

# OBSESSIONS

by Anne Boleyn

Summary: Letting go is hard to do when it comes to Erica Kane. Saying anymore would give away plot events before they are read. Continuing in the series by Amy that began with Meant To Be this is an angsty fic, though filled with lots of romance and drama. A great fic for all J/E fans! PG rating

## *Chapter 1*

May I come in?"

Erica looked up from her desk at Enchantment. She was surprised to find David Hayward standing there. "What are you doing here?" she asked. Her hand instinctively reached for the telephone.

"Please don't call security," he said. "I came to apologize to you."

Erica looked at him, her expression wary.

"I'm being sincere Erica. I've been in therapy to see if I can find out where I went wrong last year. The program I'm in is something like a twelve step program. You have to admit that you've done wrong and face the people you've hurt. I know that I hurt you by taking advantage of you that day you got the Libidozone by mistake. I'm sorry."

"If you're serious about therapy David, I think it's a wonderful idea. I hope it helps you." Erica's voice was cool.

"I'm very serious. I'm hoping to get my medical license re-instated."

Erica laughed but she didn't look amused. "I should have known you weren't just interested in self-improvement. What did Tad and Dixie say when you apologized to them?"

"I came to you first," David told her. "I thought you'd be the best person for me to start with. After all, you've done the twelve steps. And we're so much alike, I knew you'd appreciate how hard apologies are for me."

"We're not that much alike David. At one time I thought we were but I know better now." Erica stood up. "I have a meeting in a few minutes."

"Then I'll go." David turned and walked toward the door. He looked back at her with an unreadable expression on his face. "I really am sorry Erica."

"Did you believe him?" Jack asked Erica later that night after she told him what had happened. They were having dinner at the Valley Inn.

"Not really. I'm sure he's sorry that he has to go to such lengths to get his medical license back. But I don't think David is capable of seeing that what he did was wrong." She looked a little regretful. "Being unable to admit it when I'm wrong has always been one of my worst flaws. I guess that's why I can recognize it in him."

"Oh, I don't know. You look absolutely flawless to me." Jack lifted her hand and kissed it. Just then his cell phone rang. "I'm going to the lobby to answer this," he said. "I hate it when people sit at the table and talk on the phone." He came back quickly. "Honey, I'm going to have to cut this short. One of my clients was arrested for drunk driving. As much as I'd like to let him stay in jail, I've got to go arrange for his bail."

"Go on Jack, I understand. I'll finish my dessert and then call for a driver."

"Are you sure?" Jack asked. "I hate to leave you alone."

"I'm not alone. I have this delicious dessert to keep me company." She smiled up at him. "I'll see you at home." He bent down to kiss her goodbye. Then she turned back to her coffee and tiramasu.

"It looks like we've both been abandoned tonight."

She looked up to find Dimitri standing beside the table. He didn't look very happy.

"You too?" she asked.

"The hospital called and Alex had to leave. Would you mind if I joined you for coffee? I've never liked eating alone in public."

"Not at all," Erica told him. "Please sit down. You know, I started my marital career as a doctor's wife. I can sympathize."

"I appreciate the sympathy. Marriage to Alex can be lonely at times." Dimitri signaled the waiter and ordered another cup of coffee.

When Jack got home, Erica was almost asleep on the couch. "I see you got home all right. How was your dessert?" he said, wrapping his arms around her and kissed the top of her head.

"Perfect," she said drowsily. "I ran into Dimitri and he drove me home."

"It's been quite a day for you and your exes, hasn't it?"

"Are you jealous?" she said smiling at him flirtatiously.

"Should I be?" he responded with an equally flirtatious smile. "Maybe I should be trying to impress you so you'll forget about these other guys." His hands opened the white silk robe, pulling it off her shoulders as his lips worked their way down from her neck. She began unbuckling his belt. When they heard Bianca's door open they sprang apart, adjusting their clothes as she came downstairs.

"Bianca, it's very late. Shouldn't you be asleep?" Erica asked.

"I have a chemistry test tomorrow and I've been studying," Bianca said.

"Right now I'm starving. I'm going to fix myself a snack. Oh Mom, I almost forgot. You had a phone call while you were gone. Mike Roy is going to be in town next Friday and he wants to come by. He left a number for you to call him back." Bianca went into the kitchen.

"Speaking of exes," Jack said.

"Why don't you call him and arrange a visit?" Erica said. "The two of you got to be friends before. Besides, I'll be out of town next Friday. It looks like you and Mike will have to do your catching up without me."

"I'm sure he'll be looking forward to it," Jack laughed.

## *Chapter 2*

".....in the napping house where no one now is sleeping." Erica and Nicholas were snuggled together in the rocking chair in the nursery while she read to him. She put the book down and rocked him a little longer even though she was sure he was asleep.

"Missing him already?" Jack asked from the doorway. Erica smiled and nodded.

Jack took the little boy from her lap and tucked him into bed. "Honey, you could still take him with you," he said as they went into their bedroom.

"I know, but that would be selfish," Erica said. "I crammed all of my personal appearances into two days so I'll be working almost non-stop. If Coral's going to be taking care of him it's better for it to be here. He'll have his own bed and his own toys, not to mention all the rest of his family to spoil him rotten. I just hate the thought of being away from him." She

looked thoughtful. "Jack, maybe I shouldn't go."

"Sweetheart, Nicholas will be fine for two days. I don't want you to cancel."

"I don't want to put Enchantment ahead of my family. I've spent too many years without a family to take it for granted."

"You're not putting anything ahead of us," Jack told her. "You work from home most of the time now. A two day personal appearance tour isn't going to traumatize Nicholas. And you know how much you still like the spotlight. This will be fun for you. You know, I'm starting to feel a little left out here," Jack pretended to sulk. "Nicholas will be fine but what about me? I can't go with you either but you're not worried about leaving me."

Erica laughed. "I think you'll be just fine. You're pretty tough."

"I don't know." He put his arms around her from behind and started kissing her neck. "I'm the one who'll be sleeping alone every night." He turned her to face him, kissing her slowly. "The one who'll be waking up alone every morning." Another long, slow kiss. "The one who'll be missing you every second." Erica felt like her bones were melting with each kiss. They turned and dropped onto the bed.

The next morning Jack watched as Erica finished packing. "Whoa, that's mine," he said as Erica put a navy blue robe into her suitcase.

"I know," she said smiling. "But I like to wear it. It will be almost like having you with me in the hotel room."

Jack was unexpectedly touched by that, but there wasn't enough time to show how much. So he grinned at her and said, "That's a little unfair. I can't fit into anything of yours. Besides, I'd hate to have to explain to Bianca why I was wearing one of your negligees."

"That might be a little awkward," Erica laughed as she closed her suitcase.

Nicholas and Bianca came into the room just then. Erica reached down and picked up her son, hugging him tightly. "Will you be a good boy while Mommy's gone?"

"No," he said cheerfully.

She kissed him, laughing again. "At least you're honest, aren't you my angel? What about you Bianca? Are you planning on behaving yourself?"

"I promise, no nose rings or tattoos while you're gone," Bianca said rolling her eyes. " Mom, when you get back, I want us to sit down and look at some of these college brochures. I want to start planning some campus visits for later this fall."

Erica looked unhappy. "I guess we really should get started on that. It just seems so unbelievable that you'll be leaving for college in less than a year."

"Don't look so sad," Bianca told her. "Most of the colleges I'm looking at aren't that far away."

"I hate to interrupt," Jack told them. "But we really need to leave for the airport." He picked up two of Erica's suitcases. "How one person can take so much stuff for only two days is a mystery to me." He started downstairs as Erica kissed Bianca and Nicholas good-bye one more time.

"Men don't understand anything about packing," Erica said as she picked up another one of her bags. Then she pushed the intercom button. "Coral would you please bring the rest of my luggage down to the car. Thank you." She turned back to her children. "I'm going to miss the two of you so much. I wish I didn't have to go at all."

"Everything went so well today Jack," Erica said. She was curled up on the bed in her hotel suite talking to her husband on the phone.

"Aren't you glad now that you didn't back out of the trip?" he asked her.

"Hmmm, I suppose. I think the personal appearances will increase the fall sales. Of course I've probably already spent any future profits on phone bills these past two days." They both laughed.

"We have racked up the time, haven't we?" Jack said.

"I just miss you all so much." She pulled Jack's robe tighter around her.

"We miss you too. I can't wait until you get home tomorrow," Jack said. "Of course right now I've got this cute little blonde keeping me company."

"Lily's home already! Oh Jack, let me talk to her."

Jack handed the phone to Lily. She smiled at whatever Erica was saying to her but she didn't respond verbally. When she handed the phone back to Jack he said teasingly, "Now what made you so sure it was Lily? Did you even consider that I might have a girl over while you were gone?"

"Not for a minute," Erica said. "Why look elsewhere when you already have perfection?"

They talked for a few more minutes, confirming what time Erica's plane would arrive the next afternoon. She had chartered a small private jet so that she wouldn't have to be dependent on airline schedules. Just as they were about to hang up Jack said, "Did I tell you I heard from Mike Roy?"

"No, you didn't. Did the two of you get together while he was in town?"

"He called last night. But he's going to be in town for several months.

He's teaching a class at the police academy. He said he'd call again when you got home.

"Jack, if it makes you uncomfortable at all, I'll tell him that I don't want to see him."

"It doesn't. I'm not worried about Mike Roy. Like you said, why look elsewhere when you already have perfection?"

The next morning Erica sat in the VIP lounge at the airport. She was looking at her watch impatiently when her pilot came up to her. "Ms. Kane, I'm sorry for the delay. I think we've got the mechanical problems fixed. I want to go over everything myself one more time to make sure."

"Thank you for being so thorough," she said. "I'm so anxious to get home but I don't want to take off until everything is all right."

"Problems Erica?" She turned at the sound of a familiar voice.

"My goodness, what are you doing here?"

"I'm heading for Pine Valley, the same as you. Why don't we wait together?"

