

The Journey Home

Chapter One by Mary

Erica reached for another glass of champagne as the tray passed by. The noise at the party had reached a crescendo level and she had the beginnings of a headache but there were still a few people she needed to talk to before she could make her getaway. She sighed as she realized that even though she had thrown herself into starting Erica Kane Fashions, the enjoyment that she always got when she started a new venture had somehow eluded her this time. She had thought that the excitement of Paris and the fashion industry would make her forget all that she had left behind but as the weeks had turned into more than a month, the last painful days she had spent in Pine Valley were still fresh in her mind.

As Bianca's due date had approached, all that she had been able to think about was getting away. The night of the baby shower she knew she couldn't take it anymore. She had thrown some things into a suitcase and ran. The message she had left on Bianca's answering machine was brief and she knew that it must have hurt her. The note she had left for Jack was briefer still and she had left her engagement ring with it.

She had known that she couldn't bring herself to make a complete break with Bianca and she had kept in touch with her, as well as with Opal and Myrtle. When Kendall had called last week to tell her that Miranda Mona had arrived, she knew that she still couldn't go back. She had heard nothing from Jack. Not that she had expected to, not after the way she had left. No one had mentioned him in their calls and she couldn't bring herself to ask.

She had kept herself busy catching up with old acquaintances from her modeling days and had attended every fashion show she could fit into her schedule. Her sketches had been turned over to the designers and she was expecting to see the first samples within a few days. The days she was able to fill, the nights were another story. Sleep would elude her for hours. She would have a glass or two of wine and then finally fall into a restless sleep.

Some nights she thought the dream might not come but it always did. It

was her birthday and there were decorations and a cake. She was so excited and couldn't wait for her father to come home. Then *he* would arrive and she was nervous but she didn't know why. Before she knew it, everything would start to spiral out of control. The dancing, the locked door, the fear and the pain.

Next she would fast forward to Bianca being born. She would do anything to protect this little miracle that had come into her life. Suddenly Bianca was all grown up and standing next to a crib. As Erica watched, horrified, Bianca reached into the crib and picked up a baby. Hearing someone laugh, Erica turned and Michael Cambias was standing there. "It will never be over, Erica," he said. "Never."

With his laughter ringing in her ears, Erica would turn and run. She realized that there was someone that she was trying to reach, someone that could save her and protect her. She knew deep inside of her that it was Jack and that if she could just find him she would be all right. But no matter how hard she tried, she could never quite reach him, even though she knew he was there. She would wake up sobbing, her heart pounding and sleep would be impossible after that.

The glass of champagne in her hand was suddenly empty and she signaled for another. As she reached to take it off the tray, her heart stopped when she heard a familiar voice from behind her. She would know his voice anywhere but she couldn't believe he was there. She turned and their eyes met across the room. Her hand hesitated for a moment on the glass and then she picked it up. Still not believing that it could be true, she watched Jack walk across the room toward her.

Jack's heart sank as he watched her pick up the glass. For a moment, he had thought that she wasn't going to take it but if he was honest with himself, he wasn't surprised that she was still drinking. He studied her as he got closer. She looked as beautiful as ever but if he looked closely, he could see the circles under her eyes and she was thinner than he could ever remember seeing her.

Now that he was actually here, he was unsure what her reaction would be to seeing him. When he had found the note and the ring, he had vowed not to follow her, that he would give her the space she needed. He had

decided that when the time was right, he would contact her and let her know that he was never giving up on her - on them - but now circumstances had brought him here for another reason.

“What are you doing here, Jack?” she asked as he reached her. “How did you find me?” Though her tone wasn’t warm, it wasn’t angry either and he took some comfort in that.

“I need to talk to you,” he told her. “It’s important and it couldn’t be done over the phone.”

“What could possibly be so important that you couldn’t tell me over the phone?” she asked. She suddenly looked worried. “Is it Bianca? Is something wrong? Kendall said everything was fine.”

“Bianca is fine,” he quickly reassured her. “Look, let’s go outside.” He motioned toward the terrace. “I can’t talk to you about this in here.”

He was relieved when she put the glass down and preceded him to the terrace. He watched her as she walked over to the railing. It was a beautiful spring night and looking at her outlined against the twinkling lights of the Paris sky made him think of happier times when they had been there together, their love new and untouched by all the heartache and misunderstandings that had happened since then. They had come so far since those days, yet sometimes he felt that they hadn’t come very far at all.

“Bianca is fine,” he repeated, “but there’s a problem with the baby.” He watched the expression on her face as he spoke but it revealed nothing.

“What kind of problem?” she asked slowly.

“They’re not sure yet,” Jack replied. “She has a very high fever and she’s having trouble breathing. They’re trying to rule out several things - all of them serious.”

Erica turned and looked out over the city again. “Thank you for telling me, Jack,” she said, “but you didn’t need to come all this way. A phone call would have been fine. I’ll go call Bianca now.” She started past him and he reached out and grabbed her arm. They stared at each other and he

slowly released her.

“I had a feeling that’s what you would say,” Jack said, “which is why I did come all this way. She doesn’t need a phone call, Erica, she needs her mother.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Erica said bitterly. “She has you, and Kendall and Lena and everyone else that cares about her. She wouldn’t want me there.”

“That’s not true and you know it,” he told her. “Look, we have all been giving you space but just how long do you think you can hide out here? Bianca needs you and I’m afraid if you don’t come back with me now you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

He took a deep breath, praying that he could get through to her. “Miranda could die, Erica, and I know that you won’t let Bianca go through that alone. Please, say that you’ll come back with me.”

Chapter Two by Mel

“Jack, I don’t see what good I can do.” Erica turned her back to him, looking out across the city. She knew Bianca might want her there, but so much pain had been caused over the past several months. There had been so many lies, all with good intentions, her family had claimed.

Jack just stared at her, unsure of what to say or do. He had tried so hard to reach her before she fled Pine Valley. He had then given her the space she obviously desired. And now standing on this balcony amidst the cool Paris night, all he could think of was wrapping her so tightly in his arms that she could never doubt him or his love for her again.

Placing a gentle hand on her bare shoulder, he felt her shiver at his touch. “Erica, Bianca loves you. Miranda, Bianca, Kendall - they all need you. You could do good by just being present while your daughters - your family - pray for your grandchild’s life. Please just come with me. We can talk on the plane.”

With tears streaming down her cheeks, Erica turned to face the man she loved more than anything. She merely nodded. Jack placed a welcoming hand on the small of her back and led her out of the party. The limo sped to

the hotel, where Jack helped Erica quickly pack and overnight bag. Asking the hotel manager to pack the rest and ship it, they raced to the airport. Jack had already purchased two tickets for the midnight flight, praying she would join him in the journey home, but with or without Erica, Jack was determined to return to their family that needed them both so much.

While Erica was in the ladies room before take-off, Jack had called Greenlee to tell her that they were on the way back. "So she is with you?" Greenlee couldn't hide the surprise in her voice.

"Yes, I am surprised that she didn't put up more of a fight, but we are about to board the plane."

"Wow, that's great. Do you want me to tell everyone else?"

"No, just in case, Erica decides not to go with me to the hospital. I don't want to get Bianca or Kendall's hopes up. Just meet us at the airport. You've got the flight number, right?"

"Yes, Dad. Is Erica going to have a problem with me picking you up?" Greenlee had grown so much closer to all of the family while Erica was away. Now was the time to try and show Erica that she has changed and honestly wanted a good relationship with her, especially since Jack would always love Erica.

"I hope not. We will not have to see how it goes. She's coming back, honey. I'll see you in Pine Valley. Love you."

"Love you too, Dad."

After settling in the seats, waiting for take-off, Erica turned to him. "So who were you talking to in the terminal?"

Jack hesitated briefly. There was no reason to keep it from her. "Greenlee. She is going to take us to the hospital after we land."

"Okay." Erica sat back, as the plane taxied to the runway. He came for me. Erica's thoughts kept coming back to that same fact. Jack had flown all this way to bring her home. Oh God, please let Miranda be alright. Bianca doesn't need anything else.

“So what’s going on in that beautiful head of yours?” Jack couldn’t take the silence a moment longer. He was going to force her to deal with whatever issues they needed to. He didn’t understand why she had kept in contact with practically everyone but him.

