and said, "You don't like me very much do you?"

"I don't know you well enough to like you," Jack answered. "But I love my wife more than anything in the world and you're about to rip her heart out. I'm sorry if I can't exactly be friendly under the circumstances."

"I can understand that. If I were you and your wife I'd probably hate me too. But I can't help what Ricki Jo, I mean Kendall, did. I never gave up my son. I know you love him but he is MY son. I want to take him home to Dallas."

"I'd like to ask you one thing," Jack said. "I want you to give Nicholas

time to get to know you before you take him. He's been bumped around a lot in his short life. If he knows you, it won't be quite so hard on him. Will you wait for two weeks before you leave with him, visit him every day, play with him, let him adjust to being with you?"

" I think that's a great idea," Jeff said. " I want him to be happy. And I want you to know that I intend for you and your wife to stay a big part in his life. I have no intention of cutting you out." Jeff held out his hand and Jack shook it, still not completely convinced.

When Jack found out that Erica had gone for a walk he set out to find her. She was sitting on a bench in the park watching a group of children play in the sand. He sat down beside her and wrapped his arms around her. "Are you all right?" he asked.

" Is he gone? Did he take Nicholas with him?" she asked.

"You know I wouldn't let him do that while you were gone," he told her. "I've persuaded him to give us two weeks with Nicholas. That will give him time to get to know the baby. It will also give us time to get to know him."

Erica looked at Jack. "What do you mean?"

"I just think there may be more to Jeff Talbot than he's telling us. I want to check into his story. Maybe he's telling the truth. But if he isn't, we have two weeks to find out what he's really up to."

Chapter 15

"Tad, come in," Jack said as he answered the door later that night. "I'm glad you could come over on such short notice."

"You said Nicholas's father showed up this afternoon. That must have really thrown you and Erica. What can I do to help?"

"I want you to check into this guy. His name is Jeff Talbot, at least he says that's his name. Kendall apparently was living under an assumed name so we can't be too sure about anything." Jack handed Tad some papers. "He showed us a birth certificate from Dallas. I'd like for you to start there. This is the date and time of birth and the hospital where he was born. "

" What exactly do you want me to be looking for? Do you think he's not really the baby's father?"

"I think he probably is," Jack paused for a moment. "There's just something off about him. It's like every reaction he has is too perfect if you know what I mean. Maybe I just want there to be something wrong with him but every instinct I have tells me that Jeff Talbot isn't what he seems."

"The fact that he was with Kendall is one strike against him," Tad answered. "I'll leave for Dallas in the morning. As soon as I have something for you, I'll be in touch."

Jack went up to the nursery where he found Erica rocking Nicholas to sleep. He watched them from the doorway for a little while before Erica saw him. When she started to get up from the rocking chair he went in and took Nicholas from her arms, putting him into his crib. "He's getting almost too heavy for you isn't he?" he said to her as they left the nursery with their arms around each other's waists.

"Almost," she said with a sad smile. "Is Tad going to check on Jeff?"

"He's leaving for Dallas tomorrow. I'm betting he can find out if this guy is legit or not."

"Jack, will you promise me something?"

Jack took her face in his hands. "Sweetheart, I wish I could promise you that we can keep Nicholas but I can't."

"I know you'd do anything to make that happen. That's not what I'm talking about." Erica sat down on the bed and pulled Jack down beside her. "Darling you love Nicholas as much as I do. Losing him will hurt you just as much as it will hurt me. If we have to give him up, I want you to promise me that you won't shove your own pain aside and spend all your time comforting me. Will you promise me that you'll let me be strong for you while you're being strong for me?"

"I think I can promise you that." There were tears in both their eyes as they held each other.

The next morning Dixie kissed Tad goodbye at the airport and watched from a window until his plane was in the air. As she started to walk away she heard someone call her name. "Oh no," she thought. She turned around. "What are you doing here David?"