Later that afternoon, Jack and Bianca were waiting at the Pine Valley airport. Erica had phoned earlier, saying that her plane had some mechanical problems and that she would be late. But the problems had been fixed and the plane should have been there by now. They were both starting to feel uneasy. "Dad, do you think anything is wrong? Do you think the plane had more problems in the air?" Bianca asked.

"I don't think so," Jack said. "We're both probably just a little jumpy. I'm sure they wouldn't have let the plane take off if it wasn't safe." Just then he

noticed a man with a grim expression on his face entering the waiting room and realized the man was coming toward them.. His heart dropped as the man said, "Mr. Montgomery, would you please come with me? We've had some news about your wife's flight."

### *Chapter 3*

Jack and Bianca entered the house in silence. Bianca ran up the stairs to her room. Jack started to follow her but he couldn't bring himself to climb the stairs. He sank down on the couch and dropped his head into his hands. "This just can't be happening," he thought. "It's got to be a mistake." He jumped when he heard the doorbell ring. "Maybe they've heard something," he thought going rapidly to the door.

"Jackson, what's going on? I was changing channels and CNN had a newsbreak that Erica was in a plane crash. That's not true is it?" Opal was in tears.

"I don't know. All they could tell us was that her plane disappeared from radar and that hunters in the area reported hearing an explosion and seeing flames. They've got ground crews searching now." Jack looked dazed.

"Oh Jack." Opal hugged him. "I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

Jack looked at her blankly. "She can't be dead Opal. I'd know it if she was dead, wouldn't I?"

The house slowly filled with people, all waiting for more information. Bianca remained in her room, but she did let Laura and Leo in. Myrtle took charge of Nicholas and Lily, keeping them upstairs and trying to keep them occupied. Both children picked up on the tension in the house and were restless and cranky. Jack seemed to be in another world, staring out the window at nothing. When the doorbell rang he would glance over to see who was there, but he couldn't muster the strength to really talk to anyone.

Edmund came up to where he was standing. "Jack, I know it's a cliché to say I know how you feel, but I really do know what you're going through."

"I suppose you do," Jack answered.

"There's nothing I can say that will make any difference. But if you need to talk to someone who's been there, you know where I am." Edmund clasped him in a hug.

"I've made sure you won't have to worry about reporters invading your privacy," Palmer told him. "My security team from Cortland Electronics has secured the whole block. Only people whose names are on a special list will be allowed through unless the guards clear it with me personally. And they'll be checking ID's so there won't be any slip-ups."

"Jack, why don't you let me get you something to eat?" Opal said. "You need to take care of yourself."

"I don't want anything Opal. I just want to know what happened to her."

Brooke came up to them. "Jack, I was just talking to a source at AP. He's heard that the ground crews found the wreckage of the plane. The area is very heavily wooded and hard to reach but they're on the scene now."

Just then the doorbell rang again. It was Derek. Jack looked at him, dreading what he was about to hear. Bianca came down the stairs. She had seen the police car arrive and knew why he was there.

"Jack, Bianca, I'm so sorry to have to tell you this. There were no survivors from the crash. There were witnesses who saw the plane explode while it was still in the air. If it helps any, I'm sure she never knew anything."

Bianca collapsed into Leo's arms sobbing. Jack knew he should go to her but he couldn't. He just stood there, unable to do anything but feel the most searing pain he'd ever known.

Erica stirred and looked around her in confusion. The room was lovely but totally unfamiliar. It looked like a room she might have decorated herself, the same colors and art work that she would have chosen. Her head was pounding and she couldn't remember anything except being at the airport. How had she gotten here - and where was here? A door opened and a man walked into the room carrying a tray. "Good, you're awake. How do you feel?"

"Where are we? What is this place? Why are you here?" Erica was beginning to panic. If only she could think clearly. "I remember you were at the airport. My plane was grounded and you offered to take me back to Pine Valley on yours. What happened?"

"I'll explain everything. But first, have some tea. It's the kind you like best. Everything here was chosen just for you." He smiled and handed her an exquisite china teacup. "I hope that you'll be very happy here."

## *Chapter 4*

Let's get everyone out of here," Edmund said quietly to Brooke. "I know they all want to help but the last thing in the world Jack and Bianca need right now is a crowd."

"I agree," Brooke said, whispering to Palmer and then to Ruth. As everyone trickled out the door she went to Jack's side. "Jack, I'm leaving now. Please call if there's anything you need." Jack looked at her and nodded. e hadn't spoken since Derek's news.

"Laura, are you coming with me?"

Laura was sitting beside Bianca on the couch. "Do you want me to stay?" she asked her friend.

"It's OK. Go home with your mom," Bianca started to cry again.

"Are you sure?" When Bianca nodded Laura told her, "Look, call me any time you need to talk. I mean it." She hugged Bianca and then left with Brooke.

"Jack darlin, would you like me to stay and help Coral with Nicholas?" Myrtle asked.

Jack finally roused enough to respond to her. "No Myrtle. You go home and rest. I know this is killing you too."

Myrtle had tears running down her cheeks. "She was like my own daughter." She hugged both Jack and Bianca and then walked out the door. Finally Jack and Bianca were left alone.

"I shouldn't have talked to her about college right before she left," Bianca said.

"Honey, she's so proud of you. She loves the fact that you are being sought after by all the top schools."

"Was proud of me Dad. She's gone. Just like Daddy. I never really got to say goodbye this time either." Bianca started to cry again.

Jack held out his arms and she fell into them. His own tears came then. The two of them held on to each other, sobbing.

"I'm sorry you still feel so shaky," he said, watching Erica's hands trembling

as she drank her tea. "I had to give you something to make you sleep while I brought you here but it will wear off soon." Erica's eyes widened. "Don't look so frightened. It was non-addictive. I would never give you anything that would hurt you."

"I don't understand," Erica's voice shook. "Where are we? What happened?"

He smiled at her. "I've been planning this a long time you know. I just had to wait until everything fell into place."

"What are you talking about?"

He got up and walked over to the gas log fireplace, lighting it with a remote control. "You see, I never stopped loving you. I've been doing a lot of soul searching this past year and I realized that the only time in my life that I was truly happy was when we were together. So I decided that I would make sure we were together again. I designed all of this for you. Look around. Every fabric, every painting, every sofa cushion was chosen with you in mind. I even had your portrait copied. I hung it above the fireplace but we can move it if you like. I want this to be a real home for you."

Erica stared at him in horror. "You surely don't think I'm going to stay here do you?"

"Darling, you don't have any choice. You can't leave. That's part of the design. This place is ours. It's where we're going to start our new life."

He sat down on the edge of the bed. She moved away from him quickly, trying to stand up but sitting back down as a wave of dizziness struck her. "

Don't be frightened Erica. I won't force myself on you. I realize it will take you some time to get used to the idea. We'll truly be together only when you're ready."

She felt sick, almost as though she might faint. The room was spinning almost as fast as her thoughts. She had to lay down and close her eyes.

"That's good, why don't you get some rest? I have to go now but I'll be back in the morning." He walked across the room, sliding something that looked like a hotel room key into the door. Before she could see what lay beyond it he closed the door, leaving her all alone.

"What am I going to do?" she thought. "I've got to find a way out of here."

But she felt herself drifting off into unconsciousness before she could do anything.

### *Chapter 5*

The next morning Jack sat staring at his coffee cup. He hadn't slept at all the night before. Every time he closed his eyes, the pain was overwhelming. He couldn't stay in the room he and Erica had shared. Most of the night he had roamed the house, trying to dispel the haunting images of the plane exploding. Derek had called around midnight to pass on the news that remains had been found at the crash site. When Jack pressed for details, Derek had reluctantly told him that larger bones belonging to the pilot and smaller ones that were Erica's had been located in the area near the wreckage. The fire from the explosion had been intense. Jack closed his eyes as another wave of pure agony washed over him.

"Dad, aren't you going to answer the door?" Bianca had come into the room unnoticed.

"I'm sorry sweetheart. I didn't even hear it." Jack got up and went to the door.

"Jack, we came as soon as we heard," Janet said hugging him tightly, then moving on to Bianca.

"Pal, I'm so sorry. " Trevor hugged him next. "Erica was a very special lady."

As they sat down on the couch Janet said, "I talked to her just the other day. We were going to get together when she got back from her trip."

"She didn't even want to go," Jack said, the pain evident in his voice. "She was going to back out and I talked her into going. Why didn't I keep my mouth shut and let her stay?"

"Jack, you can't start blaming yourself," Janet told him. "You'll drive yourself crazy."

Erica woke up slowly, hoping the day before had been a nightmare.

"Good morning. I hope you feel better after a good night's sleep." It was him. Everything was real. "I brought you breakfast. Then I thought I'd show you around your new home."

"I'm not hungry." She sat up slowly, hugging her arms around her.

"Then lets start the tour." His voice was cheerful. "This is the bedroom of course. If you'll look in the closet you'll find it fully stocked with clothes, all in your size. The same for the chest of drawers. I know your taste perfectly. Some of the clothes I had copied from pictures of you that I found in magazines. Others I purchased just for you. The bathroom is over to the left. I have all your favorite soaps, shampoos and lotions - Enchantment products only of course. Your cosmetics are in the dressing room adjoining the bathroom, again all Enchantment products. There's a sitting room with a VCR and DVD player, satellite tv, a library of your favorite movies and CD's as well as a wide selection of books. I'll bring you anything that I've forgotten. There's also a kitchen. I know you don't cook but the freezer is full of your favorite foods that only need to be microwaved. I've stocked plenty of fresh fruits and juices. Most of the time I'll be bringing your meals and dining with you but if I can't be here you'll still have plenty to choose from. As you can see, I've thought of everything."

Erica listened with a growing sense of horror. This was insane, he was insane. "You can't keep me here, " she told him. "People will be looking for me. I'm sure Jack's already called the police. I was supposed to be home yesterday afternoon."