“Nothing. So Jackson, you said that my daughters need me. Did they ask you to come get me, Jackson? Is that why you came - just at Bianca and Kendall’s request?”

Erica had pushed him away for quite some time before she left Pine Valley. She had felt so hurt that her family had kept Bianca’s pregnancy from her, but during her time in Paris, she had longed for Jack. She needed him to help her, she knew it deep down inside, but was not about to admit that she couldn’t handle the dreams, drinking, or reality of the situation without him.

“Yes, Erica, Kendall asked me to drag you home, kicking and screaming, if I had to. But no, that is not the only reason why I came for you. We all need you. We all miss you. I need you, Erica. I have missed you so badly.” Jack voice was soft and gentle, but still firm and strong with his love. He tenderly took her hand in his. “I want to make you see that your daughters love you and need you. And that I still love you and need you. But the Kane women are not near as strong without you, Erica. You are the strength of the Kane women. There is nothing that you haven’t overcome until now.” Looking deeper into her eyes, “But even this, you can defeat. For you, my dear, are Erica Kane, and there isn’t anything that you can’t do.”

Erica felt his love for her. She yearned to pour out her heart to him, but couldn’t manage to let her walls that she had built up fall. Instead of trying harder or even admitting that to Jack, she simply rested her head on his shoulder and said, “We should sleep, Jack. It’s been a long night, and we have a long flight ahead of us.”

Kissing her forehead, “Okay, but we are going to have this discussion at some point. You can’t avoid telling me how you feel forever Erica. I know you better than that. Eventually, we will have to have it out. For tonight, I will let it stand.”

“Thank you.” Hands still intertwined, Erica and Jack rested for most of the flight, not speaking, just enjoying being in each other’s presence.

Chapter Three by Mary

Erica's mind was racing as they approached the hospital. The thought of seeing Bianca and Kendall for the first time in weeks filled her with apprehension. She supposed they were angry with her for leaving instead of staying and being supportive. She hoped that she hadn't made a mistake by coming back. She remembered what it was like when Bianca was so ill as a little girl and now Bianca was a mother worried about her own daughter. The fact that Miranda was now a reality seemed so odd to Erica. She had not allowed herself to think of how she would feel once the baby was actually born. That she found herself worried about her granddaughter made her think that she had done the right thing in coming back, that maybe there was hope for their family after all.

She realized that just being with Jack was making her feel stronger. She had missed him so much and even though she had pushed him away in the weeks before she left, she knew that she couldn't go through this without him.

"So how was Paris?" Greenlee asked from the back seat. She had been subdued since meeting them at the airport, just telling them that the latest report from the hospital was that Miranda was stable. Erica had picked up on the affection between father and daughter and realized that things had obviously progressed between Greenlee and the family in her absence.

"It was fine," Erica replied absently. "Very busy at this time of year." She felt her hand tremble as they pulled into the hospital parking lot. Her anxiety eased when Jack reached over and took her hand. "You'll be fine," he said. "You can do this."

Erica hoped he was right as they stepped off the elevator. Bianca and Kendall were standing in the hall and turned as they heard the elevator door. The look of surprise on Bianca's face was quickly replaced by joy as she raced across the room into Erica's arms.

"Mom, I can't believe that you're here," she said disbelievingly. "I've missed you so much."

"Oh, I've missed you too honey," said Erica, holding Bianca close. "How is Miranda?"

“You’re not going to believe this,” Bianca said excitedly, “but she’s better! The doctor said she has an infection and they’ve put her on antibiotics and she’s improving.”

“Thank God,” said Erica, feeling that a huge burden had been lifted off her shoulders. She couldn’t bear to think of Bianca having to deal with any more tragedy. As Bianca excitedly told Jack and Greenlee about the change in Miranda’s condition, Kendall walked over to Erica.

“Thank you for coming,” she said. “I’ve been trying to do my best but Bianca really needs you. Are you staying?”

Erica could sense that Jack was listening for her response. “I’m not really sure,” she replied evasively. “At least until we’re sure that Miranda is out of danger.”

“You can’t see her right now, Mom,” Bianca said, “but hopefully tomorrow if she keeps getting better.”

“Alright, honey,” Erica said, suddenly feeling awkward. She wasn’t sure how she would react to seeing her granddaughter for the first time but there was no way to avoid it now that she was back.

“I’ll stay with Bianca until she’s ready to leave,” Kendall said to Erica and Jack. “You two must be exhausted after that long flight. I can call you if there’s any news.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Jack, going over to Erica and taking her arm. “Let’s go back to the loft. Reggie is dying to see you and you look like you could use some food.”

“I’ll stay a little longer,” Greenlee said. “Your car is still here, right Dad?”

“Right,” Jack replied, kissing her on the forehead. “Thanks for everything.”

“There’s no need to thank me,” Greenlee said sincerely. “That’s what families are for.” She smiled and went over to Bianca and Kendall. Erica watched the three girls talking together, marveling at how well they were getting along. Maybe this is all going to work out, she thought. Maybe the nightmare is finally over. She tried to ignore the nagging sense of doubt

that persisted as she got on the elevator with Jack.

Jack opened the door to the loft and let Erica walk in ahead of him. She had barely said anything on the ride there and he had no idea how she was feeling. It saddened him that after all the years of always knowing what she was thinking, she was such an enigma to him now.

“No Reggie apparently,” he said, picking up a note from the counter. He frowned as he read it. “Gone to rent some movies. I’m sure he’ll be right back. He didn’t know you were definitely coming.” He tried not to sound concerned.

“It’s not a big deal, Jack,” said Erica. “Why are you worried?”

“No reason,” Jack answered. Seeing that she didn’t believe him, he continued, “Reggie’s been hanging out with some of those kids from his old crowd lately. Staying out late, not doing his homework, you know, the usual teenage stuff.”

“I don’t like the idea of him hanging out with those kids again,” Erica said. “I hope it doesn’t mean anything else.”

“Yeah, me too,” agreed Jack. “Look, sit down and relax. I’m going to change and make us something to eat.”

“I’m really not hungry, Jack,” said Erica. “I’m very tired. I should have had you just take me home.”

“You didn’t eat anything on the plane and I’m sure there’s nothing to eat at the penthouse. Please, just humor me,” he said. “We don’t have to talk if you don’t feel like it.”

Jack breathed a sigh of relief when she finally sat on the couch. After not having seen her for so long, he was reluctant to let her go. He was almost afraid that she would vanish on him again.

He rushed into the bedroom and changed out of the clothes he had been in since leaving Pine Valley. In spite of what he had said, he was determined to get her to talk. He couldn’t go on with things like this between them any

longer. Now that it appeared that Miranda was out of danger, he had to know how she felt - about him, about everything that had happened.

When he came out of the bedroom, he was sure that she had left and his heart sank. Then he saw her curled up asleep on the couch. Thinking how exhausted she must be to fall asleep so quickly, he reached for a blanket and carefully wrapped it around her. He sat down in the chair next to the couch, watching her as she slept, thinking of how much he loved her and wondering how he was going to get through to her.

Erica tried to stop the dream from coming but she couldn't. As soon as she realized where she was, she tried to escape but it was impossible. She was sobbing and running as always but suddenly it was different. She could hear someone calling her name and all at once she was safe. As she slowly woke up, she realized that someone was holding her, stroking her hair, and telling her that everything would be all right. She opened her eyes and looked into Jack's crystal blue ones.

"Jack, you're really here," she said wonderingly. "I'm not dreaming you, am I?"

"Of course I'm here," he answered her. "You're safe, Erica. I would never let anything happen to you."

Her breathing slowly returned to normal. She couldn't remember a time when she had felt so safe. It had been weeks since she had been so close to him and as her fear subsided, she became achingly aware of how it felt to be in his arms again. Her head was against his chest and she could feel his heart beating in her ear. When she inhaled she could smell the tangy scent of his aftershave. She shivered as his hand ran up and down her spine. She closed her eyes and then stiffened and moved away.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm fine now, Jack."

"Sweetheart, you don't have to apologize," he told her. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about," she moved further away.