"I had a job interview in New York as an insurance company

consultant. You know I can't practice medicine anymore. Aren't you happy to see me Dixie?" he asked. "I'm surprised that I haven't run into you sooner since I've been back. You haven't been avoiding me have you?"

"Honestly David? I haven't given you a second thought." Dixie glared at him.

"I don't believe that." He put on his most seductive look. "I'll bet you thought about me a lot. I'll bet you thought about me the whole time I was in prison too." He looked at her stomach and leered at her. "Were you thinking about me when your child was conceived?"

Dixie slapped him hard across the mouth. "You're disgusting!" She started to walk away but he grabbed her arm. "I'm sorry Dixie. That was a terrible thing to say. But you hurt me so badly last year. It almost killed me when you didn't come to see me in prison. Everything I did was for you." He turned on the hurt little boy look. "I thought you would understand that I loved you so much that I'd do anything to have you."

"I can't believe I ever fell for this," Dixie said as she turned to leave. David turned and headed for the baggage claim. She watched him, growing angrier by the minute as she thought about everything he had put her family through. When she saw a security guard standing nearby she walked up to him. "Officer, do you see that man walking toward the baggage claim area? I think I saw him on America's Most Wanted last night. Would you check him out please?"

"That was Jeff. He wants to come over this morning and see Nicholas." Erica had just hung up the phone as Jack came downstairs. "I told him to come around 10:00."

"I can be here then," Jack said. "I'll have to cancel an appointment but..."

"Jack, why don't you let me be the one who deals with him? I noticed yesterday he addressed almost all of his remarks to me. If he's conning us he probably sees me as the most vulnerable one. I think he'll be on guard around you but he might let something slip with me, especially if he thinks I trust him."

"Do you think you can make him think you trust him?"

"Have you ever known me not to be able to make a man believe what ever I wanted him to?" Erica smiled at Jack with some of the sparkle that had disappeared with Jeff's appearance in their lives.

"You have a point there," Jack said. "But be careful sweetheart. He may be just a nice guy who got duped by Kendall or he might be an even more ruthless con than she was."

"He can't con someone who expects to be conned. I think your instincts are right Jack. I think he's after more than just his son."

Chapter 16

"I can't tell you how grateful I am that you let me visit this morning Ms. Kane, " Jeff said as he and Erica came downstairs from the nursery. He hesitated a minute. "I'm a little surprised your husband wasn't here this morning. I got the impression that he didn't like me very much."

"Jack is very protective," Erica said. " He knew I was upset and he took it out on you. But he'll come around once he knows that I trust you."

"Do you trust me?" Jeff asked. "I really want you to believe that Nicholas means everything to me."

"I can see how much you love him," Erica said, giving Jeff the smile that had graced thousands of magazine covers over the years. "I saw it when you looked at his pictures yesterday . I saw it this morning when you played with him. Nicholas deserves the best life has to offer and that includes a loving father."

"I want you to visit us often when we get back to Texas," Jeff said. He looked down at the coffee table. "Of course my apartment in Dallas would fit inside Nicholas's nursery here. I hope he doesn't grow up thinking I'm a failure."

"Jeff, let me buy a house for you and Nicholas". Erica leaned forward and took his hand. " A house with a big yard and lots of trees. Nicholas is already a climber and I know he'll want a treehouse someday. If you'll agree, I'll start today looking at houses on the internet."

"I can't ask you to do that." Jeff looked shocked.

"You didn't ask me. I offered. Please Jeff, don't let your pride get in the way. Let me do this for my grandson." Erica gave him a melting look, the one few men could resist.

"Well, if it's for Nicholas I guess I can't refuse."

"Jack, you're instincts about Talbot were right. He's not being completely honest with you." Tad was calling from Dallas.

"Tad, hold on a minute. Erica's here and I'm going to put you on the speaker phone." Jack put the phone down and hit the speaker button. He sat down on his desk, Erica leaning against him slightly as he put one arm around her.