"I told you, I've thought of everything," he said calmly. "No one is looking for you. They think they've found you."

"What do you mean?"

"Your plane went down. Or rather it blew up. It's all very sad really."

Erica stared at him in total shock. "You did that?"

"I had too. If you just disappeared, my plan wouldn't work. But now ....."

"You killed the pilot!"

"No no, I'm not a murderer Erica. The pilot was well paid to plant the explosive device and then parachute out before it went off. And just to be sure there weren't any questions, two bodies were on board. Don't look at me like that. They were already dead. I obtained two bodies from a medical research lab, one a small boned woman, the other an average size man. You see, I'm extremely resourceful." He sounded very pleased with himself.

"I don't believe this. This can't be happening." Erica was shaking.

"Now, I need to go. You finish your breakfast, take a shower, explore your new home. I'll see you later today." He started to the door. Erica was right behind him, grabbing for the key card in his hand. He grabbed her wrist and said, "Don't even think about it Erica. I don't want to have to drug you but I will. Besides, even if you got through this door it wouldn't do you any good. You're just going to have to adjust." He pushed her aside and left before she could try to escape again.

"You can't do this!" she screamed, pounding on the door before she collapsed to her knees in tears. "You can't do this."

### *Chapter 6*

Erica had looked over every inch of her prison, trying to get some idea of where she was. It hadn't done any good. The only thing she had learned was that her captor was very thorough. There was nothing she could use as a weapon against him, she had looked for that too. Screaming hadn't helped. Either the rooms were soundproof or there was no one anywhere around to hear her. She turned on the tv, trying to find out what time it was, when she came across a report on Headline News. It showed fans leaving flowers in front of the Enchantment offices. The reporter said that the family remained in seclusion, visited only by close friends.

"Oh God," she said, starting to cry again. "This must be so awful for them. Bianca thinks she lost another parent so soon. Nicholas and Lily won't understand. And Jack... If I thought Jack had died I'd wouldn't be able to handle it. I know he's stronger than I am but this must be tearing him apart. I've got to get home to them."

"Jack, I know at times like this everyone always asks what they can do to help. Well, I'm going to make you an offer and I hope you'll take me up on it. Let me cover your practice for a while. I know you can't even think about work now so let me think about it for you," Trevor said.

"What about your own practice?" Jack asked him.

"I work in an office with 50 other lawyers. I don't think that will be a problem."

"Let him do this Jack," Janet said. "I'd like to help out at Enchantment too. We both want to do anything we can for you."

"You two are the best," Jack said. "I'm very grateful. I know Erica says that

Enchantment hasn't been the same without you Janet."

Just then the doorbell rang. It was Mike Roy. "Jack, I don't know what to say," Mike said awkwardly.

"There's nothing for you to say. How did you get here?" Jack sounded angry.

"Palmer thought it would be all right. I'm sorry if it isn't."

"You know, I look at you and all I see is the years Erica and I lost because you wanted her back. Now get out of my house." Jack turned and walked out of the room.

Mike looked stricken. "I didn't mean to cause a problem. Will you tell him I'm sorry?" He left the house, leaving Janet and Trevor alone in the living room.

"Jack's in bad shape," Trevor said.

"I know," Janet replied. "Erica meant everything to him."

"Dimitri, I've been looking for you," Edmund said as his brother came down the stairs. "I was planning on going over to see Jack and Bianca later and I thought you might like to go."

"I don't know," Dimitri said. "I want to see Bianca but I don't think I should go to the house. Maybe you should just tell them how sorry I am. Jack and I have never really gotten along you know."

"That's true. It might be better if you didn't go." Edmund paused then said. "I'm impressed that you're thinking about Jack's feelings,"

"I'm thinking of my own feelings too," Dimitri said. "I can't picture that house without Erica in it. In fact, I can't picture a world without Erica in it." Dimitri's voice broke. He walked past Edmund and out the door.

"I didn't think this would hit him so hard," Edmund thought. "I didn't realize he still felt so close to Erica."

"Joe, may I speak with you?" David stopped Joe Martin in the hospital cafeteria.

"What now David, more treatments denied by your insurance company?" Joe asked wearily.

"No nothing like that. I'm hoping to leave the insurance business and return to work as a doctor soon."

"Not in my hospital," Joe thought. Aloud he said, "Then what do you want to talk to me about?"

"I heard that you and Ruth were at Erica's last night when word of her death came in. I wanted to go and offer my condolences to Jack and Bianca but apparently I'm not on Palmer's list of acceptable mourners." David was wearing his typical "everyone is against me" look.

"What's your point David?" Joe was getting impatient.

"I'd just like for you to let the family know how sorry I am for their pain.

Erica and I had reached an understanding about everything that happened. I want her family to know that I share their grief. Do you know if there is a memorial service scheduled?"

"I don't think anything like that has been discussed yet. I'll pass on your sympathy," Joe said. "Now if you'll excuse me I have patients to see."

Erica was near the door when he came back in to her room. He pushed her back slightly as he entered. "I told you before, don't even think about trying to escape." He pulled out a syringe and showed it to her. "I could always drug you each time I leave but I'd hate for you to make me do that."

Erica faced him angrily. "How can you do this to my family? I saw a report on the news that they were in seclusion. Did you even think about Jack and my children, about how much they're hurting?"

"I'm sure that this is very hard for them right now. But Jack will recover. After all, it was only a matter of time before you left him anyway. Don't look so angry, your track record speaks for itself. Frankly, I'm surprised you've stayed together this long. And believe it or not I really did think about your children. I'm not a monster Erica. Bianca is almost grown. In a way this may make it easier for her to leave home and go on with her life out of your shadow. The little boy won't remember you for much longer, he's just a baby. Jack's daughter is autistic. She may not even really be aware of who you are. It's not going to effect them forever Erica." He smiled at her comfortingly.

Erica stared at him. "He really is completely insane," she thought.

He looked at the breakfast tray, still sitting untouched and frowned. "Why didn't you eat?"

"Being a prisoner took away my appetite," she snapped.

"You didn't eat last night either." His voice was angry. "I've gone to a lot of trouble for you. The least you could do is show a little appreciation."

He picked up a glass of orange juice from the tray and threw it across the room. Erica gasped. He took her by the wrist and dragged her over to a small table, shoving her into a chair. "Now, I'm going to prepare something for our lunch and you'll eat it. Do you understand? You stay right here while I'm gone. Don't move." He stalked into the small kitchen. Erica felt panic rising in her. "I can't afford to make him mad. He could kill me."

When he came back into the room a few minutes later, his mood had completely changed. He was smiling broadly as he said, "You're going to love this. It's one of your favorites. Now let's have a pleasant lunch. I'm sorry I was so harsh with you earlier."

Erica picked up the fork and tried to eat. She hoped he wouldn't notice how badly her hands were shaking.

### *Chapter 7*

"Mommy! Mommy!" Jack turned on the light in the nursery and picked up Nicholas. In the three days since Erica's plane went down, the toddler hadn't slept through the night. Even though he didn't understand what had happened to his mother, he knew she was gone and he missed her terribly.

"I'm sorry buddy, Mommy's not here," Jack said, sitting down with his son in the rocking chair. Nicholas laid his head on Jack's shoulder and began to sob.

"I want Mommy."

"So do I, Nicholas. So do I." Jack's voice was choked.

Bianca had started into the nursery when she heard the exchange between her father and brother. She knew Jack was trying hard to be strong but was on the edge of breaking down.

"I'll just make him feel worse," she thought. She went back to her room and called Laura.

"Laura, I know it's really late but you said to call if I needed to talk."

"I meant it Bianca." Laura's voice was sleepy. "Do you want me to come over?"

"Can I come to your house instead? I need to get out of here."

"Of course. I'll wait for you on the front porch." Laura hung up the phone and got out of bed.

Bianca wrote a note for Jack, explaining where she was going and left it on the coffee table. When Jack came downstairs after finally getting Nicholas back to sleep, he read the note. "I can't make things better for any of them," he thought. He picked up Erica's picture and ran a finger down her face. "I don't think I can do this sweetheart. I just don't think I can make it without you." He laid down on the couch and closed his eyes. Since Erica's death he hadn't been able to sleep in their bed.

Laura and Bianca sat on Brooke's front porch wrapped in quilts and drinking hot chocolate. "It's just so awful at home," Bianca said. "Nicholas cries a lot. I've tried to play with him but after a few minutes he loses interest and goes and stands by the window looking for Mom. Lily sits and rocks and she keeps saying 'Mama's coming back'. I try to explain to her that Mom's not coming back but she doesn't understand. Dad's just barely hanging on. He's trying so hard to be strong for us but he looks like he's dying inside."

"What about you?" Laura asked. "How are you holding up?"

"I don't know. I just wish I could talk to Mom one more time." Bianca's eyes were filled with tears.

"Maybe you can. Do you remember the Ouija Board?"

"Oh my God! I had forgotten about that. Do you still have it?"

"I think so," Laura said. "Let's go upstairs and look."

Erica woke up terrified from some nightmare that she couldn't remember. Her heart was pounding and she was freezing. Fighting off what must be a panic attack, she laid back down, pulling the comforter up around her. "It's not that cold in here, you're just scared," she told herself. "If you fall apart, you'll never get out of here. Just pretend you're with Jack." She closed her eyes, remembering a meditation technique she had learned in rehab. "You're home, you're with Jack, his arms are around you, you're safe." She began to

drift off to sleep, dreaming that she was standing in front of her fireplace at home. Jack was holding her in his arms, his lips in her hair.

She could even hear his voice, "I miss you so much baby." She tightened her arms around him. "Please don't give up on me Jack. Please don't give up on me."

Jack had finally fallen into an exhausted sleep when he began dreaming. He was holding Erica again. She felt so real in his arms. He could feel her heart beating, feel her breath against his chest. He buried his lips in her hair. "I miss you so much baby," he said. He felt her arms tighten around him and heard her whisper, "Please don't give up on me Jack. Please don't give up on me."