“Look, it’s pretty obvious what you were dreaming about,” he said gently. “If you don’t want to talk to me about it, how about talking to -”

Erica jumped up in a rush. “Don’t you even dare bring up therapy again, Jackson Montgomery!” she cried. “I don’t need to talk to anyone. I can handle things on my own. I always have.”

“I know that,” Jack said. “That’s why I think -”

“I don’t care what you think,” she said angrily. She crossed the room and turned to glare at him. “I can’t believe that I thought this could work out. That’s it - I’m done. As soon as we’re sure that Miranda is going to be alright, I’m going back to Paris - for good.”

Chapter 4 by Mel

Erica fumbled with the door locks. I’ve had it, she thought. I will not sit here and listen to Jack tell me that I need to go to therapy. Obviously Jack doesn’t know what I need. I do not need therapy. Just as she was ready to open the door, Jack’s hand forcefully came to rest on the door right beside her head.

“Erica, damn it, you are not leaving. I am not going to let you run again.” Jack’s voice was low. She could feel his breath on her neck, knowing he was stooped over with his head right behind hers. She turned, ready to square off. His eyes immediately saw the fire within hers, a mix of anger, hurt, and passion. “I am not going to let you run away from all of us again.”

Continuing to hold his stare, Erica’s feisty nature was in full swing. Jack saw that she was not ready to back down, but neither was he. So much needed to be said. “You can’t keep me prisoner here, Jack. I will eventually leave your loft.” Erica’s temper was just heating up, waiting for him to make a mistake in his tone, his words, anything.

“So you are going to run again? Run away from your family that loves you? Run away from me? Run away from any problem you may come up against?” Jack had to call her on the carpet for her fear. Although it would not sit well, he had to try and make her see that he was there to help. Still only inches apart, eye to eye, Jack tried to soften the tone of their argument. “Erica, I know you have been hurt, but so have I, so has Bianca,

Kendall, Reggie... Heck even Greenlee. We all have to work to get past our hurt.”

“You all seem to have gone on just fine without me. I have been gone for weeks and everyone is doing better than ever. You, Reggie, Kendall, Greenlee, Bianca, and Miranda make a fine family. There is no need for me. You will all be just fine when I return to Paris.” The smell of him so near was wearing her defenses down. She moved away from the door and away from Jack. Being that close was not helping to keep her walls up.

“Erica, can’t you see how much our children need you? Didn’t you see how much your daughters love you? Bianca practically ran Kendall down, trying to hug you. Don’t you know how much Reggie loves you? He needs you, Erica. I can’t deal with this teenaged boy mess by myself. I need you. I love you.”

Erica kept her back to Jack, but she sensed he was right behind her. Holding back all her emotions for so long, it was easy to keep the tears from falling. His hands came to rest on each of her shoulders. Steadying her voice, Erica spoke, “It’s not enough.”

Jack’s heart broke. Closing his eyes and biting his lip, Jack pulled back from her. “What’s not enough Erica? Your family begging for forgiveness, isn’t enough? Me, dying inside because I love you so much but you won’t let me love you. That isn’t enough? Your family is barely holding it together without you, Erica, but that isn’t enough to make you put all the other garbage aside? What’s it going to take, Erica? Honestly, what is it going to take, one of us to die before you realize how much we love you and need you on a daily basis?” Jack was shouting, but he didn’t care. His love wasn’t enough, he kept repeating those same words over and over again.

“Jack, I have promised not to leave until Miranda is in the clear and I won’t. But I will be on the first flight back to Paris after she is out of the hospital. I am sorry, but that is all I can do.” With tears, streaming down her cheeks, Erica turned to look at him, just long enough to have the look of pain on his face register in her heart, then she fled the loft.

Reggie was standing in the hallway, tear-stained cheeks. It ain’t worth it, he thought. The whole family thing ain’t worth it. They still leave. He heard the door slam behind Erica and Jack mutter Damn it. It just ain’t worth it, he

repeated as he headed back to his room.

Erica was at the hospital by six the following morning. Since she hadn't slept after their awful fight, Erica thought it was best to try and see Miranda before Jack would be at the hospital. The less they ran into each other before she returned the better, she thought.

Bianca had gone home briefly to shower and change the nurse had informed Erica when she asked about Miranda.

"Would you like to go in and hold her while Ms. Montgomery is gone?" the nurse asked.

"Is it alright?" Although Erica was nervous about seeing her grandchild for the first time, she liked the idea of being able to go through the emotion of it alone, without Bianca or Kendall present.

"Yes, Miranda is in the clear. She should actually be released later today, if Dr. Joe approves it." The nurse led Erica into Miranda's room. Helping her get settled with the baby in the rocking chair, the nurse placed the infant in the crook of Erica's arm.

"Thank you," Erica said, as the nurse left grandmother and child alone.

Erica was amazed by the pure emotion of love that washed over her, as she looked into Miranda's sweet wide eyes. Miranda was taking the whole scene in for a brief moment, then slowly started to drift back to sleep, as Erica rocked her. She has Bianca's nose, Erica thought. Her jaw line is very clearly Montgomery. Jack has that same... Erica trailed off as her eyes filled with tears.

"Well, Miranda Mona Montgomery, I am your grandmother. I am sorry I wasn't here sooner, sweetie. I couldn't cope with it. But here you are, so perfect, so innocent, and sweet."

Because all of Erica's attention was focused on Miranda's flushed, sleeping face, she didn't notice Jack standing at the doorway, looking through the window at them.

“Did you know that you are named after my mother, Mona Kane Tyler? There is no better woman to be named after.” Erica continued to rock slowly, brushing her hand across Miranda’s cheek. “She wouldn’t have been scared of you, like I have been. She would have been here to welcome you into the world.”

Erica’s tears started to fall, she looked up, just long enough to brush them off her cheek. Jack, still watching his amazing love through the window, saw the love back in Erica’s face for the first time in forever. As she looked back down, Jack heard Bianca and Kendall come off the elevator behind him. Leaving Erica to continue bonding with her grandchild, Jack stopped the girls a few feet away from the door.

“You can’t go in right now, Bianca. Miranda’s fine, don’t worry.” Jack hurriedly said the last statement, as he saw a mother’s fear rush over her face.

“Why not, Jack?” Kendall spoke up, trying to look around him and see in the window.

“Erica is with her. They need some time alone.” Jack’s eyes were filled with tears of joy, feeling like a break-through was occurring in that very room. Only the love of an innocent child could heal the pain Erica still felt from her own rape.

“What? Mom? Really?” Bianca and Kendall both started asking all sorts of questions. “You got through to her last night, didn’t you Uncle Jack?” Bianca was thrilled that her mother seemed to be coming around.

“Well, not exactly.” Jack turned and walked back towards the room, peering in the window at them again. “Last night was a mess, but maybe some of it did get to her.”

Erica was now telling Miranda how beautiful she was, and how much like Bianca. Kendall, Bianca, and Jack continued to watch in silence as Erica began to sing a lullaby to Miranda that she used to sing to Bianca. Jack’s arms wrapped around the shoulders of both of them, as they all watched in amazement with tears filling their eyes.

After several minutes had passed, the nurse came to the trio and informed

Bianca that it was time for Miranda's bottle. Bianca said thank you and took it. Looking back in at her mother and her child, she smiled. "I think Mom should have the opportunity to feed her grandchild."

Jack backed away from the door, so not to be seen by Erica, as Kendall and Bianca entered the room. Erica looked at the two of them with a huge smile and tears rolling down her face.

"Hi. Miranda, say hi to your mommy and aunt Kendall." Miranda was lying contently in Erica's arms, half awake, half asleep.

"Mom, I am so glad you're here." Bianca said as she leaned over to hug Erica. Kendall quickly followed suit.

Jack was back at the window and quickly noted the three Kane women wrapped in a hug, tears streaming down all their faces with the newest Kane girl caught in the middle.

Pulling back, Bianca offered the bottle to her mother. "Would you like to feed her?"

"Yes, thank you." Erica took the bottle as the other two women sat down. Erica could sense Jack outside and knew he had been there the whole time now that she was not focused solely on Miranda. She took comfort in his presence, as the ladies began to heal, talking about Miranda and all other things.

Miranda went home that same day, and life returned to normal. Jack hadn't heard from Erica after seeing her with the girls and several days had passed. Due to this, he assumed Erica had returned to Paris. Having heard all the wonderful details of Erica, Bianca and Kendall's conversation, Jack had hoped Erica would stay and work things out with him as well, but no such luck.