"I started at the hospital and was able to get an address where Talbot and Kendall were living when the baby was born. Kendall was using the Ricki Jo me all right, but listen to this. She bragged all the time about being Erica Kane's daughter. She told the manager, the neighbors, the pizza delivery people, anyone who would listen. One of the neighbors even remembers Jeff telling her to give it a rest. No one here believed her until the story came out after she was murdered. But there's no way Talbot didn't know."

"Even if he didn't believe her, if he had really been searching for her he would have come here long ago just in case," Jack said. "So we know he's lying about that."

"We need more than just the fact that he lies," Erica said.

"Tad, did you find anything else?"

"Not yet. I have another address to check in Fort Worth. I got this one from a collection agency. It seems Talbot and Kendall didn't always pay their bills."

"Keep looking Tad. I think we're on to something," Jack told him.

"And I'll make sure Jeff doesn't suspect that we're on to him," Erica said. "We have to find a way to keep Nicholas."

Chapter 17

When Jack opened the door to the house he was struck by how unnaturally still everything was. Not just quiet, not just empty but like the life had been drained out of it. He had a deep feeling of

foreboding as he went upstairs. He checked the nursery first. It was empty. Bianca's door was open but a quick glance inside showed that she wasn't there either. He looked through the doorway of the master bedroom. At first he thought it was empty too, then he saw something white on the floor near the window. As he came closer he realized it was Erica lying there, her outstretched hand the only thing visible from the door. She was face down in a pool of blood.

"God, no!" he moaned. Even before he picked her up he knew that no one could lose that much blood and live. "No, no, please God no..."

"Jack, Jack, wake up!" It was Erica shaking him. Jack sat straight up, shaking his head, trying to obliterate the nightmare from his mind. He felt Erica's arms around him.

"Darling, I didn't know nightmares were contagious." She stroked his hair with one hand, caressing his arm with the other. He laid back down, pulling her with him, and holding on to her tightly.

"I'm sorry I woke you up sweetheart," he said kissing her forehead.

"After all the nights you've had to talk me down from nightmares?" She caressed his chest. "Jack, your heart's still pounding. Can you tell me what the dream was about? It must have been awful to upset you so much."

"It's all jumbled, you know how dreams are." Jack couldn't bring himself to tell her. "Besides, you always make my heart pound when you touch me like that." He took her hand, kissing her palm, then he rolled on top of her, kissing her, almost inhaling her, absorbing the warmth of her body to dispel the iciness remaining from his nightmare. Their lovemaking took on an intensity that left them both gasping and exhausted. Erica curled up in his arms afterwards and fell asleep. Jack laid awake for a long time, still trying to banish the images of the dream from his mind.

"I'm showing Jeff these houses today," Erica told Jack the next morning, bringing up the realtor's web site. "I'll bet you a weekend in New York that he picks the most expensive one."

"Are you sure you want to go through with this? Why don't you let me deal with him today?" Jack still couldn't shake this strange feeling of

uneasiness left over from the night before.

"Jack, we agreed that I would be the one to handle Jeff. He thinks I'm a complete sucker where he's concerned. I've already given him money "for Nicholas" and he thinks he's conned me into buying a house. But we're running out of time. We only have a week left and all we know is that he's dishonest, and that he had a trail of unpaid bills all over Texas. I don't know if that's enough to beat him in court."
"

"Tad's still looking. He's in Houston right now checking on another lead."

"I know. But I think I can get something out of Jeff that might help. While we're talking about the house I'm going to ask a lot of questions, just as conversation. Maybe I can get some scrap of information that Tad can follow up on."

"No!" Jack's reaction was so vehement that it startled him. "Don't take any chances Erica. Just keep stringing him along. Maybe you can buy us another week if you stall on finding the perfect house to buy for him. But don't go any further than that."

Erica looked at him with concern. "Jack, he's a con artist but I don't think he's dangerous. I'm not going to ask him for his prison record or anything. But if I could find out something.."

Jack put his hands on her shoulders and bent down to look her straight in the eyes. "Promise me you won't try to trick him into revealing anything. Just let Tad do his job."