### *Chapter 8*

"Who was that on the phone?" Dixie asked as she put Jennifer into her high chair.

"Opal," Tad answered. "She wants me to go with her to Jack's this morning. They're going to start planning a memorial service for Erica. She's really taking this hard."

"I know," Dixie answered. "They've been such good friends for so long. Tad, if you see Bianca will you tell her that everyone in her third period class wants to do something as a memorial for her mother? The kids have raised quite a bit of money and they want to do something meaningful."

"I'll tell her." Tad bent down and kissed Dixie. "It was really great of you to start the memorial fund."

"The kids did it all Tad. I just made the suggestion."

"I'm so sorry Bianca. I don't know what happened to the Ouija board." Laura and Bianca had looked everywhere the night before without any success, finally falling asleep around 4:00. They were in the kitchen eating cereal.

"I know where it is. It's under my bed," Jamie said. "I was asking it if I would ever meet Britney Spears." He was on his way out the door. The girls went up to his room and found the board, taking it into Laura's room and closing the door. They sat down on the floor and placed their finger tips on the pointer.

"Mom, are you there?" Bianca asked. "Mom, please let me know if you're

here. Can you hear me?" Nothing.

"Mom, please! Are you there?" Nothing.

"Please Mom, I need to talk to you. Please." Nothing.

Laura was looking at the board with a strange expression on her face. "I think we should stop Bianca. It's not working."

"No, I can't stop. Mom, answer please!" Nothing.

"Bianca, let's put it away."

"No! Daddy are you there?" The pointer flew to yes.

"Oh my God!" Laura looked pale.

"Daddy is Mom mad at me? Is that why she won't talk to me?" The pointer flew to no.

"Then what's wrong? Why can't I talk to her? Where is she?" The pointer began to move. A - L - I - V - E.

Bianca and Laura stared at each other. "Alive!" Bianca said. "She's alive!"

"Come on in," Jack said opening the door to Janet, Trevor, Tad and Opal who had all arrived at the same time. "Does anyone want some coffee?"

"That sounds great," Janet said. "You seem more rested this morning."

"I am," Jack said.

"That's good to hear," said Opal. "I know Erica would hate to see you looking so tired. I guess we need to get started planning the service."

"No Opal, we're not planning any service," Jack said. "There's not going to be a service. You see, I don't think Erica's dead."

Trevor and Tad looked at each other with concern. Janet sat down next to Jack and took his hand. "Jack, I know it's hard to believe but she is dead."

"Look, I know this sounds crazy but I don't think she is. Last night I dreamed that she told me not to give up on her. Only it really wasn't a dream, it was more like a vision"

"Jack, it was a dream. I used to dream about Natalie all the time after she died. But it didn't bring her back." Trevor's voice was compassionate.

"This is different. You knew Natalie was dead. We don't know that those were Erica's remains found in the plane crash. No one ever checked dental records or anything. We just assumed it was her. Maybe we jumped to conclusions. I just believe she may still be alive."

"She is Dad. I know she is." Bianca and Laura had come in through the back. "We just have to find out where she is."

### *Chapter 9*

Everyone glanced uneasily at each other as Bianca related her experience with the Ouija board. When she finished, Janet put her arm around her.

"Honey, Ouija board's aren't real. You know that don't you? It only said what you wanted it to say."

"This was different," Laura broke in. "Bianca, I haven't even told you this yet. When you were trying to reach your mom and you were getting so upset, I decided to help you. I was going to push the pointer to yes but it wouldn't move. It was like it was stuck to the board with super glue. No matter how hard I tried, it wouldn't budge."

"Was that why you wanted to quit?" Bianca asked.

"Yeah, it scared me. Then when you talked to your dad, I thought the pointer was going to fly out of my hands. It was real, Janet. You'd believe it if you had felt it."

Janet started to reason with the girls again when Opal interrupted. "Maybe there is something to this."

"Mama!" Tad warned.

"I know, I said I wouldn't talk about this. But now, what with Jack's dream and the Ouija board, I have to. Jack, I went to see Frederick last night. He knew I was upset about Erica's death."

"Mama, don't."

Opal ignored Tad. "I was wearing this bracelet she gave me for my birthday last year. He held it and tried to get a reading. All he could tell me was that he sensed great fear and unhappiness from her. He said she hadn't crossed over and wanted desperately to come home. It broke my heart because I thought she had died so suddenly that she couldn't rest in peace yet. But

now.....maybe it means she's not dead."

Jack's eyes were alive for the first time in days. "I think that's exactly what it means. It makes perfect sense with what she said to me about not giving up on her."

"Jack, come on, listen to yourself. You're taking dreams, psychics and Ouija boards as some kind of proof," Tad said gently.

"I'd think you of all people would see the possibility of this. After all, everyone gave up on you once and you were still alive."

"Opal, why don't you and the girls go check on Nicholas and Lily," Trevor said. Bianca started to protest but Opal and Laura pulled her along with them. When they had left the room Trevor faced Jack. "I didn't want to say this in front of Bianca but you've got to face facts here. Erica's dead. No one could have survived that explosion. I've read the reports. She's not laying in a hospital somewhere or wandering around lost in the woods. She's dead."

"Jack, you're in shock over this. That's understandable. But trying to deny what happened won't help you or your children," Janet said. "I know the dream seemed real, but think about it. You knew we were going to plan her memorial service today and maybe you're just not ready to say goodbye, to give her up."

"That's not what she said Janet. She didn't ask me not to give her up, she asked me not to give up on her. I've read the reports too Trevor. But we don't know that those were Erica's bones that they found. We haven't checked dental records..."

"Pal, I don't want to be cruel here but you're leaving me no choice. There wasn't enough left of her to check dental records."

Janet winced at the bluntness of Trevor's words.

"We don't even know that she was on the plane at all." Jack wasn't giving up.

"Then where is she? If she wasn't on the plane, she'd be here now." Trevor wasn't backing down either.

"I don't have all the answers. I just know how I feel. I want DNA testing of the remains they said were Erica's. I can give them hair from her hairbrush or we can use Bianca's blood. I'm not just going to take it for granted that

she's dead without any proof."

Later, Tad, Trevor and Janet sat in a booth at BJ's trying to come up with a way to help Jack deal with what had happened.

"At least he agreed to keep his idea just between us," Janet said. "We can just say that he and Bianca didn't feel ready for a memorial service."

"You know, DNA testing can take weeks," Tad said. "I don't think we can let this drag on that long. It won't be good for Jack and it especially won't be good for the kids."

"Maybe if we can show Jack concrete proof that Erica was on that plane then he can begin to accept it," Trevor said.

"Good idea," Tad said. "I'll get on that right away."

"You believe me don't you Dad?" Bianca asked.

"I do," Jack said. "I think somehow Erica's trying to let us know she's still alive and Travis was helping her out. We just have to find out what really happened to her. I think Tad can help us out there. I'm going to ask him to check out everything that happened the day of the crash. I think he'll find out that she was never on that plane to begin with."

"But Tad thinks we're crazy for believing she's alive."

"I know. He'll think he's going to prove to us that she died in that crash. But when he starts looking into things, maybe he'll realize that our ideas aren't so crazy after all. I'd go myself, but I need to be here. Your mom would want me to be with you and Lily and Nicholas."

Erica looked up as her captor came into the room. "You seem a little calmer today," he said, smiling at her. "Does that mean you're starting to accept your life here?"

"I wouldn't go that far," she told him. "But I'm too tired to fight it right now."  
"

"Fighting it won't help at all," he told her. "You'll be much happier once you realize that. Now, look at the flowers I brought you. Aren't they beautiful?" She watched as he arranged the flowers in a crystal vase and her eyes narrowed. *"I can't overpower you but maybe I can outsmart you. It's my only chance,"* she thought.

## *Chapter 10*

Edmund, I'm worried about Dimitri," Alex said as they met for lunch at the hospital cafeteria. "He's spending so much time alone lately. I know he cared for Erica, but after all, they had been divorced for years. He just seems to be brooding about her death."

"I think he'll be all right," Edmund said. "I know this has really shaken him up but he'll work through it. Dimitri's always been a brooder, even when we were kids. It's just his way."

"I offered to cut back on my hours at the hospital and he wouldn't hear of it. He seems to prefer his own company to mine," Alex said sadly. "I know he spends a lot of time riding, but I have no idea where he is the rest of the time."

"Joe, I'm glad you were able to accept my working a reduced schedule," David said. "I need the extra time to concentrate on getting my medical license back."

"You've been missing work lately anyway," Joe said. "Frankly, you know how I feel about your company's cut backs. It's been better for everyone not having you around watching over their shoulders."

"You really don't like me do you?" David smirked. "Oh well, it doesn't matter. I've got my life back on track now and I don't need your approval. Everything is going my way for the first time in months."

"That's a frightening idea," Joe thought as David stalked out of his office. "I wonder what he meant by that."

"Mike, I'm hearing great things about your class," Derek said when he ran into Mike Roy at the police station. "Would you consider adding another section so we could get more people trained in hostage rescue techniques?"

"No way," Mike laughed. "The hours I'm working now suit me perfectly."

"It must be nice having a lot of free time," Derek said. "I've forgotten what free time feels like."

"It feels great. I spent years never having a moment that was really mine. Now I can work part time and still have enough time to enjoy life."

Derek looked at him and grinned. "Enjoying it with anyone in particular?"

Mike laughed again. "You know better than to ask a former agent personal questions."

"I have the whole afternoon just for us," he told Erica. "What would you like to do? We could watch a movie or play chess. Or we could just get reacquainted if you're ready for that." He moved closer to her and she backed away.

"You promised you wouldn't force me."

"And I'll keep that promise. I don't want to hurt you. What about chess?" He started setting up the board. Erica sat down at the table. She had learned that it was better to go along with his whims than to risk his anger.

"I've been thinking," Erica said as she made her opening move. "We must be close to Pine Valley."

"Why do you think so?"