Hitting the voicemail button, Greenlee's voice rang out. "Reggie's been in an accident. Please come to the hospital. He needs you. Hurry."

Chapter Five by Mary

Erica stared at the phone in horror. Reggie in an accident? Greenlee had sounded frantic. She glanced at her packed suitcases stacked neatly by the door. She had been ready to leave when she noticed the voice mail light. She looked at her watch. The message was from almost an hour ago. Maybe she should just call the hospital and find out what had happened.

Then she thought about Reggie and how withdrawn he had been the few times she had seen him at the hospital. She knew he was disappointed in her, disappointed that she had left and given Jackson back the ring. She understood his longing for a family and his fear that people would never stay. I can't disappoint him again, she thought. He does need me. Her heart ached when she thought about Jack. He was always there for all of them, so strong and comforting and supportive. I can't let him go through this alone, she thought. It's just too much after everything that's happened.

Before she could change her mind, she grabbed her purse and headed out the door. Please, God, let Reggie be alright, she prayed.

Jack sat with his head in his hands. When Derek had called, he couldn't believe it. Reggie and some other kids in a bad car accident. He had knocked on Greenlee's door on his way down from the loft and they had driven to the hospital together. Joe had said that Reggie was unconscious and was being evaluated. He hadn't been able to answer any questions.

The waiting was driving Jack crazy. He couldn't fathom that he was here once again, waiting for word on a loved one. Thinking about Miranda made his thoughts turn to Erica. He knew she must be gone by now. Bianca had said she had booked her flight.

He had already decided that he wouldn't go after her again. He had tried and failed. Erica couldn't - or at least wouldn't - accept his love and he had made a conscious decision to let her go and concentrate on his family. He raised his head as he heard the elevator doors open and by some miracle, Erica stepped into the hallway. She stopped when she saw him and then started toward him.

"Jack, what happened?" she asked frantically. He could see that she was worried. "Greenlee said that Reggie was in an accident. What kind of

accident? Is he alright?"

"I don't know yet," Jack replied. "He was in a car accident. Derek is supposed to meet me here with the details. Joe said that he was unconscious when they got him here. That's all I know." He stood up. "I thought you were gone."

"I almost was," Erica said. "In fact, my plane is probably taking off right now."

Greenlee came round the corner and when she saw Erica, a relieved look came over her face. "I just tried calling you again. I thought for sure I had missed you."

"No, I got your message," Erica said. "Thank you for calling me."

They all turned as Derek stepped off the elevator. He walked over to Jack. "Any word on Reggie?"

Jack shook his head. "Not yet. What do you know about the accident?"

"I just came from there," Derek replied. "From what we gathered from witnesses, the car was traveling at a high rate of speed and just left the road and hit a tree. I hate to tell you this, Jack, but the car was full of beer bottles and assorted drug paraphernalia."

Jack closed his eyes. "Look, Derek, Reggie has been upset lately but there's no way he's stupid enough to be doing that."

"Well, someone in the car was," said Derek. "I'm going to have to talk to Reggie eventually. The other three kids are in pretty bad shape."

"Derek, do we have to do this now?" Erica questioned sharply. "We don't even know how Reggie is yet."

"No, it can wait," Derek said. "Just let me know when Reggie is stable." He touched Jack's arm and walked away.

"What the hell is taking so long?" Jack muttered, turning to look at the doors to the emergency room.

“Now that you’re here, Erica,” Greenlee said. “I’m going to go get us some coffee.”

Jack sat back down again as Greenlee disappeared down the hall. Erica walked over and sat beside him.

“I’m sure that Reggie will be OK, Jack,” she said. “You know what a tough kid he is.”

“Yeah, he is,” said Jack. “But hitting a tree at a high rate of speed....,” his voice trailed off. “We had better be prepared for anything.”

He closed his eyes and put his head back against the chair. He felt his heart lighten ever so slightly when Erica slowly reached over and slipped her hand in his.

Time passed slowly as they waited. Erica hoped that her being there was helping in some small way. Jack hadn’t said much but she was encouraged that he had kept her hand in his. After a while, their fingers had become intertwined and every once in a while he would run his thumb over the back of her hand.

They both sprang to their feet as Joe came out of the emergency room. “Joe, how is he?” Jack asked immediately.

“Well, he’s a very lucky young man,” Joe said. “He does have a concussion but he’s awake now and aside from some cuts and bruises, he checks out fine.”

“Thank God,” Jack and Erica both breathed a huge sigh of relief. “What about the concussion though?” Jack asked.

“We’re going to keep him here under observation for tonight,” Joe said. “But all indications are that it’s a mild one. Apparently he had the good sense to be wearing his seat belt.”

“Can we see him?” Erica asked.

“Just give us a few more minutes,” Joe said and walked back inside the E.R.

“Jack, I knew it!” Erica said joyfully and without thinking, she reached up to kiss him. She felt his sharp intake of breath as their lips met. He hesitated, and when she didn’t move away, he pulled her closer and deepened the kiss. She reached up to touch his face as her lips parted under his.

They broke apart as the sound of Greenlee’s heels reverberated down the corridor. She appeared with three cups of coffee precariously perched on a tray. Taking in Erica’s flushed cheeks and the faint trace of lipstick on Jack’s mouth, she stopped. “Should I come back later?” she asked with a smile.

“No, no,” said Jack, going over to her. “Joe just told us that Reggie is going to be fine.”

“That’s wonderful!” exclaimed Greenlee, visibly relieved. “Can we see him?”

“Any minute now, according to Joe,” said Erica. “Why don’t you two go in?” she continued. “I should be going now that we know Reggie is OK.” She felt flustered after kissing Jack like that. She knew he was looking at her but she kept her gaze averted.

“No, you and Jack should go in,” Greenlee said immediately. “I’ll go in after you’re done.”

Erica didn’t have time to protest as Joe appeared and beckoned them to come in. Erica walked in first and stopped at the sight of Reggie lying motionless in the hospital bed. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be sleeping. As she got closer, his eyes opened and he looked surprised to see her. His eyes went past her to Jack.

“I guess I messed up pretty bad, huh, J?” he said with a shaky laugh.

“We don’t need to talk about that now,” Jack told him. “I just want you to know how happy I - how happy we - are that you’re OK.” He went over and took Reggie’s hand.

“Man, I don’t feel too OK,” Reggie said. “I feel like I crashed my skateboard into the side of a building.”

“Pretty close,” Jack observed. “Joe says he just needs to keep you here overnight for observation and then you can come home.”

Erica stepped closer. “We were so worried, Reggie,” she said. “I’m glad you’re OK.”

“I thought you were gone already,” Reggie said. “I don’t want to mess up your plans. I know you can’t wait to get away from us again.”

Erica felt her heart sink. Ever since she had gotten Greenlee’s message, she hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that she was partly responsible for Reggie’s accident. The behavior that Jack had talked about had only started after she had given Jack back the ring and gone to Europe. The look on Reggie’s face and the tone in his voice only seemed to confirm it.

“That’s not true, Reggie,” she said. “Just because I might be in Europe for a while doesn’t mean that I don’t care about you. It doesn’t change anything.”

“Right, I’m sure a Christmas or birthday card will do just fine,” Reggie said bitterly. “Don’t bother pretending. I heard you two at the loft the other night. You said you were leaving and not coming back. Don’t worry - I’m cool with it now.”

Erica was at a loss for words. She looked at Jack helplessly. “Reggie, you need to rest. We can talk about this later,” she said finally. She walked to the door and Jack followed her.

“Thank you for coming,” he said as he held the door for her. “Look, I -” He stopped. “You can probably catch a later flight,” he finished, watching her closely.

“I’ll send Greenlee in,” Erica said quickly and rushed into the hallway.

Greenlee was waiting where they had left her. “You’re not leaving, are you?” she asked as Erica came out.

“Yes, I am,” Erica replied. “Reggie is going to be fine. I’m sure he wants to see you.”