Tad arrived at the apartment complex in Houston, surprised at how much nicer this building was than the others he had seen. "They must have been moving up in the world when they lived here," he thought. He went first to the managers office and showed him the pictures of Kendall and Jeff. "I'm trying to trace this man. He may have lived here with this woman," he said.

"They lived here all right," the manager replied. But I swear I didn't know what they were up to. I wouldn't have people like that in my building."

"People like what?" Tad asked. This sounded promising.

"Who are you?" the manager asked. "Are you from one of those tabloid papers? I know the woman was Erica Kane's daughter and I don't want to say anything that might embarrass her. I've been a big fan of hers for years."

"Actually I'm working for Erica Kane. She needs to know everything she can about the man in the picture. Can you help her? I'm sure she would be very grateful."

"Well, they were both trouble. I threw them out for not paying their rent. I found out later the woman was working as a drug courier, you know, smuggling drugs in and out of the country. She made big money but I guess she couldn't be trusted. Whoever she was working for quit using her. That must have been when they quit paying the rent. She told one of the other women here she had another fool-proof way to make big money. This was right before she was murdered so I guess it didn't work."

"What about the man - Jeff Talbot?" Tad asked.

"He didn't run drugs as far as I know. He was here too much. He did have a violent streak though. Her friends said he used to knock her around sometimes. Of course they didn't tell me that while he was still living here or I would have called the police."

"Did they tell you anything else about him?"

"I heard from someone that he practically beat this guy to death in a bar fight over in Port Arthur. I don't know if it was true or not but I wouldn't be surprised."

"Jeff, come in," Erica said opening the door. "You're early. Nicholas won't be back from his playgroup for another hour."

"Oh man, I forgot about that. I can't get used to my little boy having a social schedule," Jeff laughed. "Would you mind if I came in and waited? "

"Not at all," said Erica. "I have some things I'd like to talk to you about." She thought to herself, "I'm not breaking my promise Jack. I'm just going to let him talk."

Chapter 18

Thank you Mr. Montgomery. I appreciate your help with probating my

uncle's will. I'm glad that Opal recommended you." Jack was meeting with Opal's friend Frederick.

"So am I," Jack said. "If you have any more questions, just call my office."

Frederick hesitated. "I don't mean to intrude, but you seem troubled about something. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Jack started to say no but he couldn't deny that he was troubled. The nightmare from last night kept haunting him. "Look, I'm pretty skeptical about psychics but do you think dreams can be premonitions?"

"It depends," Frederick told him. "Usually they're a reflection of your subconscious but I do believe at times they can foretell the future, or perhaps make you more aware of what the future might hold. "

"I can't believe I'm actually discussing this," Jack shook his head.

"I think that shows just how strongly this dream has affected you. And I'm not using my psychic powers to determine the dream must have been yours. Just simple reasoning," Frederick smiled.

"It was mine alright. I don't usually have nightmares and I've never had one that I just couldn't shake off. " Jack found himself telling Frederick about the dream. "It was just so damn real. I could feel how cold her body was when I picked her up, the blood was sticky on my hands. "

"It sounds unusually vivid. Have you been worried about your wife? Has she been ill or in a situation that you feel is dangerous?"

"Not physically. I've been worried about her emotionally. We've been going through a pretty stressful ordeal and I'm afraid that she may be terribly hurt. Do you think the dream was about that fear?"

"Possibly. But I sense that it may have been more of a warning. I think your wife needs to be careful for the next few days."

"Erica, these houses are incredible! I didn't expect anything like this when you talked about buying a house." Jeff was scanning the internet realty page that Erica had chosen.

"Nothing but the best for my family," Erica smiled. "Does one of these look like something you'd like?"

"I think the first one would be perfect," Jeff clicked on the details. "But this is so expensive. I never thought I'd live in a house like this."

"What sort of house did you grow up in?" Erica asked. Her eyes were wide and sympathetic.

"Nothing like this. We never had much." Jeff began to talk about his childhood. Erica listened, hoping to pick up something that she could use to nail him.