"You spend so much time here but I know you should be there. We must be close enough for you to go back and forth without people noticing your absence. You thought this whole thing out too completely to disappear from town at the same time I "died". I'm sure you're going about your normal life just as though everything were the same." Erica watched his face carefully. The more she could learn about her situation, the better the chance she might escape.

He smiled proudly. "You're right about that. I'm doing exactly what I always do. Of course I have an explanation for my absences if anyone asks. You're starting to appreciate the beauty of my plan aren't you?"

Erica didn't answer that. She studied the chess board and made another move. He seemed to want a response from her so he continued, "I have expressed my sorrow of course at your untimely death. "

She looked at him with a bitter smile. "I'm sure you sent a lovely floral arrangement to my funeral."

"There hasn't been one. It seems your family wants to wait a while. Rumor is they're planning on something for the one month anniversary of the crash." He made his next move on the board.

"Oh really," Erica's thoughts were racing. "Why would Jack postpone a memorial? Could he be suspicious that the crash was staged? Is it possible

that he's looking for me after all?" She looked at the board. Then she smiled and made her move. "Checkmate."

He looked surprised. "I didn't even see that."

"You can't win every time," she told him. "I guess it was just my turn."

### *Chapter 11*

"Brooke, come in," Jack said as he opened the door. "I'm sorry I haven't returned any of your calls. I meant to but ..." His voice trailed off.

"I understand perfectly. I just dropped by to see how you were." Brooke paused. "That's not completely true. I also wanted to talk to you about Bianca."

"What about Bianca?"

Brooke seemed uncomfortable. "Jack, did you know she and Laura have been experimenting with a Ouija board?"

"I know they used one a couple of days ago."

"They were trying to reach Travis again tonight. Bianca has this idea that Erica is alive somewhere and that Travis can tell her where she is."

"I know that," Jack answered.

"You can't be OK with this? You know that child has to accept her mother's death. Have you talked to her about this?" Brooke's voice was concerned.

"I'm not sure I accept it myself. What if Bianca is right?"

Brooke was shocked. "My God, you can't be serious! Jack, everyone knows how much you loved Erica but you can't live in some fantasy world where she's going to walk back through that door someday. If you're really letting Bianca hang on to this crazy idea, you're going to do her irreparable harm."

"I don't know why the Ouija board won't work anymore," Bianca said. Opal had taken her to see Frederick when she and Laura had failed to contact Travis.

"Ouija boards usually aren't very effective," Frederick told her. "The fact that you received any kind of message is amazing. You do know it's possible that your subconscious caused the pointer to move?"

"I know," Bianca said. "But you told Opal that my mother hadn't crossed over and my father said she was alive. Can't you please tell me more? I brought this to see if it would help you." She handed Frederick a locket that was one of Erica's favorite pieces of jewelry.

He took it in his hands and closed his eyes. "I still sense that she hasn't crossed over," he said. "That doesn't mean she is alive. Spirits sometimes can't cross over if something or someone is holding them back. I sense tremendous unrest from her. She still wants very badly to come home."

Erica tossed the remote aside in disgust. "I can't believe they didn't vote her off the island. Are those people insane?" Then she shook her head. "No, but I'm getting awfully close. Survivor? Let those wimps try being held hostage by a psychotic ex, then we'll talk survivor!" She started pacing around the room. "Don't start getting upset. You're making some progress. He doesn't watch you as carefully now as he used to. Maybe you can find a way to get the key and get out. You just need to find out more about where you are." She stopped pacing and her eyes filled with tears. "Oh Jack, I miss you so much. I miss our children so much. I have to find a way to get home."

Jack sat down on the couch and picked up Erica's picture. "Is Brooke right sweetheart? Am I trying so hard to hang on to you that I'm hurting Bianca?" He smiled. "I can just hear you now. 'When was Brooke English ever right about anything?'"

"Dad, can I talk to you?" Bianca asked as she came down the stairs.

"Of course honey. What is it?"

"I went to see Frederick today." She repeated what Frederick had said. "Do you think that maybe we're keeping her from crossing over? That we want her back so much that she can't just be at peace?"

"I don't know Bianca. Maybe. But I'm just not ready to give up yet. What about you?"

"I'm not either." She hugged Jack tightly. "I still believe she's alive."

### *Chapter 12*

"Tad, Trevor, come on in. What did you find out?" Jack asked. Tad had just returned from the airport where Erica's plane had made its final take-off.

"Erica was definately there Jack. She was in the VIP lounge for a long time waiting for repairs on the plane to be finished. Several people remember

her."

"Did anyone actually see her get on the plane?" Jack asked.

"Not exactly. She was seen going toward the plane but there were several private planes in that area. One of them had some kind of security restrictions and access to the area was limited."

Jack smiled. "So no one saw her boarding the plane."

"That doesn't mean she didn't," Trevor said.

"It doesn't mean she did." Jack countered.

"Jack, look at what you're doing. Bianca hasn't gone back to school, Lily's still here too. You're living in some kind of suspended animation trying to hang on to Erica. You've got to let her go and move on with your life, as hard as that may be."

"I'm not moving on until someone proves to me she's really dead." Jack was angry and it showed.

"Look, there's one more person I want to talk to," Tad said, trying to break some of the tension. "He's the one who was in charge of the VIP lounge. He's on vacation in Center City, visiting family."

Jack looked eager. "I want to talk to him Tad. He might know what happened to Erica."

"Or he might be the last person to see her alive," Trevor said.

Erica took a little extra time with her make-up this morning, making sure she looked paler than usual. She had a plan. It was risky, she had to play it just right and hope that he fell into line. When she heard the click of the key in the door, her eyes filled with tears. That part was easy. She felt like crying most of the time anyway. She reached up and brushed the tears away, seeming to hide them from her captor as he came in while making sure he saw them.

"Darling, what's wrong? I thought you were beginning to feel happy here." He came to her side.

"I am. I know you've tried so hard to make this place just right." She smiled at him with trembling lips.

"Then what is it?"

She turned her head. "I just need to be outside for a while. I don't know whether its warm or cold out. I don't know if it's sunny or rainy. Have the leaves turned yet? I feel like I'll go crazy if I can't just breathe fresh air or see sunshine again." She looked at him with wide begging eyes.

"I'm sorry Erica. I never thought about that. You were never exactly an outdoors person you know."

"It surprises me too that I miss it so much. Isn't there some way you can take me outside? You can handcuff me to your wrist if you're afraid I'll try to escape."

"I can't do that," he said gently. "It's too risky." When her eyes filled with tears again he said hastily, "Don't cry. I'll see what I can do. It may take a while and it will have to be at night but I'll try to find a way to take you outside. I can't bear for you to be unhappy."

"Thank you," she said smiling brilliantly. "I knew you wouldn't let me down." She was thinking, *"OK, so we're not isolated. There must be people around or he wouldn't have to make arrangements. That's good."*

"I'm so sorry about your wife Mr. Montgomery. I was a big fan of hers. She was very nice that day in the lounge."

"Tell me about that day," Jack said. "Did you see her get on the plane?"

"No, I just saw her while she was waiting. She was pretty impatient to get going. Even after her friend joined her, she kept looking at her watch."

Jack looked at him intently. "What friend?"

"I don't know who he was. I could tell he was a friend though, and not a fan by the way she greeted him."

"Was he there when she arrived?" Jack asked.

"No, he came in after she had been there a while. He was waiting for his plane to take off too. There was a lot going on that day. He left right about the same time she did."

"None of our friends ever said they talked to her that last day," Jack said. "This could be very important."

"We'll check into it Jack. Right now, Mr. Adams has to get back to Center City." Tad ended the conversation before the man caught on to Jack's theory that Erica was still alive. The last thing anyone wanted was a tabloid headline "Erica's Widower Deranged By Grief" "Come on, I'll give you a lift to the train station."

Jack turned to Trevor after they left. "This is what I've been looking for Trevor. If we can find out who this friend is, we'll find out what happened to Erica." Jack was almost euphoric.

"Jack, you're way off base here. This only means a friend saw her right before she died. "

"Then why hasn't anyone told me that? If it was an innocent encounter, whoever it was would have said something, would have told me what she said, what they talked about. But no one has. No, this man is the key to everything. I'm sure of it."

### *Chapter 13*

"Erica, you still look so disappointed. Isn't there something I can do to make it up to you for not being able to let you go outside?" He reached out and took her hand. She fought hard not to flinch at his touch.

"You could let me go you lunatic," she thought. Aloud she said, "Well, there is one thing. It sounds silly but...."

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'd love a chili burger from BJ's. And an order of their special fries."

He looked puzzled. "You never eat junk food."

She tilted her head and smiled at him. "I guess you don't know everything about me after all. I don't usually eat junk food but once in a while I indulge myself. I love BJ's chili burgers and their fries are the best I've ever eaten."

He laughed at her indulgently. "I never would have suspected. All right, I'll go get you a double order."

After he left Erica thought to herself, *"If the food is still hot, I'll know I'm not just near Pine Valley but in Pine Valley."*

"Thanks for buying my lunch Mr. Martin." Tad and Joshua Adams had stopped at BJ's on the way to the train station. "I'm sorry that I wasn't able to

help Mr. Montgomery more. What exactly did he want to know?"

"I think he just needed to know that his wife wasn't upset or scared before she boarded the plane," Tad said. "Maybe it will help him in the long run to know that she was with a friend right before she died."

"I hope so," Joshua said. He and Tad placed their orders and made small talk while they waited for their food to arrive. Suddenly Josh sat up straighter. "Wow, this is weird! He's here."

"Who?" Tad asked.

"The man Erica Kane was with at the airport. He's right over there. It looks like he's picking up a carryout order."

Tad turned and looked at the counter. His eyes widened in disbelief when he saw who it was. "This doesn't make any sense," he thought. "Why wouldn't he have come straight to Jack and told him about running into Erica that day?"