“You know, I just don’t understand you, Erica, “ Greenlee said. “All this family wants is your love and acceptance but you just can’t give it, can you? I understand how difficult it must be for you with Bianca and Miranda but everyone is willing to help you and you just won’t let them. You won’t even help yourself. Most woman could only dream about having someone love them the way my father loves you and you’re just willing to throw it all away.” She stopped and took a deep breath. “Like I said, I just don’t get you. I never will. Have a great life in Paris.” She turned and walked through the emergency room door.

Erica slowly walked over to the elevator, Greenlee’s words ringing in her ears. She thought of her suitcases, packed and ready to go. Then she thought about Reggie and Jack and the night that they had both just gone through. As she pushed the elevator button, she knew where she had to go.

Chapter Six by Mel

Jackson knew Erica had left. Greenlee had grown accustomed to her family and was not about to keep anything from them. Although he was not surprised, he still felt the hurt. When Erica had come off the elevator, he thought for sure progress was being made. Then there was the kiss. It had seemed like they were back. She had reflectively kissed him, as they had so many times before when good news came, but this time was different. They were celebrating the joy of their son being okay. Whether Erica realized that, Jack wasn’t sure, but her joy had been about family, which was a first in a long, long time.

The elevator coming to a halt jolted Jackson out of his thoughts. Man, this has been some day, he thought, putting the key in the door of his loft apartment. Thankfully Reggie was going to be fine. He needed to stay in the hospital overnight for observation. Greenlee offered to stay, knowing Jack needed sleep. After all he had been through in the past few weeks with Bianca, Erica and now Reggie, Greenlee had been his saving grace helping to take care of the family.

Pushing the door open, Jack saw her sitting there curled up on the couch

with a blanket wrapped around her. Obviously she had been waiting on him. Jack was surprised. After the conversation Erica had with Greenlee, he fully expected her to be on the first plane to Paris. Erica had been watching the door, sitting for a few hours now, thinking about all that had occurred since their almost wedding. A smile came to her face slowly as she saw Jack's surprise and relief.

"Hey you." Jack's voice was soft, but raspy due to his lack of sleep. He closed the door behind him, as she got up.

"Hey, I hope you don't mind me being here." Erica sounded so unsure of herself, something neither of them were accustomed to. Meeting halfway between the door and couch, Jackson leaned down and kissed her forehead softly.

"Now why would I mind such a beautiful woman being here?" Jack's smile was intoxicating and contagious, as Erica found herself now smiling. Taking his hand, she led him to the couch.

"How's Reggie? How's our son?" They sat facing one another and still holding hands. Erica knew what she needed to do the minute she left the hospital, so she did. Grabbing some clothes from the penthouse, she headed to the loft to be able to take care of Jackson when he arrived home.

"Our son is sleeping. Greenlee agreed to stay with him, so I could come home." Jack didn't miss a beat, although his heart leapt at her words, our son. Reggie was completely their son. He was so much like Erica, it amazed Jack.

"Well, I am glad you did come home. Do you need something to eat before you get to bed? I know you have to be exhausted." Erica jumped off the couch and headed to the kitchen. "Maybe just some tea, if you're not hungry. It will help you sleep."

Erica filled the teapot up, and Jackson rose to join her in the kitchen.

"Honey, I don't need tea or anything."

Erica continued to hurry around the kitchen trying to take care of Jack, the best way she could. Jack grabbed her by the waist as she headed to the refrigerator.

“Come here,” Jack’s voice was low. “Erica, I don’t need tea or food. I just need to have my arms wrapped around you, sweetheart.” Jack’s eyes were peering into hers, expressing his love. Erica wrapped her arms around his neck, resting her head on his chest. “Oh, Jackson.”

Pulling her even tighter against him, Jack leaned against the kitchen counter and enjoyed the feel of her wrapped in his tight embrace. If it weren’t for the shrill whistle of the teapot on the stove, she would have stayed there forever.

“How about I fix us some tea? You go get ready for bed, and I will meet you in the bedroom.” Erica said as she removed the kettle from the burner.

Unsure of just what Erica intended, Jackson nodded hesitantly, then turned to go.

Jack had changed into his trusty blue pajama pants. The spring night was just too warm for anything more. Sitting on the edge of his bed, Erica saw his tiredness, as he yawned. Pushing the door all the way open with her foot, Erica came in carrying two cups of tea. He is just so handsome, so amazing, Erica thought.

“Hey you.” Jack scooted back onto the bed with his back against the headboard, making room for her to sit next to him. Taking his cup of tea, he sipped it. “Thanks.”

“Jack, I am so sorry about Reggie. Maybe tomorrow when he gets home the three of us could have a nice long talk about his choice of friends.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Jack smiled at her, as they drank their tea. Sitting side by side, the conversation lulled as Jack started to get more sleepy. Erica was content to sit with him, her thoughts continuing to occupy her. After a while, Jack knew he would be unable to stay awake much longer.

“Honey, as nice as this is, I need to get some sleep.”

“I am so glad you are going to be able to sleep. Do you mind if I sit here with you for a while?” Erica put both of their cups on the bedside table.

“No, not at all.” Jack slid under the sheet and rested his head on the pillow beside her. Erica stroked his hair. Jack was out within five minutes. It had been so long since Erica had been able to watch the love of her life sleep. And as she sat there, watching his peaceful face, a sense of comfort and love she hadn’t felt in forever rushed over her.

Reaching back to the nightstand to take a final sip of her tea, Erica noticed a ring box sitting right beside the picture of them. He doesn’t really still have this, does he? Erica thought, it can’t be. Opening the box, Erica saw her engagement ring that she left with her note before leaving for Paris. Oh Jack, she looked over at his sleeping form. The love she felt at that very moment welled up inside of her.

That’s what I’ll do, she thought. If I really want to be a part of this family, of Jack and our children’s lives, it is what I need to do. Then we can go back to where we were. With that, Erica removed her engagement ring from the box and placed it back on her finger. Therapy just might be the answer after all, she thought. At least it was worth a try. Erica finally agreed with what her family had been wanting her to do for so long now. While Reggie’s accident and Greenlee’s loving words started the process of breaking down the walls Erica had put up, it was Jack’s amazing love that freed her heart from all the pain. He had kept her ring, waiting for her to come home.

Chapter Seven by Mary

Erica put the finishing touches on the table and stood back, finally satisfied. The floral arrangement was the perfect addition for Reggie’s homecoming celebration. She looked at the six chairs around the table, a chair for her, one for Jack and one for each of their children. She thought briefly of Lily, and how she should be there too. We’ll have to look into that, she thought, once everything else is settled.

She was surprised at how smoothly things were going. Reggie had recovered without any complications, Miranda was once again a healthy newborn, and Bianca was an excited new mother. Even though she hadn’t seen Jack since the night at the loft, they had spoken on the phone every day, and she realized that they had slipped back into a semblance of their old relationship.

Once she had made the decision, she had phoned a therapist the day after

Reggie's accident. It hadn't been anywhere near as difficult as she had feared. Despite the initial awkwardness of talking to a stranger about her feelings, she now felt as if a burden was being lifted from her shoulders. After only two sessions, the future of the Kane/Montgomery family seemed back on track and she was determined to keep it that way. I haven't had that nightmare in days, Erica thought as she went to answer the door, not since I started the therapy sessions.

She opened the door to Bianca, Kendall and Miranda. The two girls were laughing over the face that Miranda was making. Erica couldn't believe how much Miranda reminded her of Bianca at that age. She smiled as they came in.

"Hi, Mom," said Bianca. "I'm so glad that we're having this family dinner. It really means a lot to me that you want to do this."

"Me too," said Kendall. "I can't wait to see Reggie. I could throttle him for giving us such a scare though."

"Let's not throttle him until he's fully recovered," suggested Erica as she went to answer the bell again.

Greenlee was standing there, looking vaguely uncomfortable.

"I got your message," she said, "so here I am. Jack and Reggie are on their way."

"Good," Erica said. "I want everything to be perfect when Reggie gets here. I want him to realize how much we all care about him."

Greenlee went over to look at Miranda and was soon deep in conversation with Bianca and Kendall. Erica would never have believed it, if she wasn't witnessing it herself.

The doorbell rang again and Erica took a deep breath as she swung open the door.

Erica was so beautiful when she opened the door that for a moment Jack couldn't speak. She always looked beautiful, of course, but she looked happier and more relaxed than he had seen her since she had left for

Europe all those weeks ago. The sparkle that made her Erica Kane seemed to be back and he was relieved to see it. She smiled at Reggie and kissed him when he walked in.