Jack thought about Frederick's warning that Erica should be careful. He reached for the phone. "I'm going to have her cancel meeting with Jeff this morning. I just have a bad feeling about this," he thought. Just as he was about to pick up the phone it rang. It was Tad calling from Texas.

"Jack, I think I may have hit paydirt. Talbot has an arrest warrant out for him in Port Arthur, Texas for assault and battery. It's under the name Jefferson Thomas but it's him all right. The Port Arthur police are sending Derek the information right now. The Pine Valley Police can pick him up right away." Tad's voice was triumphant.

"God, he's going to be at my house in 20 minutes! I've got to call and warn Erica." Jack hung up the phone and dialed his house.

"I'll call the realtor and make an offer for this house this afternoon," Erica said. "I think you made the perfect choice."

"I just hope you don't think I'm anything like Kendall," Jeff told her. "I'm only accepting the money and the house for Nicholas. I still can't believe that money was so important to her that she would try to sell him to you. Half a million dollars is a lot of money but a baby is priceless."

Erica froze for a moment. There was no way he could know about that. The only people who knew about the half million dollars were Jack, Derek, and herself. The papers had never printed anything about Kendall trying to sell her baby. The only way Jeff could know was if he was in the room at the time. And if he was in the room, then he might have been the one who killed Kendall. Erica turned and

looked at Jeff as the phone began to ring. "I need to answer that. Will you excuse me?"

"I don't think so. You see I just realized I made a mistake here." Jeff pulled out a gun and pointed it at Erica. "But it's not going to be a fatal mistake. At least not to me."

Chapter 19

"Erica, baby, pick up the phone," Jack said to himself. The answering machine must have been turned off because the phone just kept ringing and ringing. He hung up and dialed the police station, asking for Derek. "Derek, Tad told me you have the warrant for Jeff Talbot's arrest. I have this gut feeling he's at my house now. Erica's not answering the phone and I know she's supposed to be home. I'm on my way to the house now. Can you meet me there?"

"I'll be there Jack," Derek answered him.

Erica started backing toward the staircase. If she could just get up the stairs to the bedroom there was a panic button installed by the alarm company. If she could keep Jeff distracted until she could get to the button she might have a chance. "Where were you the day Kendall was killed? You must have heard my conversation with her."

"I was in the bathroom of her hotel room. She had called me the day before and told me we could expect a pay-off. " Jeff kept the gun pointed at Erica. " But then she changed her mind. She was going to keep it all. She told me I was a loser and kept dragging her down. She even laughed at me because there was nothing I could do if she kept the money. It would be her name on the check, we weren't married. I couldn't exactly take her to court to force her to split the money we got for selling our kid. If she hadn't laughed at me I wouldn't have hit her so hard."

"I'm sure you didn't mean to kill her," Erica said, still trying to reach the staircase. "We don't have to tell anyone about this."

"I'm not stupid," Jeff said. "I know you'd have the police on me the minute I walked out this door. Just like I know you're trying to get upstairs for some reason. But upstairs works for me. It will be so tragic. Erica Kane surprised by an intruder in her bedroom. I'll call Jack and tell him that you didn't answer the door when I got here but

that your car was home. I'll tell him that I'm worried, that I think he should come home. After all, he should be the one who finds the body. He'll be too grief-stricken to fight me over Nicholas so I'll take the kid home with me. I'm sure he's well provided for in your will so I'll live just fine on his inheritance. Don't worry, I won't let him forget you." He smiled cruelly.

Jack and Derek arrived at the house at the same time. "That's Talbot's car and Erica's is still here. She's in trouble Derek, I can feel it!"

"You stay out here Jack. Let me go in. I've called for back-up and they should be here soon."

"If you think I'm staying out here you're insane. My wife needs me." Jack pulled away from Derek and went into the front door. As the door opened, Jeff grabbed Erica; putting one arm around her throat and pointing the gun at her head. "Come any closer and I'll blow her head off."