"Trevor, we've gone through every card I received after Erica's plane crash. We talked to the secretaries that Palmer had handling the phone calls. No one, no friends, no acquaintances, no distant relatives, no one said a word about seeing Erica that last day. Don't you think it's at all suspicious?" Jack was still trying to convince Trevor that the mysterious man at the airport was a part of Erica's disappearance.

"I'll admit it's strange," Trevor acknowledged. "But Jack, it doesn't mean she's alive. It just means someone didn't tell you for whatever reason. You've got to stop obsessing about this." Jack opened his mouth to try again when the doorbell rang. It was Tad.

"Jack, you're not going to believe this but while Adams and I were at BJ's, he recognized the man he saw with Erica. Are you sure Dimitri never said anything to you about seeing her the day of the crash?"

"Mmmm, these are as good as I remembered," Erica said as she ate the meal Dimitri had brought her. She thought, *"It's all still hot. We're close to BJ's. He can't take me outside so there are people nearby, people who might help me. We must be somewhere in Wildwind. If I can just get out of this room I can get away."* She finished the last of her fries and stood up. "Thank you so much for indulging me."

"Any time," Dimitri said, bowing slightly. "I'm hoping that soon you'll

indulge me." He turned and walked to the CD player, bending down to choose something to play. Erica reached out and picked up a china figurine, wondering if it was heavy enough to knock him out with. When he turned and saw her holding it she smiled sweetly. "This is so beautiful Dimitri. Where did you find it?"

"In Paris. The minute I saw it I knew it had to be a part of the home I was making for you." He came toward her holding out his arms. She gritted her teeth, thinking frantically of an excuse that wouldn't make him angry. Before she could speak, the alarm on his watch went off. "I'm sorry Erica. I promised Alex and Edmund that I would have lunch with them today. Alex is unhappy about how much time I spend away from her. I don't want her to know there's another woman in my life, at least not just yet. I have to go." He looked regretful as he went out the door.

She sank down on a chair, hugging herself as she shivered. "I won't be able to put him off much longer. He's more delusional every day. I have to try to escape as soon as possible."

#### *Chapter 14*

He's late again," Alex said in disgust as she and Edmund sat at the table Peggy had prepared on the terrace. "I wish I knew how he spends his time these days. It certainly isn't with me."

"Alex, you have to admit that you spend a lot of time at the hospital." Edmund was trying to defend his brother.

"Did you ever stop to think the reason I spend so much time at the hospital is because there's nothing for me at home?" Alex's eyes flashed. "Dimitri hasn't touched me for months. And since Erica's death, he barely speaks to me." She noticed how uncomfortable Edmund looked at her words. "I'm sorry Edmund. You're not the person I should be talking to about this."

"About what?" Dimitri asked, coming up on the terrace.

"I was thinking about the two of us having a second honeymoon," Alex said, smiling brightly. "Wouldn't it be lovely to go to Europe? I've missed England so much."

"I think you should plan a trip to England," Dimitri said. "It sounds like just what you need."

"Wonderful!" Alex was happily surprised. "When do you want to leave? I

can get vacation time from the hospital whenever I ask."

"Oh, I couldn't go," Dimitri said. "But you should. Edmund, why don't you go with Alex? Take Sam and Maddie and make it a real family vacation." He picked up his fork and began eating. Alex and Edmund looked at each other, not knowing what to say.

"Whoa, Jack, where are you going?" Trevor reached out and grabbed Jack's arm as he headed for the front door.

"I'm going to Wildwind to find out what Dimitri did to my wife!"

"We don't know that he did anything Jack. Maybe he just thought it would upset you to know that she practically spent her last moments with him." Trevor realized as he said this that it didn't really sound like Dimitri.

"Then I want to hear it from him," Jack said, removing Trevor's hand from his arm and opening the door. Mike Roy was standing there, about to ring the doorbell. "Mike, this is a really bad time."

"Look, I know you threw me out of here the last time but you have to hear me out." Mike held out an envelope. "This just came in to police headquarters. It's the preliminary DNA testing done on the body found in the crash. Normally DNA testing would take longer to make sure of a perfect match. But the early testing is all they'll have to do on this case. Jack, whoever died in that crash, it wasn't Erica. There is no way those bones were hers."

Erica had drifted off to sleep, curled on the couch in the sitting room. In her dream, she was standing on the front porch of her house watching all three children play in the snow. Bianca was trying to teach Nicholas to make snowballs, but he just threw handfuls of snow at his sister and laughed. Lily spun around and around, trying to catch snowflakes on her tongue. Jack came up on the porch behind her, wrapping his arms around her and hugging her tightly. She turned and reached up to him.....then the clicking of the key in the lock woke her up.

"I got back sooner than I expected darling." Dimitri came in with a bottle in his hand. "I brought some sparkling cider. We have something to celebrate. Alex is leaving for England. I can spend all my time here with you once she's gone." He smiled at her. "It will be just like it was when we were first married."

## *Chapter 15*

"I knew she couldn't be dead!" Jack had a smile of pure joy on his face. "Now we have to find out just what Dimitri had to do with her disappearance."

"Dimitri?" Mike asked.

Tad filled him in on Dimitri's connection. "I didn't mention this before Jack because I thought it was just too macabre but the day of the plane crash there was a mistake made. There were bodies being shipped for burial that were loaded onto Erica's plane. Someone from the ground crew said Erica's pilot threw a fit and insisted on supervising their removal himself. I just thought it was a grisly coincidence at first but now...."

"Now it explains how bodies were found in the wreckage," Trevor finished. "I'll bet you the pilot was in on whatever happened too." He looked at Jack. "I know I've been giving you a hard time about this obsession of yours. It looks like you were right all along. I owe you a big apology."

"It's all right Trevor, " Jack said. "But we're wasting time standing here talking. Let's get over to Wildwind and find out what really happened that day."

"We need to be careful," Mike said. "If we storm in and confront Dimitri we could make things worse for Erica. He's been in town ever since the crash so he must have her somewhere nearby. I don't think he would kidnap her and keep her somewhere else."

"I'm not just going to sit here and do nothing!" Jack exclaimed.

"That's not what I'm suggesting. Give me some time on your computer. I might be able to come up with something concrete. This is an area that I'm trained in you know." Mike looked at Jack compassionately. "Hey, I won't take any chances with Erica's life. She'll always be very important to me."

Erica fought back panic as Dimitri began describing the idyllic life the two of them would have once Alex left for England. His grip on reality was so enous that she wondered how no one in his family had noticed. Maybe he only let it show when he was with her. She had to make her escape now. "I know it's a big risk but I have to take it,"she thought. "I know my way around Wildwind. If I can get the key, I have a chance. If I can't get it.....well I won't think about that." She smiled up at Dimitri. "I never liked

Alex you know. I always wondered what you saw in her."

"I wonder that myself," he said. "She certainly doesn't compare to you. No one does."

"Do you remember the song that played the first time we danced at Vadsel?" she asked. "Why don't you find the CD with that song and we can dance to it now?"

"What a perfect way to celebrate," Dimitri said as he bent down to look at the CD collection. Erica picked up the bottle of cider and swung as hard as she could, crashing it on the back of his head. He slumped to the floor as glass broke and cider spilled all over the floor, mingling with blood from the wound in his head. She reached frantically into his pockets, searching for the key. Her hands were shaking so much she could hardly get it in the slot but finally the door popped open. She heard him stirring behind her, moaning slightly. Quickly, she ran through the door, slamming it behind her. For a moment she was totally disoriented.

Then she realized she must be in the area of the wine cellar. As she ran for the stairs she heard the door open behind her and Dimitri's voice calling, "You didn't really think I only had one key, did you? Now come back to me. I don't want to have to punish you."

### *Chapter 16*

Where's Dimitri?" Jack asked the minute he, Trevor, Tad and Mike were ushered into the parlor at Wildwind.

"What's this about?" Edmund asked, puzzled.

"Erica's alive. Dimitri was with her at the airport that last day. He engineered the whole thing Edmund. He's got her here somewhere and we're going to find her." Jack's heart was pounding so hard he could hardly think.

Edmund looked at Jack with pity. "Jack, I know better than anyone what grief can do to you. But you're not making any sense here. Dimitri didn't see Erica the day of the crash. He certainly didn't have anything to do with it."

"He did see her Edmund," Tad said. "He was identified by a man who runs the VIP lounge at the airport."

"Jack's telling you the truth," Mike said. "Erica wasn't the woman in the plane crash. DNA testing proved that. Dimitri was with her that day. His

plane was at the airport in the same area hers was. He had security documents from the Hungarian government that limited the access airport personnel had near the plane. He used those same documents that night at the Sea City Airport." Mike looked Edmund straight in the eyes. "I've looked at his bank account and he's withdrawn enormous amounts of money in the last few months, most of in cash. There was one large check written to a construction company. What was that for?"

Edmund listened to Mike in shock. "You can't seriously think Dimitri did something to Erica. He cared a great deal for her. He hasn't been the same since her death."

"I think he's holding her somewhere on the estate. Now I'm asking again, what was the construction for?"

"The wine cellar," Edmund answered. "But..."

"Where is it?" Jack was frantic.

"I'll show you. You won't find anything out of line though. Dimitri's not capable of what you're accusing him of."

Erica ran up the back staircase as fast as she could, but her lack of physical activity the past two weeks had affected her more than she realized. She could hear Dimitri behind her but she also heard him stumbling, still feeling the effects of the blow to the head. She tried to open the door that led to the kitchen, but it was locked. She ran on to the second floor. The door to the hallway opened. This was the part of Wildwind that was seldom used. She had to stop for a moment to remember which way to go. Then she heard the door behind her open.

"My God!" Edmund exclaimed when he saw what was really in the wine cellar. He stared in disbelief at the prison Dimitri had built for Erica, complete with her portrait on the wall.

"He's done something to her." Jack felt sick at the sight of the blood on the floor.

"Or she did something to him," Tad said. "It looks like she saw her chance and ran for it."

"But he's right behind her," Trevor said, pointing to the trail of blood leading to the staircase.