Reggie looked sheepish. "Hey, Erica, I want to say I'm sorry for what I said at the hospital," he said. "You came in to see me, and I practically kicked you out."

"Reggie, please, it's forgotten," Erica said. "I'm the one who should be sorry for leaving the way I did and making you think I didn't care about you. Friends again?"

As she held her hand out to him, the engagement ring on her finger caught the light and sparkled brightly. Jack could hardly believe his eyes. He hadn't opened the ring box since putting it on his night stand. It was just too painful. Now he realized that she must have taken it that night at the loft and the fact that she had it on and what that meant overwhelmed him for a moment.

After she was done hugging Reggie, Jack took her hand in his and looked down at the ring. "Well, this is certainly a surprise," he said softly, caressing her hand.

"A pleasant one, I hope," she replied somewhat nervously.

"You have no idea," he told her huskily, looking into her eyes.

"OK, break it up over there, you two," Bianca said. "I only have half an hour before I have to feed Miranda, and I'm starving."

Dinner was an unqualified success. Reggie kept them all in stitches with his unique observations on life. Jack couldn't remember the last time he had seen Erica really laugh. He was relieved that her wine glass contained nothing but water, and she had actually eaten her meal.

"I have something to say to everyone," Reggie said as they were starting dessert. "I just want to say that even though things looked really bad the other night, I'm not stupid enough to be drinking or doing drugs, and I won't be getting in a car again with anyone who is."

“Well, we’re certainly glad to hear that,” Jack said. “I know that I can trust your judgment. We just need to keep the lines of communication open.”

“We are so lucky that things worked out the way they did,” said Bianca, looking at Miranda. “So lucky that we have each other.”

“That we are,” Jack agreed, smiling at Erica across the table.

Erica was tidying up as everyone left. Bianca and Kendall left in a flurry of activity, anxious to get Miranda home and in her crib before she woke up. Jack walked Greenlee to the door, and Reggie trailed along.

“Why don’t you stay?” Greenlee said to Jack with a look in Erica’s direction. “Reggie can ride home with me. I’ll make sure he gets settled in at the loft.”

“Yeah, J, you should stay,” Reggie insisted. “Erica might need some help - uh - cleaning up.”

Jack looked amused. “OK, I’ll be home in a little while,” he said to Reggie. “You need to go home and rest, though. Straight to bed. No TV, no music, got it?”

“Yeah, yeah, straight to bed,” Reggie agreed. “I’m beat anyway.”

Erica watched Greenlee and Reggie leave and turned to finish cleaning up. Jack reached out and stopped her as she walked by. “Why don’t you leave the rest of this for Coral?” he asked. “We need to talk.”

“OK,” she said slowly. “What about?”

“About why you’re wearing this again,” he said, taking her hand in his and looking down at the ring. “And why you even took it off in the first place.”

Erica took a deep breath. “I wasn’t thinking clearly before I left,” she said. “I couldn’t think about anything except Bianca being pregnant and that you knew. Now, after everything that’s happened, I just want us to try to get back to where we were before, if that’s even possible...” she trailed off uncertainly and waited for his reply. “Don’t you have anything you want to say?” she finally asked.

“Yes, I do,” he answered, drawing her closer. “I want to say that there’s something that I’ve wanted to do ever since I saw you in Paris.”

“What, Jack?” she asked impatiently.

“This,” he said and pulled her into his arms. Before she could even think, his lips were on hers in a passionate kiss. Her lips parted as his tongue explored her mouth. She wound her arms around his neck, running her fingers through his hair to bring him closer. Their breathing was ragged as they broke apart. Jack slid the strap of her dress down her arm as he left a trail of kisses down her neck to her shoulder. Erica unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt and slipped her hands inside against his bare skin. She hurriedly began to undo the rest of the buttons. His hand hesitated on the zipper on the back of her dress and when she went to tug his shirt out of the waistband of his jeans, he put his hands over hers and looked down at her. “Are you sure?” he asked unevenly.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she whispered. “I want you, Jackson.” She began to kiss her way up his chest. He groaned and picked her up, bending to kiss her as they headed toward the bedroom.

Chapter Eight by Mel

Erica’s petite form may have been putty in Jack’s arms, but it was he who was going weak in the knees. Erica continued to kiss all around Jack’s collarbone then up to that spot, just below his ear that drove him mad with anticipation. As they passed through the living area towards the bedroom, the doorbell rang out.

“Ignore it.” Erica’s voice was urgent with passion as Jack stopped all forward movement. It had been so long since Jack and she had been together. Jack, seeing the passion burning deep in Erica’s eyes, started back towards the bedroom again.

“Mom, It’s Bianca.”

“Damn it,” Jack muttered. “Erica, I swear, we need to talk to that girl about her timing. She always ends up disturbing things.” Jack chuckled as he

stood Erica upright again.

“Just a second, Bianca,” Erica called. She turned her attention back to Jack again. “I thought anticipation was half the fun, Jackson. Just make sure you button your shirt back up.” Brushing her hand against his bare chest, she slowly headed for the door, fixing all of her clothing along the way. Checking to make sure Jackson was presentable, she opened the door.

“Mom.” Bianca came in and suddenly realized what she must have been interrupting with the look upon her uncle’s face, plus her mother’s smeared lipstick on his lips. “Oh, sorry, Uncle Jack. Look, I just have a quick question, then you two can get back to... Yeah.”

Jack smiled that knowing smile, as Erica laughed softly. “Bianca, what’s your question?” Erica took her daughter’s hand and led her to the couch to sit.

“Well, I was hoping, if it’s not too much trouble... would you baby-sit Miranda for me tomorrow? Kendall, Greenlee and I are doing a girls’ night, and I was thinking it might be nice for you to spend some time with your granddaughter.”

Bianca was obviously nervous. Her speech with very qualified, and her voice was soft. She never lifted her eyes to meet Erica’s as she spoke. Erica thought to herself, Bianca has every right to be nervous after the way I acted. Don’t take it personally.

Lifting Bianca’s chin until their eyes met, Erica said, “Bianca, I would love to take care of Miranda. It would be an honor. Thank you for allowing me the pleasure after all I put you through.”

Bianca threw her arms around her mother, wrapping Erica in one of the tightest hugs. “Oh, thank you, Mom. I am so glad this is okay with you. Thank you.”

Jack was admiring the scene from the chair by the fireplace. Erica and Bianca were both beaming. Mother and daughter seemed to have come full circle. And as Erica brushed Bianca’s hair with her hand, Jack noticed the engagement ring once more.

Bianca pulled back. "Okay, well I better get home before Kendall starts to worry. And so you two can resume whatever it was that you were doing." Bianca laughed. Jack ran his hand through his hair, trying to ignore her comment. At the door Bianca said, "Thanks again, Mom. I love you."

"I love you too. Kiss Miranda and Kendall good night for me."

Closing the door behind Bianca, Erica found Jack staring at her. She had felt so wonderful about Bianca trusting her with Miranda and all the progress that had been made with her daughter that she had almost completely forgotten about what she and Jack had been about to do.

Jack had never seen Erica look this content. He was amazed at how absolutely breathtaking she was, as she lingered by the door. Whatever it was that was happening, however she was getting through all the pain, Jack was thrilled at the progress she had made. That ring caught his eye again. He wanted to know what prompted the change and what did it really mean to her.

"Come here." Jack's voice was still husky from earlier. As they sat on the couch together, Jack took her hand in his.

"You're still wondering about that, aren't you?" Erica asked, noticing his finger playing with the ring.

"Maybe a little." Jack looked into her sparkling brown eyes. Trying to convey all of his questions without saying a word, their eyes seemed to be doing a dance of their own. All of the love that Jack and Erica had for each other that had not been spoken for so many months now, was finally pouring out.

"Jack," Erica started. "I am sorry I ever gave this back to you. Honestly, I am sorry for all of our broken engagements. Although we have tried to make it to the altar so many times, we have never actually become husband and wife." Erica paused. The pain of the past was still evident on her face, as tears started to well up in her eyes. "Jack, I would like for you to still consider marrying me." Erica put her hand to Jack's mouth as he started to speak. "Look, I know we have a long way to go before that, but I would like for you to keep the option open. With your permission, I would

like to continue wearing this ring, not necessarily as a sign that we will be wed, but so that everyone knows that my heart is taken, claimed by you, Jackson.”