Jack felt like his heart was about to stop. "What do you want Talbot? Money? You can have whatever you want. There's no reason to hurt Erica." His eyes met Erica's and he tried to will her not to be afraid. He knew Derek was coming around through the back door. If he could just keep Talbot talking ...

"He killed Kendall, Jack. I told him it must have been an accident. We can help him leave the country can't we?" Erica's voice was strong even though she still looked frightened. "No one ever has to know what happened."

"That's right Talbot. We can help you get away with this. Hell, there were times I wanted to kill her myself. Tell me what you need and I'll see that you get it." Jack saw Derek and another policeman moving quietly through the door leading from the dining room. "I can get you a passport under another name if that's what you want."

Just then Erica drew up her foot and plunged the spike heel of her shoe with the full force of her weight into Jeff's foot. He screamed in pain, loosening his grip on her neck, distracted just enough for Derek to rush forward and grab the gun. Erica threw herself into Jack's arms as Derek slapped the handcuffs on Jeff and the other policeman

dragged him out to the waiting car.

"Nice timing Erica," Derek told her. "How did you know we were there?"

"Jack, you're crushing me," Erica's voice was muffled against Jack's shoulder.

"Sorry," he murmured into her hair, easing his grip on her a little but still holding her very tightly, rocking her back and forth. "Are you all right sweetheart?"

"I'm fine. As soon as you came in, I knew I'd be all right." She turned slightly toward Derek. "I could tell by Jack's eyes that someone was behind us. I was hoping it was the police." She looked up at Jack. "You won't be making fun of my high heels for a while will you?"

Jack was still too shaken to laugh. "I should have been here. I should never have left you to meet him this morning. I knew something was wrong."

"Jack, you couldn't have known he was a killer."

"I should have listened to my instincts. I've known all morning that something was wrong but I didn't do anything."

"Didn't do anything? Jack, you saved my life. If you hadn't come in when you did he was going to kill me." Erica reached up and took his face in her hands. "You came in just in time with the police. How can you say you didn't do anything? We're so connected Jack. You always know when I need you and you're always there."

"I don't think I'm ever going to get over seeing you with that gun pointed at your head," Jack's arms tightened around Erica again. "Right now I don't think I can ever let you out of my sight again."

"I'm sorry to interrupt you two but I really need Erica to come down to the station and make a statement," Derek said.

"I'd be glad to," said Erica smiling up at Jack. "But I insist on bringing my lawyer with me."

Chapter 20

Later that night Erica stood over Nicholas's crib watching him sleep.

"Thank God you called Coral on your way here and told her not to bring him home," she said to Jack who was standing in the doorway. "It would have been awful if she had come in while Jeff was here. He might have held Nicholas hostage."

"Yeah, I handled everything just perfectly," Jack said bitterly and walked down the hall to their bedroom.

Erica followed him. "Jack, I don't understand why you're being so hard on yourself about this. If it weren't for you, Jeff would have killed me. The police wouldn't have found him here in time. Why do you keep acting like you could have prevented the whole thing?"

"Because I could have Erica." Jack turned away and looked out the window. "Do you remember the nightmare I had last night? I dreamed that something had happened to you. I was being warned and I didn't do anything about it. I should have stayed home and made sure that you were all right. It would have been just as easy for me to show him houses on the internet. But I left it up to you and you ended up with a gun at your head."

Erica walked up behind him and put her arms around his waist. "You offered to stay Jack. It was my decision to be the one who dealt with Jeff. Besides, if you had been here, he would have been more careful. He wouldn't have slipped up and we wouldn't have known that he killed Kendall. Maybe by finding out who killed her, I've made up in some way for not being able to care for her when she was alive."

Jack turned and put his arms around Erica. "I still feel like I failed you."

She leaned back and looked him straight in the eyes. "Don't you ever let me hear you say that again! Don't you ever even think something like that, do you understand me? Jackson Montgomery, you're the one person in my life who's never failed me. Not today, not in all the years we've been together, or in all the years when we were apart. You may not have always done what I wanted you to, but you never failed me." She looked up at him with a dazzling smile. "Now, are you going to keep beating yourself up over something that wasn't your fault or are you going to take me to bed and make love to me?"