"We have to find her before he does." Mike's voice was serious. "Edmund, where does this staircase lead?"

Erica ducked into one of the bedrooms, hoping Dimitri hadn't seen her before he came out of the stairwell. It was so dark that she thought he might have missed the movement of the door. She could hear the sound of his footsteps on the hardwood floor, moving down the hallway. She started to open the door when she heard footsteps coming back. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw the closet. "Should I hide there and risk being trapped? Or should I try to get away before he gets this far?" The footsteps were getting closer. She didn't have a choice.

The group searching for Erica and Dimitri had split up, half following the trail of blood up the back stairs, half going back to the main staircase and into the west wing. Mike had cautioned them to keep as quiet as possible. "In dealing with someone irrational, surprise is one of your best weapons."

It took every ounce of self control he possessed for Jack not to call out Erica's name. He opened the door to one of the bedrooms, switching on the light but not seeing anything. It didn't look as though the room had been disturbed in a long time. He was about to close the door when he caught a faint whiff of perfume. Erica's signature fragrance! His heart pounding, he went into the room. "Erica?" he said softly.

"Jack?" He turned as the closet door opened slowly. "Oh thank God! Jack!" Her arms went around his neck, clinging to him as he lifted her off the floor and held her tightly. Neither one of them could speak as they clung to each other, laughing and crying at the same time.

### *Chapter 17*

"Oh God, baby are you all right?" Jack asked when he could finally stop kissing her long enough to speak.

"I am now. Jack, I was so scared. How did you know I was here? Dimitri said everyone thought I was dead, that no one would ever look for me." Erica clung to him, still trembling.

"It's a long story sweetheart. Right now let's just get you out of here."

"Oh yes, I want to go home. I want my children. Are they all right Jack?" She began to cry again.

"Ssshh, they'll be fine now. They just need their mother." He brushed her

tears away, first with his fingertips, then with his lips.

"Dimitri, what are you doing up here?" Edmund, Trevor and Mike had followed the trail of blood up to the attic. Edmund stepped forward while the other two remained in the shadows.

"I have to find her. Will you help me?" Dimitri was eerily calm.

"Find who?"

"Erica. She's angry with me now but I can make things right between us. I just have to find her and bring her home. Then we'll be together forever.

You can be with Alex again and everyone will be happy. Will you help me look for her?"

"OK," Edmund signaled quietly to Mike and Trevor. "But let's go downstairs. She isn't up here." Dimitri took a step toward Edmund and then collapsed.

"Jack, are you ....Erica! " Tad opened the door to find Jack and Erica still in each others arms.

"She's all right Tad. Everything is all right now." Jack cradled Erica closer. They could hear sirens approaching the estate.

"They must have located Dimitri. Mike would have told them to kill the sirens if he was afraid they'd tip him off," Tad said. "Let's go." They walked down the main staircase just as Derrek came through the front door.

"Erica! I don't believe it," Derrek exclaimed. "What the hell is going on here? We got a call from Mike Roy saying a hostage situation had just ended and the perp had been apprehended."

"He has," Mike said coming into the room. "Dimitri has been holding Erica hostage here at Wildwind. He's unconcious now but Trevor is making sure he doesn't get away."

"I want to go home, Jack." Erica buried her face in his shoulder. "I don't want to see Dimitri again."

"You don't have to," Jack told her. "Derrek, I'm taking her home. Mike can fill you in on all the details. Any questions you have can wait until morning." The look on Jack's face said that he wasn't going to be argued with on this. When they were in the car, Jack reached for his cell phone.

"Bianca, I found her. She's fine. She's here with me right now." He handed the phone to Erica, smiling. "Our daughter wants to talk to you."

Alex was stunned to see Dimitri brought into the ER accompanied by an armed policeman.

"What's going on?" she asked Edmund.

"You won't believe it," Edmund told her. "I'm so sorry Alex. Dimitri's had some kind of psychotic breakdown."

Jack watched as Erica sat on the couch with their children, still hardly able to believe that she was really there. Lily was snuggled up against one side and Bianca was snuggled against the other. Nicholas had clung to his mother from the time she walked in the door. Now he was on her lap, looking happy for the first time since the plane had disappeared.

"Hey is there any room for me over here?" he asked, sitting down next to Lily and reaching over to stroke Erica's hair.

"This is all I thought about the whole time I was gone," Erica said. "I just knew I had to find a way to get back to all of you."

"Mama came back," Lily said. "I told you."

"She really did," Bianca said. "Even before Dad and I believed that you were still alive, Lily kept saying you were coming back."

"Did she?" Erica hugged Lily, bending down to kiss the top of her head.

"Bianca, your father told me all about your experience with the Ouija board. I can't pretend to understand how it worked, but it did. As for his dream, I had one almost identical to it when I was being held prisoner. It was part of what gave me the courage to go on. I'm just so lucky that none of you ever gave up on me."

"We're the lucky ones," Jack said, caressing her cheek. "We got you back."

### *Chapter 18*

Later, after Nicholas had fallen asleep on his mother's shoulder and the girls had gone to bed, Jack reached out and drew Erica back into his arms, tightening them protectively around her when he noticed how much thinner she seemed. "I think I could go on holding you forever," he said. "I know I could stay in your arms forever," she answered. "Sometimes I thought I'd

never be in them again."

Jack took her face in his hands gently. "Honey, did he...."

"No," she answered quickly. "But I couldn't have kept him from it much longer. Jack, when I was hostile to him he got so angry that I was afraid he would kill me. I had to be so careful. I let him think I was getting used to being there. He let his guard down then and I was able to find out something about where I was. I had to keep him at arms length without making him angry. It was working but the last two days he started getting more and more delusional. When he came in tonight and started talking about how when Alex left it would be like a honeymoon for us....well I knew I had to get away then."

"I always knew you were strong," Jack said. "You certainly proved it."

"I wasn't that strong," Erica replied. "Most of the time I was just barely holding it together."

"It was the same for me," he told her. "The only thing that kept me going was the idea that you were still alive somewhere. I couldn't face the idea of spending the rest of my life without you."

"I love you so much Jack," she said. "I just clung to the thought of you every time I felt like I couldn't deal with what was happening." She wound her arms around his neck, pulling his lips down to hers. Their kisses took on an incredible intensity as love, desire and need intermingled. He lifted her up, carrying her to the bed where he laid her down gently and covered her body with his.

Erica fought waking up. The dream was so wonderful and she knew it would vanish as soon as she opened her eyes. She was home and in Jack's arms. She could feel the warmth of his body against hers, the strength of the arms that held her so closely. Gradually she became aware that she wasn't dreaming, that this was real. Still afraid to really believe it, she kept her eyes closed but murmured, "Jackson?"

"It's all right. I'm right here," he answered.

"Oh God, I was so afraid to wake up," she said, reaching up to caress his face.

"I know," he said, kissing her tenderly. "I was afraid if I went to sleep, you'd disappear."

"Mommy!" Nicholas's voice came through the monitor beside the bed. Erica's face lit up as she started to go to him.

"Let me bring him in here," Jack said. He got up and pulled on a pair of pajama bottoms, tossing the top to Erica. When he opened the door to the nursery, Nicholas took one look at him and his lower lip began to tremble.

"I want Mommy."

"She's waiting for you in her room," Jack told his son, setting him down on the floor. He watched smiling as Nicholas sped down the hall. A few minutes later he came back into their bedroom carrying a breakfast tray. Lily and Bianca had joined their mother and brother on the bed.

Erica looked up at him smiling happily. "Breakfast in bed?" she asked.

"You'd better get used to being spoiled," he answered. "I think I brought enough for all five of us."

Alex examined the charts as she stood by Dimitri's bedside.

"How is he?" Edmund asked.

"Stable for now," she answered. "Actually, I guess stable isn't the best word to use. He's been sedated all night. The head wound wasn't serious. That isn't why he collapsed. Edmund, I think this was caused by physical problems in his brain. I've ordered a complete neurological work-up. It's possible the prion disease has come back."

"Breakfast was wonderful Jack. Of course I think we'll have to throw away these sheets. Nicholas and syrup are a deadly combination." Erica looked completely happy and relaxed.

"He does get a little sticky, doesn't he," Jack said laughing. Then he looked serious. "Honey, Derek needs to talk to you this morning. Do you feel up to that?"

Erica nodded. "I'm not looking forward to it but I know it has to be done."

"There are also an awful lot of people who are dying to see you. Would you like to have some of them over this afternoon?"

"That would be wonderful," she told him. "After two weeks of my own company, I'm ready to be surrounded by people again."

## Chapter 19

Erica sat on the couch holding Nicholas and watching her welcome home party swirl around her. She had been so glad to see everyone and had honestly been touched by how much she had been missed by her friends. But now, everything was starting to make her feel nervous and shaky again. *"What's wrong with me?"* she thought. *"I love being the center of attention. God knows I was tired of being alone all the time. Why can't I relax and enjoy this?"*

"This is the most exclusive guest list in town," Janet told her. "Palmer's got his road blocks up again making sure there aren't any gate crashers."

"Jack told me how helpful he was the night..." Erica's voice trailed off. She cuddled her son closer, comforted by the weight of him sleeping in her arms.

"Yeah, who would have thought out of all of us wanting to help, that old goat would be the only one who could think of something practical?" Opal shook her head.

"Looks like Nicholas is down for the count. I'd better take him upstairs," Jack said, reaching for him.

"I will," Erica volunteered.

"No, you're the guest of honor. I'll put him in his room." Jack took the little boy from her and carried him upstairs.

"Darlin, you haven't eaten anything all afternoon," Myrtle pointed out. "Why don't you try some of this?"

"I'm really not hungry," Erica said. Without Nicholas to hang on to and with Jack upstairs, she was starting to feel extremely anxious. She looked around for Bianca, but she was laughing with Leo and Laura. "Stop being so weak," she told herself. "Let your daughter enjoy herself without having to babysit you."