Erica’s eyes kept shifting between the ring and Jack’s handsome face. She didn’t want to push him for a response, and she certainly wasn’t looking for a proposal. She had just wanted to make her intentions clear.

“Sweetheart, of course I still want to marry you. But yes, we do need to work through some things first. You are my heart, Erica Kane. You always have been and always will be.” Pausing, Jack kissed her hand right below the ring. “I would be honored to have you continue to wear this ring, but it still holds the same promise, Erica. I will marry you.”

“Oh, Jack. I love you.” Erica leaned in, resting her head against Jack’s chest. Letting her sweet tears of happiness fall, Jack wrapped her in his embrace.

“I love you too.”

Pulling back, Jack kissed her lips softly. “It is late, and as much as I would love to continue what we had started earlier…”

“You don’t have to say it, Jack. I agree. We should wait.”

Taking in Erica’s amazing maturity, Jack replied, “Okay, so I’ll be going.” He rose, helped Erica up and headed towards the door.

“So Mr. Montgomery, how are you at changing diapers?” Erica questioned.

“Fairly good. Want help tomorrow night?” Jack had opened the door, but turned back to face her. Bending down to be face to face, Jack saw her nod. “Count me in.” His lips grazed her cheek. “Good night beautiful.”

“She really is a happy baby, isn’t she?” Erica was holding a sleepy Miranda. Miranda’s head kept falling down on Erica’s shoulder, then popping back up slightly, as the baby fought her inevitable sleep.

The evening had been a total success. When Jack arrived, Erica was down

on the floor, playing with her grandchild. Both ladies were giggling as Miranda made huge smiles at Erica's goofy faces. The love between them was evident and so was their similarity. When Erica rose to kiss Jack, Miranda started to fuss. The child had definitely inherited Erica's desire to be the center of attention.

"Yes, she is. But she also has just enough of her grandmother's fiery temper to keep things interesting." Jack enjoyed sitting beside her as she rubbed Miranda's back.

"Yes, well, it keeps life interesting. Besides, it is one of the things you love about me," Erica shot back. Jack and Erica had bantered and teased each other all night. When Miranda spit up all over Jack's shirt, Erica had teased him about having a deal with Miranda in order to tempt her. Erica pulled out one of Jack's shirts from her closet from before she ran off to Paris. The affection between them was kept at a light level due to their duties to Miranda but rarely was there a moment when their hands weren't touching.

"Yes it is. I love everything about you." Jack leaned over, kissing Erica's cheek. "Well, almost everything."

Suddenly serious, Erica laid the baby on a pallet on the floor next to the couch. Miranda was sound asleep, so they were able to talk. "What about me do you not love, Jackson?"

Erica's tone was not angry, as he had expected. It was serious, but sincere, like she was seeking honest constructive criticism. "I don't love how hard it is for you to trust me sometimes. To trust in our love. I don't like how you ran from me."

Both sitting in jeans and t-shirts, they faced each other on the couch. Erica pulled her legs up Indian-style. "That's an understandable thing to not like. I don't even like that about myself. But I am working through that, Jackson. I want to be a better person, before we take this any further."

"Whoa, what are we talking about here, Erica? How are you working through that?"

"I have been going to therapy, as you suggested. I just didn't want to make a big deal out of it." Erica looked down at Miranda. "Gosh, she is beautiful."

She looks so much like Bianca.”

“Erica, you are not about to change the subject.” Jack took her hand.
“Therapy, huh? Well, I must say I am very pleasantly surprised.”

“Good, but I am not doing this for you. I am doing it for myself and for all of our family. I would love for us all to go to a session or two a little later on.” Erica looked Jack straight in the eyes. “I love you, and I don’t want to ever doubt us or you again. I promise that from now on we will face everything together. No running.”

“Come here, you,” Jack pulled Erica in to lean against him on the couch. Adjusting slightly, they laid together. “I love you. I am very proud of you.”

Slowly enjoying being in each other’s arms, they drifted off to sleep. When Bianca came in, she found them peacefully sleeping together. She gathered up Miranda and all her things, jotted a quick note of thanks, and left the two just as she found them.

The next several weeks were full of therapy sessions and family activities. Erica spent at least an hour or two everyday with her precious granddaughter. Bianca kept telling Erica to stop spoiling Miranda with too many stuffed animals. Erica met for lunch with Kendall at least twice a week. She had even gone for coffee with Greenlee a few times. As Erica made progress in her therapy, everyone saw it.

One afternoon Reggie, Danielle and Erica sat on Jack’s couch watching the latest American Idol that Erica had taped for them. Reggie and Erica had repaired their relationship and were closer than ever. Jack had received a call from Reggie right after Erica arrived, so that Jack could put his plan into action.

“Well, well, isn’t this a wonderful surprise?” Jack strolled into the loft. With his tie loosened slightly, Jack looked amazing in his new grey suit.

“Jack, why do I think this is not a surprise?” Erica threw some popcorn at Reggie as she stood to greet him. Placing a light airy kiss on his lips, Erica looked back at Reggie. “So when did you call? While you were in the bathroom?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, E.” Reggie feigned innocence.

“It doesn’t matter how I knew you were here.” Jack said, taking her hand. “I have something to show you. Sorry, kids, but I am stealing this lovely lady.”

“That’s cool, J. Have fun, but not more than I would,” Reggie winked at Jack, as he wrapped an arm around Danielle’s shoulder.

Erica stood, taking the entire scene in, “Jack, where are you taking me?”

Jack kissed her cheek and escorted her out the door. “You’ll see.”

Chapter Nine by Mary

Erica watched out the window as the houses that dotted the outskirts of town became fewer and farther between. The late afternoon sun was giving way to escalating clouds that cast shadows across the country landscape. They had been driving for over half an hour and Erica was growing increasingly impatient.

“OK, Jackson, so where are we going?” she asked again, looking over at him.

“We’re almost there,” he said. “Do you trust me?”

Erica knew that he was looking for more than a simple answer to his question. “Always,” she replied, sliding over to rest her head on his shoulder. She felt happier and safer than she had in months. She never would have believed that going to therapy could make such a difference but it had. Opening her heart to Miranda had somehow managed to set her free of the painful memories of the past. She knew they would always be there but she felt that she had somehow made peace with them.

They approached a circular driveway leading to the most magnificent house that Erica had ever seen. It was large, with an inviting porch framed by wide columns, enormous windows, a tiled roof and gorgeously landscaped grounds. The house appeared empty and Erica couldn’t imagine why they were there.

Jack got out and came around to open her door. “No questions,” he said, placing his fingers over her lips. “I will explain everything once we get inside.”

They walked up to the porch and Erica watched as Jack took a key from under the welcome mat and opened the door. She walked in ahead of him and stopped. A feeling of tranquility overcame her as she looked around. She had been right in that the house was empty but even without furnishings, it was absolutely perfect. The walls, the carpet, the sweeping staircase - everything was in her favorite colors and styles. She felt as if she had designed this house herself or at least someone who knew her very well had.

“It’s beautiful, Jack,” she said, turning to him. “But I still don’t understand what we’re doing here.”

“I think you do,” he said, watching her closely. “Do you like it?”

“I love it,” she answered. “It’s the most breathtaking house I’ve ever been in.” When he didn’t respond, she continued. “Well, there isn’t a For Sale sign outside, so I assume it belongs to someone.”

“You would assume right,” he replied.

Taking a deep breath, not even daring to hope what this meant, she asked softly, “Is it ours, Jack?”

Jack walked over and took both her hands in his. “Yes, it is,” he said, reaching out to touch her face as she started to cry. “Hey, if you don’t like it -”

“Of course I like it, I love it,” she laughed through her tears. “You know I do. But how, when?”

“After I proposed to you again that day in my office,” he told her. “I thought it would be a wonderful surprise after the trial, something to look forward to. I envisioned us living here with Reggie and Lily. There’s a nursery for Miranda when Bianca visits and plenty of room for Kendall and Greenlee if they ever need to stay with us for any reason.” He smiled at her teasingly as he went on. “The builder says that he’s designed entire houses that are

smaller than the measurements I gave him for your closet and let's just say that the kitchen isn't the largest room in the house."