Jack smiled down at her. "Hmm, decisions, decisions." Then he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed.

"Dixie, I'm glad you and Tad were able to meet us for lunch," Erica said smiling. "Are Tad and Jack here yet?"

"Not yet," Dixie answered. "And they say women are always late."

"Jack and I are so grateful to Tad for everything he did for us. He really went above and beyond the call of duty."

"This case meant a lot to him. He identified so strongly with Nicholas that he would have done anything to help." Dixie sounded very proud of her husband.

"Still, his being out of town for so many days must have been hard on you. I appreciate how understanding you've been. Bianca told me your baby is due next month. How are you feeling?"

Before Dixie had time to answer, they heard a voice that sounded all too familiar. "Well, well, my two favorite former lovers. Comparing notes ladies?"

"We're not that bored David," Erica snapped.

"Why are you still in Pine Valley anyway?" Dixie asked.

"I'm the new Global Insurance liason with Pine Valley Hospital. I'm going to be working on cost cutting measures. I think I can save the company millions by eliminating waste at the hospital."

"David Hayward, HMO king. How perfect," Erica said.

"King of more than that as both of you well know. Tell me, which one of you misses me the most?"

"OK sport, time for you to leave," Jack said as he and Tad came up to the table.

"Do you need a lift Dr. Demento?" asked Tad. He lifted David up by his right arm while Jack lifted him by his left. They carried him toward the door of McKays. Ryan Lavery was having lunch with Gillian at a table near the front. He jumped up laughing and opened the door as Jack and Tad tossed David outside. Then they turned and faced each other, dusted their hands off, and walked back to the table

where Erica and Dixie were laughing helplessly. As they sat down, Tad winced a little.

"Did you pull a muscle taking out that trash?" Jack asked him.

"No, my back has been hurting for the last couple of days," Tad answered.

"He's having Braxton-Hicks contractions," Dixie said grinning. "I'm hoping when I go into labor he can have an epidural. I don't think he'll be able to handle natural childbirth."

"Bianca, we have something we'd like to talk to you about," Jack said at the dinner table one night a few days later. Lily was home for the weekend and Nicholas had entertained the whole family by throwing as much of his dinner as he ate. "You know that we're starting adoption procedures for Nicholas next week."

"I know Uncle Jack. I already feel like he's my little brother more than my nephew."

"Honey, I'm going to adopt Lily at the same time," Erica told her. She reached over and stroked Lily's hair. "She's already my daughter as far as I'm concerned but we want it to be legal as well. "

"That's great Mom," Bianca told her. "Did you think I'd be jealous or something?"

"No baby, I was sure you'd be happy."

"Then why do you both look so serious?" Bianca asked.

"Bianca, I have a very important question to ask you," Jack said. He stood up from the table and took a deep breath. "I don't want Lily and Nicholas to be my children while you're my step-child. I already love you like you were my own daughter and I would be very grateful if you would let me adopt you. I know I can't take your father's place, that's not what this is about. I'll understand if you want to think about it. If you feel uncomfortable with the idea, I won't be upset. But if you decide that this is what you want, then I would be honored."

Bianca's smile lit up her face. "I think that would be the best thing I could imagine. And I think it would make Daddy happy." She got up from her chair and hugged Jack tightly as Erica watched them with

tears in her eyes. "Would it be all right if I started calling you Dad?"

"I can't think of anything I would like better," he answered. Nicholas started fussing in his high chair at that moment and Erica picked him up.

"You don't like not being the center of attention do you sweetheart?" she said. "I wonder who you inherited that from?"

Jack held out one arm to the two of them as Bianca reached out and took Lily's hand, pulling her to them. "This seems like the perfect time for a family hug," he said, his voice husky. "Because as far as I'm concerned we have the perfect family."

THE END