"You need to eat something girlfriend. You look like you're about to waste away." Opal bit her lip. "Would you listen to me? I don't see how you were able to eat at all, what with all you've been through."

Erica's mind flashed to Dimitri throwing the glass across the room and dragging her to the table. "He got so angry when I didn't," she said softly. She started to shake.

"Erica, what's wrong?" Janet put her arm around her friend.

"I don't know." Erica was starting to gasp for breath. "I can't breathe!"

"She's having a panic attack," Mike said. "Erica, breathe slowly. You're going to be fine. Do you think you could breathe better outside?" Erica nodded and Mike helped her up from the chair, practically carrying her out the terrace door. She sank down on the steps.

"Sweetheart, what happened?" Jack had come down the stairs just as Mike was helping Erica out the door. He knelt in front of her and took both of her hands in his.

"She's just overwhelmed by everything," Mike said. "Erica, you've been through an awful experience. You can't expect to get over it so quickly. You spent days completely alone except for the man who was holding you prisoner. A party was just too much for you." He turned to Jack. "Why don't I go in and tactfully suggest that it's time for everyone to leave.

Erica leaned against Jack, breathing more easily now. "I feel so stupid Jack. I can't believe I spoiled everything.

"You didn't spoil anything. I should have realized you weren't ready for a crowd." Jack was angry with himself.

"You asked me if I wanted to invite people over and I said yes." Erica fought back tears. "I just want to forget everything that happened with Dimitri and get back to our lives."

David faced the board members who would decide on giving him back his medical license, smiling arrogantly. "I have affidavits from my therapist stating that I've made excellent progress since last year when I had my breakdown. My parole officer also can testify that my behavior has been exemplary. I've become a responsible citizen again and now I'm ready to be a doctor once more. To prove to you how dedicated I am to regaining my status as a physician, I've been working on my own to improve on one of my greatest triumphs - the Hayward Hormone Therapy for Neurological Disorders."

At that moment Alex walked into the room. David was unexpectedly pleased to see her. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Dr. Alexandra Marrik. Her husband was the beneficiary of my treatment."

"Yes he was. It saved his life when he received it but I'm sorry to say it's

destroyed his life now," Alex said.

"What?" David couldn't believe what she was saying.

"My husband has suffered extreme damage in the area of the brain that controls his ability to reason, to determine right from wrong. I thought possibly the prion disease had recurred but further testing shows abnormal growth in that part of the brain. It was caused by the hormone therapy. Dimitri will probably spend what's left of his life in an institution."

The members of the board looked at each other and at David. Finally one of them spoke. "Mr. Hayward, we will take your petition under consideration. Thank you and goodbye."

### *Chapter 20*

"Hey pal, I wasn't expecting you back at work so soon," Trevor said as Jack came into the office.

"I wasn't expecting to come back either but Erica insisted. She sent Bianca off to school this morning too." Jack didn't look very happy. "She's so determined for things to be back to normal."

"But you don't think she's ready," Trevor said.

"I don't know. You saw how she reacted to being around a group of friends just two days ago. What if something happens while I'm at work that sets off another panic attack? I should be with her."

"And you're afraid she won't call if she needs you," Trevor nodded understandingly. "I felt the same way about Janet when she started getting better. It was hard to trust that she would be all right without me there to look after her."

"Do you know how much it gets to me that Mike Roy had to point out that a welcome home party was a bad idea? Why couldn't I see that?" Jack sounded disgusted.

"Because he's an expert in hostage situations and you're not? Because he's done some time himself in a prison camp and you haven't? Come on Jack, you're not perfect. That doesn't mean that you're not the one Erica needs. It wasn't Mike Roy that Erica was hanging on to for dear life the other night at Wildwind. Look, give her some space this morning, go home for lunch and make sure she's handling things OK, take it all one day at a time." Trevor paused. "Now, there's something I'd like to talk to you about."

Erica, Lily, and Janet sat on the terrace watching Nicholas play with Smokey. The dog was very gentle with the little boy. Nicholas wasn't quite so gentle with him, but they were having a wonderful time. Every once in a while Nicholas would run back to Erica for a quick hug. "He's still not secure in having me home," Erica said sadly. "I always thought my children would be able to count on me no matter what. But Bianca basically grew up without me and now Nicholas is afraid I'll disappear on him."

"He won't feel that way long," Janet told her. "Amanda was very clingy with me when I first came home from the hospital. Now she ignores me like any thirteen year old daughter would." Janet looked at Erica closely. "How are you, really?"

"Better," Erica answered. "Of course better than a basket case isn't great, but I am better. I still can't believe I fell apart the other day."

"I can," Janet said. "During the whole thing with Dimitri you had to be strong in order to survive. Suddenly, you didn't have to rely on your own strength any more. "

"But I do have to rely on my own strength," Erica said. "My children deserve a mother. Jack deserves a partner, not someone he has to put back together. He didn't even want to go to work this morning. It won't take long before he gets tired of having to worry about whether I'm capable of something as normal as having friends over."

"Erica, Jack adores you. He's never going to get tired of anything that has to do with you," Janet replied. "You know that don't you?"

"I guess I do," Erica said. "If there was ever anything that I've trusted in my life, its that Jack loves me. I just don't want him to always feel like he has to take care of me." Erica looked at Janet and smiled. "I want to thank you for everything you've done at Enchantment. Do you think if I offered you an obscene amount of money, you'd move back to Pine Valley and stay on as my second in command?"

"Are you serious?" Janet asked her.

"Completely," Erica said. "Does that mean you'll think about it?"

"This is so incredible. Trevor was going to talk to Jack today about possibly going into partnership with him. We both want to come back to Pine Valley. Amanda does too. She actually begged to go back to school here

even though we only planned on staying a short time. I think we'd have to drag her back kicking and screaming if we tried to leave now. She has quite a crush on JR Chandler."

"Wonderful," Erica said. "Do you want your husband or mine to draw up your contract?"

"What contract?" Jack asked, coming out on the terrace.

"I'll let Erica fill you in," Janet said. "Right now, I'd better collect my dog and go home." She went into the yard where Nicholas and Smokey were still playing.

"You didn't have to come home to check up on me," Erica told Jack. "I'm really all right."

"That's not why I came home," he answered. Then, taking her hands he said, "Well, it's partly why I came home. I was worried about you. But I also came home because I just needed to see you, to hold you, to make sure you were really here."

"Oh Jack," she said softly, melting into his arms. "I guess we both need some more time to get over all of this."

### *Chapter 21*

You're amazing," Jack said a month later as he and Erica were dancing at the Teens Against Addiction benefit. "I was watching you tonight, conducting the auction, working the crowd. I know how nervous you were before it started but you handled everything like a pro."

"It did go well didn't it? I was afraid that I might panic at the sight of so many people, but once I got started I actually had fun." Erica was smiling. "Of course I knew you were there to rescue me if I started floundering."

"Excuse me, Erica." It was David. "I would like to make a contribution to Teens Against Addiction. I tried to buy several items at the auction but there seemed to be a concentrated effort to outbid me." David was sulking as usual.

"Imagine that," Jack said, grinning at him.

"I'd be happy to accept a contribution David. Just mail a check to my office at Enchantment."

"I don't know if you heard but the state medical board put my application to get my medical license back on hold. I was wondering if you could make a couple of phone calls expressing..."

"Erica's very busy these days Hayward. You'll have to find someone else to pull strings for you," Jack snapped.

"Jack's right," Erica told him. "But I'll still be expecting your contribution to TAA." She smiled as she and Jack began dancing again.

"How did he get in here anyway? We need to hire better security," Jack said as Erica laughed.

"Erica, may I talk to you for a moment?" Edmund interrupted them.

"What is it Edmund?" she asked. Jack's arm stayed around her protectively.

"I just wanted to apologize again about what happened last month. When I think of everything you went through and all the time I was right upstairs .... I had no idea that Dimitri was so ill."

"How is he?" she asked.

"He's in a coma now. It probably won't be that much longer," Edmund said sadly. "Again, I'm sorry for everything that happened." He walked away.

"Are you all right?" Jack asked her. "I don't know why Edmund had to bring all of that up tonight."

"I'm fine darling. It's not like he's the first person who's mentioned it."

Alex sat at Dimitri's bedside, keeping a close watch on the monitors. His heart rate and blood pressure had begun to drop. She knew it was only a matter of hours now.

"How's he doing?" Edmund asked from the doorway.

"He's failing ," she told him. She turned and looked at Edmund. "I was just about to call you. I knew you'd want to be here."

Edmund came to the bed and took Dimitri's hand. "Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better if he had died when the prion disease first struck. I know he had some wonderful times after the hormone treatment but then when it began to destroy him.."

"I know," Alex said. "On one hand I'm grateful for the time we had together, but on the other hand I know he would rather have died than to have suffered that last insanity." She paused for a moment. "Edmund, I've decided to go back to England when this is all over. The memories here are all to painful."

"I think that's for the best," Edmund told her. He was a little surprised that he felt so relieved to know that she would be leaving. At one time he might have begged her to stay.

"So I'll be leaving Pine Valley at the end of the month," Mike told Erica as he danced with her.

"I'm happy for you Mike. This job in New York sounds perfect for you. I'm glad I got a chance to thank you again for everything you did."

"It was my pleasure," he answered. "Now I see Jack's starting to look impatient so I'd better take you back to him."

"What did Mike have to say for himself?" Jack asked when Erica was back in his arms on the dance floor.

"He's leaving town soon to take a job in New York."

"Gee, that's too bad," Jack said insincerely.

"You're terrible," she said smiling.

"Do you have any idea how proud I am of you? You came through that whole awful ordeal with Dimitri stronger than ever. Most people who had been through what you have would barely be able to attend an event like this so soon, not to mention organize it and run the whole show. Where do you get this incredible ability of yours to survive anything and come out on top?"

"I have you," Erica told him simply. She reached up and kissed him, slowly, lingeringly. "Do you think it would be in poor taste if we left early?"

"Who cares?" Jack said. "Let's go."