They laughed together for a moment and then she said sadly, "You put so much thought into this and I ran out on you once again and blamed you for things that weren't your fault."

"It was a difficult time for all of us," he said, "and quite honestly, I didn't handle the Bianca situation the way I should have."

"Oh, Jack," Erica walked over to the window seat and sat down. Jack followed her, sitting down beside her and looking at her questioningly. "We both know that everything that's happened is because of me. Because of the way that I've let my feelings about my father rule my life."

"It's understandable after everything that you went through," Jack said softly. "I should have realized that you would consider me not telling you about Bianca to be a betrayal."

"I understand now why you did what you did, Jack," said Erica. "I know you were trying to do what was best for everyone - like you always do. I pushed all of you away because I felt that you had abandoned me first by not telling me but I realize now that, in your own way, you were each trying to protect me."

"It's important to me that you really believe that," he said.

"I do," she assured him. "Do you forgive me for running away the way I did?"

"Sweetheart, there isn't anything to forgive," he told her seriously. "You came home with me when Bianca needed you and I can't tell you how proud I am of you for initiating the therapy. It's done a world of good for all of us."

"If I had listened to you in the first place," Erica said ruefully. "we'd be married and living here by now. Why did you bring me here today, Jack?"

Jack stood up, bringing her with him. He looked down at her with pride and love on his face. All the years of love and passion between them came

down to this one moment.

“Because I think that we are both finally ready to recapture that life, Erica,” he said. “The one that we’ve almost had so many times. I never gave up on us, not even when you were gone. When you said you’d come back with me, I knew there was hope and when I saw you in the hospital that day with Miranda, I didn’t think I could love you any more. But I do, more than I ever thought possible. So, I guess the question is, do you still feel the same?”

“Do I still feel the same?” Erica repeated. “Of course I do! How can you even ask me that?” She reached up and put her arms around him, running her hands up his arms to his neck. “I love you so much, Jackson, I really do.” She pulled his mouth down to hers and kissed him, softly at first and then with growing intensity. After a few minutes, he pulled away, his breathing ragged.

“You know I can’t concentrate when you do that,” he laughed, putting her slightly away from him. His face turned serious as he picked up the hand that held her engagement ring.

“I love you, Erica Kane,” he said. “You’re my heart - you know that. You’re my whole life.” He took a deep breath. “I swear this is the last time I am going to do this,” he began when she stopped him.

“Jack, wait,” Erica said, “I have something I have to say to you.”

Chapter Ten by Mel

Although Jack knew Erica still wanted to marry him, her stopping his obvious proposal had him concerned. That was until their eyes met. Neither one could deny the amazing depth of the love between them. Jack knew in an instant why she had stopped him, and it warmed his heart to think that Erica was willing to be so vulnerable. So much had changed in her since she started therapy, Jack thought, all of her insecurities seemed to have vanished.

Erica knew the words she wanted to say, but she was lost in his eyes. Jack’s love was so evident in his eyes. Her heart began to race as she mentally repeated what she had prepared to say. Jack would be the only

man to ever hear what Erica was about to say, not just because he was the one she had prepared it for, but also because he was the only person in her life that she was ever able to be this open, this honest with.

Taking a deep breath, Erica started her well rehearsed speech. “Jackson Montgomery, you have been my rock. You have always been the only man for me, even when I refused to admit it.” They both chuckled, thinking back to their night of passion during her engagement to Chris. “We have had a lot of bumps on this path, but I think we have finally gotten things right.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to say, Erica. I think that with this house, now is the time to...” Erica quickly pulled his lips to hers in a quick kiss.

“Hush, Jackson. If you haven’t realized it yet, I am trying to keep you from saying what you are trying to say.”

“Oh, I realize it alright. I just enjoy making you work at it. After all, how many times have I said the same thing to you?” Jack laughed again and his eyes were dancing with mischief.

“Yes, well, cut it out. You don’t want to ruin it, do you?” Erica’s heart was calmer now, knowing he knew and was still there.

“Heavens, no.” Jack chuckled softly. “Sorry, you have my full attention.” Staring right back into her eyes, Jack knew they would be husband and wife very soon.

Kissing his lips gently before continuing, Erica took both his hands in hers. “I guess even the Great Erica Kane should follow tradition.”

Getting down on one knee with both of Jack’s hands in hers, she asked him in a strong, confident voice, “Andrew Jackson Montgomery, will you please do me the honor of marrying me?”

Jack was in awe. He been with Erica through everything, yet here she was being so vulnerable, so open. If he hadn’t known that, he would have been tempted to tease her, to make her think he might say no.

Instead Jack pulled her up and gathered her into himself. Holding her so tightly, he leaned down, lightly kissed right below her ear, sending a chill

down her spine, and whispered.

“I love you, Erica. Yes, I will be your husband.”

Slowly, his lips claimed hers. Their hearts melded together in one solidifying moment. Both of them knew this was it, the last proposal. Soon they would be wed, and soon they would have their forever.

Erica’s hand wound its way to Jack’s hair, raking her nails along his scalp as their kiss deepened. Tongues dueling in their familiar dance, but with a love that had never been matched. Finally in this moment Jack knew Erica was allowing herself to love and be loved completely, for beyond the passion and desire in her kiss was a wholeness of heart that had been missing before.

Erica pulled back slowly. “Jackson...” Jack’s eyes opened slowly, pulling himself back from his emotions. He nodded slightly. “I love you more than I have ever before. Thank you for being patient with me. Thank you for helping me to get to this point.”

Jack knew she had read his mind, another thing Erica Kane was good at. He was never able to hide his emotions or thoughts from her.

“I am grateful you have worked through your pain, Erica. Mainly for your sake. I want you to allow me to love you so completely that you never feel alone in this world again.” Pulling her close again, their lips just inches apart. “And that is exactly what I plan on showing you all afternoon. Love so complete, you will never want to leave my arms.”

With that said, Jack swooped her up into his arms, like so many times before. “My dear bride, I think it is time to start christening our house.” Erica nodded in agreement and giggled, as Jack headed up the stairs.

“So, J, E, what’s the big news? Is the wedding back on?” Reggie quizzed them, as Lily and he waited with Jack and Erica for Greenlee, Kendall and Bianca to show.

“Reggie, you can wait on the rest of the family, can’t you?” Erica teased as she started pouring the sparkling cider into champagne flutes for everyone.

Just then, the loft door opened and the girls came pouring in. Bianca had Miranda's diaper bag, Greenlee had her carrier, and Kendall had the sweet child in her arms. Before the door was even shut behind them, Reggie said, "Alright, they're here. Will you tell us now?"

"Dad, what is it that Reggie wants you to tell us?" Lily chimed in, Reggie's excitement rubbing off on her. The two of them had quickly become close since Jack had brought Lily home.

"Okay, okay you two." Jack laughed heartily, enjoying the feeling of their now complete family. It was very obvious that everyone knew what the announcement would be, but just the same they were all waiting on pins and needles for the actual pronouncement. The love between Jack and Erica was obvious to each of their children.

After handing out glasses of cider, Jack wrapped one of his arms around Erica's waist. Looking down into her eyes, shining with such love, "So do you want to tell them, or should I?"

"Somebody please just tell us." Reggie seemed at the end of his rope. Jack laughed.

"You should, Jack. After all you out number me in children, 3 to 2. Although if you count Miranda, we are tied." Erica loved teasing their family.

"Fine, fine. Your mother," motioning to Kendall and Bianca, "did the unthinkable today. Erica Kane asked me to marry her. And I accepted."

"You what?" "Erica what?" All the kids spoke at once.

"Yes, I asked Jack to marry me. I think it was finally my turn. I mean, after all the times he has proposed and we have never managed to actually get married, I felt like the whole thing needed to be different." Erica smiled and held her glass up. "To the Montgomery family, may we all end up just where we should be. I know I am." Erica snuggled in against Jack's chest.

"Yes, I think the journey home is now complete, but our lifelong journey is just beginning," Erica whispered to Jack, as his lips came down on hers to seal the great news with a glorious kiss.